

The Contribution of the Indian Linguists to Language Theory

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ABSTRACT: Indian linguists have contributed enormously to Sanskrit language. This article talks of the contribution made by them. Yaska's major work, Nirukta, is the oldest treatise on the discipline of etymology in Sanskrit grammar. Panini was the founder of a scientific system of grammar. His grammar is considered, by modern linguists, as the most complete grammar of any language. Patanjali's work, Mahabhasya, is an extensive discussion on Panini's Ashtadhyayi. Patanjali's commentary is important for Paninian linguists because it established the commentarial style in Sanskrit literature. Bhartrhari's work is, chronologically, the fourth surviving work in Paninian grammatical tradition. Both his grammar and poetic works had an enormous influence in their respective fields. Their works have contributed enormously to descriptive and generative linguistics and modern linguistic theories still borrow many linguistic concepts from them.

KEY WORDS: Contribution, Indian Linguists, Language Theory

India has a long tradition of linguistics and the Indian grammarians were instrumental in the development of the principles of Sanskrit grammar. Their works have contributed extensively to descriptive and generative linguistics and modern linguistic theories still borrow many sophisticated linguistic concepts from them.

The Indian linguist, Yaska, is believed to have lived in the 5th or 6th century B.C. and preceded Panini. The treatise of Nirukta, by him, is the only extant document of ancient Indian etymology. Earlier etymologists had held that nouns were derived from verbal roots. Yaska propounded the idea that action is a process and wanted etymology to work hand in hand with grammar. He stressed the importance of considering the context, while explaining the meaning and etymology of words. The same words could be derived and explained in different ways, to suit different contexts. He divided Sanskrit words into 4 parts of speech: nouns, verbs, preposition and particles.

Panini was the founder of a scientific system of grammar. His grammar seeks to provide a complete, maximally concise and theoretically consistent analysis of Sanskrit grammatical structure. His grammar is considered, by modern linguists, as the most complete grammar of any language yet written and is considered the foundation of all traditional and modern analysis of Sanskrit grammar. It is based on the spoken language of his time and gives rules on vedic usage and spiritual variants. It is, entirely, synchronic and consists of 4 components:

* Ashtadhyayi, (meaning 8 chapters), consisting of 3959 sutras(rules), is considered a complete descriptive grammar of the Sanskrit language.

*Sivasutras is an inventory of phonological segments, partitioned by markers, to allow abbreviations for classes of segments.

*Dhatupatha is a list of about 2000 verbal roots, with sub classification and diacritic markers, (a mark placed over, under or through a letter to show that it has a sound value different from that of the same letter, without a mark), encoding their morphological and syntactic properties.

*Ganapatha is an inventory of lexical items, idiosyncratically subject to various rules.

Patanjali's work, Mahabhasya, is an extensive discussion on Panini's Ashtadhyayi. However, it is not so much a commentary, (not every sutra is commented upon), as a technical discussion on Panini's sutras and on the Vartikas, (short comments), of Katyayana, in which their reasons and motivations are analysed and evaluated. Patanjali's commentary is important for Paninian linguists because it established the commentarial style in Sanskrit literature, introduced numerous technical terms, expressions and methods and offered discussions on logical, methodological and philosophical issues that were taken up by later scholars.

Bhartrhari's work is, chronologically, the fourth surviving work in Paninian grammatical tradition. It identifies the speech principle with Brahman and believes that language is the only key to knowledge. Bhartrhari considers the sentence as the basic unit of communication. He is likely to have written 2 influential texts, which are highly regarded: the Vakyapadiya, which is on Sanskrit grammar and linguistic philosophy and Sataktraya, which is Sanskrit poetry, of 3 collections, comprising of about a 100 stanzas each. Both his grammar and poetic works had an enormous influence in their respective fields. His theories of grammar and language are treated together, in a measure far surpassing earlier, available works.

The efforts of these Indian linguists, in increasing the facility of the Sanskrit language, is, indeed, laudable and can be regarded as one of the greatest monuments of human intelligence.

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