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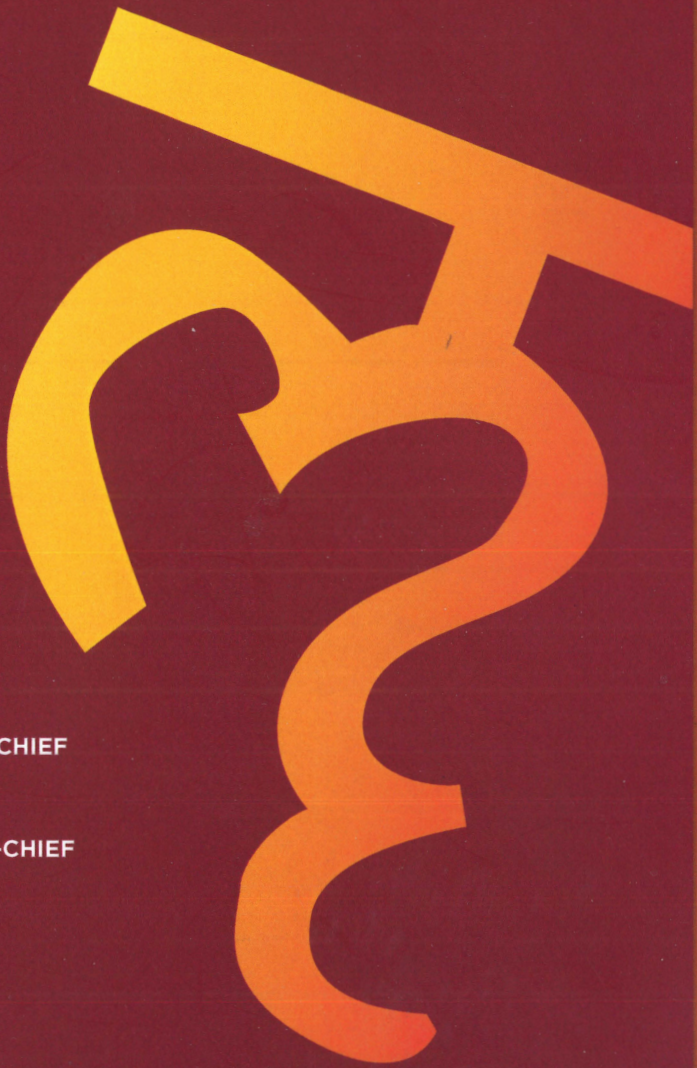

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Contents

Articles

Book Reviews

In memoriam

Book Review

Jayaratna Banda Disanayaka [ජයරත්න බණ්ඩා දිසානායක, Jayaratna Baṇḍā Disānāyaka]. *Encyclopaedia of Sinhala language and culture*. Colombo: Sumitha Publishers, 2012, xxii, 775 p., ISBN 978-955-0335-87-9. LKRs. 1500.00

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The book under review is a major work (*opus magnum*) of a well-known Sri Lankan scholar, Prof. Jayaratna Banda Disanayaka (Professor Emeritus at the University of Colombo), dedicated to his native language in its historical development. In order to avoid misunderstandings, Disanayaka warns, from the outset, that the term "encyclopaedia" is not employed in its usual sense:

> It differs from a traditional encyclopaedia in four basic ways: first, it presents facts not alphabetically but thematically; second, the themes do not cover all aspects of knowledge but only those related to Sinhala, the language and the culture in which it is embedded, third, all contributions are by the same author; and, finally there is an underlying theme that brings all the essays together: the intrinsic link between language and thought. (Foreword, p. iii).

Nonetheless the book under review can be described as "encyclopaedic": the range of topics discussed includes a variety of aspects of the domain mentioned in the title, and an enormous number of features and phenomena of the language spoken by the Sinhala people of Sri Lanka, which, altogether, creates an impression of the full coverage of the issues in question.

The book is rich in facts and very informative. The book consists of a short Foreword, twenty five chapters (1 "An island and a language", 2 "Sinhala, a living language", 3 "Sinhala, its patterns of thought", 4 "Sinhala, a bird's eye-view", 5 "Language and meaning", 6 "Sinhala across regions", 7 "Sinhala folk idiom", 8 "Buddhist Sinhala", 9 "Sinhala in proverbs", 10 "Sinhala across occupations", 11 "Origins of Sinhala", 12 "Evolution of Sinhala", 13 "Old Sinhala", 14 "Middle Sinhala", 15 "Aspects of Sinhala culture", 16 "Classical Sinhala poetry", 17 "Classical Sinhala prose", 18 "Classical Sinhala", 19 "Pre-modern Sinhala", 20 "Architects of modern Sinhala", 21 "New styles in modern Sinhala", 22 "Languages in contact", 23 "Evolution of Sinhala", 24 "Maldivian, an off-shoot of Sinhala" and 25 "Sri Lanka, the super-nation that was"), and a bibliography.

Yet, by and large, the book appears somewhat unusual as far as the presentation of both linguistic material and cultural context is concerned. Furthermore, albeit using and referring to some general methods adopted in contemporary linguistics, the author explicitly distances himself from "linguistic theory", describing his methodology as based on "common sense": "No particular linguistic theory has been used in presenting Sinhala. However, Disanayaka was inspired by some concepts in certain theories ..." (p. 16).

Indeed, we do not find in this book a systematic description and overview of the topics mentioned in the table of contents, in the usual format adopted in linguistic scholarship. Rather, the book can be described as a collection of essays and sketches dedicated to a variety of issues in the history, structure, cultural and sociolinguistic context of the Sinhala language, organized according to Disanayaka's vision of these topics. The term "essay" is commonly employed by the author himself. The discussion of linguistic phenomena is scattered over various chapters and sections, which often results in repetitions.

Disanayaka's views and ideas are sometimes quite whimsically structured and arranged. Thus, in Chapter 2, "Sinhala, a living language" (23–50), the author first offers definitions of a few basic (for a professional linguist, even elementary) notions, such as "Living Language", "Classical Language", and "Dead Language", and, subsequently, discusses different varieties of Sinhala, such as colloquial and written language, modern and classical language, standardized and spoken, formal and informal registers, child speech, slang and jargons – often indiscriminately with the aspects of the use of English in Sri Lanka, and interspersed with several facts about reforming the grammar and orthography (e.g. discussion about preservation/elimination of special characters for retroflex ['cerebral'] *ṇ* and *ḷ*, which do not differ in pronunciation from their dental counterparts any longer); all these aspects reappear in other chapters later on.

The book deals with several aspects of the origins, history and evolution of the Sinhala languages, discussing its phonetics, morphology, syntax and lexicon – often not following the usual order of presentation of these topics, which may pose some difficulties for readers of the book. It is, for instance, not quite clear what Disanayaka calls "nature of Sinhala" (p. 18), as opposed to "origins of Sinhala".

Disanayaka posits five periods in the history of Sinhala (Old Sinhala, Middle Sinhala, Classical Sinhala, Pre-Modern Sinhala, and Modern Sinhala). This differs from the generally adopted periodization of the history of Sinhala (as presented, for instance, in Geiger and Jayatilaka 1935) that is divided into four periods: Sinhala (Sinhalese) Prakrit (3th c. BC – 4th c. AD, the period of the Ancient Brahmi Inscriptions); Proto-Sinhala, or the period of the Later Brahmi

inscriptions (5th–8th c.); Mediaeval Sinhala (8th–13th c., when the first literary works appear, next to inscriptions); and Modern Sinhala (13th c. – now). Disanayaka posits a separate earliest stage, Old Sinhala, which covers the period of 2th c. BC – 1st c. AD (Disanayaka's count of "about seven centuries" (p. 315) for this period must be a misprint), which he calls "the oldest substratum[1] of the Sinhala language" (ibid.). The next stage, Middle Sinhala, covers the end of Geiger's "Sinhalese Prakrit" and the next Geiger's period, Proto-Sinhala (thus, 2nd–8th c. AD), and, according to Disanayaka, it witnesses the rise of many new linguistic features, such as the front vowel *ä* (umlaut) and pre-nasal(ized) consonants. Then follow the stages of Classical Sinhala (9th–15th c.) and Pre-modern Sinhala (16th–19th c.), characterized by Disanayaka mainly in terms of the rise of new genres and types of texts (literature, newspapers, etc.). The last stage of Modern Sinhala is associated with the 20th c. Altogether, Disanayaka's periodization appears quite convincing and deserves further substantiation and discussion.

Likewise, when discussing the dialectal varieties of Sinhala, Disanayaka mentions more dialects (seven) than usual: Western Sinhala (Standard), Southern (Ruhunu) Sinhala, Kandyan Sinhala, as well as the dialects Hatara Korala, Digamadulu and Raja Rata. He also mentions a specific mixed language, Singirisi (Sinhala with a considerable amount of English lexicon) and Sri Lankan English.[2]

Of great interest are the chapters that enrich our knowledge about special areas of use of Sinhala that rarely become the subject of linguistic research. Thus, a special chapter, Chapter 8, is dedicated to "Buddhist Sinhala", where Disanayaka distinguishes between two parts of this idiom: the language employed in the sacral life, as opposed to the language of the lay people dealing with the monastic life and personalities of the monks. Disanayaka has also collected rich materials about the linguistic aspects of proverbs (Chapter 9) and professional languages (jargons, Chapter 10). The latter include the jargons of brass workers, cinnamon peelers, dancers, fishermen, graphite miners, jewellers, journalists, masons, musicians, native physicians, paddy farmers, potters, toddy tappers and astrologers.

Disanayaka constantly focuses on the description and analysis of the features of Sinhala that, according to him, constitute its peculiar characteristics. It is well-known, however, that many of these features, considered by Disanayaka

1 The term "substratum" is used here erroneously and quite misleadingly in the sense of "chronological stage".

2 Sri Lankan English has now become the subject of monographic study (Bernaisch 2015); see also review of Lambert (2017) in this issue of *JSALL*.

as unique, are not uncommon in other languages. This holds, for instance, for the complex verbs with such light verbs as *take, give, come, go (forth), beat*, which are also well-known in other New Indo-Aryan languages: Hindi, Marathi, and others. Similarly, passive or causative constructions are not particularly different from what we find in other languages; the opposition of volitive and involitive verbs is known also in Bengali (cf. section 1.3 with the telling title "How Sinhala works"). Likewise, the unique character of the new front mid vowels in Sinhala, *ä* and its long pendant *ā̈*, resulting from the umlaut phenomena in Middle Sinhala, is overestimated: "No other Indo-Aryan, European or Dravidian language has two symbols to represent these two vowel sounds, namely: 'front mid vowels'" (p. 365). More relevant would be information about the considerable influence exerted by Dravidian languages, which contributed to the dramatic change of many structural features of Sinhala.

Chapter 24 of the book, "Maldivian, an off-shoot of Sinhala", provides the reader with some information about the closely related Maldivian language (Divehi, or Dhivehi). Altogether, this information is useful and appropriate in a popularizing book on Sinhala. The main objection is the somewhat Sinhala-centric description of the history and several features of Maldivian: as Disanayaka formulates it, "Sinhala was the parent language that gave birth to Divehi", "a daughter language of Sinhala" (p. 677). There is no doubt that Maldivian and Sinhala are closely related within the Indo-Aryan branch; as a matter of fact, they form the only undoubted subgroup (island subgroup as opposed to the mainland Indo-Aryan languages) and the only clear split within the branch, while all other subgroupings remain the matter of controversy. However, it is not correct to use this as the main proof for the "Sinhala hypothesis" about the origin of Divehi directly from Sinhala, as the author does. Likewise, it is inaccurate to say that "the 'Comparative Method' uses regular sound correspondences between two languages to prove that the one is derived from the other" (p. 682), claiming subsequently that this method proves the origin of Maldivian from Sinhala. As we know, regular sound correspondences within such pairs (or triplets etc.) as Greek and Latin, German and English, Sanskrit and Avestan etc. do not prove that one of the members of the pair derives from the other but, rather, that both derive from a common source. Although there is no doubt that Maldivian (and, in particular, its southern dialects) experienced strong influence from mediaeval Sinhala, there are good reasons to assume that the two languages derive from the one source on the Indian subcontinent (see, e.g., De Silva 1970 [1971]). Unfortunately, Disanayaka is not familiar with the most recent literature about the linguistic history of Maldivian and its relationship with Sinhala, such as, in the first instance, Fritz (2002).

Disanayaka believes that a new Sinhala grammar in English (written within the framework of European/Western linguistics) is an urgent requirement, claiming that "[t]he last grammar, 'A Comprehensive Grammar of the Sinhalese Lanaguage' was written by Abraham Mendis Gunasekara and was published in 1891". Unfortunately, the absence from the list of references of the encyclopaedia of not only the most recent grammatical studies, such as Chandralal (2010), but virtually all grammars that appeared during more than 100 years since the publication of Guṇasékara (1891) (such as, among others, De Silva 1979 or Reynolds 1980; for a short overview, see, for instance, Krasnodembskaja 2011),[3] as well as studies by many Sri Lankan scholars such as, in particular, W.S. Karunatillake, points to serious lacunae in Disanayaka's bibliography, rather than to an actual poor state-of-affairs in the field.

All in all, the author's desire to present the linguistic information about Sinhala within its cultural and sociological contexts, thus producing some sort of a Sinhala encyclopaedia is highly laudable. Discussion of extralinguistic (cultural) topics is scattered all over the book, but reaches its apogee in the last chapter 25, "Sri Lanka, the Super-Nation that was", where Disanayaka claims, in particular, that "[t]he islanders have, with their unfathomable ingenuity, brought their civilization to be among the super-league of ancient nations that included Babylonia and Egypt, Greece and Rome, India and China" (p. 758). Although the originality and unique achievements of the ancient Sinhala culture are beyond dispute, considering it within the general context of a plethora of South Asian ancient civilizations would have been more appropriate.

Disanayaka's encyclopaedia is addressed both to a variety of specialists (teachers of Sinhala, historians, literary scholars, sociologists) and to broad audience, foremost to the Sinhala people interested in their own language, history and culture. In particular, it aims at assisting in the realization of the 10-year national plan (2012–2022) of the development of a Trilingual Sri Lanka. This explains why the book contains quite a lot of general and, at first glance, redundant information, including the explanation and definitions of several very basic notions, such as the difference between dead (extinct), classical and living languages, between literary and colloquial languages, between slang and jargon. Altogether, this causes a somewhat eclectic and chaotic presentation of the material as well as some naïve claims and formulations, almost unavoidable in a book that is written both as a scholarly handbook and a popular encyclopaedia. The book is furthermore not free from inaccurate formulations and misprints (some of which are mentioned above).

3 One of the few relatively recent monographic studies on Sinhala, Gair (1970), is quoted in the bibliography (p. 764) with the wrong year (1870), obviously by misprint.

Nevertheless, in spite of these shortcomings, the book also has many merits, and the author deserves applause, as it contains rich material that can be useful for specialists from different fields: Sri Lanka and Sinhala scholars, Indologists, linguists, anthropologists, and specialists in Sinhala culture. The book is also full of insightful and sharp remarks by the author, sometimes quite different from the views adopted by most Indologists, yet not without interest for Indological scholarship. The book may help to bridge the two, still quite different, Western (European) and Eastern (Sri Lankan) scholarly traditions.

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