
POLITICS OF DICTIONARY PRODUCTION IN COLONIAL SOUTH INDIA

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Abstract: In this essay, I have tried to show that dictionary production in British India was not an “objective” and “neutral” exercise as it is generally understood to be but was directly connected with the perpetuation of colonial rule in India. The colonial state required to introduce new words to its subjects in the fields of education, law, administration, and so on, so that state could govern them efficiently. Thus, the English-Telugu dictionary produced by the Charles Philip Brown was instrumental in this hegemonic project. However, I will also try to show that the dictionary had to be structured in such a way that the difference between the rulers and subjects was explained. Since, Brown employed Brahmin pundits to compile the dictionary, it appears that their caste prejudices against Muslims and the lower castes have crept in. Therefore, the question of representation becomes important. These issues have been analyzed through some selected words and the meanings assigned to them. However, English words were not just assigned their equivalents in Telugu. They were often interpreted through elaborate comments and the ideological and political implications of such comments have been discussed in this essay.

Keywords: Telugu-English Lexicons, English-Telugu dictionaries, Telugu language, Colonial governance,

Strictly speaking, dictionaries are not ‘text books.’ Nevertheless the Telugu-English, English-Telugu dictionaries produced in the colonial Madras presidency played a key role as “resource books” for colonial scholars and administrators who were engaged in the administration and governance of the subject populations. They continue to be an integral part of the modern knowledge production in the post-independence period. This paper looks at the Telugu-English and English-Telugu dictionaries produced in the colonial era in order to understand the precise ideological and historical conditions that necessitated their production and circulation. Moreover, my attempt here is to show how dictionaries were produced at the intersection of various contesting conceptualizations of Telugu language itself.

Existing scholarly responses seem to be polarized on the question of dictionary production and its relation to politics. The dominant, but a very simplistic, perception is that dictionaries are neutral objects, and were/are produced in the “service” of the language and its speakers.

Such an understanding presupposes that dictionaries are mere repertoires of words along with their meanings and remain outside the domain of politics. Such a perception, despite the efforts of the postcolonial studies in the last four decades or so, has not changed within the Telugu public sphere. Thus, the *seva*(seevice) discourse refuses to go away, and, time and again, tributes have been paid to Charles Philip Brown, who produced monumental Telugu-English, English-Telugu and mixed-language dictionaries. In fact, some Telugu scholars have become 'disciples' of C.P. Brown. Janumaddi Hanumatchastry from Kadapa spent most of his life managing the 'Brown Library' in the same building where Brown himself had set up "Brown's college" where he worked on Telugu language (including dictionaries and grammar books) and literature with the help of Telugu Brahmin pundits.

After the Telangana movement began, a part of Telugu intelligentsia and some political leaders from the non-Telangana regions of Andhra Pradesh started paying attention to the Telugu language, and attempts have been made to promote and celebrate Telugu language and Literature. They believed that Telangana movement was a result of the continued negligence of Telugu language. Thus, the recent World Telugu Language Celebrations held in Thirupati by the AP govt., which spent more than fifty crores, is part of a campaign to enhance the missing love for the mother tongue. Some of these details are beside the point. But, in this context, an interesting and a rather curious incident occurred a couple of years ago. Two state govt. ministers travelled to London in search of C.P. Brown's grave, which they discovered after a painful search. It was reported prominently in the Telugu and English newspapers that the ministers cleared the bushes and paid their tributes to Brown. Such is the devotion for Brown. There has also been the demand for the installation of Brown's statue on Tank Bund along with all the statues of the Telugu luminaries. In fact, the government was criticized for installing the statue of another colonial administrator Sir Arthur Cotton on the Tank Bund, who built the Krishna barrage and turned parts of coastal Andhra into an agriculturally prosperous region, and not C.P. Brown's statue. All these conflicts show that C.P. Brown continues to be in the public memory of the Telugu people for the "service" that he had rendered to the Telugu language and literature, including the production of dictionaries.

However, the postcolonial scholarship treated the production of dictionaries as part of the perpetuation of colonial dominance and British rule in India. Bernard Cohn, in his classic essay, "The Command of Language and the Language of Command" presents a detailed historical account of how the British, during the late eighteenth and nineteenth century colonial India (1770-1820), went about learning Indian languages, and in the process, how they developed a "pedagogical and scholarly apparatus" for that purpose. Cohn argues that the colonial project of learning Indian languages eventually led to the establishment of a discursive formation, which converted Indian forms of knowledge into European objects, and the subjects of this discourse were Indian languages themselves. In this process, Indian languages were "re-presented in European terms" as grammars, dictionaries and teaching

aids, which were to be used by the young British scholars to acquire a working knowledge of the Indian languages.

The next important point that Cohn makes is that while the framing of colonial laws required the British to learn Indian 'classical' languages, enforcing those laws effectively required the help of—what the British termed—the 'vulgar' languages that were spoken by the Indian people. Proper governance by the rulers also meant the subject population's understanding and the willing acceptance of the British law and the benevolence of the British rule. Therefore, Cohn argues, the British realized the importance of cultivating the 'vulgar' languages such as Hindostanee or Bengali [or Telugu] since these languages were to function as the media of intercourse between the rulers and the ruled. Communication with ordinary people, the British felt, was important for one more reason i.e. the common folk were the sources of important information on local affairs, and such information was key for their administrative purposes. Thus, Cohn insists, we must understand that the *Grammars*, *Dictionaries*, etc, that were produced for the purpose of cultivating Indian languages had clear political objectives.

Another important and a related argument Cohn makes is that the corpus of knowledge produced (through studying Indian languages) for the purpose of colonial governance signals the invasion of an epistemological space. Therefore, for Cohn, the conquest of India was not limited to the invasion of a territory but the invasion of the highly specialized forms of Indian knowledge itself. We know that, after Edward Said, this line of argument has become central to the postcolonial studies. Such important insights were used in many influential books published in the 1980s and 90s, such as *The Masks of Conquest*, *The Lie of the Land*, *Rethinking English*, *Subject to Change*, *Interrogating Modernity* and so on. One of the articles by P. Sridhar in *Interrogating Modernity* discusses C.P. Brown's work and implicates his work in the violence I have discussed earlier. However, colonial power was never absolute. Ranajit Guha, for instance, talks about the existence of small voices in colonial India which speak of a degree of resistance to the imperial design of subjugating the colonized. Nevertheless, he points out that it is the colonial point of view of history that continues to prevail (which he calls statism) in the nationalist and Marxist discourses of Indian history.¹

Postcolonial scholarship has also opened up new ways of understanding Christianity and western scholarship and their association with the native populations. For instance, today it is possible for us to see, from the preface to Brown's dictionary, that one of the chief motives of preparing the dictionary was to aid proselytisation. Brown says, he compiled the dictionary "with a view to aid those translators of the Holy Scriptures, who may use this volume..."²He diagnosed

¹*The Small Voice of History*. 2010.

²Charles Philip Brown, "Preface." *A Dictionary of English and Telugu Explaining the English Idioms and Phrases in Telugu with the pronunciation of English words*. Reprint of 1853

that Telugu as well as other Indian languages did not contain the necessary words which could facilitate the translation of Bible. He writes:

Many passages which in English seem easy, are hard to translate correctly. In fact to translate correctly the Bible into any one of the Indian peninsular languages is a task resembling that of making bricks without straw. The words required in some important passages do not exist in Telugu.³

Brown himself was the author of a new Telugu version of the Holy Bible. While he was compiling his dictionary, he predicted that Christianity would slowly transform Telugu language and produce a new "dialect."

In Tamil and Telugu, as well as in Greek and Latin, Christianity will gradually produce a somewhat new dialect: in Tamil it is already perceptible.⁴

This new "dialect" which he set out to construct was to contribute to the larger global phenomena of creating a uniform Christian culture. Thus, the way he structured the dictionary was determined by his idea of popularizing Christianity among natives. No doubt, the Telugu of his time underwent considerable modifications and "improvements" in the process of carrying out this scheme.

It can also be argued that Brown's aim was to consolidate a hegemonic status to English language and literature. Brown clarified:

In writing the English Telugu Dictionary one object has been, to provide the Telugus with a means of understanding some English books which cannot be satisfactorily translated into Telugu.⁵

Brown of course like other English scholars of his time had no doubts about the superiority of English. He wrote, "The study of English language will, I hope, be a means of opening the minds of the Hindus."⁶ English no doubt functioned here as the language of power or as a hegemonic instrument whereas Telugu was to necessarily recognize and acknowledge its "lack."

Edition. Andhra Pradesh Sahitya Academy, Hyderabad. 1974. p.x.

³*Some Account of the Literary Life of C.P. Brown.* Cited in Kottapalli Virabhadra Rao. *Telugu Saahityamupai Englishu Prabhavam*. p. 108.

⁴Preface. p.xi

⁵Ibid. p.xi

⁶ Ibid. p.xi

For Telugu, to emulate the dominant language meant acknowledging the latter's superiority.⁷ Thus, for the native speaker of Telugu, to accept the study of English was to accept the hegemony of that language [English]. The consent for English on the part of the subject population marks the desirability of its own subjection.

Conceiving the Dictionaries

In the following pages, I have examined the minute details of how C.P. Brown conceived the dictionaries. Brown intended to introduce many expressions connected to revenue, military affairs, sciences, literature, history, morality, culture, etc., mainly expressions of governance, through translation into Telugu. In addition to the English vocabulary, Brown retained some "useful" Arabic and Persian words, which were already present in Telugu and supported the "Musulman rule" in matters of administration and governance. He believed that they would play only a temporary role till the English completely took over: "Though I have translated *Governor, Commandant, Hospital, Captain, College, School, Court, Police, Judge, Lawyer, Doctor*, I am aware that the Hindus will prefer using the English word without any translation."⁸

However, Brown's dictionary, "missed out" many "Colloquial" Telugu words and many Arabic and "Hindustani" words which were part of Telugu. English and Sanskrit simultaneously occupied the forceful evacuation of this space. Today, it is hard to understand what standardisation of Telugu meant without understanding the changes that were brought in during Brown's time. It meant was a systematic destruction of "colloquial" Telugu and all the Arabic and "Hindustani" words it possessed earlier, and slowly, it was turned into the "language of the Hindus." Brown wrote: "Under the Musalman rule, Telugu, Kannadi and Tamil were filled with Arabic words...." "Many expressions regarding government, revenue, and military affairs are rendered by well known Hindustani words: which are familiarly used by the Telugus. *Elsewhere I have avoided Hindustani phraseology, which is always a blemish in Telugu composition.* In the colloquial Telugu, we find Hindustani words as numerous as French words were among ourselves in the days of Dryden and Addison. *But most of these words will, I hope, now perish.*" (Emphasis added)

Brown himself "discovered" that many (modern) Telugu "poems" like *Radhamadhava Samvaadam, Balarama Charitra, Dasaavatara Charitra, Kalapurnodayam, etc.* admitted some Hindustani phrases.⁹ However, Brown along with the Brahmin pundits employed by him purged Telugu of the "Hindustani language" was Urdu, which sometimes was derogatorily referred to as

⁷Guha, *An Indian Historiography of India*, p.42.

⁸ Ibid. p.xi

⁹Preface, *A Dictionary of the Mixed Dialects and Foreign Words used in Telugu*. C. P. Brown, Madras, 1854. Cited in *Telugupai*...P. 3.

"Turaka Bhasha" or "Mlechha Bhasha". For Brown, Hindustani language and the corrupt colloquial Telugu were the fountains of knowledge.

Interestingly, Brown compiled dictionaries not just for the Telugu people but for a multilingual audience. He wrote, "Though this volume pretends to explain English in Telugu alone, it abounds with Sanscrit phrases, and is likely to be used by the Kannadis and the Tamils, until it is translated into their own tongues. It was also meant to assist those who wanted to translate the dictionary into other Indian languages. He mentions, "In many places (for instance, under Neighbour, and Craniology) useful Sanskrit expressions are given: which may assist those who translate the English Dictionary into Bengali, Tamil, or Cannadi."¹⁰

However, Brown did not eliminate all the colloquial words. For instance, under the word "majority", a non-Sanskritized popular word "saanamandi" is added to its standard counterparts. In fact, Brown was criticized by the later native lexicographers like Sankarnarayana (whose dictionary is popular today) for "corrupting" Telugu with such "bad" words. On the other hand, those who supported the Spoken Telugu movement (*Vyavahaarika Bhashodyamam*) praised Brown for promoting people's Telugu.

Let us examine how the words and their newly assigned meanings are closely connected with the idea of governance. It is obvious that only a small selection of words could be examined below. Therefore, the list is by no means exhaustive.

Democrat: The one who thinks that he should not become a king, the one who says that there should not be the king.

Liberty: ...exemption from tyranny and inordinate government... When he gained his liberty...In some places it means the general good *prajaasukhamu*. thus, the king has a design against their liberty...if the criminal was debarred a proper trail, it would give the people occasion to think that the king had a design against their liberty...

Brown structures the meanings of these words in relation to only the tyranny of the native kings, as if these terms have nothing to do with the power structure of colonial empire. The logic of Brown's narrative, perhaps, is that, his reader, by detesting the rule of the "despotic" kings, would automatically consent for the colonial government. Such an expectation is not surprising from the perspective of the colonizer since the latter believed that colonization was beneficial to the former. Though the readers of Brown's dictionary are expected to understand the meanings of his words in isolation, they make better sense when we place them next to other words. For instance, the meanings of the above words *Liberty and Democrat* make sense to us only when we place them next to *Colonial*.

¹⁰Preface.

Colonial: ...related to the new village/place, the colonial government. the (British) officials in the colony (*seema*), who go to the foreign country for the protection of its people (*kaapulu*).

Brown here attempts to convert the whole history and nature of colonial rule—all its atrocities, its material and spiritual exploitation, its violence--in other words, its conquest into the protection of its people.

However, many English words put Brown in an awkward position. Have a look at the following.

Right: *Nyayamu, Dharmamu* (Justice) [Note that "Hakku" is not given]¹¹

Freedom of speech: *Nourududuku* [talking excessively or irresponsibly or rude talk]

Freedom of Manners: *Amaryaada* [not polite or ill manners]

Citizen: *pourudu* [now this word is accepted as the Telugu equivalent], *townsman, villager, Kapu, Samsari, Setti, Komati, Nivasi*...a citizen of the world: the one who is not particularly favourable to his village (*swagramaabhimanam*). *i.e.* the one who says that wherever you live in the world it is the same thing.

Honest: we ought to be honest to our masters.

Civilian: ...a special scientist of justice. Collector, Magistrate, Judge and other similar employees.

These words put Brown in a very awkward position. On the one hand, they help him in narrating the grand and glorious story of the west to his reader-subjects. But, the meanings that he assigns to them are aimed at persuading the readers to appreciate the perpetuation of colonial empire. Thus, Brown had to make sure that his readers realized their position in the new system of governance as only *subjects* but not citizens (in the sense of bourgeois democracy). As Partha Chatterjee rightly pointed out, the colonial state never fulfilled the "normalizing mission" of the nation state. He argues that the premise of the colonial empire's power was a rule of colonial difference. As the institutions of colonial state were elaborated in the second half of the nineteenth century, the ruling European groups laid down—in lawmaking, in the bureaucracy, in the administration of justice, etc.—the precise difference between the rulers and the ruled. The questions were "If Indians had to be admitted into the judiciary, could they be allowed to try Europeans? Was it right that Indians should enter the civil service by taking the same examinations as British graduates? If European newspapers in India are given freedom of speech, could the same apply to native newspapers?"¹²

What the colonial empire sought to create was, in Guha's words, "a state without citizens/citizenship." Therefore Brown, fully engaged in constructing such a state, was forced to redefine the already existing (European) meanings of the above words in the context of colonial

¹¹Pl note that the English words placed between brackets [] here are my translations back into English.

¹²Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995. p.10

India. Hence, he restricts the meaning of *civilian* only to the rulers, and defines *honesty* in the sense of the subjects' obedience to their masters. However, Brown did not always seem to have succeeded in what he set out to do. For instance, the Telugu meanings he provides to *right*, *freedom of speech*, etc., sound quite contradictory to their English counterparts or caricatures of the latter with so empty of any meaning.

Brown grabbed every opportunity to present the virtues of the colonial government and European knowledge to his audience, and never forgot to point out the "deficiency" of the natives. For this, he depended on Christian scriptures and several well established liberal writers of Europe. The dictionary is filled with references and quotations from the Bible and authors like, to cite a few, Locke, John Stuart Mill, Chaucer, Milton, Shakespeare, Dr. Johnson, Dryden, Addison, et. al. with detailed commentaries by Brown himself. Look at this:

Civilization: ...Education is a great promoter of civilization. Sir Thomas Munro says, "I do not exactly understand what is meant by civilizing the people of India. In the theory and practice of good government they may be deficient: but if a good system of agriculture, if unrivalled manufactures, if a capacity to produce what convenience or luxury demands, if the establishment of schools for reading and writing, if the general practice of kindness and hospitality; and above all, if a scrupulous respect and delicacy towards the female sex are among the points that denote a civilized people- then the Hindus are not inferior in civilization to the people of Europe."

Thus, the reader gets his lesson: In civilization, Indians were not inferior but were deficient in governing themselves. However, there were others who believed that the Indians lacked in culture and civilization too. Brown contributes his own share to it. They are superstitious and barbaric:

Necessity: the Hindus believe that everything is governed by necessity (*Purvakarmaphalam* - the belief that one's life depends on what one did in the last birth)

Proscribed: Education is proscribed to Hindu women.

Conscience: ...the bramins make it a matter of conscience to drink wine but they made no conscience of burning women.

Though Brown at times uses the words *Hindus* and *Bramins* as synonyms, he makes clear distinctions of religion and caste. Also, consider the following:

Tolerant: ...the Musulmans were not tolerant...the English are tolerant. *Muslims hate other religions. English don't.*

To Tolerate: ...the Musulmans would not tolerate any other religion. In Madras, all religions are tolerated.

Ruling: the ruling passion of the Musulmans is arrogance. The common and primary characteristic of Muslims is arrogance.

Evangelist: the one who brings good news. ...an evangelical teacher *Sadguruvu*. [Here the explanation of the word *Evangelist* may be of a typical Christian one. But still the message is clear.]

He represents Muslims as intolerant, communal and arrogant people. They are also immoral in his conduct. The term Musulman is used as an abuse to describe any "bramin" whose character is immoral.

Morally: that bramin is morally a Musalman i.e. he is externally a Bramin and internally a Musalman.

Brown employed many pundits as assistants in his compiling the dictionaries. Therefore, it appears that some of the caste prejudices against Muslims and the lower castes have crept in through them. Thus, at times, we come across Bramins as self-righteous, Muslims as communal and Sudras and Dalits as impure.

Nature: ...by nature he is a Sudra. *Vaadu Janmatahaa Sudrudu.* [by birth he is Sudra]

Temple: ...his house is indeed a temple of dissipation (*vaadiilluvoka Dommarikompa* = his home is a living place of Dommaris).

Dommaris is a lower caste. Brown himself refers to them as rope-dancers by profession.

Dancer: actress, rope-dancers: *dommaravaalu.*

In Brown's dictionary, the Adivasis such as Chenchus, Boyas and Yaanadis, who are now categorized as Scheduled Castes by the Indian government, have been described as cruel people by nature and also ill-mannered. They are barbarians, savages, Mlechhas and Chandaalas.

Barbarian: a rude person, *abashed, amaryadastudu*, a savage, a forestman, *a chenchu man...* Dr. Johnson says: "*The mass of the Greeks and Romans were barbarians: the mass of every people must be barbarous*, where there is no printing, and consequently knowledge is diffused among the people by our newspapers. *I am talking of the mass of the people...Mlechha.*

Savage: *Adavimanishi* (a forestman), *Chandaludu* [upper castes today sometimes use this word to refer to Dalits] *Chenchuvaadu, Boyavaadu Yaanaadivaadu...* and such people.

Barbaric: related to *Chenchu* people

Interestingly, more than five thousand Chenchus, Boyas, Yaanadis whom Brown's dictionary describes as barbarians raised a rebellion against the British rule and participated in the famous insurgency under the leadership of a Palegar called Narasimha Reddy in the Cuddapah district in the then Madras presidency. The Special Commissioner W.A.D. Ingles on 19 Jan., 1847 submitted a report on the event to the Secretary, Judicial Department in which he mentioned that the uprising was a result of the cruel policies of the British government.

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