

# Cultural Implications in the Structure of Sanskrit Language

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## Abstract

*Just as face is the index of mind, so also language is the mirror that reflects the knowledge, shared patterns of behavior, social norms, attitude, values, culture and personality of the native speakers of that language. Sanskrit, which is held globally as the cultural language of Bharatam is structurally perfect and significant. Apart from being a technically perfect language, that has innumerable scientific, technological, philosophical and classical vocabulary, the cultural implications in the literature and structure of this language is noteworthy. Grounded in the native culture, the broader and wider literature of this language has evolved. The classically unparalleled grammar of Panini too radiates several aspects of native culture. The present paper seeks to probe linguistically into the cultural implications in the surface and deep structures of Sanskrit language.*

**Keywords:** cultural implications, deep structure, surface structure, language and linguistics

## Introduction

Bharatam is well known in the globe as a land of a glorious and rich cultural heritage. The traditionally transmitted culture with all its material and immaterial aspects got condensed into its precious and laudable cultural heritage. Culture is the soul of a nation. It is the culture that highlights the uniqueness of a nation and hence gives an identity to it. It is the way of life of the people of a nation and it gets reflected in all aspects of life right from one's garments, food, art, architecture, music, dance, language, etc., to the highest knowledge traditions inclusive of the philosophical and spiritual speculations. The terms culture and संस्कृतिः (saṃskṛti) (the term used to refer to the culture of Bharatam) etymologically point out to refinement. Saṃskṛtam, the classical language of all times of Bharatam and the most refined among languages, reflects and radiates the native culture. This language, which is held globally as the cultural language of Bharatam, has exerted a great influence on the culture of entire south-east Asia for more than 2000 years. Apart from being a technically perfect language, that has innumerable scientific, technological, philosophical and classical vocabulary, the cultural implications in the literature and structure of this language are noteworthy. The broader and wider literature of this language has evolved grounded in the native culture.

The classically unparalleled grammar of Panini to radiates several aspects of native culture. Some such aspects are observed in the deep and surface structures of this language and they are considered in the present paper.

First of all, in the phonetic and phonological level, the most striking features are the conceptions of vowel and consonant and syllables. The thirteen vowels are conceived as the actual voice patterns of speech sounds and can be pronounced independently as अ इ उ ए ओ etc. These voice patterns, along with the thirty-three consonants, which are only voice forms, can be modulated like क किकु के को, etc. Further, every sound – the vowels and consonants with vowels are treated as syllables. This system is not adopted in the languages of the world. Consequently, there is no uniformity in their syllables. The same syllable has different pronunciations in some cases and others, two different syllables have the same pronunciation. For example in English, the syllable co is pronounced as ka and ko in come and coma. Similarly, the two syllables ca and ka have same pronunciation in kind and kick. No such syllabic irregularities are there in Sanskrit.

This systematic syllable structure is the foundation upon which the classical music of Bharatam stands. Śrutirmātā layaḥ pitā (श्रुतिरमाता लयः पति) is a well-known statement in music which states that śruti or quality of frequency of musical notes is the mother and laya or rhythm is the father of music. Svāra-s or musical notes, the basis of śruti and rhythm are based on syllabic structures. Seven musical notes used for vocal and string instruments, konnakol used for rhythm in drum instruments, nattuvangam in classical dances, svāra-s as basics for tunes or rāga-s while composing the sāhitya or lyrics for music are all based on a syllabic system.

Due to the regular syllabic system, there is perfect sound- script coordination. This is something which is unique to Sanskrit. This is not found in other languages like Tamil, English, etc. including even Hindi. This coordination ensures the underlying harmony. Thus the syllabic system is the base for melody, rhythm, and harmony of music.

The grammatical philosophers like Bhartṛhari and others conceived of sound or śabda (शब्दः) as śabdabrahman (शब्दब्रह्मन्) in their sphotāvāda

(स्फोटवादः). This is a reflection in the language, of the native culture that focuses more on philosophical and spiritual aspects.

Then in the morphological level, several unique and special aspects of the native culture are reflected. First of all, the inflectional word formation pattern involving exclusively bound morphemes in Sanskrit deserve special attention. The basic rule of word formation is - न केवला प्रकृतिः प्रयोक्तव्या नापि च केवलः प्रत्ययः। (Neither a prakṛti – nominal base or verbal root, nor pratyaya-s - prefix, suffix or infixes, can be used independently). It is clear from this that all are bound morphemes in the primary word formation level. Similarly, when the prakṛti and pratyaya are joined together to form a word, the process involves high inflection and not a mere agglutination. Due to a lot of changes, the prakṛti and pratyaya cannot be easily identified. These two aspects of word formation reflect the bound and inflectional aspect of our culture. In spite of the variations and varieties in the culture based on community, region etc, the underlying unity of our culture emerges predominantly. Just as prakṛti and pratyaya are meaningful, individually but need to be put together for usability, so also though the diverse cultures are meaningful, yet they get united to radiate the oneness. This unity in diversity is reflected in the word formation of Sanskrit.

It is well known that Sanskrit has three persons or (पुरुषाः). They are – uttama-puruṣa (उत्तमपुरुषः) – first person, madhyama-puruṣa (मध्यमपुरुषः) – second person, and prathama-puruṣa (प्रथमपुरुषः) - third person. The very nomenclature reflects the culture. No one is treated as a third person in Bharatiya culture. In fact, they are to be treated as first persons. That is why ‘third person’ is named as prathama-puruṣa (प्रथम पुरुषः) and not तृतीय (third) or अन्य (other). In this context, the idea conveyed in verse quoted below is fit to be considered.

अयं नजिः परो वेता गिणना लघुचेतसाम्। उदारचरितानां तु  
वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम्॥  
आत्मारथे सर्वमुत्सृजेत्।

Hence the uttama-puruṣa (उत्तम पुरुषः) nomenclature for the first person is also culturally proper.

Generally, in languages, the number of words conveying things which are frequently used or

held in high esteem will be more. For example, the language of Eskimos has more words for snow as they are always surrounded by it. Similarly, Sanskrit has number of words for wo men. Amarakosha in the manushya-Varga lists out several synonyms for women with different shades of meanings reflecting her merits, values, character, types of relations, different stages in the course of the growth of women etc. Panini also refers to stages of women in the sutra - वयसिप्रथमे .

Words denoting great and good things are mostly feminine in gender. Example – dayā, karuṇā, kṣamā, buddhi, vidyā, vidyā, mahimā, kīrtih, prakṛth (दया करुणा क्षमा बुद्धिः वदिया महिमा कीर्तिः प्रकृतिः), etc. Apart from this, Panini has also listed the feminine suffixes (in 73 sutras) meant to be added to words in masculine gender to derive their feminine counter parts. So the number of feminine gender words is more in Sanskrit. All these reflect the culture that glorifies and esteem women.

Sīmantaḥ keśaveśe (सीमन्तः केशवेशे) is a गणवार्त्तकम्, listed under the sutra – एङिपररूपम् । The word sīmantaḥ (सीमन्तः) is possible only in the meaning of parting of hair of women. In the other senses like the boundaries, the form of the word will only be sīmāntaḥ (सीमान्तः)। This is culturally significant. Sīmanta is a ritual prescribed in the dharmashastra-s to be performed in the third month of pregnancy. But in practice, it is done in the eighth month of pregnancy. In this ritual, a parting of hair of the pregnant woman is performed for the safe delivery. Sīmanta ensures the protection of the mother and long life for the child in the womb. The hair of the women is ceremoniously parted with darbha grass and a porcupine quill to ward off negative energies and evil spirits and protect the child. This ritual is described by different texts as meant for the welfare of the fetus, pregnant women's health, safe delivery and welfare of her family. It is also described that the fetus gets purified during this ritual and the mantras recited during this ritual enable the child to remember its past births. So this is a spiritually significant ritual. Realising the importance of this, Sanskrit grammarians have framed a vārttika with a semantic condition, to fix the form of the word .

Similarly, respecting elders and teachers is given more priority in our culture. The following verse is

worth quoting here.

अभविदनशीलस्य नतियं वृद्धोपसेवनिः। चत्वारि तस्य  
वर्धन्ते आयुरवदियायशोबलम् ॥

(the one who is humble before elders and serves upon them will have his longevity, learning, fame and strength enhanced).

उशनसंहति also states - गुरुं दूष्यवा समुत्तपिठेदभविद्य  
कृताञ्जलिः। (१.३०) (on seeing elders or preceptors one should raise up and perform).

The terms आर्य, आर्ये, भवान्, भवती, मान्य, मान्ये, etc., are used for addressing respectable men and women. Plural usage even while addressing a single male or female (आदरे बहुवचनम्।) and प्रथमपुरुष usage even when addressing a respectable person in front (मध्यमपुरुषः) as भवान् आगच्छन्तु ।, भवती उपविशन्तु।, आचार्य! अनुगृह्णन्तु। etc are to be seen.

अभविदनम् is a reverential salutation by a person to an elderly or respectable person accompanied by a self introduction, ending in a reverential भोः। Panini records that, as a response and reply to अभविदनम्, प्रत्यभविदनम् is to be uttered by the respectable person, with words of blessings pronounced along with the name of the person who did the अभविदनम् ending in the supra-segmental phoneme – प्लुतस्वरः।

From this, it is evident that the respect shown should be properly recognized and responded in a befitting way. In contexts, in which proper response is not possible, the reverential salutation need not be done.

Likewise, a disciple under a preceptor in a gurukula has to complete his studies inclusive of spiritual training. He, then, with due permission of his guru, complete the brahmacharya and enter grihastha -ashrama. If a disciple marries without the permission of his preceptor, then it is considered as a censurable act. This has been recorded by Panini in the sutra - खट्वा क्षेपे । While dealing with the compounds in general and द्वितीया तत्पुरुष समासः in particular, by specifying abuse (नन्दिदा) as a semantic condition, this sutra has been framed. In the sense of the one who ascended cot (with out the permission of the preceptor) - खट्वं आरूढः, the compound - खट्वारूढः (जालूमः - rogue)। is used in the language.

Syntactically, Sanskrit has no specific word order. Since the case endings are glued to the word end, the word conveys the same meaning in any position it occupies in a sentence. This flexibility

and adaptability of the language reflect the flexibility and adaptability of our culture that has made it a perennially living culture.

The deep and surface structures described in the kāraḱa theory reflects the seemingly simple surface level and elaborate and significant deep structure of our culture. The three types of constructions (करतर, करमण, भावे) can be explained as referring to the three forms of reality explained in philosophy as पारमार्थकिसत्त्वम्, व्यावहारकिसत्त्वम्, परातभासकिसत्त्वम् ।

Maunam (मौनम्) meaning silence, is etymologically derived as miner bhāvah (the nature of a sage) (मुनेः भावः)। Sages are in absolute silence due to spiritual contemplations constantly. So silence in Bharati ya culture is spiritually rooted. This is reflected in the etymology of the word. In this way, several such aspects of Sanskrit as implying bhāratīya culture can be brought out.

### Concluding Remarks

To conclude, a language of a nation reflects its past, inspires its present and conceptualizes its future. So due care and concern to languages and their deeper implications will help a lot in maintaining the identity of the nation and achieving indigenous growth and development. Sanskrit, being the language of Bharatam, with national affinity devoid of any regional restrictions, is a great torch bearer of bhāratīya culture. Further more studies on such aspects of the language and their propagation are sure to make our land richer and richer in all aspects for ever.

### End Notes

Aṣṭādhyāyī 1.4.101

पञ्चतन्त्रम् ५.३८, हतिपदेशः १.७, शार्ङ्गधरपद्धतिः २७३

चाणक्यनीतिः ३.१०

अमरकोशः २.६.२ – २.६.२४, २.६.२९ – ३१(१)

अष्टाध्यायी ४.१.२०

अष्टाध्यायी ४.१.३ – ४.१.७५

वार्तकम् ३६३३

अष्टाध्यायी ६। १।९४

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अष्टाध्यायी ८.२.८३

अष्टाध्यायी २.१.२६

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