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REVIEWS

Seino van Breugel. 2021. *A dictionary of Atong, a Tibeto-Burman language of Northeast India and Bangladesh* (Pacific Linguistics 664). Berlin–Boston: De Gruyter Mouton. Pp. xxviii + 378.

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The Atong language¹ presented in the dictionary described above is spoken as a minority tongue (“lesser-used” language) in the eastern part of the South Garo Hills, south-western part of the West Khasi Hills, and westernmost part of the Southwest Khasi Districts in the Indian State of Meghalaya and, across the state border, in the Bangladeshi Netrokona District (*Nētrakōnā jilā* নেত্রকোণা জিলা) of the Mymensingh Division (higher administrative unit, *Maṃyamanasinha bibhāga* ময়মনসিংহ বিভাগ) along the Simsang~Some(s)h(wari) River². The volume includes two small but reasonably transparent maps, one showing “Meghalaya within India” (p. xvii); the other is a “rough indication [with a grey oval] of the Atong speaking area in Meghalaya” (xviii, *italics* afm.) with some trans-border intrusion into Bangladesh, which means that the most important map needed is absent – one which would display details of the inside of the grey oval³.

Two dominant languages in the State of Meghalaya are the Austroasiatic (Mon-Khmer) Khasi dominating in the east, and Sino-Tibetan Garo (~ Achik(ku)) dominating in the west, each in use by over 30% of the State population. The two most eastern (West and East Jaintia Hills) Districts of Meghalaya are Pnar (~Jaintia~Synteng; Mon-Khmer) language areas (10÷11% of State population). Atong is on the Indian side of the border

¹ At least one other <Atong> language (Southern Bantoid Grassfields) is in use in Cameroon (Département de la Momo, Région du Nord-Ouest; Breton & Fohitung 1991: 135), cf. Asher and Moseley (2007: 313), maps 93 (p. 359) and 95 (361) and *Ethnologue* (¹⁶2009:65) and (map) 685. The subtitle of the volume is therefore important and useful.

² Crossing the border, the river changes its name to Someshwari~Someswari (Bengali: *Sōmēśbarī nadī* সোমেশ্বরী নদী).

³ See reviews of Schokkin (2020) and Smith-Dennis (2020) in this journal on maps, statistics, and other similar issues touched upon in the present text. One would like to e.g. see the location of the two villages – Badri Maidugythy and Siju – and at least some of the “different places” where “Atong is spoken in different ways” (xvi) mentioned in the “Introduction” (xv-xvi).

surrounded by Khasi-speaking territory, and on the Bangladeshi side by Bengali-speaking population⁴.

The official language of the State is English. Atong-speaking people regard themselves as “belonging to the Garo tribe” and are officially counted in respective statistics as speakers of Garo, even if Garo speakers do not understand Atong (while Atong speakers understand and can speak Garo; cf. xvi). Breugel quotes (from *Ethnologue* ²³2020 but the ¹⁶2009 edition provides precisely the same figures) “a population of 4,600 Atongs in India, with the addition that the total number of “users in all countries” is 10,000” and himself adds that “no official numbers are available” (xvii). *Ethnologue* (¹⁶2009: 366) mentions also Atong speakers in the “south Kamrup District” of the State of Assam. The same source reports 5,400 Atong speakers from Netrokona (cf. above) which indeed makes up 10,000. Voegelin and Voegelin (1977: 82) leave Atong without statistics but mention “a Koch (sub)group” which “is said to include several separate languages, two of which are named” – Atong and Wanang – and provide the number of speakers of all Koch languages: 10,000. Asher and Moseley (2007: 166) explain that “Koch is a collective term of various western *Bodo-Garo* languages beyond Garo. [...] Most Koch languages are poorly known and have small and declining speaker numbers”, and “Some Koch languages (Atong, Wanang, Hajong) are also officially (but incorrectly) regarded as dialects of Garo”. Two more Koch languages mentioned (ibid.) are Rabha and Ruga; no statistics have been provided for any Koch ethnolect or for the entire group. Interestingly, Meier and Meier (1979: 157) quoted or assessed the number of Atong speakers at 20,000⁵.

Atong has been classified among languages of the Koch sub-branch (<Kotó Unterzweig>) of the Garo sub-branch (Garo-Unterzweig) of the Bodo branch (“Bodo-Zweig, auch Barischer Zweig”) in Sino-Tibeto-Tai, “numerically the world’s second largest language family” (<die zahlenmäßig zweitgrößte Sprachfamilie der Erde>; see Meier and Meier 1979: 157, 128), with the remark that “it contains various/multiple Garo elements” (<es enthält mehrere Garo-Elemente>, ibid. 157); cf. also Voegelin and Voegelin (1977: 82). In Asher and Moseley (2007), “Atong is a Koch language” of the Bodo-Garo (~Bodo-Koch) grouping in the Sal [~ Brahmaputran ~ Jingpho-Konyak-Bodo ~ Bodo-Konyak-Jinghpaw” (~ BKJ)] subgroup of Tibeto-Burman subdivision of the Sino-Tibetan family of languages (166, 159). Breugel’s dictionary “does not represent Atong as a whole” and “the variety recorded is the variety spoken in India” (xvi). The Bangladeshi variety (varieties ?), as one learns from *Ethnologue* (¹⁶2009: 328), “will possibly become more mixed with the Abeng dialect of Garo and Bengali”. It is said to be spoken by generations of “all ages, but many children can speak Abeng before starting school” (ibid.).

⁴ While Khasi-speaking population exceeds 1,000,000, Bengali with its well over 250,000,000-strong population of speakers is the fifth-sixth largest language in the world.

⁵ This reviewer also provided the same figure for Atong in his (1989: 70) publication (compiled five years earlier, staying far away from sources to be consulted) – evidently, either using the same source, in both cases not indicated, or simply taking it from Meier and Meier.

Also Breugel speaks about Atong [sub]varieties (~ dialects) on the Indian territory⁶. The source of the material presented in the Dictionary was, in the first place, the language of inhabitants of the two villages (2, v) mentioned in footnote 3. “Many of the words and sentences [... have been] taken from the texts [...] recorded [...] between 2004 and 2014” on tape⁷, subsequently transcribed on paper and translated (with “remarkable enthusiasm and devotion”) with the help of seven named male assistance (the names of story tellers have also been listed, see “Acknowledgements”, v). The lexicon was then supplemented with similar material from notes taken during interaction with native speakers, such as learning the language, from “a variety of speakers intentionally adding some words to the dictionary”, and “queries on Facebook” (v; rearrangement of phrases *afm.*). The Kamrup variety (Kamrupi), seemingly not mentioned by Breugel, may naturally include Western Assamese elements and other traces of influence.

The book is organized into five “Parts” preceded by the usual “front matter” and concludes with a list of “References” (375-6) and an “Index” (377-8); the latter two both clearly testify (see items listed with <Breugel> as author, 375, and entry <van Breugel>, 378) that Atong so-far had its sole researcher studying, documenting, and describing the language.

The front matter includes, apart from the “Acknowledgements” (v-vi) quoted above, a detailed table of “Contents” (vii-xii), “List of Tables [37] and Maps [2]” (xiii-xiv), followed by a “Prologue” (xv-xxii, with “Introduction” (xv-xvi), a (far too) short note on “Atong and its Speakers” with the two maps referred to above (xvi-xviii), and “A note on Atong orthography” (developed by Breugel himself; xviii-xxii), a list of “Abbreviations of grammatical categories” (xxiii-xxiv), a “List of abbreviations of types of headword” (i.e., items like e.g. <adjective Type 1, adjective Type 2, classifier, auto-classifier, collocation, conjunction, discourse connective, demonstrative, enclitic, event specifier, ideophone, khathajyksai⁸, numeral, suffix, or various verbal types: *v.*, *vB.*, *vgoal.*, *vintr.*, *v∅*, *vpan.*, *vph.*, *vsI.*, *vsec.*, *vts.*>, xxv-xxvi), “Labels for the semantic domains of nouns in the Atong-English dictionary” (items like e.g. <abstract noun, human activities, animals, body parts, emotions and feelings, persons, places, shapes, supernatural beings>, etc., xxvii), and a short list of “Symbols” (xxviii).

The first part opens with an atypical instruction for potential users entitled “What do we see in the Atong-English dictionary?” (1-10) with directions being precise to the point of exaggeration⁹ but at the same time including detailed information on the structure and contents of entries which are quite elaborate. The author himself classified his dictionary

⁶ “Within Atong there are several dialects. People from Badri, for example, speak differently from people in Siju” (Breugel 2015: 8).

⁷ At least some part of these texts, if not all, can be these printed in Breugel (2015) (all the names of the 26 [four ladies] “authors of the stories [Breugel] recorded” mentioned in “Acknowledgements” of the *Dictionary* under review (p. v) have been indicated as story-tellers in the 2015 collection and the order of the names listed coincides for the most part with the sequence of the texts authored by the respective persons in the collection).

⁸ ‘Married words’, explained by Breugel on p. 2.

⁹ But, after some reflection (why not?), even a person using dictionaries practically constantly can read these indications with a growing interest, perhaps with some amusement added.

as “scholarly”, “contain[ing] a lot of information [...] meant for academics in universities” but at the same time useful to “anyone who just wants to translate a word from” one language to the other both ways (cf. p. xv). Apart from entry words and their equivalents in the other language, practically every entry provides abundant information both linguistic (like e.g. word category, classifier where appropriate, donor language in the case of loans, usage examples in form of phrases and sentences, etc.) and extralinguistic (like e.g. <measure>, <kinship>, <supernatural>, <plant> - with Latin identification, etc.); the equally elaborate system of vehicles of all that information (abbreviations, labels, symbols – mentioned above) is applied for this purpose.

What follows is the “Atong-English dictionary” (11-134), treated by Breugel as the third edition of his developing dictionary of the language (xv), its predecessors being a local (Tura: Tura Book Room) publication under the same title in 2009 (Breugel’s second work related to Atong on the chronologically arranged list of “References” (375)) and the *Atong-English Dictionary. Second edition* published online in 2015 and also 2019¹⁰.

With its over 3,900 entry words (some entries are followed by sub-entries) revised and corrected in relation to the previous editions mentioned, it is not a big or extensive dictionary but with its rich information offered in the entries throughout the “Atong-English” part, it constitutes an attractive proposal useful for specialists and others with interest in ethnolinguistics, also ethnology, cultural anthropology, etc., far beyond the area of Tibeto-Burman linguistics.

Part two is “English-Atong dictionary” (140-84), also preceded by the “What do we see...?” users’ guide – in this case shorter¹¹ (135-7) but supported with a note on “How to use the English-Atong dictionary” (137-9). As expected, this is conceived as a companion (an index-vocabulary) to the Atong-English part (cf. p. 137) and proposes a very convenient innovation: not the English entry words but their Atong equivalents are provided in bold type. Most entries are of the simple structure <entry word abbr./symbol **equivalent(s)**> but selected entries (e.g. <the, *art.*>, <a ~ an *art.*>, <rice, *n.*>, <person, *n.*>, <cut, *v.*>, <go, *v.*>, <put, *v.*>, <sit, *v.*>) are relatively expanded. The number of entry words is estimated at “almost 3000” and the material is treated as “the first edition” (xv). The author emphasizes that this way dictionary “only contains Atong words [he] has recorded” himself.

Part three entitled “Semantic lexica” (185-245) constitutes a sort of classifying (~ classified ~ thematic) vocabulary consisting of “lists of words organized by their meanings”; the first four of them are: 1. “Days of the week” (185; since they are Bengali loans “completely integrated into Atong, and adopted to Atong pronunciation”, their source equivalents have been provided in the original Bengali syllabary *vāmlā* (~ *bānlā*) *lipi* (বাংলা লিপি) without transliteration), 2. “Months of the year” (186; with two “styles” provided: “modern”, borrowed from English (*jenuari*, *phebuari*, etc.), and “old”, based

¹⁰ The “Introduction” to the latter starts with the information that “This dictionary is in the first place for the Atongs, and in the second place for everyone else who is interested in Atong” (p. vi).

¹¹ Remarks concerning its equivalent preceding the Atong-English part (cf. above) are applicable also in this case.

on Bengali-Atong compounds (*makja*, *pargunja*, etc., *-ja* being Atong *ja* ‘month’) with source equivalents provided in the same way as in the case of “Days...”), 3. “...kinship terms: Atong-English” (187-90), and 4. “...kinship terms: English-Atong” (191-3). The fifth component labeled “Semantic lexicon of verbs and nouns” (194-245) is a set of 25 thematic sections, such as e.g. “5.1 Nature and natural phenomena” (including subsections like “Heavenly bodies”, “Parts of the day”, “Seasons”, “Weather”, etc.), “5.3 Physical processes” (like ‘to burn’, ‘to be alive’, ‘to flow into’, ‘to shine’, etc.), “5.5 Humans” (with subsections like “Human body parts”, “Products of the human body”, “Bodily functions”, “Diseases and infections”, etc.), “5.6 Human behaviour” (here subsections include “Child bearing and raising”, “Death”, “Religion”, but also “Killing” (with words for e.g. ‘to slaughter’, ‘to poison’, but also ‘to hang someone’), “5.7 Language” (including even *Masteldygri* ‘MA degree’ and *Bechylyrdygri*), “5.8 Food and cooking, eating and drinking”, “5.13 The supernatural”, “5.14 Animals”, “5.15 Plants and trees”, etc., to end with “5.25 Abstract”. This part should also attract attention of ethnographers, ethnologists, anthropologists, ethnolinguists.

Part four, in turn, is more interesting for linguists, perhaps particularly typologists. Entitled “Grammatical lexica” (246-84), it embraces 22 “lists of lexemes and morphemes grouped together on the basis of grammatical criteria” (246), including i.a. lists of classifiers and measure words (252-5), demonstratives (259), conjunctions (~ discourse connectives, 260), grammatical categories and their exponents (261-4), “ideophones” (rather onomatopoeias¹², 266-7), interrogatives (271), personal pronouns (273), numerals (with sub-lists of loans from English and from Hindi, 276-81), “time words” (non-deictic, like ‘year’, ‘evening’, ‘minute’, and deictic, like ‘before’, ‘this morning’, ‘now’, ‘next year’, etc., 282), “intransitive and transitive verbal pairs” (283).

“Part 5: Compendium of Atong Grammar” (285-310) is a sketchy grammatical outline elegantly complementing and supporting “Part 4” and the list of abbreviations of grammatical categories mentioned, but actually the entire structure of the volume. The author, however, naturally advises the use of his own 2014 almost 700-page grammar.

The list of “References” is preceded by an “Appendix of Photos”, 127 of them (311-73, many color photos) – they may compensate to some extent the feeling, expressed above, of the want of certain information in the material preceding the dictionary part. Breugel suggests using the appendix “when an English word is not in [the English-Atong] dictionary” (139). Indeed, among the photos there are such on which names of objects photographed or their parts have been printed. It is advisable to inspect also all-color quality photos to be found in Breugel’s publication of Atong texts (2015) available online – you may get familiar with practically all Breugel’s story-teller informants as well as scenes from Atong people’s life and habitat (the two villages!) and even Breugel’s field-work.

The release (by one of the world’s leading publishers of linguistic literature!) of the volume under scrutiny here should be met with much appreciation: one more from among

¹² On ideophones in e.g. African languages see e.g. Childs 1995:132ff., 369 (“no grammar of an African language with ideophones can be considered adequate without a treatment of ideophones”, *ibid.*, p. 132). To better understand the difference, check also the gist of “iconic expressions” (see e.g. Kakehi et al. 1996).

the majority of “lesser-used” and so far undescribed languages significantly changes its status in this respect – to <adequately described>. Both the author of the Atong dictionary and its Publisher deserve words of gratitude from all those who do care about the world’s language diversity.

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