

## 1 Historical and Genetic Setting

Bengali, together with Assamese and Oriya, belongs to the eastern group within the Magadhan subfamily of Indo-Aryan. In reconstructing the development of Indo-Aryan, scholars hypothetically posit a common parent language from which the modern Magadhan languages are said to have sprung. The unattested parent of the Magadhan languages is designated as Eastern or Magadhi Apabhraṁśa, and is assigned to Middle Indo-Aryan. Apart from the eastern languages, other modern representatives of the Magadhan subfamily are Magahi, Maithili and Bhojpuri.

Within the eastern group of Magadhan languages, the closest relative of Bengali is Assamese. The two share not only many coincidences of form and structure, but also have in common one system of written expression, on which more details will be given later.

Historically, the entire Magadhan group is distinguished from the remaining Indo-Aryan languages by a sound change involving sibilant coalescence. Specifically, there occurred in Magadhan a falling together of three sibilant elements inherited from common Indo-Aryan, dental /s/, palatal /ʃ/ and retroflex /ʂ/. Among modern Magadhan languages, the coalescence of these three sounds is manifested in different ways; e.g. the modern Assamese reflex is the velar fricative /x/, as contrasted with the palatal /ʃ/ of Modern Bengali.

The majority of Magadhan languages also show evidence of historical regression in the articulation of what was a central vowel /ā/ in common Indo-Aryan; the Modern Bengali reflex is /ɔ/.

Although the Magadhan subfamily is defined through a commonality of sound shifts separating it from the rest of Indo-Aryan, the three eastern languages of the subfamily share one phonological peculiarity distinguishing them from all other modern Indo-Aryan languages, both Magadhan and non-Magadhan. This feature is due to a historical coalescence of the long and short variants of the high vowels, which were distinguished in common Indo-Aryan. As a result, the vowel inventories of Modern Bengali, Assamese and Oriya show no phonemic distinction of /ī/ and /i/, /ū/ and /u/. Moreover, Assamese and Bengali are distinguished from Oriya by the innovation of a high/low distinction in

the mid vowels. Thus Bengali has /æ/ as well as /e/, and /ɔ/ as well as /o/. Bengali differs phonologically from Assamese principally in that the latter lacks a retroflex consonant series, a fact which distinguishes Assamese not just from Bengali, but from the majority of modern Indo-Aryan languages.

Besides various phonological characteristics, there are certain grammatical features peculiar to Bengali and the other Magadhan languages. The most noteworthy of these features is the absence of gender, a grammatical category found in most other modern Indo-Aryan languages. Bengali and its close relative Assamese also lack number as a verbal category. More will be said on these topics in the section on morphology, below.

Writing and literature have played no small role in the evolution of Bengali linguistic identity. A common script was in use throughout eastern India centuries before the emergence of the separate Magadhan vernaculars. The Oriya version of this script underwent special development in the medieval period, while the characters of the Bengali and Assamese scripts coincide with but a couple of exceptions.

Undoubtedly the availability of a written form of expression was essential to the development of the rich literary traditions associated not just with Bengali, but also with other Magadhan languages such as Maithili. However, even after the separation of the modern Magadhan languages from one another, literary composition in eastern India seems to have reflected a common milieu scarcely compromised by linguistic boundaries. Although vernacular literature appears in eastern India by AD 1200, vernacular writings for several centuries thereafter tend to be perceived as the common inheritance of the whole eastern area, more so than as the output of individual languages.

This is clearly evident, for instance, in the case of the celebrated Buddhist hymns called the *Caryāpada*, composed in eastern India roughly between AD 1000 and 1200. Though the language of these hymns is Old Bengali, there are reference works on Assamese, Oriya and even Maithili that treat the same hymns as the earliest specimens of each of these languages and their literatures.

Bengali linguistic identity is not wholly a function of the language's genetic affiliation in the Indo-Aryan family. Eastern India was subjected to Aryanisation before the onset of the Christian era, and therefore well before the evolution of Bengali and the other Magadhan languages. Certain events of the medieval era have had a greater significance than Aryanisation in the shaping of Bengali linguistic identity, since they furnished the prerequisites of Bengali regional and national identity.

Among these events, one of the most crucial was the establishment of Islamic rule in the early thirteenth century. Islamisation led to six hundred years of political unity in Bengal, under which it was possible for a distinctly national style of literary and cultural expression to evolve, more or less unaffected by religious distinctions. To be sure, much if not all early popular literature in Bengali had a sacred basis; the early compositions were largely translations and reworkings of Hindu legends, like the Krishna myth cycle and the *Rāmāyaṇa* religious epic. However, this material seems to have always been looked upon more as a product of local than of sectarian tradition. From the outset of their rule, the Muslim aristocracy did little to discourage the composition of literature on such popular themes; on the contrary, they often lent their patronage to the authors of these works, who were both Muslim and Hindu. Further, when in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Islamic writers ultimately did set about creating a body of sectarian, didactic vernacular literature in Bengali, they readily adapted the originally Hindu motifs, themes and stories that had become part of the local cultural tradition.

The relative weakness of religious identity in Bengali cultural institutions is perhaps best interpreted in light of a major event which occurred concomitant to the rise of Islamic rule. This event was a massive shift in the course of the Ganges River between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries AD. Whereas it had earlier emptied into the Bay of Bengal nearly due south of the site of present-day Calcutta, the river gradually approached and eventually became linked with the Padma River system in the territory today called Bangladesh. The shift in the Ganges has been one of the greatest influences upon material history and human geography in eastern India; for, prior to the completion of the river's change of course, the inhabitants of the eastern tracts had been virtually untouched by civilisation and sociocultural influences from without, whether Islamic or Hindu. Over the past four centuries, it is the descendants of the same people who have come to make up the majority of speakers of the Bengali language; so that the basis of their Bengali identity is not genetic and not religious, but linguistic. That the bulk of the population perceives commonality of language as the principal basis of its social unity is clear from the name taken by the new nation-state of eastern Bengal following the 1971 war of liberation. In the proper noun *Bangladesh* (composed of *bāṅglā* plus *deśa*, the latter meaning 'country'), the first part of the compound does not mean the Bengali people or the territory of Bengal; the term *bāṅglā* specifically refers, rather, to the Bengali language.

The Muslim aristocracy that ruled Bengal for some six centuries was supplanted in the eighteenth century by new invaders, the British. Since the latter's withdrawal from the subcontinent in 1947, the community which identifies itself as Bengali has been divided between two sovereign political entities. However, the Bengali language continues to be spoken throughout Bengal's traditional domains, and on both sides of the newly imposed international boundary. Today, Bengali is one of the official regional speeches of the Indian Union, a status which is also enjoyed by the other eastern Magadhan languages, Oriya and Assamese. Among the three languages, the one which is currently in the strongest position is Bengali, since it alone also has the status of a national language outside India's present borders. With over 70 million native speakers in India and over 100 million in Bangladesh, Bengali has perhaps the sixth largest number of native speakers among the languages of the world, considerably more than such European languages as Russian, German and French.

## 2 Orthography and Sound System

The writing system of Modern Bengali is derived from Brāhmī, an ancient Indian syllabary. Brāhmī is also the source of all the other native Indian scripts (including those of the modern South Indian languages) as well as of Devanāgarī, a script associated with classical Sanskrit and with a number of the modern Indo-Aryan languages.

The scripts of the modern eastern Magadhan languages (Oriya, Assamese and Bengali) are based on a system of characters historically related to, but distinct from, Devanāgarī. The Bengali script is identical to that of Assamese except for two characters; while the Oriya script, though closely related historically to the Bengali-Assamese script, is quite distinctive in its appearance.

Like all Brāhmī-derived scripts, Bengali orthography reads from left to right, and is organised according to syllabic rather than segmental units.

Accordingly, a special diacritic or character is employed to represent a single consonant segment in isolation from any following vowel, or a single vowel in isolation from any

preceding consonant. Furthermore, the writing system of Bengali, like Devanāgarī, represents characters as hanging from a superimposed horizontal line and has no distinction of upper and lower cases.

Table 23.1 sets out the Bengali script according to the traditional ordering of characters, with two special diacritics listed at the end. Most Bengali characters are designated according to the pronunciation of their independent or ordinary form. Thus the first vowel character is called *o*, while the first consonant character is called *ko*. The designation of the latter is such, because the corresponding sign in isolation is read not as a single segment, but as a syllable terminating in /*o*/, the so-called ‘inherent vowel’. Several Bengali characters are not designated by the pronunciation of their independent or ordinary forms; their special names are listed in the leftmost column of Table 23.1. Among the terms used in the special designations of vowel characters, *hr̥sso* literally means ‘short’ and *dirgho* ‘long’. Among the terms used in the special designations of consonant characters, *talobbo* literally means ‘palatal’, *murdhonno* ‘retroflex’, and *donto* ‘dental’. These terms are used, for historical reasons, to distinguish the names for the three sibilant characters. The three characters (transliterated *ś*, *ṣ* and *s*) are used to represent a single non-obstruent sibilant phoneme in Modern Bengali. This phoneme is a palatal with a conditioned dental allophone; further discussion will be given below. It might be pointed out that another Bengali phoneme, the dental nasal /*n*/, is likewise represented in orthography by three different characters, which are transliterated *ñ*, *ṇ* and *n*.

In Bengali orthography, a vowel sign normally occurs in its independent form only when it is the first segment of a syllable. Otherwise, the combining form of the vowel sign is written together with the ordinary form of a consonant character, as illustrated in Table 23.1 for the character *ko*. There are a few exceptional cases: for instance, the character *ho* when written with the combining form of the sign *ri* appears not as হ্ৰি but as হ্রি (pronounced [hri]). The character *ro* combined with *dirgho* *u* is written not as রু but as রূ [ru]. The combination of *talobbo* *so* with *hr̥sso* *u* is optionally represented either as শু or as শু (both are pronounced [ʃu]), while *g̃ro* and *ho* in combination with *hr̥sso* *u* yield the respective representations গু [gu], রূ [ru], and হু [hu].

**Table 23.1** Bengali Script

<i>Vowel segments</i>			
<i>Special name of character, if any</i>	<i>Independent form</i>	<i>Combining form (shown with the sign ko)</i>	<i>Transliteration</i>
	অ	ক	o
	আ	কা	a
<i>hr̥sso</i> i	ই	কি	i
<i>dirgho</i> i	ঐ	কী	ī
<i>hr̥sso</i> u	উ	কু	u
<i>dirgho</i> u	ঊ	কূ	ū
<i>ri</i>	ঋ	ক্ৰ	ri
	এ	কে	e
	ঐ	কৈ	oy
	ও	কৌ	o
	ঔ	কৌ	ow

Table 23.1 continued

<i>Consonant Segments</i>		<i>Ordinary form</i>	<i>Special form(s)</i>	<i>Transliteration</i> (so-called 'inherent vowel' not represent)
	ক			k
	খ			kh
	গ			g
	ঘ			gh
	ঙ		ং	ñ
	চ			c
	ছ			ch
	জ			j
	ঝ			jh
	ঞ			ñ
	ট			ʈ
	ঠ			ʈh
	ড			ɖ
	ড়			r
	ঢ			ɢh
	ঢ়			rɢh
	ণ			ɳ
	ত		ৎ	t
	থ			th
	দ			d
	ধ			dh
	ন			n
	প			p
	ফ			ph
	ব			b
	ভ			bh
	ম			m
ɔntostho jɔ	য			j
ɔntostho ɔ	য়		র্	y, w
	র		র্	r
	ল			l
talobbo sɔ	শ			ʃ
murdhonno sɔ	ষ			ʂ
donto sɔ	স			s
	হ		ঃ	h
<i>Special diacritics</i>				-
cɔndrobindu	্			
hosonto	্			

Several of the consonant characters in Bengali have special forms designated in Table 23.1; their distribution is as follows. The characters *hɔ* and *tɔ* occur in their special forms when the consonants they represent are the final segments of phonological syllables. Thus /baɪla/ ‘Bengali language’ is written বাংলা while /sɔt/ ‘true’ is written সৎ.

The character *ɔntostho* ɔ has a special form listed in Table 23.1; the name of this special form is *jɔ phɔla*. Generally, *jɔ phɔla* is the form in which *ɔntostho* ɔ occurs when combined with a preceding ordinary consonant sign, as in ত্যাগ [tæg] ‘renunciation’. When combined with an ordinary consonant sign in non-initial syllables, *jɔ phɔla* tends to be realised as gemination of the consonant segment, as in গ্রাম্য [grammo] ‘rural’. The sign *ɔntostho* ɔ in its ordinary form is usually represented intervocalically, and generally realised phonetically as a front or back high or mid semi-vowel. Incidentally, the character *ɔntostho* ɔ in its ordinary form is not to be confused with the similar looking character that precedes it in Table 23.1, the *ɔntostho jɔ* character. This character has the same phonemic realisation as the consonant sign *jɔ* (listed much earlier in Table 23.1), and is transliterated in the same way. While *jɔ* and *ɔntostho jɔ* have the same phonemic realisation, they have separate historical sources; and the sign *ɔntostho jɔ* occurs today in the spelling of a limited number of Bengali lexemes, largely direct borrowings from Sanskrit.

The sign *rɔ* exhibits one of two special forms when written in combination with an ordinary consonant sign. In cases where the ordinary consonant sign represents a segment which is pronounced before /r/, then *rɔ* appears in the combining form *rɔ phɔla*; to illustrate: প্রেত [pret] ‘ghost, evil spirit’. In cases where the sound represented by the ordinary consonant sign is realised after /r/, *rɔ* appears in the second of its combining forms, which is called *reph*; as in অর্থ [ortho] ‘value’.

The sign *hɔ* has a special form, listed in Table 23.1, which is written word-finally or before a succeeding consonant in the same syllable. In neither case, however, is the special form of *hɔ* very commonly observed in Bengali writing.

Two special diacritics are listed at the end of Table 23.1. The first of these, *cɔndrobindu* represents the suprasegmental for nasalisation, and is written over the ordinary or combining form of any vowel character. The other special diacritic, called *hɔsonto* is used to represent two ordinary consonant signs as being realised one after another, without an intervening syllabic, in the same phonological syllable; or to show that an ordinary consonant sign written in isolation is to be realised phonologically without the customary ‘inherent vowel’. Thus: বাক্ [bak] ‘speech’, বাক্শক্তি [bakʂkti] ‘power of speech’. In practice, the use of this diacritic is uncommon, except where spelling is offered as a guide to pronunciation; or where the spelling of a word takes account of internal morpheme boundaries, as in the last example.

Table 23.1 does not show the representation of consonant clusters in Bengali orthography. Bengali has about two dozen or so special *sonjukto* (literally ‘conjunct’) characters, used to designate the combination of two, or sometimes three, ordinary consonant signs. In learning to write Bengali, a person must learn the *sonjukto* signs more or less by rote.

Before considering the sound system of Bengali, it should be mentioned that the spelling of Bengali words is well standardised, though not in all cases a strict guide to pronunciation. There are two especially common areas of inconsistency. One involves the representation of the sound [æ]. Compare the phonetic realisations of the following words with their spellings and transliterations: [æto] এত (transliterated *etɔ*) ‘so much, so many’; [bæsto] ব্যস্ত (transliterated *byɔstɔ*) ‘busy’; and [læj] লাজ (transliterated *lyajɔ*) ‘tail’. The sound [æ] can be orthographically represented in any of the three ways illustrated, and the precise spelling of any word containing this sound must accordingly be memorised.

Another area of inconsistency involves the realisation of the ‘inherent vowel’. Since, as mentioned above, the diacritic *h̄osonto* (used to indicate the absence of the inherent vowel) is rarely used in practice, it is not always clear whether an unmodified ordinary consonant character is to be read with or without the inherent vowel. Compare, for example, [kɔto] কত (transliterated *kɔto*) ‘how much/how many’ with [mɔt] মত (transliterated *mɔto*) ‘opinion’. This example makes it especially clear that Bengali spelling is not an infallible guide to pronunciation.

The segmental phonemes (oral vowels and consonants) of the standard dialect of Bengali are set forth in Table 23.2. As Table 23.2 makes clear, the feature of aspiration is significant for obstruents and defines two phonemically distinct series, the unaspirates and the aspirates. Though not represented in the table since it is non-segmental, the feature of nasalisation is nonetheless significant for vowels and similarly defines two phonemically distinct series. Thus in addition to the oral vowels as listed in Table 23.2, Bengali has the corresponding nasalised vowel phonemes /ɔ̃/, /ã/, /æ̃/, /õ/, /ẽ/, /ũ/ and /ĩ/.

The phonemic inventory of modern standard Bengali marks it as a fairly typical Indo-Aryan language. The organisation of the consonant system in terms of five basic points of articulation (velar, palatal, retroflex, dental and labial) is characteristic, as is the stop/flap distinction in the retroflex series. (Hindi-Urdu, for instance, likewise has several retroflex stop phonemes and a retroflex flap.) Also typically Indo-Aryan is the distinctive character of voicing in the Bengali obstruent inventory, along with the distinctive character of aspiration. The latter feature tends, however, to be suppressed pre-consonantly, especially in rapid speech. Moreover, the voiced labial aspirate /bh/ tends to be unstable in the pronunciation of many Bengali speakers, often approximating to a voiced labial continuant [v].

**Table 23.2** Segmental Phonemes of Bengali

<i>Consonants</i>						
	<i>Labial</i>	<i>Dental</i>	<i>Retroflex</i>	<i>Palatal</i>	<i>Velar</i>	<i>Post-velar</i>
<i>Obstruents</i>						
voiceless:						
unaspirated	p	t	ʈ	c	k	
aspirated	ph	th	ʈh	ch	kh	
voiced:						
unaspirated	b	d	ɖ	j	g	
aspirated	bh	dh	ɖh	jh	gh	
Nasals	m	n	ɳ		ŋ	
Flaps		r	ɽ			
Lateral		l				
Spirants				s		h
<i>Vowels</i>						
		<i>Front</i>		<i>Back</i>		
High		i		u		
High mid		e		o		
Low mid		æ		ɔ		
Low			a			

In the consonant inventory, Bengali can be regarded as unusual only in having a palatal sibilant phoneme in the absence of a dental sibilant. The historical background of this has been discussed in the preceding section. The phoneme in question is realised as a palatal [ʃ] in all environments, except before the segments /t/, /th/, /n/, /r/, and /l/, where it is realised as a dental, i.e. as [s]. For simplicity, this Bengali sibilant is represented as *s* in the remainder of this chapter.

Nasalisation as a distinctive non-segmental feature of the vowel system is typical not only of Bengali but of modern Indo-Aryan languages generally. In actual articulation, the nasality of the Bengali nasalised vowel segments tends to be fairly weak, and is certainly not as strong as the nasality of vowels in standard French.

The most interesting Modern Bengali phonological processes involve the vowel segments to the relative exclusion of the consonants. One process, Vowel Raising, produces a neutralisation of the high/low distinction in the mid vowels, generally in unstressed syllables. Given the stress pattern of the present standard dialect, which will be discussed later, Vowel Raising generally applies in non-word-initial syllables. Evidence for the process is found in the following alternations:

mɔl	'dirt'	ɔmol	'pure'
sɔ	'hundred'	ækso	'one hundred'
æk	'one'	ɔnek	'many'

A second phonological process affecting vowel height is very significant because of its relationship to morphophonemic alternations in the Bengali verbal base. This process may be called Vowel Height Assimilation, since it involves the assimilation of a non-high vowel (other than /a/) to the nearest succeeding vowel segment within the phonological word, provided the latter has the specification [+ high]. Outside the area of verbal morphophonemics, the evidence for this process principally comes from the neutralisation of the high/low distinction in the mid vowels before /i/ or /u/ in a following contiguous syllable. Some alternations which illustrate this process are:

æk	'one'	ekti	'one' (plus classifier -ṭi)
lɔjja	'shame'	lojjito	'ashamed'
noṭ	'actor'	noṭi	'actress'
æk	'one'	ekṭu	'a little, a bit'
tɔbe	'then'	tobu	'but (then)'

At this point it will be useful to qualify the observation drawn earlier that Bengali is – phonologically speaking – a fairly typical Indo-Aryan language. It is true that most of the segments in the Modern Bengali sound system can be traced more or less directly to Old Indo-Aryan. However, the retroflex flap /ɾ/ of the former has no counterpart in the latter, and its presence in modern standard Bengali (and in some of its sisters) is due to a phonological innovation of Middle Indo-Aryan. Furthermore, while the other retroflex segments of Modern Bengali (/t/, /th/, /d/, /dh/) have counterparts in the Old Indo-Aryan sound system, their overall frequency (phonetic load) in Old Indo-Aryan was low. On the other hand, among the modern Indo-Aryan languages, it is Bengali (along with the other Magadhan languages, especially the eastern Magadhan languages) which demonstrates a comparatively high frequency of retroflex sounds. Some external, i.e. non-Aryan influence on the diachronic development of the



Bengali sound system is suggested. Such a hypothesis ought logically to be tied in with the observation in the earlier section of this essay that the numerical majority of Bengali speakers represents what were, until recent centuries, culturally unassimilated tribals of eastern Bengal, about whose prior linguistic and social history not much is known.

Further evidence of probable non-Aryan influence in the phonology is to be found in the peculiar word stress pattern of Modern Bengali. Accent was phonemic only in very early Old Indo-Aryan, i.e. Vedic (see pages 386–387). Subsequently, however, predictable word stress has typified the Indo-Aryan languages; the characteristic pattern, moreover, has been for the stress to fall so many morae from the end of the phonological word. Bengali word stress, though, is exceptional. It is non-phonemic and, in the standard dialect, there is a strong tendency for it to be associated with word-*initial* syllables. This pattern evidently became dominant after AD 1400, or well after Bengali acquired a linguistic identity separate from that of its Indo-Aryan sisters. What this and other evidence may imply about the place of Bengali within the general South Asian language area is an issue to be further pursued toward the end of this essay.

### 3 Morphology

Morphology in Modern Bengali is non-existent for adjectives, minimal for nouns and very productive for verbs. Loss or reduction of the earlier Indo-Aryan adjective declensional parameters (gender, case, number) is fairly typical of the modern Indo-Aryan languages; hence the absence of adjectival morphology in Modern Bengali is not surprising. Bengali differs from many of its sisters, however, in lacking certain characteristic nominal categories. The early Indo-Aryan category of gender persists in most of the modern languages, with the richest (three-gender) systems still to be found in some of the western languages, such as Marathi. Early stages of the Magadhan languages (e.g. Oriya, Assamese and Bengali) also show evidence of a gender system. However, the category is no longer productive in any of the modern Magadhan languages. In Modern Bengali, it is only in a few relic alternations (e.g. the earlier cited pair *nɔt* ‘actor’/*noṭi* ‘actress’) that one observes any evidence today for the system of nominal gender which once existed in the language.

The early Indo-Aryan system of three number categories has been reduced in Modern Bengali to a singular/plural distinction which is marked on nouns and pronouns. The elaborate case system of early Indo-Aryan has also been reduced in Modern Bengali as it has in most modern Indo-Aryan languages. Table 23.3 summarises the standard Bengali declension for full nouns (pronouns are not given). Pertinent parameters not, however, revealed in this table are animacy, definiteness and determinacy.

**Table 23.3** Bengali Nominal Declension

	Singular	Plural
Nominative	∅	-ra/-era; -gulo
Objective	-ke	-der(ke)/-eder(ke); -guloke
Genitive	-r/-er	-der/-eder; -guloṛ
Locative-Instrumental	-te/-e <i>or</i> -ete	-gulote

Generally, the plural markers are added only to count nouns having animate or definite referents; otherwise plurality tends to be unmarked. Compare, e.g. *jutogulo dārkar* ‘the (specified) shoes are necessary’ versus *juto dārkar* ‘(unspecified) shoes are necessary’. Further, among the plurality markers listed in Table 23.3, *-gulo* (nominative), *-guloke* (objective), *-gulor* (genitive) and *-gulote* (locative-instrumental) are applicable to nouns with both animate and inanimate referents, while the other markers co-occur only with animate nouns. Hence: *chelera* ‘(the) boys’, *chelegulo* ‘(the) boys’, *jutogulo* ‘the shoes’, but *\*jutora* ‘the shoes’.

The Bengali case markers in Table 23.3 which show an alternation of form (e.g. *-r/-er*, *-te/-e* or *-ete*, *-der(ke)/-eder(ke)*, etc.) are phonologically conditioned according to whether the forms to which they are appended terminate in a syllabic or non-syllabic segment respectively. Both *-eder(ke)* and *-ete* are, however, currently rare. The usage of the objective singular marker *-ke*, listed in Table 23.3, tends to be confined to inanimate noun phrases having definite referents and to definite or determinate animate noun phrases. Thus compare *kichu* (*\*kichuke*) *caichen* ‘do you want something?’ with *kauke* (*\*kau*) *caichen* ‘do you want someone?’; but: *pulis caichen* ‘are you seeking a policeman/some policemen?’ versus *puliske caichen* ‘are you seeking the police?’.

Bengali subject-predicate agreement will be covered in the following section on syntax. It bears mentioning at present, however, that the sole parameters for subject-verb agreement in Modern Bengali are person (three are distinguished) and status. Inflectionally, the Bengali verb is marked for three status categories (despective/ordinary/honorific) in the second person and two categories (ordinary/honorific) in the third. It is notable that the shapes of the honorific inflectional endings are modelled on earlier Indo-Aryan plural inflectional markers. Table 23.4 lists the verbal inflection of modern standard Bengali.

The most interesting area of Bengali morphology is the derivation of inflecting stems from verbal bases. Properly speaking, a formal analysis of Bengali verbal stem derivation presupposes the statement of various morphophonological rules. However, for the sake of brevity and clarity, the phenomena will be outlined below more or less informally.

But before the system of verbal stem derivational marking can be discussed, two facts must be presented concerning the shapes of Bengali verbal bases, i.e. the bases to which the stem markers are added.

First, Bengali verbal bases are all either monosyllabic (such as *jan-* ‘know’) or disyllabic (such as *kamra-* ‘bite’). The first syllabic in the verbal base may be called the root vowel. There is a productive process for deriving disyllabic bases from monosyllabics by the addition of a stem vowel. This stem vowel is *-a-* (post-vocally *-oa-*)

**Table 23.4** Bengali Verbal Inflection

	<i>1st person</i>	<i>2nd person despective</i>	<i>2nd person ordinary</i>	<i>3rd person ordinary</i>	<i>Honorific (2nd, 3rd persons)</i>
Present imperative	–	∅	-o	-uk	-un
Unmarked indicative and <i>-(c)ch-</i> stems	-i	-is	-o	-e	-en
<i>-b-</i> stems	-o	-i	-e	-e	-en
<i>-t-</i> and <i>-l-</i> stems	-am	-i	-e	-o	-en

as in *jana-* ‘inform’; although, for many speakers, the stem vowel may be *-o-* if the root vowel (i.e. of the monosyllabic base) is [+ high]; e.g. *jira-*, for some speakers *jira-* ‘rest’. Derived disyllabics usually serve as the formal causatives of their monosyllabic counterparts. Compare: *jan-* ‘know’, *jana-* ‘inform’; *oṭh-* ‘rise’, *oṭha-* ‘raise’; *dækḥ-* ‘see’, *dækḥa-* ‘show’.

Second, monosyllabic bases with non-high root vowels have two alternate forms, respectively called low and high. Examples are:

	<i>Low alternate base</i>	<i>High alternate base</i>
‘know’	jan-	jen-
‘see’	dækḥ-	dekḥ-
‘sit’	bos-	bos-
‘buy’	ken-	kin-
‘rise’	oṭh-	uṭh-

When the root vowel is /a/, /e/ is substituted to derive the high alternate base; for bases with front or back non-high root vowels, the high alternate base is formed by assimilating the original root vowel to the next higher vowel in the vowel inventory (see again Table 23.2). The latter behaviour suggests an extended application of the Vowel Height Assimilation process discussed in the preceding section. It is, in fact, feasible to state the rules of verb stem derivation so that the low/high alternation is phonologically motivated; i.e. by positing a high vowel (specifically, /i/) in the underlying shapes of the stem-deriving markers. In some verbal forms there is concrete evidence for the /i/ element, as will be observed below. Also, Vowel Height Assimilation must be invoked in any case to account for the fact that, in the derivation of verbal forms which have zero marking of the stem (that is, the present imperative and unmarked (present) indicative), the high alternate base occurs before any inflection containing a high vowel. Thus *dækḥ-* ‘see’, *dækḥo* ‘you (ordinary) see’, but *dekḥi* ‘I see’, *dekḥis* ‘you (despective) see’, *dekḥun* (honorific) ‘see!’, etc. That there is no high–low alternation in these inflections for disyllabic bases is consistent with the fact that Vowel Height Assimilation only applies when a high syllabic occurs in the immediately succeeding syllable. Thus *oṭha-* ‘raise (cause to rise)’, *oṭhae* ‘he/she raises’, (*\*uṭhai*) ‘I/we raise’, etc.

The left-hand column of Table 23.4 lists the various Bengali verbal stem types. Two of the verbal forms with  $\emptyset$  stem marking, the present imperative and present indicative, were just discussed. It may be pointed out that, in this stem type, the vowel element /u/ of the third person ordinary inflection *-uk* and of the second/third person honorific inflection *-un*, as well as the /i/ of the second person despective inflection *-is*, all disappear post-vocally (after Vowel Height Assimilation applies); thus (as above) *dekḥis* ‘you (despective) see’ but (from *hɔ-* ‘become’) *hok* ‘let him/her/it/them become!’; *hon* ‘he/she/you/they (honorific) become!’; *hos* ‘you (despective) become’.

A verbal form with  $\emptyset$  stem marking not so far discussed is the denominative verbal form or verbal noun. The verbal noun is a non-inflecting form and is therefore not listed in Table 23.4. In monosyllabic bases, the marker of this form is suffixed *-a* (*-oa* post-vocally); for most standard dialect speakers, the marker in disyllabics is *-no*. Thus *oṭh-* ‘rise’, *oṭha* ‘rising’, *oṭha-* ‘raise’, *oṭhano* ‘raising’; *jan-* ‘know’, *jana* ‘knowing’, *jana-* ‘inform’, *janano* ‘informing’; *ga-* ‘sing’, *gaoa* ‘singing’, *gaoa-* ‘cause to sing’, *gaoano* ‘causing to sing’.

Continuing in the leftmost column of Table 23.4, the stem-deriving marker *-(c)ch-* signals continuative aspect and is used, independent of any other derivational marker, to derive the present continuous verbal form. The element (c) of the marker *-(c)ch-* deletes

post-consonantly; compare *khacche* ‘is eating’ (from *kha-*) with *anche* ‘is bringing’ (from *an-*). In forming the verbal stem with *-(c)ch-* the high alternate base is selected, unless the base is disyllabic or is a monosyllabic base having the root vowel /a/. Compare the last examples with *uthche* ‘is rising’ (from *oth-*), *othacche* ‘is raising’ (from *otha-*). In a formal treatment of Bengali morphophonemics, the basic or underlying form of the stem marker could be given as *-(c)ch-*; in this event, one would posit a rule to delete the element /i/ after Vowel Height Assimilation applies, except in a very limited class of verbs including *ga-* ‘sing’, *so-* ‘bear’ and *ca-* ‘want’. In forming the present continuous forms of these verbs, the element /i/ surfaces, although the element (c) of the stem marker tends to be deleted. The resulting shapes are, respectively: *gaiche* ‘is singing’ (*gacche* is at best non-standard); *soiche* (\**socche*) ‘is bearing’; *caiche* ‘is wanting’ (*cacche* does, however, occur as a variant).

The stem-deriving marker *-b-* (see Table 23.4) signals irrealis aspect and is used to derive future verbal forms, both indicative and imperative (except for the imperative of the second person ordinary, which will be treated after the next paragraph). In Bengali, the future imperative, as well as the present imperative, may occur in affirmative commands; however, the future imperative, never the present imperative, occurs in negative commands.

In forming the verbal stem with *-b-*, the high alternate base is selected except in three cases: where the base is disyllabic, where the monosyllabic base has the root vowel /a/ and where the monosyllabic base is vowel-final. Thus: *uthbo* ‘I/we will rise’ (from *oth-*), but *othabo* ‘I/we will raise’ (from *otha-*); *janbo* ‘I/we will know’ (from *jan-*), *debo* ‘I/we will give’ (from *de-*). Compare, however, *dibi* ‘you (despective) will give’, where Vowel Height Assimilation raises the root vowel. It is possible, again, to posit an underlying /i/ in the irrealis stem marker’s underlying shape (i.e. *-ib-*), with deletion of the element /i/ applying except for the small class of verbs noted earlier; thus *gaibo* (\**gabo*) ‘I/we will sing’, *soibo* (\**sobo*) ‘I/we will bear’, *caibo* (\**cabo*) ‘I/we will want’.

The future imperative of the second person ordinary takes the termination *-io*, which can be analysed as a stem formant *-i-* followed by the second person ordinary inflection *-o* (which is also added to unmarked stems, as Table 23.4 shows). When combining with this marker *-i-*, all monosyllabic bases occur in their high alternate shapes; e.g. *hoio* ‘become!’ (from *ho-*). The *-i-* marker is deleted post-consonantly, hence *utho* ‘rise!’ (from *oth-*); it also deletes when added to most monosyllabic bases terminating in final /a/, for instance: *peo* ‘get!’ (\**peio*) (from *pa-* ‘receive’); *geo* ‘sing!’ (from *ga-* ‘sing’). Bengali disyllabic bases drop their final element /a/ or /o/ before the future imperative stem marker *-i-*. Vowel Height Assimilation applies, hence *uthio* ‘you must raise!’ (from *otha-*), *dekhio* ‘you must show!’ (from *dækha-*), *kamrio* ‘you must bite!’ (from *kamra-*).

Continuing in the left-hand column of Table 23.4, the stem-deriving marker *-t-* signals non-punctual aspect and appears in several forms of the Bengali verb. The Bengali infinitive termination is invariant *-te*, e.g. *jante* ‘to know’ (from *jan-*) (as in *jante cai* ‘I want to know’). The marker *-t-* also occurs in the finite verbal form used to express the past habitual and perfect conditional, e.g. *jantam* ‘I/we used to know’ or ‘if I/we had known’. The high alternate of monosyllabic bases co-occurs with this marker except in those bases containing a root vowel /a/ followed by a consonant. To illustrate, the infinitive of *oth-* ‘rise’ is *uthte*; of *otha-* ‘raise’, *othate*; of *de-* ‘give’, *dite*; of *ho-* ‘become’, *hote*; of *kha-* ‘eat’, *khete*; of *an-* ‘bring’, *ante* (\**ente*). Similarly, *uthtam* ‘I/we used to rise’ or ‘if I/we had risen’; *othatam* ‘I/we used to raise’ or ‘if I/we had raised’, etc. As before, evidence for an /i/ element in the underlying form of the marker *-t-* (i.e.

-it-) comes from the earlier noted class of verbs 'sing', etc.; for example, *gaitē* (\**gate*) 'to sing', *gaitam* (\**gatam*) 'I/we used to sing' or 'if I/we had sung'; *soite* (\**sote*) 'to bear', *soitam* (\**sotam*) 'I/we used to bear' or 'if I/we had borne'; *caite* (\**cate*) 'to want', *caitam* (\**catam*) 'I/we used to want' or 'if I/we had wanted', etc.

The stem-deriving marker *-l-* signals anterior aspect and appears in two verbal forms. The termination of the imperfect conditional is invariant *-le*, e.g. *janle* 'if one knows' (from *jan-*). The marker *-l-* also occurs in the ordinary past tense verbal form, e.g. *janlam* 'I/we knew'. The behaviour of monosyllabic verbal bases in co-occurrence with this marker is the same as their behaviour in co-occurrence with the marker *-t-* discussed above. Thus *uṭhle* 'if one rises', *oṭhale* 'if one raises', *dile* 'if one gives', *hole* 'if one becomes', *khele* 'if one eats', *anle* 'if one brings'; *uṭhalam* 'I/we rose', *oṭhalam* 'I/we raised'; and, again, *gaile* (\**gale*) 'if one sings', *soile* (\**sole*) 'if one bears', *caile* (\**cale*) 'if one wants'; *gailam* 'I/we sang', and so on.

To complete the account of the conjugation of the Bengali verb it is only necessary to mention that certain stem-deriving markers can be combined on a single verbal base. For instance, the marker *-l-* combined with the uninflected stem in *-(c)ch-* yields a verbal form called the past continuous. Illustrations are: *uṭhchilam* 'I was/we were rising' (from *oṭh-*), *oṭhacchilam* 'I was/we were raising' (from *oṭha-*), *khacchilam* 'I was/we were eating' (from *kha-*).

It is also possible to combine stem-deriving markers on the Bengali verbal base in the completive aspect. The marker of this aspect is *-(i)e-*, not listed in Table 23.4 because it is not used in isolation from other stem-forming markers to form inflecting verbal stems. Independently of any other stem-forming marker it may, however, be added to a verbal base to derive a non-finite verbal form known as the conjunctive participle (or gerund). An example is: *bujhe* 'having understood' from *bujh-* 'understand' (note that the element (*i*) of *-(i)e-* deletes post-consonantly). When attached to the completive aspect marker *-(i)e-*, all monosyllabic bases occur in their high alternate shapes; disyllabic bases drop their final element /a/ or /o/; and in the latter case, Vowel Height Assimilation applies. Thus: *uṭhe* 'having risen' (from *oṭh-*); *jene* 'having known' (from *jan-*); *diye* 'having given' (from *de-*); *uṭhie* 'having raised' (from *oṭha-*), *janie* 'having informed' (from *jana-*). Now the stem-deriving marker *-(c)ch-* may combine with the verbal stem in *-(i)e-*, yielding a verbal form called the present perfect; the combining shape of the former marker in such cases is invariably *-ch-*. This is to say that the element (*c*) of the marker *-(c)ch-* not only deletes post-consonantly (see the earlier discussion of continuous aspect marking), but also following the stem-deriving marker *-(i)e-*. Some examples are: *dekheche* 'has seen' (from monosyllabic *dækḥ-*), *dekheche* 'has shown' (from disyllabic *dækḥa-*), *diyeche* 'has given' (from *de-* 'give'). The verbal stem in *-(i)e-* followed by *-(c)ch-* may further combine with the anterior aspect marker *-l-* to yield a verbal form called the past perfect; e.g. *dekhechilam* 'I/we had seen', *dekhechilam* 'I/we had shown'.

Examples of conjugation for four Bengali verbal bases are given in the chart of verbal conjugation types. The inflection illustrated in the chart is the third person ordinary.

## 4 Syntax

The preceding discussion of declensional parameters (case and number for nouns, person and status for verbs) ties in naturally with the topic of agreement in Bengali syntax.

### Bengali Verbal Conjugation Types

	<i>pa-</i> 'receive'	<i>an-</i> 'bring'	<i>bos-</i> 'sit'	<i>bosa-</i> 'seat'
Verbal noun	paoa	ana	bosa	bosano
Present indicative	pae	ane	bose	bosae
Present imperative	pak	anuk	bosuk	bosak
Present continuous	pacche	anche	bosche	bosacche
Future indicative/future imperative	pabe	anbe	bosbe	bosabe
Infinitive	pete	ante	boste	bosate
Perfect conditional/past habitual	peto	anto	bosto	bosato
Imperfect conditional	pele	anle	bosle	bosale
Ordinary past	pelo	anlo	boslo	bosalo
Past continuous	pacchilo	anchilo	boschilo	bosacchilo
Conjunctive participle	peye	ene	bose	bosie
Present perfect	peyechhe	eneche	boseche	bosieche

A number of modern Indo-Aryan languages (see, for example, the chapter on Hindi-Urdu) demonstrate a degree of ergative patterning in predicate–noun phrase agreement; and Bengali, in its early historical stages, likewise showed some ergative patterning (i. e. sentential verb agreeing with subject of an intransitive sentence but with object, not subject, of a transitive sentence). However, this behaviour is not characteristic today of any of the eastern Magadhan languages.

Thus in Modern Bengali, sentences normally have subjects in the nominative or unmarked case, and the finite predicates of sentences normally agree with their subjects for the parameters of person and status. There are, however, two broad classes of exceptions to this generalisation. The passive constructions exemplify one class. Passive in Modern Bengali is a special variety of sentence nominalisation. When a sentence is nominalised, the predicate takes the verbal noun form (discussed in the preceding section) and the subject is marked with the genitive case. Under passivisation, a sentence is nominalised and then assigned to one of a small set of matrix predicates, the most common being *hɔ-* ‘become’ and *ja-* ‘go’; and when the latter is selected, the subject of the nominalised sentence is obligatorily deleted. Examples are: *tomar jōthes̄to khaoa hoyeche?* (your enough eating has-become) ‘have you eaten enough?’ (i.e. has it been sufficiently eaten by you?) and *oke paoa ḡx̄lo* (to-him getting it-went) ‘he was found’ (i.e. him was found). In a passive sentence, the matrix verb (*hɔ-* or *ja-*) lacks agreement with any noun phrase. In particular, it cannot agree with the original subject of the active sentence – this noun phrase has become marked with the genitive case under nominalisation, or deleted altogether. This is to say that the Modern Bengali passive construction lacks a formal subject; it is of a type referred to in some grammatical literature as the ‘impersonal passive’. These constructions form one class of exceptions to the characteristic pattern of Bengali subject–verb agreement.

The other class of exceptions comprises certain expressions having subjects which occur in a marked or oblique case. In Bengali there are a few complex constructions of this type. Bengali also has several dozen predicates which regularly occur in non-complex constructions with marked subjects. These constructions can be called indirect subject constructions, and indirect subjects in Modern Bengali are invariably marked with the genitive case. (At an earlier historical stage of the language, any of the oblique cases could be used for the marking of the subject noun phrase in this sort of construction.) In the Modern Bengali indirect subject construction, the finite predicate normally demonstrates no agreement. An example is: *maer tomake p̄chondo h̄oy* (of-mother to-you likes) ‘Mother likes you’. Bengali indirect subject predicates typically express sensory, mental, emotional, corporal and other characteristically human experiences. These predicates constitute a significant class of exceptions to the generalised pattern of subject–finite predicate agreement in Modern Bengali.

The remainder of this overview of Bengali syntax will be devoted to the topic of word order, or the relative ordering of major constituents in sentences. In some literature on word order types, Bengali has been characterised as a rigidly verb-final language, wherein nominal modifiers precede their heads; verbal modifiers follow verbal bases; the verbal complex is placed sentence-finally; and the subject noun phrase occupies the initial position in a sentence. In these respects Bengali is said to contrast with earlier Indo-Aryan, in which the relative ordering of sentential constituents was freer, notwithstanding a statistical tendency for verbs to stand at the ends of their clauses.

It is true that the ordering of sentential elements is more rigid in Modern Bengali than in Classical Sanskrit. However, the view that Bengali represents a ‘rigid’ verb-final

language does not adequately describe its differences from earlier Indo-Aryan word order patterning.

Word order within the Modern Bengali noun phrase is, to be sure, strict. An adjective or genitive expression is always placed before the noun it modifies. By contrast, in earlier Indo-Aryan, adjectives showed inflectional concord with their modified nouns and consequently were freer in their positioning; more or less the same applied to the positioning of genitive expressions with respect to nominal heads. Not only is the ordering of elements within the noun phrase more rigid in Modern Bengali, but the mutual ordering of noun phrases within the sentence is strict as well, much more so than in earlier Indo-Aryan. The subject noun phrase generally comes first in a Modern Bengali sentence, followed by an indirect object if one occurs; next comes the direct object if one occurs; after which an oblique object noun phrase may be positioned. This strictness of linear ordering can be ascribed to the relative impoverishment of the Modern Bengali case system in comparison with earlier Indo-Aryan. Bengali case markers are, nonetheless, supplemented by a number of postpositions, each of which may govern nouns declined in one of two cases, the objective or genitive.

We will now consider word order within the verb phrase. At the Old Indo-Aryan stage exemplified by Classical Sanskrit, markers representing certain verbal qualifiers (causal, desiderative, potential and conditional) could be affixed to verbal bases, as stem-forming markers and/or as inflectional endings. Another verbal qualifier, the marker of sentential negation, tended to be placed just before the sentential verb. The sentential interrogative particle, on the other hand, was often placed at a distance from the verbal complex.

In Modern Bengali, the only verbal qualifier which is regularly affixed to verbal bases is the causal. (See the discussion of derived disyllabic verbal bases in Section 3 above.) The following pair of Bengali sentences illustrates the formal relationship between non-causative and causative constructions: *cheleṭi ciṭhita porlo* (the-boy the-letter read) ‘the boy read the letter’; *ma cheleṭi-ke diye ciṭhita p̄ralen* (mother to-the-boy by the-letter caused-to-read) ‘the mother had the boy read the letter’. It will be noted that in the second example the non-causal agent is marked with the postposition *diye* ‘by’ placed after its governed noun, which appears in the objective case. Usually, when the verbal base from which the causative is formed is transitive, the non-causal agent is marked in just this way. The objective case alone is used to mark the non-causal agent when the causative is derived either from an intransitive base, or from any of several semantically ‘affective’ verbs – transitive verbs expressing actions whose principal effect accrues to their agents and not their undergoers. Examples are: ‘eat’, ‘smell’, ‘hear’, ‘see’, ‘read’ (in the sense of ‘study’), ‘understand’ and several others.

It was mentioned above that the modalities of desiderative and potential action could be marked on the verbal form itself in Old Indo-Aryan. In Modern Bengali, these modalities are usually expressed periphrastically; i.e. by suffixing the infinitive marker to the verbal stem, which is then followed by a modal verb. To illustrate: *uṭhte cae* ‘wants to rise’, *uṭhte pare* ‘can rise’.

Conditional expressions occur in two forms in Modern Bengali. The conditional clause may be finite, in which case there appears the particle *jodi*, which is a direct borrowing from a functionally similar Sanskrit particle *yadi*. To illustrate: *jodi tumi kajta sarbe (t̄obe) eso* (if you the-work will-finish (then) come) ‘if/when you finish the work, (then) come over!’. An alternate way of framing a conditional is by means of the non-finite conditional verbal form (imperfect conditional), which was mentioned in



Section 3. In this case no conditional particle is used; e.g. *tumi kajta sarle (tobe) eso* (you the-work if-finish (then) come) ‘if/when you finish the work, come over!’.

The particle of sentential negation in Bengali is *na*. In independent clauses it generally follows the sentential verb; in subjoined clauses (both finite and non-finite), it precedes. Thus: *boslam na* (I-sat not) ‘I did not sit’; *jodi tumi na bosso* (if you not sit) ‘if you don’t sit’; *tumi na bosle* (you not if-sit) ‘if you don’t sit’. Bengali has, it should be mentioned, two negative verbs. Each of them is a counterpart to one of the verbs ‘to be’; and in this connection it needs to be stated that Bengali has three verbs ‘to be’. These are respectively the predicative *ho-* ‘become’; the existential verb ‘exist’, having independent/subjoined clause allomorphs *ach-/thak-*; and the equational verb or copula, which is normally  $\emptyset$  but in emphatic contexts is represented by *ho-* placed between two arguments (compare, for example, non-emphatic *ini jodu* (this-person  $\emptyset$  Jodu) ‘this is Jodu’ versus emphatic *ini hocchen jodu* (this-person is Jodu) ‘this (one) is Jodu’). While the predicative verb ‘to be’ has no special negative counterpart (it is negated like any other Bengali verb), the other two verbs ‘to be’ each have a negative counterpart. Moreover, for each of these negative verbs, there are separate allomorphs which occur in independent and subjoined clauses. The respective independent/subjoined shapes of the negative verbs are existential *nei/na thak-* (note that the verb *nei* is invariant) and equational *no-/na ho-*. It bears mentioning, incidentally, that negative verbs are neither characteristic of modern nor of earlier Indo-Aryan. They are, if anything, reminiscent of negative copulas and other negative verbs in languages of the Dravidian (South Indian) family, such as Modern Tamil.

The Modern Bengali sentential interrogative particle *ki* is inherited from an earlier Indo-Aryan particle of similar function. The sentential interrogative *ki* may appear in almost any position in a Bengali sentence other than absolute initial; however, sentences vary in their presuppositional nuances according to the placement of this particle, which seems to give the most neutral reading when placed in the second position (i.e. after the first sentential constituent). To illustrate, compare: *tumi ki ekhane chatro?* (you interrogative here student) ‘are you a student here?’; *tumi ekhane ki chatro?* (you here interrogative student) ‘is it here that you are a student?’; *tumi ekhane chatro (na) ki?* (you here student (negative) interrogative) ‘oh, is it that you are a student here?’.

To complete this treatment of word order, we may discuss the relative ordering of marked and unmarked clauses in Bengali complex sentences. By ‘marked clause’ is meant either a non-finite subordinate clause or a clause whose function within the sentential frame is signalled by some distinctive marker; an instance of such a marker being *jodi*, the particle of the finite conditional clause. As a rule, in a Bengali sentence containing two or more clauses, marked clauses tend to precede unmarked. This is, for instance, true of conjunctive participle constructions; e.g. *bari giye kapor chere ami can korlam* (home having-gone clothes having-removed I bath did) ‘going home and removing my clothes, I had a bath’. Relative clauses in Bengali likewise generally precede main clauses, since they are marked (that is, with relative pronouns); Bengali, then, exhibits the correlative sentential type which is well attested throughout the history of Indo-Aryan. An illustration of this construction is: *je boita enecho ami seta kichu din rakhbo* (which book you-brought I it some days will-keep) ‘I shall keep the book you have brought for a few days’. Finite complement sentences marked with the complementiser *bole* (derived from the conjunctive participle of the verb *bol-* ‘say’) likewise precede unmarked clauses; e.g. *apni jacchen bole ami jani* (you are-going complementiser I know) ‘I know that you are going’.

An exception to the usual order of marked before unmarked clauses is exemplified by an alternative finite complement construction. Instead of clause-final marking (with *bole*), the complement clause type in question has an initial marker, a particle *je* (derived historically from a complementiser particle of earlier Indo-Aryan). A complement clause marked initially with *je* is ordered invariably after, not before, the unmarked clause; e.g. *ami jani je apni jacchen* (I know complementiser you are-going) ‘I know that you are going’.

## 5 Concluding Points

In this final section the intention is to relate the foregoing discussion to the question of Bengali’s historical development and present standing, both within the Indo-Aryan family and within the general South Asian language area. To accomplish this, it is useful to consider the fact of lectal differentiation in the present community of Bengali speakers. Both vertical and horizontal varieties are observed.

Vertical differentiation, or diglossia, is a feature of the current standard language. This is to say that the language has two styles used more or less for complementary purposes. Of the two styles, the literary or ‘pundit language’ (*sadhu bhasa*) shows greater conservatism in word morphology (i.e. in regard to verbal morphophonemics and the shapes of case endings) as well as in lexis (it is characterised by a high frequency of words whose forms are directly borrowed from Sanskrit). The less conservative style identified with the spoken or ‘current language’ (*colti bhasa*) is the everyday medium of informal discourse. Lately it is also gaining currency in more formal discourse situations and, in written expression, has been encroaching on the literary style for some decades.

The institutionalisation of the *sadhu–colti* distinction occurred in Bengali in the nineteenth century, and (as suggested in the last paragraph) shows signs of weakening today. Given (1) that the majority of Bengali speakers today are not Hindu and cannot be expected to maintain an emotional affinity to Sanskritic norms, plus (2) the Bangladesh government’s recent moves to enhance the Islamic character of eastern Bengali society and culture and (3) the fact that the colloquial style is overtaking the literary even in western Bengal (both in speech and writing), it remains to be seen over the coming years whether a formal differentiation of everyday versus ‘pundit’ style language will be maintained.

It should be added that, although throughout the Bengali-speaking area a single, more or less uniform variety of the language is regarded as the standard dialect, the bulk of speakers have at best a passing acquaintance with it. That is, horizontal differentiation of Bengali lects is very extensive (if poorly researched), both in terms of the number of regional dialects that occur and in terms of their mutual divergence. (The extreme eastern dialect of Chittagong, for instance, is unintelligible even to many speakers of other eastern Bengali dialects.) The degree of horizontal differentiation that occurs in the present Bengali-speaking region is related to the ambiguity of Bengali’s linguistic affiliation, i.e. areal as contrasted with genetic. It is to be noted that the Bengali-speaking region of the Indian subcontinent to this day borders on or subsumes the domains of a number of non-Indo-Aryan languages. Among them are Malto (a Dravidian language of eastern Bihar); Ahom (a Tai language of neighbouring Assam); Garo (a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in the northern districts of Bengal itself); as well as several languages

affiliated with Munda (a subfamily of Austro-Asiatic), such as Santali and Mundari (both of these languages are spoken within as well as outside the Bengali-speaking area).

It has been pointed out earlier that modern standard Bengali has several features suggestive of extra-Aryan influence. These features are: the frequency of retroflex consonants; initial-syllable word stress; absence of grammatical gender; negative verbs. Though not specifically pointed out as such previously, Bengali has several other formal features, discussed above, which represent divergences from the norms of Indo-Aryan and suggest convergence with the areal norms of greater South Asia. These features are: post-verbal negative particle placement; clause-final complement sentence marking; relative rigidity of word order patterning in general, and sentence-final verb positioning in particular; proliferation of the indirect subject construction (which was only occasionally manifested in early Indo-Aryan).

In addition to the above, it may be mentioned that Bengali has two lexical features of a type foreign to Indo-Aryan. These features are, however, not atypical of languages of the general South Asian language area (and are even more typical of South-East Asian languages). One of these is a class of reduplicative expressives, words such as: *kickic* (suggesting grittiness), *miṁmiṁ* (suggesting flickering), *ṭolmɔl* (suggesting an overflowing or fluid state). There are dozens of such lexemes in current standard Bengali. The other un-Aryan lexical class consists of around a dozen classifier words, principally numeral classifiers. Examples are: *du jon chatro* (two human-classifier student) 'two students'; *tin khana boi* (three flat-thing-classifier book) 'three books'.

It is probable that the features discussed above were absorbed from other languages into Bengali after the thirteenth century, as the language came to be increasingly used east of the traditional sociocultural centre of Bengal. That centre, located along the former main course of the Ganges (the present-day Bhagirathi–Hooghley River) in western Bengal, still sets the standard for spoken and written expression in the language. Thus standard Bengali is defined even today as the dialect spoken in Calcutta and its environs. It is a reasonable hypothesis nevertheless, as suggested above in Section 1, that descendants of non-Bengali tribals of a few centuries past now comprise the bulk of Bengali speakers. In other words, the vast majority of the Bengali linguistic community today represents present or former inhabitants of the previously uncultivated and culturally unassimilated tracts of eastern Bengal. Over the past several centuries, these newcomers to the Bengali-speaking community are the ones responsible for the language's having acquired a definite affiliation within the South Asian linguistic area, above and beyond the predetermined and less interesting fact of its genetic affiliation in Indo-Aryan.

## Bibliography

Chatterji (1926) is the classic, and indispensable, treatment of historical phonology and morphology in Bengali and the other Indo-Aryan languages. A good bibliographical source is Čižikova and Ferguson (1969). For the relation between literary and colloquial Bengali, see Dimock (1960).

The absence of a comprehensive reference grammar of Bengali in English is noticeable. Ray et al. (1966) is one of the better concise reference grammars. Chatterji (1939) is a comprehensive grammar in Bengali, while Chatterji (1972) is a concise but thorough treatment of Bengali grammar following the traditional scheme of Indian grammars. Two pedagogical works are also useful: Dimock et al. (1965), a first-year textbook containing very lucid descriptions of the basic structural categories of the language, and Bender and Riccardi (1978), an advanced Bengali textbook containing much useful

information on Bengali literature and on the modern literary language. For individual topics, the following can be recommended: on phonetics–phonology, Chatterji (1921) and Ferguson and Chowdhury (1960); on the morphology of the verb, Dimock (1957), Ferguson (1945) and Sarkar (1976); on syntax, Klaiman (1981), which discusses the syntax and semantics of the indirect subject construction, passives and the conjunctive participle construction in modern and earlier stages of Bengali.

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