

Comrie, Zamponi *A Grammar of Akajeru*

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Review of Comrie, B.; Zamponi, R. (2021). *A Grammar of Akajeru: Fragments of a Traditional North Andamanese Dialect*. London: UCL Press, xi + 171 pp.

1 Introduction: Why Do We Talk About an Endangered Language?

The book I am reviewing is the grammar of a language that is nowadays practically extinct, surviving essentially in some grammatical forms of another language spoken by only a few people today. The language I am talking about is called Akajeru, one of the ten Great Andamanese language varieties that, prior to the British settlement on the islands in the mid-nineteenth century, were widely spoken along the territories of the Andaman Islands, from north to south, by the numerous communities living there [\[map 1\]](#).

Before I get into the heart of the review, I would like to spend a few lines describing the particularly endangered status of the Akajeru language. It is essential to do so because the study conducted by Comrie and Zamponi has focused on a language that is practically, but not entirely, extinct. In fact, their work lies somewhere between reconstructing the grammar of a language that is no longer spoken and observing what forms of this language are, instead, present in another language that is still known today, albeit by only three people. Their research is indeed of immense value and interest to scholars in this field.



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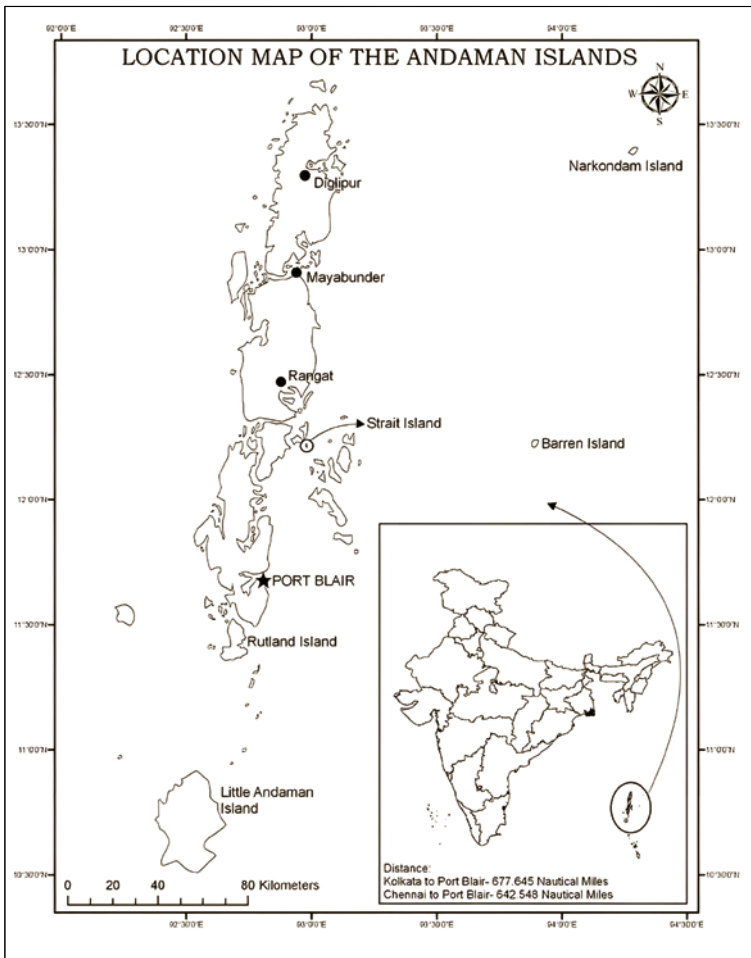
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Map 1 Location of the Andaman Islands. Source: Abbi 2013, 4

The study of the Akajeru language is not isolated but stands within a broader interest towards Great Andamanese languages, but it also goes further. As we shall see, Comrie and Zamponi speak of the presence of typological phenomena such as somatic prefixes, thus broadening the interest in the study of Great Andamanese language family to the field of linguistic typology, which is an area of research in which Comrie in particular is engaged, but also to the broader reflection on languages as human means of communication.

To understand why Comrie and Zamponi felt the need to write a grammar on this language, let us briefly look at what happened to

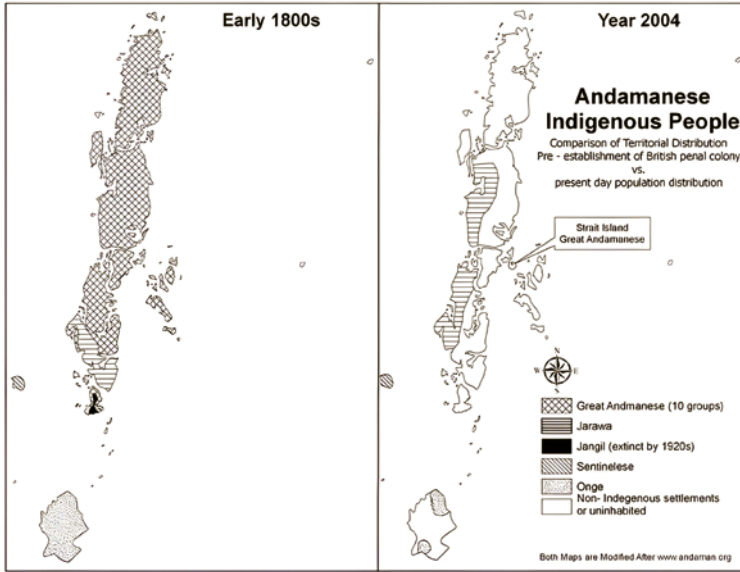
the Akajeru language and its neighbouring languages over the past 150 years. The story of how these languages became so threatened is mainly related to the history of British rule over the islands and the measures they took against the Andaman peoples. Since the mid-nineteenth century, when the British managed to finally settle permanently on the islands, the irreversible phase of demographic, cultural and linguistic decline of the islands' native peoples began.

The colonisation of the islands by the British caused a massive demographic pressure due to the establishment of a penal settlement on the islands, the spread of diseases among the Andamanese and the creation of 'Andaman Homes' where Andamanese inhabitants were housed for the purpose of studying and 'civilising' them, according to the standards of nineteenth-century British society. Both during the movements for Indian independence from British rule and after the independence and Partition of India in 1947, large numbers of people were transported to the Andaman Islands. While the presence of inhabitants arriving from outside expanded, the number of local Andamanese inhabitants decreased and, with it, the large cultural and linguistic diversity present on the islands also began to disappear. The Andaman Islands and its native inhabitants were the most affected of the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago, and this was because it was here that the largest number of convicts and new settlers arrived.¹

As we mentioned in the opening paragraph, before the arrival of the British, the Andaman Islands were a very linguistically flourishing territory. Anvita Abbi, who has been devoting her research and fieldwork to the Great Andamanese language family for years, has indicated the presence of two different language families in the Andamanese archipelago, i.e. Great Andamanese and Angan (2006). To this latter language family belong the Önge, Jarawa and the extinct Jangil language, but we will not deal with them here. Abbi firstly classified the Great Andamanese language family as the sixth language family of India and the Akajeru language belongs to it. Today, the term 'Great Andamanese' is used as a cover term (Abbi 2009, 792; 2013, 9) to refer to all the language varieties that were once spoken on the territory of Great Andaman, which is the largest island of the Andamanese archipelago. These varieties are counted as ten and were originally distributed over the territory from north to south, and known as North Andamanese, Middle Andamanese and South Andamanese. The Akajeru language belongs to the group of northern language varieties, together with the Akabo, Akachari (or Sare)

1 In this regard, there are many scholars who have devoted themselves to analysing this historical period and the relations between the British and the native inhabitants of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The main scholars who have dealt with this subject are: Sen 2010; 2011; Vaidik 2010; Zehmisch 2012; 2017; Anderson, Mazumdar, Pandya 2016; Mathur 1985.

and Akakhora languages, and they together make up what is known today as Present Great Andamanese (PGA) [map 2].



Map 2 Andamanese indigenous people on the Islands in the early 1800s vs. in 2004. Source: Abbi 2013, 5

Today, the linguistic diversity and variety once present in the Andaman Islands no longer exists. The languages mainly affected by this serious endangered condition are the Great Andamanese languages that are known in the form of PGA by only three members of the Great Andamanese community living on Strait Island.

It is important to recognise the value of Comrie and Zamponi's work also in the light of the context just described. From that, we learn that the process of endangerment affects both the Great Andamanese languages as well as the physical community of native speakers who, today, also choose not to give these languages the prestige of being the primary means of communication within the community but choosing Hindi instead.

In the next section, I will go into more detail about their work on the Akajeru language, the sources they used and the structure of the volume, as well as the most interesting points of their research.

2 Comrie and Zamponi's Project and the Sources They Used

In the history of linguistic studies of the Andaman Islands, Bernard Comrie and Raoul Zamponi are fairly recent scholars. The *Grammar of the Akajeru* is not an isolated volume but belongs to a larger project that the two authors have in mind, of which they themselves talk about in the preface to the volume. Here, the authors claim that it is part of an “ongoing effort to analyse all the extant material on the now-extinct traditional Great Andamanese languages, as they were documented in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (2021, xi). Prior to this volume, the authors had published the article “Typological Profile of the Great Andamanese Family” in 2017 and their first grammar of a Great Andamanese language, the Akabea of the southern Great Andamanese language group, was released in 2020. For this grammar of Akabea language, they drew on sources from the British period, such as the scholar-administrators Edward Horace Man and Maurice Vidal Portman, and focused heavily on particularly interesting typological linguistic elements, that are peculiar to the Akabea language, such as the somatic prefixes.

The *Grammar of Akajeru*, unlike the *Grammar of Akabea*, is published as part of a recent series of publications born in 2020, of which this volume is the second publication. The series is called *Grammars of World and Minority Languages* and is edited by Lily Kahn and Riitta-Liisa Valijärvi.² It has been created with the aim of promoting and supporting the study, teaching and revitalisation, where possible, of minority and endangered languages in the world. The Akajeru language is certainly very interesting to study because the fact that it is not completely extinct, but survives in a certain sense within another language, makes Comrie's and Zamponi's research even more interesting from the point of view of methodology and the use of multiple sources. The work of the two scholars lies in between; on the one hand, they rely on sources from the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century British period to reconstruct the Akajeru grammar, and on the other hand, they make use of contemporary PGA research to establish how much Akajeru is present in it. For while it is true that no one now speaks Akajeru as a native language, it is equally true that this language is still present in the grammatical structure of the PGA, even though only three people know this language, which is a *koinè* (Manoharan 1989).³

² Lily Kahn is Professor of Hebrew and Jewish languages at University College London. Riitta-Liisa Valijärvi is Associate Professor of Finnish and minority languages at University College London and senior lecturer in Finno-Ugric languages at Uppsala University.

³ As we mentioned in the concluding lines of the first section, it is worth keeping in mind that these three Great Andamanese people who know PGA do not use it as their native language. They understand and speak PGA if necessary or if requested - for ex-

Thus, the main objectives of this grammar are as follows: first, to reconstruct the grammar of the Akajeru language and second, to establish the consistency of the Akajeru language in the PGA. Comrie and Zamponi also give a lot of importance to the other North Andamanese co-dialects and the position of Akajeru in relation to them, but also to the position of the four main Northern Andamanese language varieties (Akajeru, Akachari, Akakhora, Akabo) in relation to PGA. In order to achieve their objectives, the authors have at their disposal a whole series of primary and secondary sources, resulting from the numerous studies conducted on these languages over time since the mid-1800s. With regard to the second point on the PGA language, they rely on researches from the mid-1900s to the present day and in particular on the material carefully collected, analysed and published by Abbi (2006; 2009; 2012; 2013; 2020) over the past ten years. Other important scholars they rely on include Basu (1952), Manoharan (1989; 1997), Gnanasundaram and Manoharan (2007), Avtans (2006), Choudhary (2006), Som (2006) and Narang (2008).

On the first point, their research was based on British sources from the late 1800s and early 1900s. Their two main sources are those published by the social anthropologist Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown and the administrator and anthropologist Edward Horace Man. Both of them were British and they collected linguistic material first-hand from native speakers. However, neither of them were on the islands to exclusively conduct linguistic studies. Man was on the islands for reasons related to his position as an administrator and it was here that he became interested in the anthropological study of the islands' indigenous communities. The study of languages was part of his anthropological interest, he devoted much fieldwork to it and published several works in collaboration with another scholar-administrator, Richard Carnac Temple, and a linguist of the time, Alexander John Ellis. Man collected material on the traditional speech of Akajeru in a dictionary of the Akabea language, which he published between 1919 and 1923 as a series of supplements within the journal *Indian Antiquary*, and then in 1923 in a comprehensive monograph.

Radcliffe-Brown, on the other hand, was by training a social anthropologist and conducted fieldwork in the Andaman Islands from 1906 to 1909, in which he focused primarily on the anthropological study of indigenous communities. His linguistic interest merged with his anthropological one, and it is thus that in his publications we find much material on the languages of Great Andaman and Lit-

ample, during Anvita Abbi's fieldwork they spoke PGA as it was requested for research purposes. However, normally, the preferred language of communication is Andamanese Hindi even among themselves and with other members of the Great Andamanese community (Abbi 2013, 7).

tle Andaman, although his primary merit lies not in the accuracy of the linguistic analyses but in the consistency of the data collected.

Indeed, an important point that Comrie and Zamponi highlight is their intention to re-evaluate the relevance of the data collected by Radcliffe-Brown in his early twentieth-century fieldwork, while acknowledging its limitations in terms of its analysis. The British anthropologist is, in fact, the main source from which Comrie and Zamponi draw fragments of the Akajeru language to write the present grammar. In particular, they use the material contained in the work *The Andaman Islanders*, which was first published in 1922 and then republished in an expanded version eleven years later, in 1933.

In the 1922 version, we find an appendix entitled “The Spelling of Andamanese words” (Radcliffe-Brown 1922, 495-7) containing information on the Great Andamanese and Little Andaman languages, while in the 1933 work, we find a small essay on the sounds and grammar of the Andamanese languages, “The Andamanese Languages” (Radcliffe-Brown 1933, 495-504), where he specifies that he included primary material on the Akajeru and Önge languages, as well as material on the Aka-Bea language retrieved from the publications of another British scholar, Maurice Vidal Portman.

3 **The Structure of the Grammar: A Parallel Between Late Nineteenth-Early Twentieth-Century British Sources and Recent Fieldwork**

In the introduction, in addition to discussing the sources used, the authors give some background on the Akajeru language and its genealogical position in relation to its Great Andamanese co-dialects. To do so, they make extensive use of the research material of Radcliffe-Brown, Man, Temple and Portman and compile comparative tables between the dialects. Right from the start, we notice that Comrie and Zamponi analyse the sources at their disposal in a parallel manner, engaging in an in-depth comparison between them. This is a strong point of their work, which introduces the reader to the state of knowledge of Akajeru, including other North Andamanese co-dialects, by comparing it with the material recently collected by the scholar Abbi on PGA. In the book, we can find numerous comparative tables between Akajeru, its other North Andamanese co-dialects and PGA, accompanied by careful analysis and references to the sources available to them.

After the introduction, Comrie and Zamponi devote the heart of the volume to analysing the grammar of the Akajeru language. From the second to the sixth chapter, they deal with phonology, stems, words, noun phrases and clauses.

In chapter 2 on phonology, the two authors focus on the different transcription systems of the consonant and vowel phonemes of the Akajeru and other North Andamanese dialects used by Radcliffe-Brown and Man, comparing them with each other and with PGA transcriptions by Abbi. There are several tables confronting the different transcriptions of particular phonemes. In addition, aided by the transcriptions at their disposal, they compile two tables (tables 2.3 and 2.5) - which they refer to as 'tentative' and 'plausible' - in which they attempt to reconstruct the framework of the consonantal and vowel system in the Akajeru language.

Another aspect they point out is the non-attestation of accents in the Great Andamanese language family in general, in both Radcliffe-Brown's and Man's sources. After spending a brief section on the syllabic structure in Akajeru, they inform us about the transcription system they chose to adopt for this volume, which, however, is not free of difficulties and phonetic limitations due to the scarce documentation available, as well as the fact that PGA cannot be completely relied upon as there is not always any certainty as to whether Akajeru is equivalent or not.⁴

The third chapter is dedicated to stems, which are very important for Great Andamanese languages since their morphology is agglutinative and therefore certain elements such as prefixes and suffixes are very important. The two scholars point out that in the case of these languages, the prefixes and suffixes are predominantly monosyllabic, only a few are disyllabic, whereas the roots can be di- or trisyllabic. In this chapter, they first analyse roots and then the types of affixes, presenting numerous examples drawn from their sources. As far as roots are concerned, they recognise that from a morphological and syntactic point of view they mostly have an invariable word class. They go into detail about some particular roots, for example the root *kimil*, which has a multi-categorical lexical base, or some roots that have an etymological doublet with relatable meaning. Interestingly, they note that there are four separate roots that in Radcliffe-Brown's Akajeru documentation would share the same source.

In the section on affixes, the two authors highlight how the Akajeru language possesses a complex and rich derivational morphology, with 10 documented prefixes and 2 suffixes. It is here that they highlight one of the most interesting aspects not only of the Akajeru language, but of Great Andamanese languages in general: somatic prefixes, i.e. those prefixes that are related to body parts. The authors point out that at least about one third of the Akajeru/North Andamanese words collected by Radcliffe-Brown and Man have a somatic

⁴ "PGA is not simply the linear descendant of Akajeru and there is no guarantee that such values would be correct" (Comrie, Zamponi 2021, 23).

prefix. They report them as follows: *aka-* / *a-* (mouth), *ara-* / *arai-* / *εra-* (abdomen, back), *e-* (body), *εr-* (face, arms), *oŋ* / *om-* (hands, feet), *ot-* (head). In the course of the chapter, they dedicate a separate section to analyse each of these somatic prefixes by making an extensive use of sources but still highlighting the paucity of data available to them.

Comrie and Zamponi had already discussed the presence of somatic prefixes in the Great Andamanese languages in their 2017 article in which they outlined the typological profile of these languages, and later, they elaborated on it in their 2020 *Grammar of Akabea* and in an article published the following year, in 2021, in the open access journal *Cadernos de Linguística*. They define somatic prefixes as a ‘cross-linguistically rare phenomenon’ since they are not only found in the Great Andamanese languages but can also be found in other language families located in two separate geographical areas of the American continent: one in the Pacific Northwest of North America and the other in Mesoamerica (2017, 68; 2021, 10). This is a really interesting phenomenon as it shows us a strong link, expressed at a linguistic level, between the body and its environment, thus offering us an interesting opportunity to reflect on the relationship between humans and the environment in the Great Andamanese community, and more widely in our contemporary communities as well.

In Chapter 4, the authors turn to the description of words in Akajeru. They devote the first section to analysing various word classes in Akajeru, which they identify as major – such as nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs – and minor – pronouns, definite article, postpositions and particles. First of all, they note the consistent presence of clitics that from a morpho-syntactic point of view are considered words – since they occupy their own space in the syntax of the sentence – but from a phonological point of view they do not, and for this reason they are bound to phonological words that host them. They can be bound to be either proclitically – when they are placed before phonological host words – or enclitically – when they are placed after them. Each of the word classes analysed is richly accompanied by examples of words and phrases taken from the sources and which Comrie and Zamponi committed to paralleling with material on the other North Andamanese languages and the PGA.

In the same chapter, the authors show the formation of compound words, consisting in two elements of which one is necessarily a noun, and they provide examples taken from Radcliffe-Brown. Lastly, they address the issue of Akajeru word inflections by making an interesting parallel with the attestations recorded by Abbi in the PGA.

There follows the fifth chapter, which is a short chapter on noun phrases in which Comrie and Zamponi observe that the construction of noun phrases in Akajeru is similar to that of other Great Andamanese languages, where possessive pronouns and nominal possessors are placed before the main noun while the definite article and ad-

jectives follow it. They note that Akajeru behaves differently in the case of noun phrases with a full nominal possessor and indicate two different types of possessive constructions.

Finally, in Chapter 6, Comrie and Zamponi show very briefly how clauses are formed in Akajeru, distinguishing between copular and verbal clauses. Copular clauses may or may not have the enclitic copula (=bi) and they express ties of identity, attribution and existence whereas for verbal clauses they distinguish between those with transitive verbs and those with intransitive verbs. In the first ones, the order is subject-object-verb, in the second ones it is subject-verb. Moreover, in the sources they trace the presence of only one interrogative clause determined by the initial presence of an interrogative pronoun (*afiu*, who).

4 Results and Conclusions of the Grammatical Analysis: To What Extent is Akajeru Present in PGA?

Following these five central chapters, the chapter that follows is very interesting and somewhat pulls together all the observations and analyses made by the two authors in the course of their study of the older British sources alongside, in parallel to the more recent ones especially by Abbi but also by some other scholars. They point out that in that process of cultural and linguistic endangerment that began in the mid-1800s, with the establishment of the British on the islands, the Great Andamanese communities present on the islands began to intermix with each other and the main slice of them was Akajeru. Recalling the main claims made by scholars over the past 50-70 years about the Great Andamanese languages and about Akajeru being the main constituent of PGA, Comrie and Zamponi seek to understand if the results of their research tell us anything more, if and what they confirm or deny about these claims to some extent.

Firstly, they point out that the presence of the fricatives [ʃ] or [s] in PGA is an innovation in this language as they do not find them documented in any of the North Andamanese dialects and suggest that they may be a post-contact result, such as the influence of Hindi. They also remark on the fact that often words that are similar in the various North Andamanese dialects - specifying that they mainly refer to Akajeru and Akachari, since they are the best documented - differ in vowel correspondence. The PGA sometimes shows the Akajeru form, sometimes the Akachari form, but most of the times it follows neither one nor the other and is likely to be an Akabo or Akakhora form.

Instead, with regard to the pronunciation of consonants, they state that there are rarely differences in pronunciation between PGA and the Akajeru and Akachari forms. They give only two examples: the word for 'imperial pigeon' (*merit* in PGA, *mirid* both in Akajeru and

Akachari) and for the tree of the species *Dipterocarpus laevis* (*kəɔɔij* in PGA, *kəɔɔin* in Akajeru and Akachari). Interestingly, we learn that in those few cases where the words Akajeru and Akachari do not correspond at all, PGA prefers the form either the same or more similar to Akajeru. The only exception they find is in the word for ‘moon’, which for PGA and Akachari is very similar (*dulɔ* in PGA, <*dolāū*> in Akachari as reported by Portman 1887, 51) whereas in Akajeru it differs a lot (*firikli*).

From a morphological point of view, the only difference they find between Akajeru and PGA is in their different use of the somatic prefix *-ot* with words that indicate the possession of human beings (understood as, for example, ‘my sister/my brother’). Regarding syntax, they detect no differences between PGA and Akajeru, but they also point out that it could be due to the insufficiency of sources on the Akajeru language.

The conclusion reached by Comrie and Zamponi confirms the hypotheses advanced by other authors on PGA and the Great Andamanese languages of which it is composed and which they presented and observed at the beginning of this chapter. In fact, the two authors state that the linguistic data they analysed confirm that Akajeru represents the main grammatical basis of PGA. They point out that the other North Andamanese language varieties have certainly contributed as well. In addition to Akajeru, which is the focus of the volume, their comparison could mainly concentrate on Akachari, since it is better documented than Akakhora and Akabo. Akachari contributed with numerous words, and they assume that Akabo and Akakhora also contributed to some extent, probably more from a lexical point of view, but they cannot state this with certainty as there is very little information on this.

A particularly interesting result from Comrie and Zamponi’s research concerns PGA and certain lexical forms that would probably show signs of post-contact development, namely the deaffrication/depalatalisation of [tʃ] / [c] in [ʃ] / [s] and the lowering of [i] in [e].

5 Akajeru Words

In the eighth and final chapter, Comrie and Zamponi bring together all the Akajeru words documented in the sources they studied, with the exception of personal names and toponyms. They organise the words into two lists - Akajeru word list and English-Akajeru finder list - also including words that Radcliffe-Brown had listed as North Andamanese but which they think are most likely words used in Akajeru.

The first is not a simple list presenting an Akajeru term and its English translation, but the two authors want to go more specific and

add all the information they have gathered on that term. In this way, the reader is also guided to understand the entire analysis behind each individual term presented. For each headword in the list, a series of information is given concerning, on the one hand, its grammatical analysis and meaning, and on the other hand, its occurrence in historical sources and its cognate words in PGA and/or Akachari. It is very interesting that for each lemma, they tell us whether in the historical sources it was reported as Akajeru, North Andamanese or both, drawing attestations from Radcliffe-Brown and Man's material. It is equally interesting that, as in the body of the entire book, but here doing it lemma by lemma, they make comparisons with PGA and Akachari by drawing from Abbi and Portman's materials.

In the second list, they include a series of words in English next to their corresponding term or terms in Akajeru and/or North Andamanese. Here again, what is curious is to see that often for some terms that in English are translated by a single word, for Akajeru or the other North Andamanese languages there can be many more terms.

6 Final Considerations on the Book: Why It Is Worth Reading

In a first instance, the greatness of Comrie and Zamponi's work can be surely attributed to their effort to reconstruct the grammar of a practically extinct language by adopting an interesting approach. In fact, considering the condition of Akajeru language and the impossibility to conduct a fieldwork with native speakers of the language (as we saw, the last three speakers of PGA, not specifically Akajeru, are actually 'rememberers') leads the authors to conduct a multiple approach to linguistic documentation. Their study is mainly conducted on the previously collected and analysed material on Akajeru, which they study in parallel with the most recent studies on the field by Abbi on PGA.

Another interesting aspect of Comrie and Zamponi's work lies in the continuous parallel between the Akajeru language and its North Andamanese co-dialects. In addition to recognising that the choice was also born out of necessity, given the scarcity of sources available to the authors, their effort to study Akajeru not from an isolated perspective, but well aware of its position within a linguistic 'whole' should also be noted. The study of the Akajeru language and the present reconstruction of its grammar, in fact, has also been made possible thanks to a continuous and fruitful side-by-side comparison with the other North Andamanese languages that are today part of the PGA.

We have seen that the mixing process of Great Andamanese languages, over a period of only about 150 years, has caused a serious loss of linguistic variety on the islands, resulting in a gradual and increasing adoption by Great Andamanese communities of the lan-

guages brought by new settlers from mainland India, such as Hindi or Bengali. A work totally free of doubt and uncertainty on these languages is not possible because what we are left with are some historical sources and no native speakers who regularly use this language in everyday life. The same work on PGA by the scholar Abbi was not without its difficulties because those who speak and understand this language are not only few, but they are also middle-aged people who neither normally use this language among themselves nor pass it on to younger generations.

I believe that Comrie and Zamponi's work is truly excellent and curious not only for those involved in language studies of South Asia and Southeast Asia, but also for those who are more generally interested in linguistic phenomena in the world. Many languages have been lost in the course of human history, or perhaps they have simply blended into the languages that have succeeded them and still survive in some minimal, imperceptible form.

The beauty of the world's languages is also this, that is the richness and history they tell us through their grammar, their vocabulary, their sounds. If we read a few words from the list of Akajeru terms in Comrie and Zamponi, we can immediately detect the unicity and the peculiarity of this language. Its uniqueness is traceable, for instance, in the strong link between the native speaker and his or her surrounding ambience, a feature that is clearly visible in the presence of somatic prefixes for at least a third of the approximately 320 Akajeru/North Andamanese words documented by British scholars. Somatic prefixes are an indicator of how in these Great Andamanese communities the link between body and environment is indispensable in human communication. At the linguistic level, humans act in a precise environmental context, and the language features, such as a vocabulary enriched with somatic prefixes, sanction this link.

In conclusion, Comrie and Zamponi have put together a volume that is truly valuable for language studies, but that actually goes far beyond this and gives us the opportunity to reflect on many linguistic topics and expand future studies, giving importance to the study of languages - extinct and/or not - spoken by communities that still maintain a close relationship with their environment. Therefore, while waiting for the two authors to publish future articles and their forthcoming volume on the grammar of the Akachari language, I highly recommend that you take a look at their volume and let your curiosity and confrontation with our worlds and languages revive in you the beauty of linguistic variety in the world, which is richness for us human beings.

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