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Front matter

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Editorial introduction

Sylheti is an Eastern Indo-Aryan language with approximately 11 million speakers. It has a large concentration of speakers in the Surma and Barak river basins in north-eastern Bangladesh, and in south Assam, India. There are several diasporic communities around the world, including around 400,000 speakers in the UK. Everywhere it is minoritised, politically unrecognised, and understudied.

In terms of vocabulary and structure, Sylheti is on a linguistic continuum between Assamese and Bengali, arguably more similar to the former than to Kolkata-based standard Bengali (or Bangla), yet it is often viewed politically as a dialect of Bengali. This volume presents six papers covering the phonology, morphology, and syntax of the Sylheti language as it is spoken in Camden, London, and in north-east India, describing many features that distinguish it from its better-known neighbouring languages.

This collection of papers on the Sylheti language is a direct outcome of the first *SOAS Sylheti Conference*, held on 12th May 2016. It was opened by guest plenary speaker Mark Sebba (Lancaster University) who addressed the participants on 'Spelling Sylheti: Phonology and Practice', followed by nine oral presentations:

- Candide Simard, E. Marie Thaut, Robert Laub (SOAS, University of London) 'The SOAS Sylheti Project'
- Satarupa Sen (The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India) 'Mapping of Spirantization and De-aspiration in Sylheti'
- Elizabeth Eden (University College London) 'Does Sylheti have Consonant Clusters?'
- Zander Zambas (alumnus, SOAS, University of London) 'Scoping out Negation: a Lexical Functional Account of Negation in Sylheti'
- Robert Laub (SOAS, University of London) 'Differential Object Marking in Sylheti'
- Caoife Garvey (alumna, SOAS, University of London) 'Relative Clauses in Sylheti'
- Sarah Dopierala (SOAS, University of London) 'A Cross-Linguistic Perspective on Converb Constructions in Sylheti'
- Heather Brown (alumna, SOAS, University of London) 'Additive Focus in Sylheti'
- Chris Tang (King's College London) 'The Role of Sylheti in the Investigation of the Linguistic and Cultural Mediation of Disaster and Health Messages about Heatwaves and Cold Spells within the Bangladeshi Community in Tower Hamlets'.

There were five poster presentations:

- Emily Gref (SOAS, University of London) 'The Sylheti Storybook: a Work in Progress'
- Jean Rohleder (SOAS, University of London) 'Relative Pronouns and Question Words'
- Zurab Baratashvili & E. Marie Thaut (SOAS, University of London) 'Sylheti Passive Constructions'
- Jonas Lau (SOAS, University of London) 'Irrealis? Issues Concerning the Inflected t-Form in Sylheti'
- Kathleen M McCarthy, Merle Mahon, & Bronwen G. Evans (University College London) 'The Production of Sylheti Stops and Vowels by Speakers from the London Bengali Community'.

The high quality of the presentations was commented on by many attendees at the conference, as the students demonstrated not only their abilities to produce knowledge but also to engage critically with it. They discussed theoretical issues, while remaining aware of the possibilities for utility and impact. Mark Sebba commented after the conference:

> I would like to say how nice it was to see how enthusiastic the students were about their topics. Not only that, but the presentations were of a very high standard. I have sat through many student presentations over the last 35 years and I found these were particularly impressive – well prepared, clearly articulated, well presented for an audience with mixed levels of knowledge in the topic. Congratulations to the organisers and the presenters!

Six of the conference presentations were selected for publication. Most of the papers are based on data collected in Linguistics Field Methods courses at SOAS, University of London (UK), and during documentation undertaken by the *SOAS Sylheti Project* (SSP hereafter),[1] discussed in more detail in Chapter 1 by Simard et al. This collection has two major aims. One is to contribute to a descriptive grammar of Sylheti, which remains little-studied (see Tunga 1995; Chalmers 1996; Plettner 2004; Nabila 2012; Mishra & Bhattacharjee 2013; Das 2017). The second is to provide an opportunity for the high quality and original work produced by MA and PhD students to be published, enriching the field at large and benefitting them in an academic context that has become increasingly competitive.

This volume continues the SSP's aim of widening and enriching the students' experience, in this case by creating an opportunity to learn about

[1] See https://sylhetiproject.wordpress.com/ (accessed 2019-05-21)

and participate in the publication process. They have been involved not only in writing, but also in reviewing and editing these academic papers. Their patience and dedication deserve praise. We present these studies to the wider linguistics community as illustrations of a viable postgraduate training model in language documentation and revitalisation that bridges academia and community involvement. These papers constitute the first comprehensive linguistic description of Sylheti in English, and will be of interest to linguists in the fields of South Asian linguistics, diaspora studies, and cross-linguistic typology.

In this volume, readers will find Elizabeth Eden's paper 'Does Camden Sylheti have consonant clusters?' which provides an analysis of the phonemic inventory and syllable structure of Camden Sylheti, assisted by the online database and lexical analysis tool *Nidaba*, developed by Eden. The tool is used to provide evidence for the predictability of a phoneme's distribution and its overall phonological behaviour. A discussion of how Camden Sylheti deviates from a canonical CV syllable structure is supported by an examination of the phonological behaviour of clusters in loanwords and in historically significant languages such as Bengali and Sanskrit. Eden then discusses issues of language contact and repair strategies to explain the observed patterns. Her work is a convincing illustration of how computational tools can facilitate the search and analysis of phonological data, and the description of the phonological patterns in under-documented languages.

Satarupa Sen's paper 'Mapping of spirantization and de-aspiration in Sylheti: An Optimality Theory analysis' studies these lenition processes in Sylheti with reference to two neighbouring languages with which it is in contact: Standard Colloquial Bangla (SCB) and Standard Colloquial Assamese (SCA). Spirantisation refers to the transformation of a plosive into its corresponding fricative; it can affect both voiceless and voiced plosives and instances of both are well attested across languages. The theoretical challenges posed by these phonological processes in Sylheti are tackled by Sen using the framework of Optimality Theory, showing that the phenomena can be accounted for in a natural way in terms of some ranked violable constraints.

In 'Irrealis? Issues concerning the inflected t-form in Sylheti', Jonas Lau discusses a particular inflected verb form, referred to as the 'inflected t-form', involving an affix *-t* after the verbal stem with subject agreement. Lau proposes it can be interpreted as an expression of irrealis mood, a category that is controversial in typology, whether it is described in semantic or functional terms. In Sylheti, the inflected t-form occurs in constructions expressing counterfactual conditionals, negations of the future tense, and before modal verbs. It is also used to mark verbs in the past habitual tense. Lau describes and analyses the various functions of the inflected t-form and argues that they all share sufficient semantic features to be viewed as a single grammatical category which he analyses as an instance of irrealis mood.

Heather Brown's paper 'Additive focus in Sylheti: Description and analysis within the Lexical-Functional Grammar framework' offers a description of an enclitic particle that serves to mark a kind of focus in Sylheti. She first examines the literature concerning focus-sensitive particles, and then provides a descriptive account of the Sylheti particle *=ɔ,* which, she argues, marks additive focus. The data analysed comes from a combination of narratives, structured elicitation tasks, and translations by native speakers, with most weight placed on the first two as sources of evidence. Finally, a theoretical account of the particle is proposed within the Lexical-Functional Grammar (LFG) framework.

Sarah Dopierala describes the category 'converb' in Sylheti in 'A cross-linguistic perspective on converb constructions in Sylheti'. Based on the definition of converb by Haspelmath (1995: 3) as 'a non-finite verb form whose main function is to mark adverbial subordination', she focuses on several types of adverbial clauses: conditional, manner, temporal and simultaneous. The paper then discusses the theoretical implications of the converb description using the framework of Role and Reference Grammar (RRG), ultimately giving evidence for a cosubordinate analysis of Sylheti converbal clauses.

In their contribution 'A descriptive account of agentless constructions in Sylheti: Passive, impersonal, and anticausative', E. Marie Thaut, Andriana Koumbarou and Zurab Baratashvili investigate case-marking and passive constructions in Sylheti, pointing to similarities and differences with other Indo-Aryan languages. They focus on the optional use of the nominal marker *-e*, which occurs in constructions with some verbs and in some contexts, being subject to a number of semantic factors in the contexts in which it is optional. Their work highlights the existence of differential marking of the single argument of intransitive clauses, a striking feature of the Sylheti case system, not shared with Bengali.

As editors, we are deeply thankful to all our SOAS colleagues and students for their encouragement and support. All the papers have been double-blind reviewed by external referees and we wish to thank them for their participation in the evaluation process. We are extremely indebted to our collaborators at the *Surma Community Centre*, most particularly Faruk Miah, Farhana Ferdous, and Nadia Akthar, who have been our teachers of Sylheti for many years. This volume would have not been possible without the assistance of EL Publishing, who have provided advice and support throughout, particularly Peter Austin, who helped in the final editing of these papers, and Tom Castle, who designed, formatted and typeset them. Many thanks to all of you.

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