

Some Issues with the Orientalists' Urdu-English Dictionaries

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Abstract

After their invasion in the sub-continent, the British rulers took great interest in the local languages in order to understand the beliefs, literature and folklore of the natives. They prepared materials and dictionaries in order to facilitate the learning of the local languages. The Urdu-English dictionaries written by them are of great merit as they mark the beginning of lexicography in the Indian sub-continent on sound principles. Despite being of great merit, these dictionaries do not measure up to the needs of the learners of English in Pakistan. Their needs and wants warrant the publishing of an Urdu-English learner's dictionary which incorporates the new developments in the fields of lexicography, applied linguistics and information technology.

The British invasion in the sub-continent impacted every aspect of the life and culture of the local people. Language was no exception. English was the mother tongue as well as official language of the British rulers in India. They felt the need to learn the indigenous languages in order to understand the cultures, beliefs, literature and folklore of the natives of the Indian sub-continent. They set up various educational institutions to promote the indigenous languages. In order to learn and teach the

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local languages, the missionaries and bureaucrats prepared dictionaries. Grierson, cited in Noor Muhammad, claims that as many as 298 books on Urdu grammar, morphology, syntax and dictionaries were written during the period from 1744 to 1853.(1) The dictionaries varied in size from diaries and notebooks to glossaries and full-fledged dictionaries, and in direction, from local to English and English to local language.

1.1. Characteristic features of Urdu-English dictionaries compiled by the colonial scholars

The colonial scholars wrote a number of Urdu – English dictionaries. Noor Muhammad mentions as many as twenty five such dictionaries. (2) Most well-known among these are:

- I. John Shakespear (1817) A Hindoostanee-English Dictionary (3)
- II. Duncan Forbes (1848)A Hindustani-English , English - Hindustani Dictionary (4)
- III. S.W. Fallon (1879) New Hindustani-English Dictionary (5)
- IV. John T. Platts (1884) A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi and English (6)

A word about the word ‘Hindustani’ is in order. Urdu is the developed form of the popular language spoken across the sub-continent during the British Raj. The British called it ‘Hindustani’ though it was given different names such as ‘Zuban-e-Urdu-e-Mualla’ ‘Kharri Boli’, ‘Braj Bhasha’, ‘Dakhni’ and ‘Rekhta’. It split into two languages i.e. Hindi and Urdu in the wake of the establishment of the Fort Williams College in Calcutta at the turn of the 19th century. The differences between the newly born languages were mainly in script, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Whereas Hindi was written in Devanagri script, Urdu was written in Perso-Arabic script. Moreover, Hindi drew on Sanskrit for new words while Urdu borrowed words from Arabic and Persian. For details see Khalil Baig 2007. (7)

A random browsing of the above-mentioned dictionaries revealed the following design features of these dictionaries vis-à-vis the micro- and macro-structures. The entry **پینا** *pina*’ will serve as an example:

2.SHAKESPEAR’S HINDOOSTANI-ENGLISH DICTIONARY (1817)

The entry contains the following information:

H. **پینا** *paina*, *s.m.* A goad, *adj. m.* sharp.

s. **پینا** *pina* 1. *v.a.* To drink; to smoke (tobacco): *subst.* Drinking & c. 2. *s.m.* The dregs or refuse (of linseed, & c.), the oil cake

(2.1) The lexical item پینا 'pina' is listed at page 472 which contains 44 entries out of which 28 lexical items are never/no longer used in Urdu:

پیل pel (shove) پیلَا *Pela* (a testicle) پیلَا *paila* (a vessel for measuring grain), پیلڑا *pelar* (a testicle) پیلڑا *pelara* (a testicle)s, پیلبان *pilban* (an elephant driver), پیلبانے *pilbani* (the business of taking care of elephants), پیلپا *pilpa* (Afflicted with elephantiasis), پیلپایا *pilpaya* (An elephant's foot...) پیل مارنا *pel marna* (to shove), پیلک *pilak* (the large black ant), پیلن *pailan* (First child), پیلنا *pelna* (to shove), پیلو *pelu* (a wrestler) پیلہ *pela* (...a silk worm), پیلور *pailwar* (see پری *pare*) پیلھڑ *pelhar* (see پیلڑ *pelar*) پیلھڑا *pelhar* (see پیلڑ *pelar*, پیلے بھیت *Pili bhit* (the name of a town in Rohilkhand), پیلور *pailwar* (Beyond) پیم *pem* (Love...), پین *pain* (a reservoir), پین *pin* (Heavy...), پین *pen* (An imitative sound), پینا *paina* (A goad), پینالا *painala* (A gutter), پینانا *painana* (To sharpen), پینتانا *paintana* (The foot of a bed...), پینٹھ *penth* (A market)

It means that about 64 % (!) words are irrelevant as far the Urdu speaker is concerned. Situation at numerous other pages is not any different: Page 16/17 i.e. one out of 44, i.e. 98% (!), Page 19/20 i.e. one out of 38, i.e. 97% (!)

(2.2) The use of Devanagiri characters is more of a hindrance than a help as they are hard to decipher for the Urdu speakers who are used to Persian characters only.

(2.3) *Transliteration in the Roman script*: Interestingly, the Roman script does not adequately represent Urdu letters in many cases. Ahmad elaborates how the Roman script fails to represent the Urdu characters: (8)

* "there is no Roman letter to represent the Urdu letters د, ط, ت, ع, غ, ق, & ء .

* Similarly, letter 'z' is used to represent four Urdu letters ظ, ض, ز, ذ. Consequently, the difference between Urdu words such as ظن (zan) i.e. 'opinion' vs. زن (zan) i.e. 'woman' is blurred.

* The letter 's' is used to represent three Urdu letters س, ص, ث and

* The letter 'h' is used to represent two Urdu letters ح & ہ."

* In fact, the Urdu letter ہ and ه have different values as in ہند (mouth) and ہند (wealth).

* Some other letters difficult to be represented using the Roman script include چ, ک, ٹ, combined with ہ. Similarly, the difference between ن

and ٺ is blurred when written in Roman script. The letter ٺ is difficult to be represented in Roman script.

* Many words must have an extra vowel since the present script of Urdu has fewer vowels and it shows the vowel values above or below the line with the help of dashes and other diacritical marks. Even diacritical marks are seldom used. As a result, some vowels would become diphthongs. In other words, Roman script would change the very character of the language (9).

* Another major inadequacy of the dictionary is lack of sense discrimination. For example, the entry on پینا contains two translation equivalents:

s. پینا *pina* 1. v.a. To drink; to smoke (tobacco): subst. Drinking & c

2. s.m. The dregs or refuse (of linseed, & c.), the oil cake

It is impossible to figure out in which context which sense is appropriate.

(2.5) In numerous cases, the dictionary gives such meanings as no more exist or are wrong:

اپاہج apahaj adj. lazy, cripple , a person who never visits anyone.

(Only 'cripple' is in use these days.)

ابوبکر Abubikr the father of a virgin [correct meaning: pioneer]

عملیات amaliyat s, plur. practices [correct meaning: charm; spell]

عوامل awamil, s. plur. ... Governing words (in grammar [correct meaning: factors])

دھماکہ dhamaka, s. m. A kind of cannon carried on an elephant. [page 905] [correct meaning: explosion]

دھند dhund, s. (dakh.) Design, intention, idea, thought [correct meaning: fog; mist]

استعفا isti'fa (inf. x. of عفو) Asking forgiveness, deprecating. [correct meaning :resignation]

احد aHad unity, [correct meaning :only, solitary]

اشتمال ishtemaal comprehension [correct meaning :consolidation of lands]

پنیری paneeri a young flowering shrub [correct meaning : nursery]

تریاق taryaq opium [correct meaning: antidote]

روبکار roobkaar face to business [correct meaning: court decree]

(2.6) The dictionary contains too many abbreviations which serve only to impede comprehension.

(2.7) Etymology: The entry indicates the origin of the word. However, it has been revealed that users very rarely consult a dictionary for etymology (9).

(2.8) Metalanguage: The language of description is English in order to facilitate the comprehension of the text of the entry by the target users, i.e. the British learners of Urdu. However, it is not helpful in an encoding activity such as text production.

3. Forbes' A Hindustani-English, English -Hindustani Dictionary (1837)

پینا *paina*, s.m. A goad, adj. m. sharp. h.

s. *pina* . a. to drink; to smoke (tobacco): m. act of drinking ; the dregs or refuse (of linseed, & c.), the oil cake. s.

3.1. Page 227 contains 60 entries out of which 46 lexical items never/no longer used in Urdu, 2 lexical items have unfamiliar meanings and the spelling of one English word are obsolete. It means that more than 75 % (!) words are irrelevant as far as the Pakistani Urdu speakers are concerned:

پیلباتی *pilbani* (the business of taking care of elephants), پیلپا *pilpa* (afflicted with elephantiasis), پیل پال *pilpal* (pushing), پیلپایہ *pelpaya* (a pillar), پیلپای *pelpai* (the name of a sage), پیلپرنی *pilparni* (a plant), پیلتن *piltan*, پیلدندان *pildandan* (ivory), پیلڑ *pilaR* (testicle), پیلڑا *pelRa* (testicle), پیل مرغ *pil-murgh* (a turkey fowl), پیلن *pailan* (the first-born (child, &c)), پیلنا *pailna* (to shove), پیلنشین *pil-nashin* (an elephant order), پیلو *pelu* (wrestler), پیلور *pailwar* (pedlar), پیلہ *pelah* (silkworm), پیلھڑ *pelhR* (testicle), پیلھڑا *pelhRa* (testicle), پیلی *pili* (gold mohur), پیلے *paile* (first), پیلے بہیت *pili-bhit* (a town ...), پیلےوار *pailewar* (younder), پیم *pem* (love), پیمی *pemi* (a lover), پین *pain* (a reservoir), پین *pin* (heavy), پین *pen* (an imitative sound), پینا *paina* (a goad), پینالا *painala* (gutter), پینام *painam* (a division of province), پینانا *painana* (to sharpen), پینتانا *pentana*, پینتھ *penth* (a market), پینجنی *penjni* (little bells fastened round the feet of pigeons and of children ,), پینچ *pench* (twisting), پینچا *paincha* (return), پینچنا *painchna* (to winnow), پینڈ *pind* (a roller), پینڈ *pend/paind* (pace), پینڈا *painda* (road...), پینس *pinas* (a kind of a sedan...), پینسی *pinasi* (having a cold)

Out of the remaining 17 lexical items, four are the derivatives of paRna, six of paRhna, three of paRos. Situation on numerous other pages is not much different. Page 100: nine out of 53 i.e. 84% (!) Page 801: five out of 44, i.e. 91%(!)

(3.2) The use of Devnagri characters seems to be of no use as far as the Urdu speakers are concerned since they are used to Persian characters only.

(3.3) Another major inadequacy of the dictionary is the lack of sense discrimination. The user is given no clue as what the difference between different senses is. Her/his best conjecture may fail. It is matter of chance that s/he will pick the right sense.

(3.4) *Unfamiliar meanings*

In many cases the meanings entered no longer exist:

پیلی *Pili* f. a gold mohr. s.

پینا *pina* the dregs or refuse (of linseed, & c.), the oil cake. s.

Obsolete spellings: The dictionary contains many spellings which have become obsolete. Here are a few instances:

Obsolete spellings

Current spellings

احمقی *ahmqi*

حماقت [hamaaqat] i.e. stupidity

لائقی *laiqi*

لیاقت [liaqat] i.e. ability

آسانیت *asaaniyat*:

آسانی [aassaani] i.e. easy

استاذ *ustaaZ*;

استاد [ustaad] i.e. teacher

برادرزادی *braadar zadi*

بہتیجی [bhateeji] i.e. niece

Inadequate / wrong Meanings:

Meanings entered

Current meanings

ابھرنا *ubharna*: overflow

appear

اجیرن *ajeeran*: unimpaired; undecayed

distressing

استعفا *isti'fa* : deprecating:

resignation

انشاء *insha* : inshallah

composition

بدکنا *bidakna*: :move

to be scared

برمحل *barmehal* ; the ruler of the district

appropriate

بیوی *bevi* : widow

wife

تذبذب *tazabzab*: commotion; agitation

wavering; perplexity

غنڈہ *ghundah* : fop, ridiculous

rogue

گوبھی *gobhi* : a medicinal herb

cauliflower

کھیوٹ *khewaT* : a sailor the register showing the portion of land owned by the farmer

لن ترانی *lan-taraani* : if you saw me you shall not see me; refuse to court the lover

مثله *musla* : question, problem... to distort the face of the dead body out of hatred]

(3.5) The dictionary gives the pronunciation of the headword in Devanagari characters which merely serve to confuse the modern users of the dictionary in Pakistan. .

(3.6) *Transliteration in the Roman script*: Interestingly, the Roman script does not adequately represent Urdu letters in many cases as pointed out in (2.3).

(3.7) *Too many abbreviations*: The dictionary contains too many abbreviations which impede comprehension.

(3.8) *Etymology*: The entry indicates the origin of the word. However, it has been revealed that users very rarely consult a dictionary for etymology. Also, it contributes very little to sense discrimination.

(3.9) *Metalanguage*: Like other dictionaries written by the Orientalists, the language of description is English which is meant to aid the comprehension of the British users of the dictionary.

4. Fallon's A New Hindustani-English Dictionary (1879)

Fallon's Dictionary contains the following information on the headword پینا :

H. پینا paina, paini, adj. Sharp (tez); paina, n.m. paini, n.f. A goad (for oxen)

H. پینا ...pina, pi jana, pi lena; Tir. Piab; v.a S. ... , Pali. Pibati.

1. To drink; imbibe; sip; quaff lutf-i-mae tujh se kyon kahun, zahid!

Hae kambakht, tu ne pi hi nahin Mir

2. To smoke. 3. To absorb; suck; take in.

4. To suppress one's feelings; to bear patiently. Bat pi kar baith raha, javab na diya

H. پینا pinna ; Mar. pindRon, v.a.S....To card; comb (cotton).

4.1. The page contains 29 entries out of which 21 (72%) are unfamiliar to the Urdu users:

پیمک paimak (gold or silver lace), پین pin (fact), پین pain pin (water course), پینا paina (sharp), پینا pinna (to card), پینانا painana (to sharpen), پینتھی penthi (the edge of a reservoir...), پینتھ penth (a mart), پینجن painjan (see پایل), پینجی penjni (little bells fastened round the feet of pigeons), پینچ pinch (a peacock's tail), پینچا paincha (a small loan), پینچنا painchna (to winnow), پینڈ painD (to move), پینڈا painDa (a path), پینڈا painDa (a stand for pitchers), پینڈی peenDi (fried sweet balls...), پینس pinas (a palanquin), پینس pinas (suppuration from the nose), پینک pinak (drowsiness), پینکڑا painkRa (a heel rope of a camel)

4.2. The use of Devnagri characters is unfamiliar to the Urdu speakers who are accustomed to Persian characters only

4.3. Fallon introduced a new feature. He gave verbal illustrations of the headwords in Hindustani in Roman characters along with its translation in English.

4.4 Wrong meanings

ادیب adeeb a teacher of etiquette and manners [correct meaning : literary writer]

شہریت shahriyat antonym of rustic [correct meaning citizenship]

اهل ahl meek, modest, clever [correct meaning : eligible]
 بام baam fish, woman [correct meaning : roof]
 مسمات musammat title [correct meaning : named]
 معروف ma'roof notorious [correct meaning : well-known]
 مولوی molvi doctor [correct meaning : cleric]
 مومن momon an orthodox Mohammadan [correct meaning : believer]

V. **A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi and English (1884) by John T.Platts**

The dictionary contains following information on the headword پینا:

H. پینا ...pina, [.....] v.t

1. To drink; imbibe; to absorb; suck ; take in; to smoke; &c. (see pi-jana); -s.m. Drinking; drink, &c. :-pi-jana, pi lena, v.t. (intensive forms) To drink off or up, to toss down, to suck up, absorb completely; to gulp down, (wrath, &c.) to stifle or suppress (anger, emotion, &c.) to bear patiently; to refrain from answer, to keep quiet (in these senses the word baat is usually expressed, e.g. b\|t pina or pi-jana)

H. پینا pina [S...] s.m. Dregs or refuse (of linseed, &c.), the oil-cake

H. پینا ... paina[.....] adj. & s.m. (f. -i), Sharp, pointed; a goad (for oxen, &c.) :- paina karna, To sharpen, &c. &c. = painana, q.v. (Page 301)

5.1 Words never/no longer used in Urdu

5.1.1. Sanskrit words

The very title shows that the dictionary is a trilingual one and not a bilingual one. It is small wonder that it contains a very large number of lexical items which are Hindi or Sanskrit. Here are a few instances of such words at page 301:

پینا pela(a prop... fault); پینا paila n. (a vessel...); پینا paila adj. (corr. of pahla); پیلار pailar (beyond...:- pailar-ka baras, The year before last); پیلام pilam (Satin); پیلای pilai (yellowness), پیلبان pilban (See s.v. pil...); پیلڑا pilarṇ (a testicle), پیلڑا pilṛa (a testicle); پیلڑھ pelarḥ (a testicle) پیلک pilak (the large black ant), پیلک pilak (The Indian oriole); پیلن pailn (first-born); پیلد pelu (...a wrestler...); پیلور pilwar (a druggist...); پیلہ pela (the silkworm) پیلہا pilha (=pilha); پیلہڑا pilharṇ (=pelarṇ, pelṛa); پیلہڑا pilhṛa (=pelarṇ, pelṛa); پیلی pili (see pila, s.f. 'The yellow piece', a gold mohur syn. ashrafi) پیلے paile (corr. of pahle); پیلیا piliya (A yellow sheet worn by a woman on the sixth day after her giving birth to a child and subsequently); پیم pem (= prem); پیمک paimak (Gold or silver lace...); پیمود paimud (...To be measured);

پیمی pemi (premi); پین pin (Fat...); پین pain (Water-course); پینانا painana (...To sharpen...); پیتانا paintana (The foot part of a bedstead); پینتھی painthi (The edge of a reservoir...); (پینٹھ) penth (a stated or fixed market syn. haṭī) (پینٹھ) painth (=paiṭh) painjan (پینجن) an anklet of small bells.

In fact, out of 53 lexical items 38 (71%) at page 301 are unknown to the modern Urdu speaker in Pakistan.

5.1.2. Persian words noticed after a random browsing:

ثیبہ saibah (a young woman who has consummated her marriage); جاروب jaroob (a sweeper); جازم jaazam (cutting off); جاجم jajam (floor cloth); جامگی jamgi (a piece of cotton cloth); جانفہ jaifa (a wound); جبا jaba (revenue); جودت joodat (excellence); جولان jolan (gallop); چرا chura (why); آبستہ abasta (pregnant), آبست abast (pregnant), آبستن abastan (pregnant) آبستان abastan (pregnant); آبستگی abastgi (pregnancy).

5.1.3. Arabic words noticed after a random browsing:

ابرہ abrad (very cold); ابرش abrash (specks); ابخرہ abkhrah (vapours); ابرک abrak (tale); ابطل abtal (very vain); ابعد ab'ad (vary distant); جاموس jamoos (buffalo); جسر jasr (a bridge); جفر jafr (a lamb); جلف jalf (a miser); اکول akool (a glutton); التهاب iltihab (burning)

5.2. *Devanagri characters:* Like other dictionaries written by the Orientalists, it also contains Devanagri characters which are of little help to the modern speakers of Urdu in Pakistan who use only Person script:.

5.3. *Transliteration in the Roman script:* As pointed out earlier, the Roman script does not express the Urdu letters in a satisfactory manner.

5.4. *Lack of sense discrimination:* The dictionary suffers from lack of sense discrimination. The user is given no clue as what the difference between the various senses is. His/ her best conjecture may fail. It is matter of chance that s/he will pick the right sense.

For example, information on منگل mangal spreads over 70 lines. The well-known meaning 'Tuesday' is given in the fourteenth line under 'mangal-war':

منگل (lucky, fortunate, prosperous, faring well or happily, auspicious, propitious, conferring happiness, :- pleasing, agreeable' good, beautiful; -brave; s.m. Good luck, luckiness good, fortune, success.....happiness, felicity, welfare, bliss; - a happy or auspicious event (as a marriage, &c.); a festival; festivity; rejoicing, revelry, pleasure, enjoyment; solemnly, any solemn ceremony or religious service, burnt-offering (on various occasions of rejoicing), anything regarded as auspicious or tending to a lucky issue; a good omen; an auspicious prayer; blessing, benediction; - name of the planet Mars,

or of its deified personification; - (for mangal-war) 'Mars-day, 'Tuesday.....

The information continues for 56 more lines.

5.5. The metalanguage: The dictionary uses English as the metalanguage. For example, the pronunciation, part of speech, and other symbols are in English. Given the fact that the entry is in itself a text the use of the target language as the metalanguage is scaring for the EFL users (10).

5.6. Unfamiliar meanings:

No Urdu speaking person is expected to be use the word in the following sense:

پینا pina [S...] s.m. Dregs or refuse (of linseed, &c.), the oil-cake.

Similarly, the following meaning is obsolete:

pili. s.f. The yellow piece. a gold mohur. (syn. ashrafi).

[One wonders if the non-native users of the dictionary understood the meaning 'mohur'. A coin would have been a far better word as a translation equivalent.]

5.7. Inadequate / wrong Meanings

On quite a few occasions the dictionary lists inadequate or wrong meanings:

Head- Transliteration Meaning given Remarks word .

ادب adab; respect [Missing meaning : literature],

ابوبکر Abubikr, the father of a virgin [correct meaning: pioneer],

اصطلاح istilah construction [correct meaning: term],

تجرید tajrid : celibacy [correct meaning: Abstract],

5.8. *Too many abbreviations:* The dictionary makes use of too many abbreviations. It has been revealed that the users rarely consult the front matter.

5.9. Etymological information

It has been revealed that information on the origin of the word is not sought for by the users. The three headwords of پینا (including homographs) show that they are of Hindi origin. This kind of information is of little help for the users in any way. Hence it is redundant.

For all their merits, the dictionaries mentioned suffer from various inadequacies:

(a) The dictionaries have been compiled by the non-native speakers of the target language i.e. Urdu. It is evident that the compilers' own knowledge of the target language was not up to the mark. They relied on the informants whose knowledge was far from being complete. The informants' insufficient knowledge was bound to affect the information to be included in the dictionaries.

(b) Platts maintained in the preface of his dictionary that “the dictionary of Forbes’ (1837) – to say nothing more unfavorable of it – was considerably behind the age. ... Words and phrases and meanings of words by thousands will be sought in it in vain.” (11) What Platts said of Forbes’ work after 47 years of its publication toward the end of the 19th century holds for the works of the oriental scholars at the beginning of the 21st century in the age of information technology and the resulting social milieu.

(c) Whereas before partition, the Hindi language drew upon Sanskrit, and Urdu upon Arabic and Persian, the trend has changed in the wake of information technology revolution and Urdu is drawing more and more upon English and the indigenous languages of Pakistan (12). It is necessary to identify such lexical items, preferably with the help of a corpus, as are no longer used in modern Urdu and subsequently the exclusion of such redundant lexical items would become possible. It would create room for the inclusion of more lexical items which have become a part of modern Urdu along with the inclusion of more useful information on the lexical items such as illustrations, both verbal and pictorial, and collocations etc.

(d) The roles of the languages involved have changed as a result of the social and political changes as those of their speakers. Urdu is no more a mere a vernacular. It is the national language of Pakistan. As such the changed roles call for the compilation of a dictionary which treats it at par with English, if not superior to it. An instance will illustrate the point: the 1857 uprising in no more to be entered as *غدر* ‘ghadr’ (mutiny) but as *جنگ آزادی* ‘jang-i-azadi’ (freedom war).

(e) The information provided can be analysed from target users’ perspectives. Englishmen, being non-native learners of Urdu needed cultural information. These dictionaries were targeted at the foreign learners of Urdu in the 19th century. Their needs and wants were diametrically opposed to those of the users in the sub-continent. The target users knew many covert facts about English such as context of use, collocations, phrases and grammatical patterns, etc. The compilers did not feel the need to provide such information. On the other hand, for Indian native learners of English such information as the language of origin, the connotations of the Hindustani words and usage restrictions was redundant. However, they needed information on verbal illustrations, collocations, phrases and grammatical patterns. Obviously, they would find these dictionaries wanting in many respects.

The dictionaries written by the orientalist are not without merit. Abdul-Haq pays rich tribute to the orientalist lexicographers and calls them the ‘benefactors’ of Urdu. (13) Noor Muhammad also praises the services rendered by the orientalist and writes, “The standard laid

down by them in lexicography, grammar and textbooks is enviable. ... No grammarian, critic, historian of literature can ignore their achievements.” (14)

References

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