THE TITULAR PROBLEM AND THE TITLE MYSTERY

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Abstract:*At the level of the distinction between 'problems' amenable to scientific tackling and 'mysteries' lacking this property, it is both linguistically and semiotically interesting to juxtapose the way titles of books are recycled in ordinary discourse – a 'mystery' – and the formal characteristics of titular elements in the structure of language – a 'problem' that has been opened up for rigorous investigation only recently, in the context of the study of the Eastern Indo-Aryan language Bangla (a.k.a. Bengali). Titles, such as The Three Musketeers, circulate as recyclable material: it is normal for any group of three friends who are inseparable to be called 'the three musketeers' even by persons who will never have the time to read the novel by Alexandre Dumas. Titular elements in a language like Bangla – such as babu 'mister', mOSai 'excellency', dada 'elder brother' and didi 'elder sister' – have been shown by Ghosh 2006 (who calls them 'honorific words') to be distinct from classifiers. Her argument rests on their compatibility with the plural format Nra. We consider further facts – that a titularized nominal can occur in the classification format NTa, and that examples with title recursion sometimes work, as in mitrobabumOSai 'his excellency Mr Mitra', indudidiSona 'our dear elder sister Indu' – and propose that the relevant word formation strategy should have formal freedom of action supplemented by semiotic principles that require some rise in the level of either respect or endearment in order to license actual applications of the recursive option. It is in the semiotics that linguistic problems meet discursive mysteries.*

The present intervention touches on two topics – titles in discourse and the titular projection in generative grammar. In the interest of what is sometimes called rigour, I consider titular elements first. Ghosh (2006) is apparently the first author to scrutinize certain formal properties of what she terms 'honorific words' in Bangla – items like *babu* 'mister', *mOSai* 'excellency', *dada* 'elder brother' and *didi* 'elder sister'. She argues that these elements (which we shall hereinafter describe as Titulars, projecting a Titular Phrase TituP) are distinct from classifiers. After reconsidering these and other formal matters, and suggesting that they interact with semiotic issues, I turn to the way titles of books and other compositions are

treated in discourse, focusing on their conversational recycling by speakers who may not be familiar with the compositions themselves. This decision to juxtapose the 'problem' of titular functors and the 'mystery' of titles, while it is not innocent of word play, helps articulate a methodological question or two about the semiotic interface at which the problems of exact syntax encounter the mysteries of inexact discourse.

Descriptions in the framework of Whole Word Morphology (WWM) by Dasgupta (2008) and others have shown classifiers to be grammatical features whose exponents in Bangla are never independent words, but classification formats associated with Word Formation Strategies. For instance, *dujon meye* 'two.Jon girl = two girls', *tinkhana alu* 'three.Khana potato = three potatoes', *paMcTa chele* 'five.Ta boy = five boys', *Onekgulo boi* 'many.Gulo books = many books' exemplify four distinct classification formats.[1] Readers dissatisfied with the dummy glosses or this minimal introduction to Word Formation Strategies may consult relevant WWM writings – such as Ford, Singh and Martohardjono (1997), Singh, Starosta and Neuvel (2003) and Dasgupta (2008) – for a fuller account. For our purposes it is enough to note that some classification formats expand nouns rather than numerals or determiners: *alukhana* 'the potato', *meyeTa* 'the girl', *boigulo* 'the books' expand *alu* 'potato', *meye* 'girl' and *boi* 'book' respectively.

Titular formatting in Bangla, which occurs in such nouns as *dOttobabu* 'Mister Datta', *rajamOSai* 'his excellency the king', *biramdada* 'elder brother Biram' and *minotididi* 'elder sister Minati', may at first sight seem identical to the classification formatting exemplified above.

However, Ghosh (2006) argues that titular formatting is distinct from classification formatting (she uses the term 'honorific words' for the titular material because certain titular elements are viable as independent nouns, for instance the full forms *dada* 'elder brother' and *didi* 'elder sister', though not their clipped versions *da* and *di*).

Her argument rests on facts of the following sort. Consider the pluralized nouns *meyera* '(the) girls', *chelera* '(the) boys'. They exhibit what WWM treats as 'plural' formatting[2] and describes in terms of a 'pluralizing' WFS (Word Formation Strategy) $[X]_N \leftrightarrow [Xra]_{N, Plur}$. Now, clear cases of classification formatting are incompatible with the 'pluralizing' WFS: **meyeTara* (for 'the girls') and the like are robustly excluded. But titularized nouns accept 'plural' formatting: *rajamOSaira*, *biramdadara*, *minotididira*. (I return below to the question of what these 'plurals' mean.) Thus, titular formatting is distinct from classification formatting. In the vocabulary of formalistic theories, some of whose practitioners have begun to realize the need for a dialogue with substantivism in general linguistics and specifically with WWM in morphological theory, this means that a titular item and a classifier item are featurally distinct.

Proceeding one step beyond Ghosh, we note that if $[X]_N \leftrightarrow [XmOSai]_{N, Titu}$ and $[X]_N \leftrightarrow [Xbabu]_{N, Titu}$ are typical titularizing WFSes, and if a titularized noun (an [N, Titu]) counts as a kind of N, then the Strategy Shadow Theorem of Dasgupta (2009) does not exclude such forms as *mitrobabumOSai* 'his excellency Mr Mitra', *indudidimoni* 'our dear elder sister Indu' exhibiting formal recursion but not the iteration of any particular strategy. And indeed these forms are licit.

Presuming that a classification formatted noun or an [N, Cla] also counts as an N, why is it, then, that classification formatting WFSes like $[X]_N \leftrightarrow [Xkhana]_{N, Cla}$ and $[X]_N \leftrightarrow [XTa]_{N, Cla}$ never exercise their right to apply one on top of another? In other words, why do we never observe forms like **alukhanagulo* and **cheleTagulo*, which, if they did occur, would have meant 'the potatoes, more precisely the plurality of potatoes viewed as segments' and 'the boys, more precisely the plurality of boys viewed neutrally' respectively?

Ghosh proceeds on the assumption that these forms are excluded, as are forms where plural formatting (as in *meyera* '(the) girls') is applied on top of classification formatting (in other words, *meyeTara*, for 'the girls', is excluded). She uses this fact as an empirical criterion that helps her to distinguish titular formatting from classification formatting. Working as she is in a period prior to the 2009 Strategy Shadow Theorem, she quite naturally

does not regard the ill-formedness of these multiple applications of the relevant strategies as an issue to be addressed. It is this gap that must now elicit further work.

Writings on classification formatted material in Bangla that employ formalistic or first approximation methodologies (from Azad (1983) onwards, if we confine ourselves to writings published in English) have provided useful pointers for the work of building foundations for a second approximation, substantivist account. While substantivism takes a postformal view of syntactic embedding – associating it with the discursive – it has found the formalist architecture for the clause entirely heritable, and separable from the atomistic morphologies that continue to proliferate in the formalist literature. Substantivist work at the syntax-morphology interface continues Tesnière's Project (Tesnière (1959)) of capturing correctly the alignments between morphological devices and their syntactic equivalents. What the formalist legacy would encourage us to do is to relegate to the syntax the task of handling the un/availability of this or that type of multiple formatting.

On that view, the classifier projection that takes syntactic responsibility for the features driving classification morphology would be presumed to have formal properties preventing recursion. All workers agree that the classifier projection does have specific formal properties worth investigating. However, tweaking these to prevent recursion would hardly help; for we have seen that titular formatting allows precisely the recursion that classification formatting does not. To tweak the classifier projection in an anti-recursive direction, while making recursion available in the syntax of titulars, would amount to begging the question. A serious argument for a syntactic basis for the titular-classifier asymmetry, if one is ever constructed, will need to be made of sterner stuff.

The properties of 'plural' formatting, though poorly understood, are known to be distinct from those of classification formatting for collective aggregation. At first sight the 'plural' formatted *meyera* '(the) girls' and the classification formatted *meyegulo* 'the girls' (specified as collective for the aggregation feature) may look similar. But the language allows classification formatting of genitives – *tomarTa* 'yours, the one that is yours', *tomargulo* 'yours, the ones that are yours' – and emphatically prohibits 'plural' formatting of genitives:

tomarra 'yours, the ones who are yours'. Only pronouns and human nouns (see note 2) can be 'plural' formatted, whereas classification formatting targets quantifiers and fails to target personal pronouns. 'Plural' formatting, unlike classification formatting, fuses with case formatting, yielding the quirky format *Nder* 'Noun.Plur.Acc/Gen'. These asymmetries suggest that syntactically the projection responsible for *Nra* – which we have been informally describing as 'plural' as if Bangla were indeed endowed with phi-features (note 2 is relevant again) – encodes [Human], [Nominative] and [Collective].

This proposal paves the way to a semiotic account of the asymmetry between titular formatting and classification formatting. One distinctive characteristic of names in Bangla, as distinct from common nouns, is that a 'plural' formatted name like *prodipra* '(the) Prodips' is always ambiguous – whereas an identically formatted common noun such as *mohilara* '(the) women' is absolutely never ambiguous – between a 'multiple instances' reading and an 'et cetera' reading, as first reported in Dasgupta (1985). A few paragraphs ago, I noted that the plurals *rajamOSaira*, *biramdadara, minotididira* exist, but I carefully avoided glossing them. The time has come to reveal that *rajamOSaira* usually means 'their excellencies the kings' but can in the right context also mean 'his royal highness and his retinue'; and that *biramdadara, minotididira* usually mean 'elder brother Biram etc., elder sister Minoti etc.' but can in the right context also mean 'the elder brothers called Biram, the elder sisters called Minoti'. In other words, while the pragmatics helps choose the right reading differently for different cases, the semantics uniformly specifies this ambiguity between 'multiple instances' and 'et cetera' for titularized nouns exactly the way it handles names.

Ghosh's 'honorific words' – words like *mOSai* or *dada* used independently – behave identically under 'plural' formatting; I omit the glosses to save space. I shall assume that her 'honorific words' carry titular features in their own (lexical) right, and that titular formatted nouns are given these features by the Word Formation Strategy that formats them. From the foregoing considerations I conclude that part of the semantic core content of titularity is an [Appellation] feature that titular (and titularized, i.e. titular-formatted) items share with full-fledged personal names like *biram* 'Biram' and *minoti* 'Minoti'. It is that [Appellation]

feature that I propose to associate with this ambiguity of the 'plural' format between the multiple instances reading and the et cetera reading.

I take it that appellation involves personal addressability and places the phenomenon at the boundary between problem-level formal linguistics and mystery-level semiotics. Scholars wishing to sweep this matter under some mystery rug, claiming that formal linguistics can validly confine itself to dealings with some sort of mystery-free safe zone, may wish to note that decades of rigorous work by some of the syntax and semantics community's best minds has failed to provide a satisfactory formal account of the properties of the Japanese element *tati*, which, as noted in Dasgupta (1985), closely resemble those of the human collective aggregation format in Bangla often called 'plural'. Note also that in all known languages the words for 'we' and 'you (plural)' do not signify multiple instances of 'I' or of 'you (singular)', but mean 'I/you (singular) and others in my/your orbit', which is an 'et cetera' reading in the sense of this discussion. One cannot exactly construct a formal linguistics that relegates first and second person pronouns to a semiotic periphery.

It is not enough, however, to assign an [Appellation] feature to titularized nominals. Titular items, including titularized nouns, are also [Honorific], with consequences that become clear when classification formatting is applied on top of titularization.

A common noun under default classification formatting *NTa*, like *boiTa* 'the book', carries no pejoration. But consider a name under such formatting: *prodipTa* 'this guy Prodip, this Prodip of yours'. This form is at least slightly pejorative – the context determines just how much pejoration is involved. What about titularized items under *NTa* formatting? One can indeed say *rajamOSaiTa, dOttobabuTa, biramdadaTa, minotididiTa*, but only where the context can handle the unusual subtlety involved at the rhetorical level: one is applying a titular format operation first, which raises the status of the word, and then a second process introduces a pejorative twist, thus lowering its status. This lowering ensures that a verb agreeing with such a subject shall carry non-honorific morphology: Dasgupta 2008 provides the empirical details, deploying both the 'opacity vs transparency' binary and 'arbitrary vs motivated' in a part-formal, part-semiotic account.[3]

Notice, however, that even though titular formatting maps a name like *biram* into a name like *biramdada*, and even though classification formatting employing the format *NTa* can map a name *biram* into a pejorative designation *biramTa*, nonetheless the language prohibits the application of the *Ndada* titular format to a classification formatted *biramTa* to yield **biramTadada*; this imagined output is so remote from generability that linguistically untrained speakers can hardly parse it. When we look for resources to handle this fact, we notice also that repeat applications of titularization using distinct titular formats, as in *mitrobabumOSai* 'his excellency Mr Mitra', *indudidiSona* 'our dear elder sister Indu', are a one-way street. The language robustly prohibits **mitromOSaibabu* 'Mr his excellency Mitra', **induSonadidi* 'our elder sister dear Indu'. These are unlikely to be two traffic problems calling for distinct formal solutions.

My solution is formally simple: titular formatting and classification formatting Word Formation Strategies should remain minimally specified, just as they were in the early parts of this article; no formal gadget should be given the power to block particular application sequences for such processes. My solution is also semiotically simple: each application of such a strategy must make sense of what is being done within the pattern. A titularization needs to increase honour or endearment, and is semiotically pointless if it cannot do this. A pejoration-inducing process needs to produce its typical effect, and cannot do so if it is buried under honorification induced by another process, any more than an interjection like *Hey!* can exert any interjectivity if it is sitting in the middle of a sentence like **The claim that hey you cannot do this does not hold water*. The semiotic principle involved is that a device that is intended to produce a special effect needs to be so timed and so placed that it can do so. No more needs to be said in the formal part or the semiotic part of our bifocal account. The facts adduced above follow from these simple principles without special formal or semiotic stipulation.

What may look intriguing about the material we have considered here is that it is both rigid (therefore describable at the problem solving level of a formal account) and subtle (therefore requiring a partly semiotic analysis). These properties also appear in the phenomena addressed in the extensive morphological and syntactic analysis of names and

related matters – again with a serious semiotic supplement intricately interwoven with the formal grammar – in Dasgupta (2011), which draws on the theory of deconstruction.

Without going quite that far this time, however, we do need to take a quick look at what 'problem'-focused formal linguists are bound to regard as 'mysteries' involving titles of books and other compositions. Consider the recycling of an Alexandre Dumas novel title *The Three Musketeers* by ordinary people who describe any inseparable trio of friends as 'three musketeers'. Now juxtapose this with what Imre Lakatos is doing when he[4] calls a book of his own *Proofs and Refutations* and gives it the subtitle *The Logic of Mathematical Discovery*. He is alluding to two different books written by his teacher Karl Popper: *Conjectures and Refutations* and *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. Lakatos so words his title and subtitle that his main point – that mathematics too is empirical like the sciences that Popper was at pains to distinguish from mathematics – begins to emerge even before the reader has reached the first page. Is his use of the words in Popper's titles significantly different from the way ordinary readers pick up *The Idiot* from a Dostoyevsky novel title?

What Lakatos is doing, I would like to suggest, raises the stakes by alluding not just to the wording of Popper's titles but to the content of the books. If you write something – it need not be a play – and call it *Coffee and Sympathy*, your allusion to the title *Tea and Sympathy* will be obvious even to readers who have not read Anderson (1953) or watched the play or its derivatives. However, if your work is only a longish essay making the point that a cup of coffee makes you so sympathetic to an academic adversary that you will be able to provide an effective summary of their theses and follow it up with a devastating critique – all the more definitive because you appeared to be all ears at the beginning – then you will disappoint readers who have at least basic familiarity with what happens in *Tea and Sympathy*, which is far less arid than this. However, while your surface recycling of a catchy title will gain you some credit, readers seem to regard a recycled title as richer in content if the later work actually engages with the content of the earlier text whose memory is being invoked.

Contrast all this with the recycling of *The Three Musketeers* by ordinary people engaging in simple banter with friends. The critical standards for that enterprise are low. No bystander would dream of carping at the simple recycling of such a title for these purposes. Nor would anyone suggest that you get special credit for joking about a particular trio whose antics remind you exactly of Athos, Porthos and Aramis, or for even identifying a plausible D'Artagnan. The point seems to be that a recycler of a title who is writing a fresh text that revisits an earlier text is judged by the higher standards applicable to authors, whereas ordinary conversationists who allude in their daily talk to a familiar book title are not judged at all.

What underlies this contrast between the higher standards authors are held to and the low-brow non-standards that come into force in ordinary conversations? It is obviously pointless to press for an answer to this question. But what underlies this evident state of affairs?

The fact that most European readers assume that their well-known Mr Robinson was a character created by Daniel Defoe misread not just the title of Defoe's book but the name of its eponymous hero. The book was in fact called – hold your breath – *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner: Who lived Eight and Twenty Years, all alone in an un-inhabited Island on the Coast of America, near the Mouth of the Great River of Oroonoque; Having been cast on Shore by Shipwreck, wherein all the Men perished but himself. With An Account how he was at last as strangely deliver'd by Pirates.* That was the length of your typical title in 1719. But when Johann David Wyss wrote *Der schweizerische Robinson* (1812, literally 'The Swiss Robinson'), usually translated as *The Swiss Family Robinson*, he was echoing the pan-European misreading of Robinson as a last name, whereas in Defoe's novel Robinson is Crusoe's first name. These are cultural facts. If you wish to focus on the historical question of whether a pedagogue at the time could have screamed himself hoarse throughout the continent of Europe – correcting all these misreaders and restoring the true status of the name Robinson in Defoe's novel – you are looking at one of the might-have-beens of history.

Likewise, 'everybody knows' that Mary Shelley's fictional monster was called Frankenstein. That 'in fact' she chose this name for the harmless but deluded scientist who created the monster is not a 'fact' that any real life pedagogue can establish in the face of the universal reassignment of the name to the monster. Notice that the experience of reading Mary Shelley's book itself, or Daniel Defoe's book, in the original form or some version which, however abridged, is bound to reveal the pedagogue's 'truth' about these names, does nothing to dislodge these firmly established, universal misreadings.

To take an Indian example, Sukumar Ray's major play *Calacintacancari* has an intriguing title, which happens to be a nonsense word. Most Bengalis pronounce this title as *Calaccintacancari*, 'wrongly' doubling the second *c* under the influence of the familiar word *calaccitra* 'film'. The fact that many of them do read the book and notice the discrepancy between the written title and the common pronunciation makes no difference to the prevalence of this established error.

The point I am trying to drive home is that, in the domain of cultural facts such as the ordinary recycling of titles, even the ordinary precisions that standard pedagogies are based on fail to apply. If we in linguistics or semiotics seek to find hidden norms and ask seriously whether these special norms can be applied with precision to make sense of the details of title recycling, then we are missing the point. Even what are socially recognized as ordinary norms cannot be applied with precision in this domain. Our question about special norms, which we discover through painstaking inquiry, is even less relevant. This is not to say that all hell breaks loose in the cultural domain, but that the way in which laws and principles are applied is very different from what rigorous scientific inquiry about problems and their exact formal solutions leads us to expect.

In other words, a quick glance at the recycling of titles confirms the intuitive understanding of the contrast between problems and mysteries that drives most traffic in linguistics, semiotics and communication studies. At the same time, the earlier section of this paper has shown that the rigorous study of problems is not watertight, but has a porous

boundary. Certain mysteries demonstrably mingle with problems. This mingling shapes the sorts of solutions available when the phenomena under scrutiny are situated at the boundary between the two species. In other words, I am not denying the value of keeping this kind of dichotomy in place, but saying that it is like the analytic-synthetic binary: you take it excessively seriously at your peril.

Acknowledgements:

Notes:

1. Transcription conventions for Bangla used here: *ng* is a velar nasal; *E* and *O* are low vowels, back unrounded and front rounded respectively; *c j* are palato-alveolar; *T D R* are retroflex; *M* nasalizes vowels and semivowels to its left.

2. My persistent scarequotes for 'plural' and 'pluralizing' may look annoying, but are the only reliable way to indicate that linguistic descriptions must keep in view at all the times the contrast between true phi-features such as [Plural] in languages like English or Hindi-Urdu and their tau-laden surrogates in Bangla, a phi-inert language. Only the small print of bracket labels compels me to leave the scarequotes understood, for typographic reasons. The fact that only human nouns in Bangla – and animate nouns under an anthropomorphized construal – permit 'plural' formatting makes it clear that there is more to this 'plurality' than meets the eye or is readily encodable on the basis of currently available formal devices.

3. I save space by not repeating the exercise for independent titular words like *mOSai*. The pattern is identical. There are nuances that become clearer when the alternative classification formatting *NTi* is brought into the picture; see Dasgupta (2008). Space prevents me from doing more than quickly suggest that that paper's bare common nouns eliciting honorific verb agreement, like *montri* 'the minister' in *montri eSechen* 'the minister has come', possibly instantiate what a formalistic analysis would regard as a null Titular affix and what we substantivists describe in terms of WFS-induced conversion (in this case, from common nounhood to namehood). Exploring such an idea would take us too far afield.

4. I allow for the possibility that perhaps his editors John Worrall and Elie Zahar, rather than Lakatos himself, made the final decisions; the book was posthumous; however, the articles on which it was based were not.

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