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THE POSITION OF THE BIHĀRĪ DIALECTS
IN INDO-ARYAN*

0.1. This paper is an attempt to make some preliminary suggestions about the position of the languages of northern India known as the Bihārī dialects within the Indo-Aryan family. The languages under discussion are Maithilī (Mth.), Magahī (Mag.), and Bhojpuri (Bhoj.). They are spoken in an area linguistically bounded on the west by speakers of the Midlands (or Hindi) languages, (Hindi, Braj, Bundeli, Awadhi, etc.), and to the east by speakers of the Eastern (or Bengali) languages, (Bengali, Assamese, and Oriyā).

It is difficult to do historical work with languages such as those of Bihar for a number of reasons. Since they are spoken in an area bounded by speakers of two such socially and culturally dominant language groups, there is a considerable amount of borrowing. Because the differences between the languages involved are often not very great, once borrowing has occurred, it is difficult to determine what represents the native element in the lexicon, and which words are borrowed from cognate languages. Another problem that the linguist confronts in an attempt at an historical investigation of these languages is conflicting data. Whereas languages like Hindi or Bengali have fairly standardized dialects which serve, at least, as a starting point in historical work, the languages under discussion here have no such standard forms. Consequently, the investigator is forced to select for citation from the

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1 Actually, the so-called Hindi languages are generally considered to comprise two groups, Eastern Hindi (Awadhi, Baghelī, Chattisgarhi) and Western Hindi (Hindi-Urdu, Braj, Bundeli, etc.). Despite the fact that many features are shared by these two groups (collectively termed Midlands languages here), some scholars have seen a special relationship between Eastern Hindi and the Bihārī languages (perhaps, more properly, between Eastern Hindi and the larger eastern group, Bengali and Bihārī, of traditional sub-groupings (see 0.2)). This paper will argue that Bihārī shares no major phonological innovations with the Bengali languages or any Hindi language which is not shared by the whole northern complex of dialects stretching from West Hindi to the Eastern dialects.

2 The problem is even more complex, because it is also important, and often difficult to distinguish, for both native and borrowed forms, which are words that come to the modern dialect from OIA through MIA as a result of regular processes of linguistic evolution (tadbhava words), and which have been borrowed by a given language from Sanskrit and subsequently modified to conform to the phonological principles of the borrowing language (tatsama words).
possible dialect forms, those which he considers to be most representative and most appropriate for comparison.

0.2. Certain assumptions have been made in the past concerning the early history of the Bihāri languages. From the time of G. A. Grierson, these dialects have been assumed to represent one branch of an eastern group of languages which includes Bengali, Assamese, and Oriyā. This assumption has been based largely on the fact that the area in which all of these languages are spoken shows the same boundaries as that which is associated with the Māgadhī dialect of the Middle Indo-Aryan (MIA) period. In Grierson’s Survey (1903–28), the classification was based, to a great extent, on contemporary geographical distribution and the boundaries of MIA literary dialects. Little subsequent research has been conducted from the point of view of modern methods in historical linguistics. Most later researchers, like Chatterji (1926: 6 et passim), have merely assumed, after Grierson, the hypothesis that the languages of Bihar are Eastern dialects.

It must be remembered, however, that the recorded languages of the MIA period are literary, semi-standardized dialects, which were not necessarily representative of the vernaculars of the areas in which they came to be used. Consequently, a great deal of work remains to be done before we can determine relationships which obtain between certain of the modern languages and the Indo-Aryan family as a whole. This paper looks toward a clarification of the situation concerning the position of the Bihāri dialects within Indo-Aryan.

0.3. A brief mention of the linguistic principles to be used in the discussion which follows is appropriate. We will assume that one of the basic results of comparative investigation should be the recognition of the points at which language split occurs. In the reconstruction of the history of families of languages, it is important to have a method by which it can be determined that one language has split into two or more languages. The criterion which is generally used for the establishment of language split is phonological restructuring. Phonological restructuring occurs when the system of phonological contrasts and/or oppositions is altered in a language. Phonological restructuring, especially phonological merger (coalescence), is for many linguists the fundamental criterion for language split, because when it has taken place the innovation is irreversible. If, for example, in the prehistory of Language A, some phoneme /x/ coalesces with a phoneme /y/ as /x'/, a speaker of Language A cannot ascertain which /x'/ were earlier /x/, and which were once /y/.

Another basic notion of historical linguistics that will be useful in our discussion is the shared innovation. If innovations are shared by two or more languages in a

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3 For a more detailed discussion of the historical linguistic principles briefly outlined here, see Hoenigswald (1960, 1966) and Fairbanks (1969).