About the Author: Shalini Sridhar

My name is Shalini Sridhar. I hold a Masters Degree in Bioinformatics and Computational Biology from the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom and have experience in Web development and design. I am writing about one of the most ancient of all languages and one that is still in use today – Sanskrit.

I am proud to say that this world-renowned language originated from my country of birth, India. It is a constant reminder of my roots, my beliefs, and my image as a proud Indian. It is fascinating to note that Sanskrit has journeyed so many years in its purest form and yet has managed to survive change.

Sanskrit to me is not just a language but a world in itself. Without Sanskrit, I would have never learned our traditional customs and rituals. It is amazing to note that the prayers and hymns chanted by me today have been used for centuries. Heritage Sanskrit speakers seem to be touching something so old and yet so sacred.

Like my forefathers, I know that the next generation will continue to uphold values and traditions that have been passed on through time and through this beautiful language.

This article discusses this language that has existed for centuries and the impact that Sanskrit has made on the languages of today.
About the Sanskrit Language

Sanskrit is considered to be one of the oldest and least changed languages in the world, along with other ancient languages such as Sumerian, Ancient Egyptian, Akkadian, and Hebrew. Sanskrit, or संस्कृत, means "a language that is brought to formal perfection" or "perfected," "refined," or "polished." The orthodox and religious nature of the Sanskrit language is in contrast to the colloquial nature of the natural language - Prakrit. In earlier times, Sanskrit was mainly spoken by the higher echelons of society -- namely kings, queens, and learned Brahmans -- while Prakrit was spoken by the lower castes as well as wealthy merchants and bankers (Burrow, 2001).

Origins

As we know it today, Sanskrit exists in two forms – Vedic and Classical. Vedas are the four holiest books in the Hindu religion. These include Rig, Yajur, Sama, and Atharvana. These holy books contain prayers, hymns, chants, and instructions in Sanskrit for performing religious functions. Even today, most followers of the Hindu religion use Sanskrit as a means of discourse while performing religious rites.

Classical Sanskrit derives from Vedic Sanskrit. Roughly around the 3rd to 8th centuries CE, this form of Sanskrit was newer and more in fashion when poetry, drama, and dance were written. Laid out in the grammar of Pāṇini, (named after a Hindu Indian grammarian) around 400 BC, classical Sanskrit gave rise to literary, scientific, and philosophical knowledge, as well as scriptures and literature.

Poet Kālidāsa’s works mark the early forms of classical Sanskrit literature such as Shakuntala. Later works of Sanskrit saw epics such as The Gita and The Ramayana (Berriedale, 1924).

Languages That Have Stemmed From Sanskrit

In the 18th century, a philologist named Sir William Jones (1786) pointed out that Sanskrit’s grammar and vocabulary are, in fact, very similar to many other languages. These included Greek, Latin, and English.

According to Jones:

The Sanscrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in roots of verbs and in forms of grammar, than could not possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source which, perhaps, no longer exists; there is a similar reason, though not quite so forcible, for supposing that both the Gothick and the Celtick, though blended with a very different idiom, had the same origin with the Sanscrit; and the old Persian might be added to the same family... (Jones, 1786)
This notion that Sanskrit is similar to other languages made noted scholars and linguists come together to research this claim. They studied the mutations of letters, sounds, and tones; structure of the words; vowels; consonants; arrangement and expressions of grammar associated with different words of the different languages. This study led to the finding that these languages indeed have a common ancestor that has slowly evolved into their own languages as we know them today. Thus, in the early 19th century, the concept of an Indo-European family of languages took shape.

Many common English words today can be recognized as derived from Sanskrit roots:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English Word</th>
<th>Sanskrit Root</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Candy</td>
<td>Khanda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cash</td>
<td>Karsha (weight of gold)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheetah</td>
<td>Chitraka (meaning speckled or spotted)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ginger</td>
<td>Smgaveram (meaning body of a horn)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jungle</td>
<td>Jangala-s (meaning arid)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loot</td>
<td>Lota-m (means a booty or stolen thing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opal</td>
<td>Upalah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>Simhapuram (literally the lion city)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugar</td>
<td>Sharkara</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Online Etymology Dictionary

**Sanskrit and the Devanāgarī Script**

Although the original evidence of Sanskrit was inscribed in various ancient scripts such as Brāhmī and Kharosthī, somewhere around 150 AD (Venkataraman, 1985), today the language is written entirely in the syllabic Devanāgarī script. Written from left to right, the Devanāgarī script’s distinction lies in the horizontal line on the top of the letters that links them together. The Devanāgarī script is also seen in the Hindi language. Deva meaning God – thus refers to Sanskrit as the "Language of the Gods."

The following is a glimpse of Sanskrit vowels, consonants, and numeric symbols written in this script:

**Vowels and Vowel Diacritics**

अ आ इ ई उ ऊ ऋ ऌ ए ऐ ओ औ एँ ऐँ ओँ औँ ल लू

[ə] [əː] [ɪ] [ɪː] [ʊ] [ʊː] [ɛ] [ɛː] [ɔ] [ɔː] [ʌ] [ʌː] [a] [aː]

प पा पिपी पु पु पू पू ये ये पो पो पौ पौ पः पः पृ पृ
Consonants

ट ta [t̪a] ठ tha [tʰa] ड da [d̪a] ढ dha [dʰa]
त ta [t̪a] थ tha [tʰa] द da [d̪a] ध dhya [d̤ʰa]
प pa [pa] फ pha [pʰa] ब ba [ba] भ bha [bʰa]
श sa [sa] ष ṣa [ṣa] स sa [sa]
ह ha [ha] छ ṭha [ṭa]

Numerals

० १ २ ३ ४ ५ ६ ७ ८ ९ १०
शून्य एक दि त्रि चतुर्थ पन्छ पञ्च सप्त अष्ट नवन् दसन्
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Conjunct Consonants

क kka kkh kca kkh kha kha kha kha kha kha
च kka kkh kca kkh kha kha kha kha kha kha
ट kka kkh kca kkh kha kha kha kha kha kha
त kka kkh kca kkh kha kha kha kha kha kha
प kka kkh kca kkh kha kha kha kha kha kha
य kka kkh kca kkh kha kha kha kha kha kha
श kka kkh kca kkh kha kha kha kha kha kha
ह kka kkh kca kkh kha kha kha kha kha kha

Adapted from Omniglot
Computer scientists worldwide have dubbed Sanskrit as one of the most “unambiguous representations of natural language for computer processing” (Brigg, 1985).

Even movie directors have seen the power of using the Sanskrit language in their movies as a novel way of communicating messages. In Matrix Revolutions, music composer Don Davis rolls credits by playing a brilliant rendition of the Sanskrit mantra “Asatho Ma Sad Gamaya,” taken from the Upanishads:

ॐ

असतो मा सद्भमय ||
	
tamso maa jyotirgamay ||

मृत्यूर्मृत्यूंगमय | |

asato mA sadgmay |

tamaso mA jyotirgamaya |

mRRityormA amRRitaM gamaya ||

Lead me from the unreal to the real.  
Lead me from darkness to light.  
Lead me from death to immortality.  
May there be peace everywhere.  
(Brhadaranyaka Upanishad — I.iii.28)

Source adapted from the Amritapuri Archives

While speakers of Sanskrit may be few today, the uniqueness and importance of this language has held the interest of many, and India includes Sanskrit, as one of its official 20 languages (Paranjape, 2007). Sanskrit has survived the test of time. It is a language that will continue for generations to come, because interest in and efforts to preserve and maintain the language are strong.

Acknowledgement

Shalini Sridhar would like to thank Mr. Michel Danino, author and convener of the International Forum for India’s Heritage (IFIH), for his valuable insights on the Sanskrit language.
References


Related Links
- American Sanskrit Institute
- International Forum for India’s Heritage; Who’s Afraid of Sanskrit
- Spoken Sanskrit
- Online Sanskrit Dictionary and Frequently Asked Questions for Sanskrit Documents

*****************************************************

Visit us online at www.cal.org/heritage