

***A Dictionary in Assamese and English* by M. Bronson:
Historical Background and Lexicographic Approach**

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Abstract

The first printed lexicographic work in Assam is attributed to Dr. Miles Bronson, an American Baptist Missionary, the compiler of *A Dictionary in Assamese and English* (published in 1864). At the time of arrival of Dr. Bronson in Assam (1837), the language of the land, Assamese, had been banished. It was replaced in the schools of Assam and courts by Bengali. The missionaries saw that the general population of Assam understood only the Assamese language and that this fact should be recognized by using Assamese in all fields. Bronson openly began the agitation in favor of the Assamese language on behalf of the mission. *A Dictionary in Assamese and English* was a part of the struggle for the survival of the language. This paper aims at giving an account of the first printed lexicographic work in Assam. The paper sets out with an introduction on historical background and linguistic circumstances which prompted Bronson to compile the dictionary followed by an overview of the work from lexicographic points of view. The paper discusses especially the ‘macro-structure’ of the dictionary. Further, the paper discusses the lexicographic potential that the dictionary intended to fulfill and concludes that in spite of some lapses, this dictionary was Bronson’s outstanding contribution to the Assamese language

Key Words: Dictionary, Bilingual dictionary, Utility lexicography, Bidirectional-bilingual dictionary

Introduction

A Dictionary in Assamese and English (অসমীয়া আৰু ইংৰাজি অভিধান) compiled by Dr. Miles Bronson, an American Baptist Missionary, is the first printed lexicographic work in Assamese. The dictionary was published by the American Baptist Mission Press, Sibsagar in 1867. It is a bilingual dictionary with meanings from Assamese to both Assamese and English. This had been the only published dictionary in Assamese until 1900.

The American Baptist Missionaries coming to North-east India, in the nineteenth century found themselves among a rich assortment of people, cultures and languages. Language study was necessary for communication, and since in most of the language areas linguistic work had not been previously done, they themselves became pioneers in the work of language analysis and the preparation of dictionaries and grammar.

The Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the paper are to look at the following:

1. To highlight the background which prompted Bronson to compile the dictionary.
2. To explore the lexicographic structure of the dictionary.
3. To discuss the lexicographic potential that the dictionary was intended to fulfill.

1. Historical Background and Linguistic Circumstances

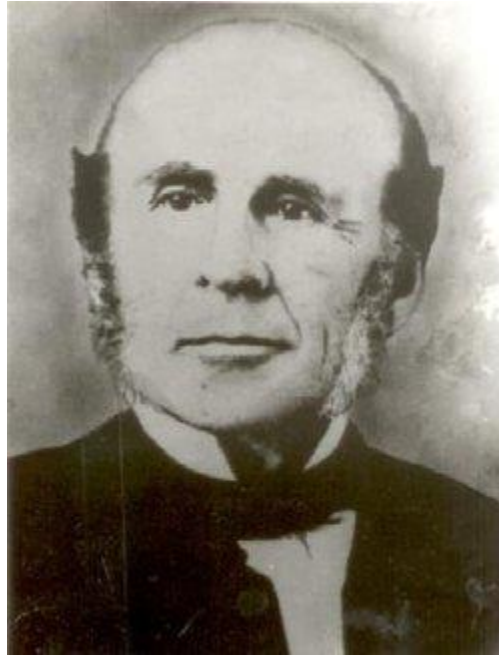
The Ahoms, a branch of the great Shan or Tai race, ruled in Assam from the beginning of the thirteenth to about the middle of the nineteenth century (1826). The closing decades of the Ahom rule were fateful years in the history of Assam. The whole period was torn with internal strife. In 1817, Badan Barphukan, an Ahom Viceroy, invited the Burmese to invade Assam which plundered the land. In 1826 the Burmese came into conflict with the British and were defeated. They surrendered Assam to the East India Company under the treaty of Yandabu. The British were strangers to the land and had no knowledge of the local tongue. So, people from other provinces of India migrated into Assam and settled down as interpreters and clerks of the British to enable them to carry on the newly established administration. Under the influence of these men, who were recruited mostly from Bengal, the British administrators made Bengali the

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language of the Court and the medium of instruction in the schools of Assam. In 1836, Assamese language was eliminated from the law-courts and schools and replaced by Bengali language (Neog 2008).



Miles Bronson (1812-1883)

Courtesy: <http://onlinesivasagar.com/literature/miles-bronson.html>

In the same year when Assamese language had lost its official position, two remarkable members of the American Baptist Mission, Rev. N. Brown and O. T. Cutter, arrived in Assam. At Brown's call the Home Board in the States deputed as his associates two more missionaries. One was Dr. Miles Bronson. The Missionaries observed the fact that the Assamese people could be approached by using their language and the Assamese people could approach the world only through the Assamese language. Missionaries employed this language in the religious books they wrote and as medium of instruction in the vernacular schools they started. They sent their objections to the Government at Calcutta and took upon the task of the rehabilitation of the Assamese language. The Missionaries had stressed on the point that the Bengali language was not understood by the common Assamese people. Bronson himself said that the use of Assamese as the medium of instruction was the only hope of popularizing and rendering successful the

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present educational scheme of the Government. Bronson openly began the agitation in favour of the Assamese language on behalf of the mission (Neog 2008). This man is a great benefactor to Assam, who struggled for the survival of Assamese language and was the main spirit behind the efforts. His *A Dictionary in Assamese and English*, published in 1867, was, in part, designed to establish the claims of Assamese as a distinct language.

2. Lexicographic Structure

From the perspective of its ‘macro-structure’, there are potentially three parts to a dictionary: the front matter, the body, and the appendices. The front matter usually includes an introduction or preface, explaining the innovations and characteristics of the edition concerned, together with a guide to using the dictionary. Other front matter might be an explanation of the transcription system used for indicating pronunciation, a list of abbreviations used in the dictionary and an essay on some relevant topic, such as the history of the language or variation of the language etc. A dictionary is used as a useful reference book for different types of linguistic information of various lexical items. The information is related to spelling, meaning, grammar, pronunciation, usage, etymology etc. The body of a dictionary contains all these types of information. Appendices may be various and even non-lexical.

2.1 The Front Matter

A Dictionary in Assamese and English includes preface both in Assamese and English. The preface (both in Assamese and English) includes the purpose, scope and sources of the dictionary. The preface also clearly states the background for the preparation of the dictionary, its aims, objectives and the need for such a dictionary.

2.1.1 Purpose of Compilation

A Dictionary in Assamese and English is Bronson’s important contribution to the Assamese language. It was not merely a dictionary; it was a weapon for the battle of self-establishment of the language. In the preface of his dictionary Bronson wrote: “*Assamese is the*

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language usually spoken by the entire population of the Brahmaputra valley, and in most cases is the only medium of intercourse with the bordering hill tribes. There is nothing to show that the Assamese race and their language have not existed in this valley from time immemorial; and it is surprising that during the change of rulers, the oppression and misrule to which they have been subjected, there are so few traces of any material change in their language” (Bronson 1867).

From the experience of thirty years of living with the Assamese people, Bronson said emphatically that the Assamese language was worthy of cultivation and not of neglect. Among the forty thousand words collected in this first dictionary there were many words of daily use which would not be understood by any Bengali scholars. In the preface of his dictionary, with a quotation of philologist of the status of Max Muller, the individual identity of the languages like Assamese and Bengali, which were derived from the same root Sanskrit language are explained: *“It matters not how many words may be derived in common from another language, it does not prove the identity of any two dialects. It is to the grammar that we must look, to decide their identity* In the preface wrote in Assamese, named as “*Abhas*”(অভাস), Bronson expresses his faith for the banished Assamese language : *“Thus almost thirty years had passed, but like the current of the river Brahmaputra, the Assamese language was in use in the state and would be used in the future also” (Bronson 1867).*

2.1.2 Scope and Sources of the Dictionary

In the Assamese Introduction part of the dictionary Dr. Bronson states that the dictionary aims at native speakers as well as the English speakers who desire to learn Assamese. It was prepared for native speakers to learn English and English speakers to learn Assamese. ‘*A Dictionary in Assamese and English*’ contains forty thousand words collected from various sources. Bronson inserted colloquial terms and ordinary words of Assamese language as well as Sanskrit words that are often used in the *Puthis*, School Books and Scripture Translations, with a modified meaning, and a different pronunciation. He acknowledges his debt to the Reverend Dr. Nathan Brown and the Reverend Mr. Whiting for a valuable list of words and definitions.

2.2 The Body

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2.2.1 Selection of Vocabulary

A dictionary is a 'store house' of words of a language. It is also a source of information of life, language and society. The compiler of the first dictionary of Assamese Language, Miles Bronson had collected words from various sources. Besides using old Assamese Manuscripts, school books and Scripture translations, Bronson collected many words from the day-to-day used language of the people. Moreover, he had inserted the more common Sanskrit words used in the Puthis, i.e., in old Assamese manuscripts, and therefore known to the people. These Sanskrit words were often used in Assamese with modified meanings, and different pronunciations. Again, the form and pronunciation of some of these words were slightly different from the originals. Primarily, Bronson's field of work attempted to cover the areas of Upper Assam and Mid Assam as his area of work; therefore his *A Dictionary in Assamese and English* is mainly a collection of words gathered from these two regions of Assam.

2.2.2 Alphabetization

A compiler of a dictionary, after collecting words from different sources, arranges them systematically in alphabetical order. The words inserted in the dictionary are arranged in the following alphabetical order (Bronson 1867).

অ (a)	আ(ā)	ই(i)	উ(u)	এ(e)	ঐ(ai)
ও(o)	ঔ(ou)	ক(k)	খ(kh)	গ(g)	ঘ(gh)
চ(ch)	জ(j)	ট(t)	ঠ(th)	ড(d)	ঢ(ḍh)
ত(t)	থ(th)	দ(d)	ধ(dh)	ন(n)	প(p)
ফ(ph)	ব(b)	ভ(bh)	ম(m)	ৰ(r)	ল(l)
স(s)	হ(h)				

As the pronunciation of letters like ঐ(ī), উ(ū), ঋ(r), ছ(chh), ঞ(jh), ঞ(w), শ(ś), ষ(ṣ), ৱ(ṛh) etc. are absent in Assamese language, perhaps Bronson dropped these letters from the dictionary.

2.2.3 Spelling and Pronunciation

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The model of spelling used in the dictionary was that of Joduram Barua, a learned Assamese Pundit, which it is believed, much better corresponds with the actual pronunciation of the people than any other system met with (Bronson 1867). The biggest advocate of this system was Reverend Dr. Nathan Brown. In his *Grammatical Notices of the Assamese language* (1848) Brown upheld the same principles. As the written form of words inserted in the dictionary correspond with the actual pronunciation of the people, separate pronunciation was not indicated. The dictionary aims to equally serve the purpose of the speakers of Assamese language and speakers of English language (Bronson 1867). It was prepared for native speakers to learn English and English speakers to learn Assamese. For the convenience of the English speakers who desire to learn Assamese, pronunciation guide is included in the introduction of the letters. For instance -

অ, the first vowel in the Alphabet. In Assamese the sound fluctuates between long and short o, as in the two syllables of the word morrow. It is inherent in every consonant; but the mark () placed underneath suppresses the vowel sound. Native writers denote the long sound of অ, by a circumflex, as কলা *black* মঁহ a *buffalo*.

ই, ঐ, These two vowels are used indiscriminately to express the sound of *i* in *pique*, *pin*, *pity*. The Assamese language knows no distinction between them except what is produced by accent, to which the Sanscrit and Bengali distinction of long and short denoted by those two characters have no reference.

ঔ, this vowel is generally considered as a compound of *o* and *u*, but the sound in Assamese is that of long *o* in *more*.

য, In Assamese this letter is usually pronounced like the soft or French *j*... (Bronson1867).

2.2.4 Grammatical Information

In the dictionary, English abbreviations are used for indication related to grammar, e.g.; *a.* (adjective), *interj.* (interjection), *ad.* (adverb), *v.* (verb), *pron.* (pronoun), *conj.*

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(conjunction), *part.* (participle). It is not clear about the form of abbreviation *s* in respect of noun words which is included in the grammatical information.

2.2.5 Presentation of Meaning

Word-meanings are presented both in Assamese and English. Meanings of the words are given with definition and their synonymous words. For polysemous word, the approximate meaning is placed first.

2.2.6 Examples, Etymology, etc.

The dictionary does not give illustrative examples, illustrative pictures, glosses and usage of the words. Etymological information and notes regarding the origin of the words are also not traced in the dictionary.

2.3 Appendices

The appendices contain two parts. The first part added supplement of 337 entries and in the second part it includes errata and emendation of 540 words.

3. Lexicographic Potential

The title of the dictionary (*A Dictionary in Assamese and English*) suggests that it is a bilingual dictionary. In the Assamese Introduction of the dictionary, Bronson states that, *Many English long to learn Assamese, and many Assamese too are making an effort to learn the English language. For the benefit of everyone I bring out this Assamese dictionary.* From the above quote it can be said that it aims equally to serve the purpose of the speakers of both the source language and the target language. However, it is not easy to pay equal attention to the speakers of both languages in one and the same work. So, it is difficult to decide whether the work was intended primarily for the speakers of Assamese language or the speakers of English language. Though the meanings of the entry words have been given both in Assamese and in

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English, other information including grammatical ones is presented in English. Therefore, it is considered that stress was put in this compilation to facilitate the English speaking American Missionaries in comprehending the language. It is to be noted that in those days Assamese was used in the missionary schools of Assam. The missionaries had a hope that from among the new learners some regional writers would emerge out who would contribute to the Christian literature in Assamese to fulfill their purpose. Obviously it would be beneficial for them if they hold the knowledge of English together with their mother tongue.

The characteristic of Utility lexicography is observed in the dictionary. Utility lexicography serves two main purposes; one of them is to support communication, either in the user's native language or in a foreign language and the other purpose is to support the learning of language, either one's native language or a foreign language (Svense'n, Bo.2009). The introduction, various information and meanings are given both in the source language and target language. Thus, this work can be categorized among the bidirectional-bilingual dictionaries.

The spellings used in the dictionary are based on the actual pronunciation made by the native people. But, this principle was not strictly followed by the compiler. There is no difference in pronunciation between cerebral **ট(t), ঠ(th), ড(d), ঢ(dh), ণ(n)** and dental **ত(t), থ(th), দ(d), ধ(dh), ন(n)** in Assamese. Both are pronounced as alveolar sound. But in the dictionary difference has been indicated regarding the spellings of the above alphabet letters. Some errors in the meanings of certain words are also noticed. Absence of explanatory notes for the readers to use the dictionary is another shortcoming of the dictionary.

Concluding Remarks

In view of the foregoing discussion, it can be said that despite having some lapses, this dictionary is an invaluable contribution of Bronson to the Assamese language. He was the first person to introduce modern lexicographic ideas in Assamese dictionary making. As the first full-fledged printed dictionary of Assamese, Bronson's work marked a new era in the history of

Assamese lexicography. Besides, as a weapon for self-establishment of Assamese language, the role of this dictionary is unique.

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