

Heritage Voices: Language – Sanskrit

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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 *samskr̥tā*, 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 Brahmins -- 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:

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

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 ॠ ए ऐ ओ औ अं अँ अः लृ लृ

a ā i ī u ū ṛ ṛ e ai o au aṅ aṅ aḥ | ṛ
[ʌ] [a:] [i] [i:] [u] [u:] [ɹ] [ɹ:] [e:] [a:ɪ] [o] [a:u] [aŋ] [ə] [əh] [l] [l:]

प पा पि पी पु पू पृ पृ पे पै पो पौ पं पाँ पः पू पू

pa pā pi pī pu pū pṛ pṛ pe pai po pō paṅ paṅ pah pl pṛ

Consonants

क	ka [kʌ]	ख	kha [kʰʌ]	ग	ga [gʌ]	घ	gha [gʱʌ]	ङ	ṅa [ŋʌ]
च	ca [cʌ]	छ	cha [cʰʌ]	ज	ja [jʌ]	झ	jha [jʱʌ]	ञ	ña [ɲʌ]
ट	ṭa [ʈʌ]	ठ	ṭha [ʈʰʌ]	ड	ḍa [ɖʌ]	ढ	ḍha [ɖʱʌ]	ण	ṇa [ɳʌ]
त	ta [tʌ]	थ	tha [tʰʌ]	द	da [dʌ]	ध	dha [dʱʌ]	न	na [nʌ]
प	pa [pʌ]	फ	pha [pʰʌ]	ब	ba [bʌ]	भ	bha [bʱʌ]	म	ma [mʌ]
य	ya [jʌ]	र	ra [rʌ]	ल	la [lʌ]	व	va [vʌ]		
श	śa [ʃʌ]	ष	ṣa [ʂʌ]	स	sa [sʌ]				
ह	ha [ɦʌ]	ळ	ḷa [ɭʌ]						

Numerals

०	१	२	३	४	५	६	७	८	९	१०
शून्य	एक	द्वि	त्रि	चतुर्	पञ्चन्	षष्	सप्तन्	अष्टन्	नवन्	दशन्
śūnya	eka	dvi	tri	catur	pañcan	ṣaṣ	saptan	aṣṭan	navan	daśan
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Conjunct Consonants

क्क	क्ख	क्क	क्कण	क्त	क्त्य	क्त्र	क्त्रय	क्त्व	क्क	क्क्य	क्कम
kka	kkha	kca	kṅa	kta	ktya	ktra	ktrya	ktva	kna	knya	kma
क्य	क्क	क्क्य	क्क	क्क	क्क्य	क्क	क्कम	क्क्य	क्क	क्क्य	क्क
kya	kra	krya	kla	kva	kvya	kṣa	kṣma	kṣya	kṣva	khya	khra
ग्य	ग्र	ग्र्य	घ्न	घ्न्य	घ्नम	घ्न्य	घ्न	ङ्क	ङ्क	ङ्क्य	ङ्क
gya	gra	grya	ghna	ghnya	ghma	ghya	ghra	ṅka	ṅkta	ṅktya	ṅkya
ङ्क	ङ्क	ङ्क	ङ्क	ङ्क	ङ्क्य	ङ्क	ङ्क	ङ्क	ङ्क	ङ्क	ङ्क
ṅka	ṅkva	ṅkha	ṅkhyā	ṅga	ṅgya	ṅgha	ṅghya	ṅghra	ṅṅa	ṅṅa	ṅṅa
ञ्य	च्च	च्च	च्च	च्च	च्च	च्च	च्च	च्च	च्च	च्च	च्च
ṅya	cca	ccha	cchra	cṅa	cma	cya	chya	chra	jja	jjha	jṅa
झ्य	ज्म	ज्य	ज्र	ज्व	ञ्च	ञ्म	ञ्य	ञ्च	ञ्च	ञ्च	ञ्च
jṅya	jma	jya	jra	jva	ñca	ñcma	ñcya	ñcha	ñja	ñjya	ṭṭa

Adapted from [Omniglot](#)

Impact of Sanskrit Around the World



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 सद्गमय ।
तमसो मा ज्योतिर्गमय ।
मृत्योर्मा मृतं गमय ॥

asato mA sadgamaya |
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.*
(Bhadaranyaka 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.

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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
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