

TRIBAL LANGUAGE AND CHRISTIAN USAGE

Part I. The Characteristics of Tribal Languages.

The following is part of a paper written for a seminar sponsored by the Christian Institute of Social and Religious Studies, Bangalore, India, for a group of specialist consultants preparing a book on 'The Christian Church and Tribal Communities Today'. The second part, 'The Christian Application of Tribal Languages', will appear in our next issue. Ed.

In this article I am not concerned so much with the description of particular languages or language groups, but rather with those general features which distinguish the character of tribal languages from national or literary languages.

It will be useful first of all to consider the background of tribal life, as far as it is relevant to language. In this we are involved in the attempt to define both what a tribe is, and what a language is, a hazardous undertaking and one on which the standard textbooks are not always very helpful. Here I want only to reach such notions as will help in the present enquiry, without necessarily satisfying the experts for general purposes. In the definitions of the tribe most often given, there is frequent allusion to the supposed descent from a common ancestor, and also to government by chiefs. We may note also common characteristics, which may not, however, be intrinsic to the definition, and some of which may be absent in particular instances. Tribal society usually implies lack of development in technology: that is, industry depends upon handicrafts, and not large-scale technical procedures. In language this lack of technological development means the absence of writing, hence the lack of script and the lack of literature; the introduction of these features is a move away from traditional tribal life.

Again, the continuance of tribal society has often depended on a measure of geographical isolation. This is never absolute, but frequently is sufficient to preserve specialized forms, and sometimes antiquated usages whose origin and meaning may be lost. This explains the variety of tribal languages throughout the world, where small groups have not only preserved ancient forms but also developed new ones in isolation from other societies. Geographical isolation has sometimes meant the limitation of the variety and richness of life, but complementary to this we see special adaptations to environment, and the latter will be reflected in new and particular developments of language.

This isolation has its social and psychological reflex. The basic pattern is that the tribe are 'the men', as against the rest of the world, who are conceived to be of a different and probably lower order of creation, and the

only relationship contemplated is one of defence against unwelcome intrusion. Hence warfare is frequently a basic element in tribal society. The effect of this on language has been to limit outside communication, and with it the curbs on individualistic development of language. Hence the variety and the confusion. A special development of this pattern was the tradition for head-hunting in some groups.

Another variety is where a fixed relationship has developed between two tribes, or between a tribe and a national group. An example of the former is that of the Apatanis and Daphlas of the Subansiri Division of the North-East Frontier Agency. Physically and linguistically the two tribes are closely related, but the type of social and economic life in each is highly distinctive. Yet they depend on one another: the Apatanis are agriculturalists, and peace-lovers; the Daphlas are nomadic warriors and traders; a regular trade in food, cloth and salt exists between the two, and the connections between certain families in the one and certain families in the other tribe are fixed on traditional lines. In this case, there is not only mutual influence in the languages, but the use of a lingua franca introduces a new factor into tribal relationships. The Riang (Tuikhuk) tribe of Tripura became dependent upon the more powerful Tripura tribe. In this case a complete change of language ensued, for though the Riangs were Kukis they adopted a form of the Tripura language, which belongs to the Boro group. Sometimes martial tribes were employed by national governments as mercenaries or on border patrols. This kind of situation again resulted in bilingualism, the use of lingua francas, and the influence of the tribal languages by the national ones.

One thing to be noted is that the relative lack of technological advance in tribal life bears no relationship to the complexity of the social system, or to the intelligence or capacities of the tribal peoples. This again is true of the languages. Many of them are highly complex in their general structure, and show great refinement and sophistication in the expression of social relationships, as well as in the specialized activities determined by particular environments, whether in the terminology of boats and fishing in riverine tribes, or in the use of bamboos or palms for many and varied purposes where they are available. The idea of simplicity or backwardness being the characteristic of the tribal is a false notion, and bears no relationship to the facts. As touching language, this prejudice usually takes the view that tribal forms of speech lack the capacity to express certain aspects of civilization, whether technological or abstract. This is scarcely ever true; it is most often a rationalization of the fact that the languages themselves have been incompletely studied, and that abstractions are less easily elicited than concrete terms by an outside observer. To this we may add the fact that in religion and magic we enter a realm of reticence and taboo, where an esoteric vocabulary may exist undetected. Moreover, most languages have the capacity for forming new words and new expressions to correspond to new ideas, either by taking over vocabulary from another language, or by inventing terms in their own.

In the sphere of religion, the tribes are characteristically animist in their first state, and interest centres round the spirits of hill, wood and stream, festivals to promote the fertility of the fields and of man and beast, and to

mark the agricultural cycle and the great events of human life, and to avert evil caused through sickness, or accidents, or the ill-will of enemies. This side of life has its special language, which would repay more sympathetic and thorough investigation. The professional language of the priest, the medicine man or the shaman deserves study. A good example of this is given in the still valuable *Comprehensive Grammar of the Sinhalese Language* by A. M. Gunasekara (Colombo, 1891; pp. 384–87), with its account of taboo terminology used by harvesters, hunters and others.

Language

Let us now turn to the problem of defining language. As in the case of the tribe, it is difficult to find a statement which will cover all cases. It may suffice for our purpose to say that language is a complete system of speech common to one community, or sometimes several communities. Two things are important here: first, that the definition says nothing about written forms. In our studies of language, we are so much with the written record that we are apt to neglect the fact that the written language is posterior to and secondary to the spoken, and that the determinative factor is colloquial usage. It is the business of the descriptive linguist to discover this norm, so that the true nature of the language concerned may be understood. Secondly, though language is co-extensive with community in many cases, this is by no means always so. An obvious example is the sharing of English by Great Britain, the United States and some other countries; conversely Belgium has two contrasted languages, French and Flemish. This note of warning is especially necessary in India, where the formation of linguistic states has tended to equate language and community. In the tribes the trend is to insist on the distinctive character of the tribal language as an essential part of tribal identity and self-esteem. A consequence of this is that it is not always possible to get an objective assessment from the tribe itself of the relationship of its language to other neighbouring languages, and on the whole they exaggerate the differences, and ignore or rebut the similarities.

Dialects

This brings us to the question of dialects and shibboleths. A dialect is a variant form of a language, where the major part of the sound system, vocabulary and syntax is the same as the norm, but a significant minor part is different—it may be in a certain number of phonemes, or different phonetic treatment of the same phoneme, or a certain number of words, idioms and methods of expression. Phonetic variation is usually the most readily observed aspect. Frequently dialect forms tend to identify the speaker with a particular locality, or some other division of the community (e.g. in some societies, class, caste or occupational group). The difference between a dialect and a language is that between dialects there is a large measure of common forms and mutual intelligibility; whereas when two forms of speech are mutually unintelligible they may be said to represent two languages. Again it is frequently reckoned that dialect represents a deviation from a language

norm: this presupposes the existence of a norm, which in national communities is usually the educated speech of the capital, and may be related to the literary tradition. Where these conditions do not exist, we frequently observe a number of related forms of speech, all of a parity of esteem, so that there is no dominant form or norm. In such cases it is difficult to say that they are dialects of any definable language. This applies to some of the tribal situations in India, particularly in the Kuki area of Manipur, Cachar and the adjacent regions. Many speech forms now generally listed as languages are in fact (on the test of mutual intelligibility) really only dialects, but it is difficult to say of what language, as there is no generally accepted standard speech. Their classification as languages is due to the political self-consciousness of the tribes, coupled with the fact that these dialects have distinctive names. But on linguistic grounds the claims are not always well authenticated, and at the very least this whole situation needs to be dealt with as objectively but as tactfully as possible.

Shibboleths

A third type of distinction between forms of speech we may conveniently label shibboleths. These are minor variations of speech not amounting to dialect difference, which, however, are sufficient to indicate the community to which the speaker belongs. For example, take the recent studies on 'U' speech (meaning Upper-class) in England: certain words are acceptable and others are not in various social classes, and the suggestion is that a person gives away his class by the words he uses—by asking for 'sweet' instead of 'pudding' at a meal, and so on. These minor identifying marks in language serve to inform the speakers as to whether they are in the 'in' or 'out' groups, and so alert the company, and determine the kind of behaviour suitable to a particular situation. The sharing of similar types of greeting, or similar jokes, belongs to this type of speech distinction. Its significance in the tribal situation is that the consciousness of the 'in' and 'out' groups is stronger than the feeling for true language distinction, and is a cause for exaggerating the difference between the speech of contiguous tribes, especially where feelings of rivalry or hostility are present.

The Linguistic Survey of India

Most of the languages of India belong to one or other of six families: Thai, Mon-Khmer, Tibeto-Burman, Munda, Dravidian and Indo-Aryan. The most complete treatment of them is to be found in the *Linguistic Survey of India*, which was made at the end of the nineteenth century and published in a large folio series by the Government of India at Calcutta from 1898 to 1927. For each language a short geographical and ethnological introduction is given, followed by a bibliography (up to about 1900), a brief grammatical description, and sample texts with interlinear translations. Usually one text in each language is a version of the Prodigal Son, and another any available short story or poem. These are followed by comparative vocabularies and sentences. The *Linguistic Survey* was directed and edited by Sir George Grierson, but the volumes relating to the non-Indo-Aryan languages

were edited by Sten Konow, a Norwegian anthropologist and linguist, whose own special field was the Munda group.

For much of India, the linguistic survey was the first systematic attempt to classify the many languages, and was, as the editors themselves said, tentative. Broadly speaking, we may say that the main groupings in the *Linguistic Survey* are still acceptable, but some of the detailed classifications need adding to or correcting. This is due in part to the fact that where sufficient was not known about the language groupings, a geographical and historical grouping was attempted, rather than a comparison of the internal structure of each language. Since the time of the survey, more has become known of many of the languages treated, new ones have been studied, and there has been a great advance in the science of general linguistics. So for the present age, the *Linguistic Survey of India* remains the starting point for any general language study of the region, but needs bringing up to date. Some help for the Tibeto-Burman Group may be had from R. Shafer's *Bibliography of Sino-Tibetan Languages* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1957), and for Dravidian, T. Burrow's and M. B. Emeneau's *A Dravidian Etymological Dictionary* (Oxford, 1961).

In such a wide and varied scene, it is difficult to describe the characteristics of tribal languages in general terms which will be valid for all. As we have seen, political and linguistic boundaries do not always coincide; sometimes a tribe will change its language, and this fact must put us on our guard against drawing up theories of racial origin from linguistic evidence. We may note too that tribal languages often bear a practical day-to-day political, commercial and sometimes cultural relationship to the major languages of their regions, a relationship which has nothing to do with linguistic affinities, but which sets the scene for linguistic influence across family boundaries. There are, however, two features which deserve attention: a tendency in tribal languages to specialization of terminology and function, and its obverse, the frequently alleged gaps in tribal languages which may restrict their use.

Specialization

This is of two types, the first due to environment, the second to linguistic history. Of the former, Malay has examples of a large number of words for different kinds of carrying: in the hand, between the fingers, on the upturned hand, on the head, on the shoulder, on the back, on the thigh. Manipuri distinguishes various kinds of washing: the hands, the face, the body, clothes. This kind of distinction is likely to be used where much of life's work is perforce carried on manually and not mechanically. Again, Malay has a large technical vocabulary for different kinds of boats, their parts, sailing and fishing, while Lushai, a hill language, has only one common term for a boat; on the other hand, Lushai, besides the ordinary demonstratives 'this' and 'that', has additional ones of the type 'this up here', 'that down there', 'that near you', which have an obvious and useful relationship to the environment of co-operative field work in a hilly terrain.

The second type of specialization might better be described as the existence of certain grammatical categories in various groups of languages, which strike the foreign student as unusual because they do not occur in his own,

or which may be overlooked because their existence was not noted or only imperfectly understood. There is still a tendency to write grammar in the terms of Latin, English and Sanskrit. This is unsuitable to most tribal languages as failing to deal with large sectors of essential grammar, while introducing irrelevancies in many cases. Some of the more widespread examples of this type are the use of numeral classifiers, that is, words which are used in conjunction with numerals and nouns, stating which class of noun is involved, so that in certain languages one has to say 'two *sticks* cigarettes, three *tails* elephants, five *doors* houses' and so on. This feature often goes with absence of grammatical gender, so that in compiling a dictionary it is useful to state which *class* (instead of gender) the noun belongs to. Another example is the frequently complex usage relating to pronouns and terms of address. The system obtaining in many languages is not the use of general pronouns, but rather that of special forms, which are determined by the relative standing of the speakers: chief to commoner, commoner to chief, chief to equal, commoner to commoner, terms of endearment, especial deference or abuse. Again, many languages have differentiated forms for the first person plural 'we' according to whether the referent includes or excludes those addressed (i.e. 'we and you' as against 'we and not you'). The inclusion of this kind of data in anthropological monographs would be useful besides the tables of kinship terms, and it would often be useful to draw up tables of co-relationship between the pronouns and the corresponding kinship terms (e.g. 'maternal uncle' and the appropriate pronoun used in addressing him or referring to him).

'Poverty of Expression'

The alleged poverty of expression of certain tribal languages is often more apparent than real. The argument runs that certain aspects of sophisticated life are unknown to the tribes, and so they have no terms or expressions to deal with them; or again that where the tribal wishes to deal with such matters, he turns to a foreign language to do so. The deceptiveness of this assessment lies in the fact that it is often due to lack of knowledge in the foreign student, rather than to lack of terms in the language, together with a tendency to underestimate the capacity of tribal languages to adapt themselves to new needs, objects and experiences, which in its turn probably stems from a low estimate of the average intelligence of the tribal. One problem for the student is that it is always more difficult to elicit abstract terminology than concrete; moreover, in certain sectors taboos operate to inhibit communication. But the study of the best tribal dictionaries (where they exist at all), such as Lorrain's *Dictionary of Lushai* (Calcutta, 1941), should convince the doubter of the flexibility, sophistication and potential range of expression of tribal languages.

Oral Traditions

A study of special interest is that of the oral traditions of the tribes. These are proper matter for the anthropological monograph, but though the best of these do contain such material, on the whole we know much less about them than we should. The students of folklore have shown how certain

themes and stock figures recur again and again in widely separated parts of the world, as, for instance, the beast fable, in which the small animal gains his ends by cunning rather than strength—the fox of the classics, the jackal of India, the mouse-deer of Malaya, Brer Rabbit of Negro America.

In tribal studies the collecting of orally transmitted literature supplies the place of the study of formal literature of the world languages. Though there are varieties of detail from one language to another, there is a tendency for certain forms to recur, and also for the rules of literary structure to be as subtle and sometimes as inflexible as those of any language which has centuries of written tradition. The most common forms are the lyric and dance song, the epic or annalistic poem, the proverb and riddle, short stories, semi-historical traditions especially about origins, and conventional oratory, in which the art of pleading a cause in the village council has both its set form and its traditional embellishments. Much more needs to be known about these before any attempt is made to foster literature in a tribal language. Too often the only canon is that of translating not only the content, but also the form, of foreign matter into a tribal language, with a consequent note of falsity, impoverishment and remoteness.

Part of this study requires an investigation of allusion and metaphor. To appreciate the beauty of Kalidasa's *Sakuntala* a knowledge is needed not only of the Sanskrit language but also of the natural history of India, without which the force of the allusions would frequently be lost. Similarly, in the tribal scene the elements of local colour need to be known: geography, history, flora, fauna, and the reference and meaning of proper names.

Two Widespread Literary Forms

Two special literary forms are so widespread that they deserve particular mention, and perhaps they ought to be sought out in any linguistic study. The first is the allusive quatrain. In Malay these are known as *pantuns* or comparisons; in Assam as Bihu songs, where they are associated with the Spring and other festivals; similar forms are found in Sanskrit and Pali literature—single epigrammatic *slokas* introduced by picturesque images. In their popular tribal form, the first two lines contain a simile or metaphor, usually derived from the local scene—flowers, birds, mountains and so on. The last two lines contain some epigrammatic observation, which relates the quatrain to the human situation. Many of them are erotic in subject, and quatrain will be capped by quatrain between the young men and women of a dance party:

What is the use of a fine cloth
If it is not clean?

What is the use of a pretty girl
If she lacks judgement?

*

If you go upstream,
Pluck me a frangipanni flower.

If you die before me,
Wait at the gate of heaven.

The second widespread literary form is that of the rhapsodist's tale. In this there are two elements: one is the sets of fixed traditional verses, containing a short moral disquisition, or a scene or description such as the break of dawn, or the wonders attending the birth of the hero; the second is the framework of the story, which may be varied in detail and style by the storyteller. The skill of the rhapsodist consists in the accurate remembering of the traditional verses on the one hand, and their appropriate introduction into the story; and on the other hand the individual variation of the tale, and the graces and embellishments the teller can make. This kind of story is widespread in Malay, where it is the standard form for the village storyteller, and there are fossilized examples of the genre in Sanskrit literature. Undoubtedly tribal samples could be collected in many parts of India.

So we come back to our starting point: quite apart from the detailed study of particular languages and language groups, quite a lot can be gathered by knowing the kind of material to expect from tribal sources, and how this may resemble or differ from that of the literary languages. As the investigation is extended, so the classes of tribal literature may be both broadened and made more specific, and the investigator better prepared to look for it. A useful exercise for a group of tribal representatives would be to give samples of oral traditions from different languages and then to attempt to classify them, and to see whether types from one language have parallels in others.

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