Introduction: Sign and Script in South Asia

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ABSTRACT
This essay introduces a collection of six articles that analyze the political economy of language and script in relation to the emergence and contestation of identities and publics in contemporary India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, and South Asian diasporas. Social media and the virtual forums that they enable have inspired new representational practices and discursive possibilities that are in dialogue with older ways of ordering difference. Rather than making a hard-and-fast distinction between new and old media, this issue draws on the rich visual tapestries of South Asia to examine implicit and explicit debates over codes, scripts, and sign language systems in relation to different forms of print and digital media, from street signs to social media posts. We demonstrate the centrality of visual semiotic systems in processes of political, economic, and sociocultural change in contemporary South Asia.

Anthropologists and historians have long associated South Asia with multilingualism. Public spaces in this region are marked by street and traffic signs, advertisements, and other types of messages in different systems of code and script. Social media and the virtual forums that they enable have inspired new representational practices and discursive possibilities that are in dialogue with older ways of ordering difference. The articles in this special issue of *Signs and Society* analyze the political economy of language and script in relation to the affordances of newer and older media technologies in contemporary India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, and South Asian diasporas in Europe and North America. The six articles investigate implicit and explicit contestations over codes, scripts, and sign language systems across different settings,

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Signs and Society, vol. 8, no. 1 (Winter 2020). © 2020 by Semiosis Research Center at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies. All rights reserved. 2326-4489/2020/0801-0001$10.00

https://doi.org/10.1086/706465 Published online by Cambridge University Press

situations, and levels of practice, from institutional processes to everyday interactions. We demonstrate the centrality of visual semiotic systems in processes of social, economic, and political change in this dynamic, postcolonial region.

In the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods, South Asian languages and scripts have been subject to processes of standardization, the effort to create uniformity of use that is never fully achieved in practice (Milroy 2001). Standardization processes are inevitably political, as they involve placing linguistic and visual semiotic systems and the social types of persons attributed to them in hierarchical relationships (Agha 2007; Woolard 2016). In the last three decades, South Asia has undergone a period of rapid social change due to neoliberal economic policies, globalization, civil war, migration, and other factors. Incorporating ethnographic, historical, and semiotic analyses, the contributors to this special issue examine how ways of representing languages, scripts, and images—and their relationships to one another—can challenge state- and nonstate-sponsored standardization projects and uncover pertinent discourses about how to represent a nation, a region, a minority group, an institution, or a diasporic population.

The growth of social media in South Asia in the last decade has created new virtual forums for self-expression and social and political engagement. Digital communication has also enabled new technologies (e.g., fonts and keyboards) for representing South Asian languages graphically. By virtue of bringing together disparate groups of people on an enormous scale, social media have led to particular articulations of national and transnational publics (Anderson 1991; Cody 2011; boyd 2014).

Social media users often can have precise ideas of the target audiences or addressees for their posts, but there is always a level of indeterminacy in how an image, text, or video might be received by particular people at different moments in time (Hillewaert 2015; Varis and Blommaert 2015). Enabled by smart phone technology, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp have played an important role in South Asian political campaigns, social movements, and the contestation of ethnolinguistic and religious identities. Viral social media posts involving videos and images have also been widely associated with fueling rumors, communal discord, and mob violence (Neyazi et al. 2016; Taub and Fisher 2018).

While it is highly difficult to draw clear boundaries between social processes occurring online and offline, it is important to attend to the ways in which digital media technologies structure human interactions (Gershon 2010; Blommaert

https://doi.org/10.1086/706465 Published online by Cambridge University Press

2018). The properties or characteristics of networked publics include persistence (the durability of content), visibility (the ability of content to reach audiences), spreadability (the easy sharing of media content), and searchability (ability to find new content) (see boyd 2014). Rather than make a hard-and-fast distinction between new and old media (see Reyes 2014), the six articles in this issue trace visual and linguistic semiotic systems across different forms of media, defined broadly as the means of mass communication. We incorporate a concept of "affordances" as "functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object" (Hutchby 2001, 444). This notion allows us to attend to the specific ways in which digital and analog technologies structure semiosis across institutional and noninstitutional practices. Peircean semiotics provides an ideal framework for analyzing material forms—from a digital script on a smart phone to a Tamil-French signboard for a Hindu temple in Paris—as they circulate and are structured by semiotic ideologies (Keane 2003, 2018).

Some of the articles in this issue analyze explicit debates pertaining to codes, scripts, or images, while others chart the processes by which these forms are reimagined or realigned in space and time. All six of the articles are grounded in long-term ethnographic research in South Asia and the diaspora. Consistent with scholarship on media focused on production and consumption (Ginsburg 2002; Spitulnik 2002; Larkin 2008), the contributors investigate how individuals, groups, and institutions take up or interpret semiotic forms in relation to wider-scale sociocultural and political practices. Several of the articles focus on enregisterment—the "processes whereby distinct forms of speech come to be socially recognized (or enregistered) as indexical of speaker attributes by a population of language users" (Agha 2005, 38)—in relation to different visual signs. The articles herein analyze how material forms achieve indexical resonance in discursive activity by looking at the semiotic ideologies connecting the verbal and visual in South Asia.

Ideologies related to languages, scripts, and images are crucial to ongoing representational projects in South Asia, whether they pertain to the renaming of an Indian state and language, devising a digital orthography for writing a minority language, mediating notions of errors or blunders, or socializing students into new sign language forms. Several of the articles focus on how language-script or language-script-image correspondences become naturalized or rhematized (Irvine and Gal 2000; Gal and Irvine 2019) in social practices in relation to the figures of personhood associated with them (Agha 2011). The contributors

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also consider how emergent ways of representing codes and scripts in digital and print media can embed older ways of ordering difference that speak to colonial and postcolonial histories and regimes of inequality.

Other articles in the issue consider the semiosis of code and script in relation to multilingual street signs in South Asia. Government signboards, for example, can index the presence of the state and the successful implementation of its multilingual language policies.[1] Errors and outright omissions of languages from signboards can take on political salience for ethnolinguistic minority groups who have been denied access to resources. Scripts too can acquire indexical value in complex relationships to languages. Advertisements, which are ubiquitous in urban South Asia, contain code-script combinations that can speak to the product or service being offered and also signal relevant institutional distinctions. These combinations can also be used to ascertain chronotopic distinctions between diasporic groups given the relationships between sign conventions and local political economies. The presence of particular languages and transcription conventions in advertisements and other street signs in multiple geographic locations can create continuity among diasporic or transnational communities separated by geography and history.

In the first article, Katherine Martineau investigates parliamentary and media debates over a 2012 Indian constitutional amendment that proposed the renaming of the eastern Indian state Odisha and its language, Odia. The debates about the renaming involved the Odia language but also the Devanagari and Roman scripts. As the name change did not alter how Odia speakers write or pronounce the name, the discussions centered on methods to train Hindi and English speakers to say the names in a way that is similar to the Odia pronunciations. Martineau demonstrates how semiotic ideologies implied in code-script-sound correspondences draw on different orientations to embodiment that, in turn, entail different social imaginaries of Odisha.

Erika Hoffmann-Dilloway discusses how innovative pictorial representations of people performing sign forms for standardized Nepali Sign Language (NSL) impact enkillment to sign language. Sign language users engage with the images through body mimesis in NSL lessons, but their orientations to the signs shift as they transform from animating to performing them in a way that is intended to align with portrayed figures of personhood. The analysis of the illustrated NSL version of Nepal's new national anthem demonstrates how figures of

1. Personal communication with E. Annamalai, May 25, 2019 (Christina P. Davis).

https://doi.org/10.1086/706465 Published online by Cambridge University Press

personhood shifted in response to large-scale political changes following the end of the Nepalese civil war. Hoffmann-Dilloway's account of the shifting political dimensions of sign language representation and use shows how minoritized languages are impacted by state recognition and political change.

Nishaant Choksi analyzes historical transformations of language-to-script relations in different scripts of Santali, an Austroasiatic language spoken in eastern India, Nepal, and Bangladesh. These scripts include several Indic scripts, a Roman alphabet–based script devised by missionaries, and an independent script known as Ol-Chiki. He charts how a nonstandard Romanized Santali transcription, which was initially created to mediate between Ol-Chiki and the several other scripts, gained prominence as Santali speakers started using it in digital and online communication. While it appears to be a novel orthography, it is a "trans-script" in that the graphic choices involved in it invoke the knowledge of multiple scripts by people utilizing the script digitally and in print. Choksi argues that use of this Romanized trans-script in new digital spaces is crucial for advancing the cultural project associated with the newly created script Ol-Chiki amid a situation of widespread multiscriptality.

Christina Davis investigates the contrasting ways Sri Lankan Tamil speakers living in-country and abroad interpret images of Tamil blunders in trilingual public signs in relation to the minority/majority politics in the postwar nation. Grounded in an account of the circulation and discussion of images of language errors on social media, Davis incorporates interviews to analyze how three Tamil speakers made sense of a signboard displayed in several government buses in Colombo, in which the Tamil portion read "reserved for pregnant dogs" instead of "reserved for pregnant mothers." She argues that Tamil speakers' disparate interpretations reflect contrasting semiotic ideologies concerning the intentionality of the blunders and the relationship between the posted signboard images and lived sociolinguistic practices. These contrasts have implications for transnational Tamil political activism and imagined postwar futures.

Sonia Das incorporates ethnographic and archival analysis to present an interdiscursive ethnohistory of street signs in Tamil-speaking neighborhoods in three francophone cities: Paris, Montreal, and Puducherry. The continuities and discontinuities in the Tamil, French, and English translation and transliteration conventions bring these cities with distinct histories of Tamil settlement into contact with one another. The semiotic patterns that animate the graphic artifacts lead to a recalibration of the chronotopes of francophone Tamil settlements. Das illustrates the importance of comparative research on writing and

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script politics by demonstrating the complex spatiotemporal relationships embodied in the transliteration of outdoor signs that reconfigure Paris as a city of the present, Montreal as a city of the future, and Puducherry as a city of the past.

In the final article, Chaise LaDousa examines changes in advertising conventions in North India since the 1990s, a period of accelerated liberalization in India. Combinations of languages and scripts take on indexical properties that are regimented by the institution, product, or service being offered—commercial items, government services and information, schooling, and coaching services. By analyzing language and script combinations and conventions as partly constitutive of the "voice" of an institution, LaDousa argues that recent shifts in advertising conventions—particularly the association of English with a future-oriented, mobile disposition—are interdiscursively related to changes in communication realms outside of advertising.

"Sign and Script in South Asia" draws on the rich visual landscapes of South Asia to analyze the regimentation of code, script, and image in relation to the emergence and contestation of identities and publics in contemporary South Asia. This issue contributes to semiotic understandings of social life by illustrating how visual forms of representation are involved in struggles of identity and recognition in the context of liberalization, transnational migration, minority rights, and postwar reconciliation. New and old media function as crucial vectors of change in South Asia, an important region in studies of multilingualism, sociopolitical processes, and ethnic and religious conflict.

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