Chapter 8   Conclusions and implications

This study has, from the outset, been undertaken with two kinds of reader in mind. Firstly, an historical linguist, interested primarily in the discussion and application of theory and method. Secondly, an educated speaker of a Kamta/Rajbanshi/Northern Deshi Bangla lect, wanting to understand more about their mother tongue, its history, and its relation to other lects. My hope is that the study has been somewhat satisfactory for both kinds of reader, and also for those readers in whom the two interests are combined.

In this the final chapter, conclusions and implications are presented so as to address separately the concerns of these two kinds of reader. The conclusions presented in section 8.1 attempt to speak to the concerns of KRNB speakers, while conclusions listed in section 8.2 are geared towards the interests of historical linguists. The intention is not to repeat the historical argument of preceding chapters but to reflect on implications of this reconstruction for the contemporary status of KRNB on the one hand, and for historical linguistic methodology on the other.

8.1.   Conclusions for speakers of Kamta/Rajbanshi/Northern Deshi Bangla

It has not been the object of this study to construct a proof one way or the other on the controversial question of the contemporary status of KRNB. As argued in 1.7, the debate whether KRNB is a 'distinct language' or a 'dialect of Bangla' is for many on both sides not really about language at all, rather it is about social and *political* identity. Language status is used as a political symbol of social status—as a symbol of socio-political autonomy vs. subordination—and consequently, when it comes down to it, the debate is primarily about the status of the *speakers* not the status of the *language.* Of course, the two are interlinked, but it remains helpful to acknowledge the distinction. The debate on the socio-political status of speakers is a necessary one, but this is not the place for it. Therefore, it is my intention to remain as focussed as possible in this section on the issues surrounding the status of the language, and not get too bogged down in discussion of the socio-political status of its speakers.

Nevertheless, this much must be said: history has implications for the present, and a confused understanding of the past can lead to distorted thinking about the present realities. Furthermore, influential people with socio-political agendas (of whatever colour) can promote accounts of language history without proper consideration of the historical veracity of their statements. The simple villager, of course, has no such recourse to promote his own opinions in reply. A careful and critical reconstruction of history is necessary in order to protect the marginalised from the pseudo-historical ideologies which the powerful may wish to promote in order to justify their position.

The following conclusions may be justified on the basis of the historical reconstruction of preceding chapters:

1) A stage of linguistic history, termed in this study as 'proto-Kamta', is a justified historical reality. It is defined by linguistic changes that seem to have occurred between 1250 and 1550 AD in the community centred on Kamtapur—the relocated capital of the Kamrupa kingdom. This much is a *historical linguistic* statement, based on reconstruction of the chronology of linguistic changes. The chosen label of 'proto-Kamta' is also a historical statement, and is not intended as a justification for any contemporary political party or contemporary language name over another. The linguistic history reconstructed here shows that all KRNB lects—whether the 'Rajbanshi' of Morang district in Nepal, the '*sthaniyo bhasha*' (local language) of Rangpur in Bangladesh, or the 'Kamta' of Cooch Behar in India—share a common ancestor, which for historical reasons is termed proto-Kamta. *This common linguistic ancestor is not a fantasy created to justify a contemporary political position, but a historical entity reconstructed by the best historical linguistic methodology available to us.* On one occasion when collecting data with KRNB speakers in a remote-ish village, we were interrupted by a local official protesting that the people are "simply making up the language that you are recording" and "no-one speaks this way here"—in short that the lects in question *do not exist*. After taking information regarding the purpose of my research the official left, and, a little shaken, I returned to collecting the data from speakers whose linguistic tradition is no fantasy, but as argued in this study is almost 8 centuries old.

2) This historical stage, proto-Kamta, is reconstructed as historically parallel, not subordinate, to the historical emergence of proto-Bangla and proto-Asamiya from the common Magadhan stage. The implication of this statement is that the KRNB lects reflect a linguistic (and cultural) tradition equally as ancient as the Bangla and Asamiya linguistic traditions. This study thus confirms Clark's proposal, following Henry Frowde, that "Northern Bengali may be as old or older than standard Bengali" (1969: 85), and Grierson's statement that "Northern Bengal and Assam did not get their language from Bengal proper, but directly from the west" (Grierson 1903-28 Vol. 1: 126).

3) Kamta/Rajbanshi/Northern Deshi Bangla *is not bad, or corrupted Bangla.* Statements to this effect by numerous 19th and early 20th researchers (cf. those quoted in van Driem 2001) are simply a distortion of the historical reality. I find myself on the point of digression into the social status of the speakers, but will restrict myself to posing the following question: is it right that children who speak KRNB lects are ridiculed at school for using linguistic norms that are more ancient that the norms of Standard Colloquial Bangla? I intend no political statement whatsoever by this question, but merely to illustrate the fact that *the status of KRNB lects is historically misrepresented in contemporary north Bengal society.* See also the resolutions given in section 1.7.

4) While KRNB may have replaced an earlier Tibeto-Burman language, the shift from non-Aryan to Indo-Aryan language is *far from being unique to KRNB* and is no justification for ascribing inferior status to the KRNB lects. Klaiman writes that "It is a reasonable hypothesis … that descendants of non-Bengali tribals of a few centuries past now comprise the bulk of Bengali speakers" (Klaiman 1990: 512).

5) Since the 16th century (during the middle and modern KRNB periods), KRNB lects have not existed in isolation from broader Magadhan and NIA changes. During this period, central KRNB in particular has been shown to have undergone changes in common with Bangla and Asamiya. The KRNB, Bangla and Asamiya communities have in general *not been closed off from one another.* That is, while

their linguistic traditions are distinct from one another, they are yet intertwined, and not separate from each other. India has often been true to its motto: unity in diversity.

6) Furthermore, since the 16th century, the KRNB lects have undergone differentiation from one another. This diversification is not merely the result of 'contamination' with other languages—it is the natural course that the lects of differentiated speech communities also tend to become differentiated. Many speakers will tell me that "in Nepal they speak differently to us because they mix with Maithili" or "in Bengal they speak differently to us because they mix with Bangla", etc. etc. There is some truth to these statements, but they are far from being the whole truth of the matter. Some proto-Kamta features are maintained in parts of Nepal, or Bengal, etc. but have been changed elsewhere; some innovative and unique features have sprung up in each of these different regions, and are unrelated to the ecologies of language contact. Linguistic differentiation is just part and parcel of linguistic history. A consequence of this is that when speakers in Nepal and Cooch Behar use quite different linguistic varieties in songs, videos, newspapers, etc. this is not a denial of their linguistic history, but because of it. Their history has a common origin 500 years ago, but since then there has been much diversification—to the point where lects at different points in the continuum share low inherent intelligibility without acquired bilingualism. As a result, there are today *two* distinct standards emerging in the literature of KRNB speakers. The variety of *central Jhapa* features in an increasing number of publications aimed at speakers in Nepal and Bihar. The variety of *eastern Cooch Behar* likewise is increasingly used for publications aimed at the Rajbanshis and deshi Muslims of Northern West Bengal and western Assam.

7) The standardisation of Bangla, Asamiya, Nepali and Hindi, and the propagation of these standardised varieties during the 19th and 20th centuries has had significant effects upon the KRNB lects. The influence of Hindi has been reconstructed for Nepal KRNB (Rajbanshi) and Bihar KRNB (Surjapuri) in section 7.5.2.2; the influence of standard colloquial Bangla has been reconstructed for KRNB lects in West Bengal and northern Bangladesh; though the most significant influence is of

standard colloquial Asamiya upon the KRNB lects around Bongaigaon in Assam (cf. 7.5.4.2).

8) The absence of an early standardised form of KRNB used in written literature is not simply the fault of external powers. As I have undertaken this reconstruction of linguistic history it has struck me that *patronisation of Bangla and Asamiya written varieties by the Koch kings—rather than the mother tongue of their subjects—during the middle and modern KRNB periods is a major reason why these lects have been subsequently accorded the status of 'dialect' of either Bangla and Asamiya*. When Grierson categorised 'Rajbanshi' as a 'dialect of Bangla', I am quite sure that this was based on (a) the Indo-Aryan character of the lect; coupled with (b) the absence of a large written literature in the lect; and (c) the patronisation of written Bangla and Asamiya varieties by the Koch Kings. (Unlike Chauduri 1939, Grierson does not seem to have given much importance to oral literature when categorising Indo-Aryan lects).

9) Given this *modus operandi* behind the handing out of 'dialect' status in the *Linguistic Survey of India*, this status is not irreversible. With the development of an increasing written literature in the KRNB varieties of Jhapa and of Cooch Behar, the question of recognition becomes worthy of reconsideration. Let me reiterate that I am commenting here on the social status of the lects, not the socio-political status of speakers. The situation can be compared with the status of 'dialect of Bengali' given previously both to Asamiya and Oriya. Mohanty describes the following episode from 1869 during what he terms 'the Bengali language dispute':

> Dr. Mitra [an eminent Bengali historiographer] asserted that the population of Orissa being barely 20 lakhs [2 million] it would be an absurdity to maintain a separate language for so few people … In the course of the agitation attempts were not only made to prove that the Oriya language did not have a separate identity but books and articles were printed which distorted the history of the land. In 'Utkal Hitaisini' (the periodical of the domiciled Bengalis) it was said that this land owed its development in religion, language and administration to Bengal. (Mohanty 1982: 22-23)

As demonstrated by the present recognition of Asamiya and Oriya, the status of 'dialect' once given need not be irrevocably binding. The further example could be given of the recent recognition of Maithili.

10) A further lesson which can be learnt from the history of relations between Assam and Bengal is that controversial relationships between different language communities need not always remains so. Chatterji (1963) wrote that "at least one Bengali scholar settled in Assam … has sought to make partial atonement for the injustice done to Assam's language by serving the same language by his literary and other publications in it". Similar demonstrations of *rapprochement* between linguistically distinct communities are to be welcomed also in the case of relations between the Bangla and Kamta/Rajbanshi/Northern Deshi Bangla speech communities.

8.2. Conclusions for historical linguists

The findings of the present study are now evaluated for an audience of historical linguists, with a focus on the success or otherwise of the innovative methods which played a large part in this reconstruction. As these statements will be (hopefully) less controversial than those in section 8.1, they are outlined in a more summarised form and without too much hedging of the point.

1) While historical documentation of a language can be an aid to reconstructing its linguistic history, its absence does not negate the possibility of such reconstruction. This point may seem so obvious as to go without saying to historical linguists working in, for example, the Austronesian family of languages whose history has been quite thoroughly reconstructed despite the absence of historical documentation. However, as has been mentioned several times in this study, historical studies in Indo-Aryan have been almost exclusively of written varieties, using texts of different eras as the fixed points in establishing chronology of linguistic changes. Reconstruction of the history of unwritten Indo-Aryan lects has rarely been attempted.

2) Sociohistorical criteria for sequencing changes contribute more to historical reconstruction than linguistic criteria, because most innovations are linguistically

independent of each other. That is, of all the changes that a set of languages undergoes, only a few logically require a relative chronology due to bleeding and feeding of linguistic conditions. Other criteria must be used for sequencing, and in the absence of historical documentation (and perhaps even when it is present), sociohistorical criteria are the best (and may be the only) option available to the historical linguistic.

3) Sociohistorical sequencing need not be an *ad hoc* approach but can be formalised on the basis of a sociohistorical theory of language change. It has been one of the goals of this study to develop such a procedure and demonstrate both its theoretical well-foundedness and empirical usefulness.

4) A sociohistorical theory of language change, when applied to methodology of historical reconstruction, can substantially increase our ability to reconstruct linguistic history. This *theory* of change has been accepted by historical linguists for quite some time now, but little effort has been made to bring our *methodologies* in line with the *theory*. This study has (a) developed the sociohistorical theory so as to draw out the connections with reconstruction methodology, and (b) re-articulated the reconstruction methodology so as to be explicitly in line with the sociohistorical theory.

5) The re-articulated methodology is not *complementary* to the family tree model, but rather *subsumes* that model as well as others. This approach does not negate previous reconstruction which has assumed a family tree-like shape to linguistic history, but accounts both for why the tree diagram works in some cases, and doesn't work elsewhere. Where linguistic history is family-tree 'shaped' it is because the SCEs were characterised by division, or, because the historical linguist has chosen to only reconstruct propagation events that represent divisions of communities. The present approach subsumes such analyses, but also opens up new possibilities of analysis in cases of non-discrete division of lects—where propagation events occur through *reintegration* of speech communities as well as division.

6) Sociohistorical methods of reconstruction depend on a robust reconstruction of linguistic innovations, and a consideration of the phylogenetic diagnostic value of each individual innovation. Therefore, *historical linguistic reconstruction must always precede sociohistorical linguistic reconstruction*.

7) Sociohistorical sequencing of changes depends upon (a) disjunctions in the ranges of changes, and (b) sociohistorical or geographical phenomena which coincide with at least some of the incongruent ranges. When either of these factors are absent the method will be less succesful.

8) Reconstruction which stops at the linguistic innovations must either (a) depend on textual evidence to establish chronology of innovations (e.g. Chatterji 1926); (b) slip in unexamined sociohistorical assumptions about the 'normalcy' of SC division in the guise of a family tree model of change (e.g. Pattanayak 1966); or (c) conclude with a dialectological map instead of a coherent account of linguistic history (e.g. Maniruzzaman 1977). By viewing linguistic history through the lens of sociohistorical propagation of changes between speakers, the strengths of each of these three approaches are given a cohesive framework within which they can be integrated.

Interaction between speakers is the mechanism by which propagation of linguistic change occurs, and reconstruction of linguistic history is understandably more successful when founded on this principle.

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