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A Grammar of the Great Andamanese Language

An Ethnolinguistic Study

Anvita Abbi

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By

Anvita Abbi

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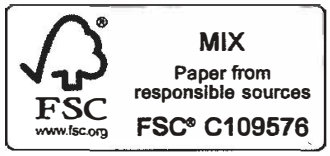

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To Peter Austin

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Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi

PREFACE

This grammar is the result of a major language documentation project *Vanishing Voices of the Great Andamanese* (*VOGA*), which was undertaken from 2005 to 2009 in the Andaman Islands. Under the auspices of the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project, I, along with a team of research assistants spent approximately 40 months in the Andamans, documenting Great Andamanese and producing descriptive and theoretical work on the language. The team members spent varying amounts of time on the island during this four-year period, but I spent the longest as after the initial phase of fieldwork, my research assistants could not sustain their interest in the work primarily because of the threatening attitude of some of the officials, the difficult living conditions in the islands and boredom.

Present-day Great Andamanese (PGA) is a highly endangered language; when the VOGA team first visited Strait Island, the current home of the tribe, there were nine speakers. By the time the team left the Andamans for the last time in 2009 there were only six left. The last speaker of Bo, a variety of Great Andamanese, also died in January 2010. At present there are only five speakers with varying degrees of competence in the language. PGA is a complex and diverse language; it is a koiné formed from four surviving northern Great Andamanese languages: Khora, Jeru, Sare and Bo. It draws its lexicon from all four of these dialects but its grammar is primarily based on Jeru. It displays highly unusual grammatical features such as body part proclitics modifying all parts of speech. Perhaps most importantly, PGA is a unique language; there is strong linguistic and genetic evidence to suggest that the people of the Andaman Islands represent a distinct genetic group who populated the islands from the mainland tens of thousands of years ago. According to some geneticists, Andamanese are the survivors of the first migration out of Africa 70.000 years BP. The language is a fast-closing window on a very ancient form of cognition, or as Nicholas Ostler puts it in his review of the *A Dictionary of the Great Andamanese Language. English-Great Andamanese-Hindi* (Anvita Abbi 2012): "700 centuries of unique experience terminated in just two."

In addition to the Great Andamanese, there are three other distinct indigenous ethnolinguistic groups inhabiting the Andamans: the Jarawa, the Onge and the Sentinelese. My first introduction to the tribes of the Andaman Islands was made in 2000–2001 when I conducted a pilot survey

of the languages of the island titled *Language Survey of Andaman* supported by the Max Planck Institute of Evolutionary Anthropology, Leipzig, Germany. The results of this survey not only opened the road to language documentation but also paved the path to explore the grammar of the Great Andamanese language.

All the languages spoken by these peoples are endangered as their population bases dwindle and Hindi extends its reach ever further in the islands. Great Andamanese is the closest to extinction, however; today only two of the four northern varieties of the language survive. The other two, Khora and Bo, became extinct with the passing of their last speakers Boro Sr. and Boa Sr. respectively.

Little is known about the affairs of the inhabitants of the Andaman Islands until the arrival of the British in the 1860s. The early colonists reported around 5000 people living as hunter-gatherers. At that time there were ten distinct varieties of Great Andamanese named after the ten tribes which spoke them. An estimated 3000–3500 Great Andamanese people lived right across the group of islands known as the Great Andaman. By the time of the 1901 Census of the islands, this number had fallen to just 625. It seems that contact with mainlanders had a devastating effect on the indigenous population, as Edward Horace Man noted: "The interesting Negrito race inhabiting the Andaman Islands is doomed to early extinction—save possibly the small section occupying Little Andaman." (27th June 1918).

By the time of the VOGA team's arrival in 2005, this ominous prediction had sadly been borne out; the number of the Great Andamanese had dwindled to just 51, with only ten members of the tribe still able to speak some form of the language. When the team first encountered the people, they found their lives further blighted by the 2004 tsunami, which drove them from their homes in Strait Island and forced them into temporary shelters in the Andaman capital of Port Blair. Many of the earlier recordings were made in this difficult period. The people were often withdrawn and unwilling to collaborate with the VOGA team, preoccupied as they were with dealing with the difficult situation in which they found themselves. In late 2005 the members of the tribe returned to their homes in Strait Island, a small island to the northeast of Port Blair. The later recordings were all made there.

The Great Andamanese of today live on subsidies provided to them by the Indian government, though some members still continue their traditions of fishing for crabs and other sea-life and hunting turtles. Gathering tubers and potatoes, however, is now virtually non-existent. Most tribe

members understand Hindi, Bangla and a few words of English as well as some words in Great Andamanese. Children under 16 now do not speak or understand the heritage language. The main language of communication amongst members of the tribe is the Andaman variety of Hindi.

The unusual structures of the language captured in the present grammar motivate us to capture the 'possible' structures of human language.

SOAS, University of London, UK

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ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

1	first person
2	second person
3	third person
A	agent
ABL	ablative
ABS	absolutive
ACC	accusative
ADJ	adjective
ADV	adverb
AGT	agentive
APPL	applicative
C	consonant
CAUS	causative
CL 1, CL 2, etc.	body division class 1, 2, etc.
CLASS	classifier
CLT	clitic
COM	comitative
COMP	complementiser
COMPR	comparative
CONJ	conjunct
COP	copula
COND	conditional
CONV	converb
D	possessed
DAT	dative
DEM	demonstrative
DIR	directional
DIS.VIS	distant visible
DIS.INVIS	distant invisible
DST.PST	distant past
DO	Direct object
DU	dual
EMPH	emphatic
ERG	ergative
EXCL	exclusive

EXIST	existential
F	female
FA	formative affix
GEN	genitive
H, HON	honorific
HAB	habitual
IMM.PST	immediate past
IMP	imperative
IO	indirect object
INA	inalienability
INCL	inclusive
INSTR	instrument
INT	intimate
LOC	locational
M	male
MOD	modifier
MT	mother tongue
N	noun
NEG	negative
NMLZ	nominaliser
NOM	nominal
NP	noun phrase
NPST	non-past tense
NRR.PST	narrative past
O	object
OBJ	object clitic
PGA	Present-day Great Andamanese
PCPL	participial
PL	plural
PP	postpositional phrase
POSS	possessive
PRO	pronoun
PROHB	prohibitive
PROX	proximate
PROX1	proximate, nearer to the speaker
PROX2	proximate, nearer to the hearer
PST	past
Q	question
R	possessor

REC	reciprocal
REL	relativiser
REFL	reflexive
RESULT	resultative
S	subject
SG	singular
Sp	speaker
SPEC	specific
STAT	stative
SUBJ	subjunctive
TAM	tense, mood and aspect
TR	transitiviser
V	verb
vt	verb transitive
vi	verb intransitive
X	any entity
=	clitic boundary