Review of Walter N. Hakala, *Negotiating Languages: Urdu, Hindi, and the Definition of Modern South Asia*. New York: Columbia, August 2016. ISBN: 978-0-231-17830-3 (Hardcover); 978-0-231-54212-8 (e-book). US$65.00/£54.95.

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Walter Hakala’s *Negotiating Languages* opens with a personal recollection of the author’s visit to a bookshop “in Urdu Bazaar…adjacent to the Jām‘ě Masjid, the massive Friday Mosque…” (1). I was brought up short: was I being teased, or deliberately provoked? The everyday English reference to “Friday” mosques is of course itself an accident of etymology and two very similar-sounding words: *jum‘ah* as the “day of congregation” is distinct from *jām‘ě*, the active participle; Delhi’s, or any, *jām‘ě masjid* should then be more properly referred to in English as the “Congregational Mosque”.

Quickly, I decided it was quite on purpose, perhaps even a sly aside to the kind of person (ahem) who worries about such things. The Urdu name was transliterated in precise detail; it was then followed by the common English term—more than adequate for most kinds of reader. For this is a book of extraordinary scholarship, with remarkable attention paid to the minutiae of historical lexicography in South Asia, based on which Hakala opens up vistas into the grand historical narrative of the role that language politics played in inter-religious rivalry and mutually-divergent nationalisms in the modern period. So, while a work on “dictionaries” or historical lexicography might be expected to appeal only to a quite narrow readership, this is without doubt a volume that should be read and studied by anyone with an interest in literary creativity, language policy, and community relations in South Asia in any era from the 17th century to the present day—not just those of us with a perhaps unhealthy interest in etymology and diacritics.

Hakala takes us through three historical moments—the turns of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries—focussing in on four particular lexicographical projects: Abdul Wasi Hanswi’s late 17th-century *Gharā’ib al-Lughāt*; the 1792 *Shams al-Bayān* of Mirza Jan “Tapish”; Sayyid Ahmad Dihlawi’s *Hindūstānī Urdū Lughat* of 1888–1901; and the 1886 *Makhzan al-Muhāwarat* of Chiranji Lal. Such a structure might have resulted in hermetically sealed, disconnected readings, but even more impressive than Hakala’s firm mastery of the sources are the links he draws—between, for instance, 17th-century language “intentionality” and the formulation by state-sponsored committee of administrative glossaries in post-Independence India (56–7)—ensuring that the reader is never tempted to consign the relevance of pre-colonial or colonial language work to one particular period alone. Rather, it is such attention to detail that allows him to demonstrate, inter alia, that “the so-called philological revolution attributed to British ‘Orientalists’” (198) had much longer historical antecedents than many prior studies had appreciated—though the colonial intervention was not without its lexicographical consequences.

The book’s “central premise…is that lexicographical works reflect dominant cosmographies: the means by which a people understand the organisation of the universe about them” (12). This takes on particular importance in the context of shifts in political and power structures, not least that which occurred under colonial and post-Independence nationalisms, the “monoglot ideology” of which “reduces a vast complex of shared cosmographies to a flat orthographic logocentrism” (22). Thus, from the varied fate of Hanswi’s work—central to later projects, but derided by his major subsequent interpreter as irredeemably provincial—through the life and work of Tapish, “a product of the ancien regime and a comprador in the nouvelle” (78), to the “new era of Urdu lexicography” (115) embodied in Dihlawi’s *Lughat*, and the close collaboration between Chiranji Lal and colonial administrator-lexicographers, Hakala documents the ebbs and flows of the documentation of language, and the attendant processes of mutual exclusion that saw modern Hindi and Urdu crystallise as discrete components of political and cultural identity formation. The thesis is compelling, the evidence carefully marshalled, and the detailed readings of these neglected texts thoroughly contextualised in wider literary and linguistic projects, as well as political developments. Any quibbles I might have are very minor indeed (though having to flip back and forth through the book to find the excellent, detailed endnotes is certainly not my idea of fun).

Perhaps the most consequential—though apparently not always well received—of Hakala’s interventions is his insistence on the importance of, shall we say, second-rate and lesser grade works to the history of language use and literary production. If we accept that “an Urdu literary culture developed reflexively in parallel to lexicography” (192)—and Hakala strongly suggests we should—we must bend our necks, move beyond the stubborn intransigence of those who consider literature a treasure house stocked only with the best and the “greats”, and move to consider the non-canonical, the quotidian, even the popular, and the production and consumption of literature and its meanings beyond the elite and canonical, rarefied and reified. This volume is in some ways an important corrective to this tendency—hardly unique to Urdu literary scholarship—and particularly appropriate as lexicography enters online, interactive domains in the 21st century (199–200). Even here, however, Hakala provides a South Asian precedent to a kind of crowd-sourced lexicography in H. H. Wilson’s mid-19th-century glossary, the failure of which seemed, in his own words, “far from creditable to the public zeal and philological proficiency of the East-India Company’s Civil Service” (65). If the balance between public interest and proficiency is a hard one to strike in such cases, it is certainly not so in *Negotiating Languages*.