

INTRODUCTION TO SANSKRIT GRAMMAR

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The study of language (in this case Sanskrit) has been an integral part of Indian intellectual life since at least 1000 B.C. Contributions to phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics by Indian scholars have been unparalleled in the ancient world.

It was the Indian grammarians and phoneticians who:

1. Emphasized the study of sounds, not letters;
2. Emphasized the descriptive use of grammar and not the prescriptive use of grammar;
3. Most likely discovered the **zero** element in morphology, most certainly employed it well before the Europeans in linguistic analyses;
4. Emphasized the notion of substitution rather than transformation (*vikāra*);
5. Developed morphophonological explanations (= *sandhi*);
6. Stressed in phonetics the place and manner of articulation;
7. Recognized ablaut correspondences;
8. described language in a formal manner and not as a logical system;
9. Developed a metalanguage;
10. Approached the sense the phoneme.

The reason for this investigation was very practical. How were the sacred texts (*Veda*), orally transmitted from memory from teacher to student for at least 2500 years to be preserved? This was done by investigating the sounds of the language (**Śikṣā-**), the word-meanings (etymology: **Nirukta-**), and the language structure (**Vyākaraṇa-**).

Although one might expect a grammar of the language of the sacred texts, it is curious that the earliest surviving grammar, the *Aṣṭadhāyī* of Pāṇini, has as its object the spoken language (a version of Sanskrit) of the area where Pāṇini lived, Gandhāra, in what is today Pakistan. Living around the 5th c. BCE, Pāṇini sought to *describe* the language that was spoken, the earliest known grammarian to do so.

It has been observed that a “detailed study of language teaches the greatest respect for the capabilities of the human mind” (Kenneth Hale in *Reinventing Anthropology*). Not only does this refer to language as the product of the human mind, it also pertains in this case to the investigator of the language, Pāṇini, for his labors resulted in what L. Bloomfield

described as one of the “greatest monuments of human intelligence.” (LG:11) In 4000 brief aphorisms (called *sūtras* “threads,”) [about 40 pages] the phonology, inflectional system (both verbal and nominal), compounds and derivations of the object language had been described and analyzed. Yet it was not only his description of the language that we know as Sanskrit, but the method in which he described it. He wrote in Sūtra-style, a style designed to reflect and capture the core of the brevity principle. If the Sūtra is the stylistic means of manifesting the brevity principle, then what is the best means of expressing this style? The answer is to establish a technical language system that best fits the object of the system. It is a language system based on the object language (in this case the language under investigation: Sanskrit). Such a technical, or artificial, language designed to shed light on the linguistic structure of the object language is termed a metalanguage.

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What were some of the devices that Pāṇini employed to make up technical terms (*saṃjñā-*) or *metawords*?

1. For one thing, Pāṇini employs *akṛtrima-* terms, i.e. terms that are self-explanatory or current in the language (ex. “*anubandha*” referring to “marker”);

2. the use of artificial terms (*kṛtrima-*): of which words are

(a) entirely made up, such as BHA ‘nominal stem before suffixes beginning with y or vowels’ ex. *rājan-* + *as* __ *rāj**n + *as* 1.4.18)

(b) abbreviations of longer words with or without certain additions and alterations (+ *pratyāhāra-* or “condensation”)

One technique was the use of “markers” (*anubandha-s*). Markers are used to denote the inclusion of a certain number of language sounds in phonological rules or to denote certain endings. For instance, *sUP* represents a collective name for the 21 case inflections (from *sU* = nominative singular ending to *suP* loc. pl. = *sUP*).