

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sanskrit or Prakrit: Which Came Earlier?

Dr. Sharda Narayanan

Acharya, Siddhanta Knowledge Foundation

A language that is well-established is said to have three important aspects by linguistic experts:

1. Sub-Dialect – This is a highly localized form of the spoken language that may have a small area or district over which it is used. Especially in earlier times before the advent of technology and mass communication, local dialects could be clearly seen.
2. Dialects – These have a wider geographical presence than sub-dialects and may even show literary activity. There is some distinction of vocabulary and grammatical structure and over time, some dialects attain the status of language proper.
3. Standard language – Has true recognition of a mature language with distinct vocabulary, grammar and literature; in India considered national languages, used in mass communication such as media and for higher education.



Over time, the sounds, that is, the pronunciation of many words in any language keep changing. We see many changes in the way English words are used across the centuries, and also between Vedic and classical Sanskrit. These phonetic changes are due to mainly three reasons –

1. Economy of effort – Everybody prefers to pronounce words more easily, with less effort. As illustration we can consider the following: सत्य → सच, प्रचार → परचार

चक्र → चक्कर etc.

1. Shortening of long words – This is especially noticeable in names or proper nouns. During the British colonial times, Anglicized names for persons and places came into use. E.g. Mukherjee for Mukhopadhyaya, Deccan for Dakshin, Upadhya became Ojha which became Jha. Kolkata became Calcutta.
2. Improper or incomplete Repetition – Often words are not carried forward in intact form, but rather with some changes as per local pronunciation. E.g., ‘Lakshmi’ is pronounced as ‘Lokkhi’ in Bihar and Bengal but as ‘Lechumi’ in Tamil Nadu. ‘Lakshman’ is ‘Lakhan’, ‘Sita’ becomes ‘Siya’ in popular usage. ‘Om namaḥ siddham’ is ‘Onāmāsīdham’. ‘Visham’ meaning poison is ‘Bis’ in Bihar-Bengal but ‘Vidam’ in Tamil. ओम् नमः सिद्धम् → ओनामासीधम्
3. Lack of Education – When uneducated people repeat words according to their own usage, many phonetic changes that they are unaware of may become transmitted and over time, these corrupt forms gain currency become part of the language. E.g., गङ्गोपाध्याय → गङ्गुली, प्रभात → परभात, गोस्वामी → गोसैन्

सूर्य → सूर्जो, सूरज

1. Poetic Usage – In order to keep up the metrical tempo, or Chandas, words are often changed a little bit such that they still resemble the original closely. E.g.,

नदी → नदिया, द्वार → दुआर, नहीं → नाहीं, वीर → वीरा

The phonetic changes may be said to be of the type of Aspiration,

De-aspiration, Vocalization, Nasalization, shortening of long sound and lengthening of short sound.

गृह → घर, शाक → साग, काक → काग, सर्प → सांप, अक्षि → आंख, अश्रु → आंसु, वानर → बन्दर, अद्य → आज, प्रियतम → पीतम

With this brief background we can understand some of the transformations of the words, ranging from early literature, such as Vedas and Puranas to later poetic language known as classical Sanskrit. In Panini grammar Vedic Sanskrit is referred to as ‘Chandas’ and the spoken language in the world as Bhasha. Panini records many changes and regional variations. Once Panini’s Grammar became well established, scholars adhered to the rules and hence Sanskrit acquired a polished, standard form that is understood across the millennia, making it the *lingua franca*.

Did Sanskrit come from Prakrit or vice versa or are they two separate languages? Since ‘Prakrit’ means ‘natural’ or ‘raw’ and ‘Samskrit’ means ‘polished’ or ‘refined’ or ‘sophisticated’, some scholars opine that Sanskrit originated from Prakrit. This is just as the mineral is mined in natural crude form but cut and polished to a dazzling ruby gem, we take the unrefined form and give it refinement. There are other scholars who oppose this view and say that Prakrit usages are all based on Sanskrit structure. There are yet other scholars who opine that the two are separate languages that coexisted in society as two modes of expression.

When we study the nature of language and see the natural way that it undergoes changes in society, we can see that the spoken and written original language was Sanskrit. But since people unacquainted with grammar rules would tend to speak with many changes in pronunciation and structure of words and sentences, combined with local words, it leads to Prakrit. While Sanskrit had a universal presence, aided by formal education, the Prakrits were naturally localized, with vocabularies of their own in addition to words derived from Sanskrit. It is easy to imagine that ancient Indian society was mostly multi-lingual, especially among the classes that travelled widely, such as soldiers and traders. This is the situation even today in any society in any country in the world. This is the social strata that the *Nāṭyaśāstra* reflects – the state of society - and language does not propose any bias or prejudice against the classes.

We may now understand the words ‘Prakrit’ and ‘Sanskrit’ in our linguistic heritage thus – while ‘Prakrit’ refers to the natural, colloquial and unsophisticated manner of expression of the common people or population in general, ‘Sanskrit’ refers to the more formal, polished, correct manner of expression as per grammar rules, for unambiguous and clear communication in verbal or written form. The natural human tendency is to find an easier way of accomplishing any task – there is always a preference for comfort and economy of effort. This points to the development of Prakrit from the Sanskrit formation rather than the reverse, as nobody would want to make simple pronunciations more complex. We find that diphthongs and difficult combinations of phonemes in Sanskrit are usually simplified in the Prakrit version and it is not natural for society to operate the reverse process on language. Thus Sanskrit precedes Prakrit.