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Sanskrit Vyakaran - Pāṇini's Aṣṭādhyāyī

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The word, vyakaran, is formed by prefixing 'vi' and 'ā' to the root 'kri', to do. The first prefix suggests division, differentiation, distinguishing etc.; the sense of the second prefix is to put together, gather, to include etc. Thus, Vyākaraṇa may be thought of as an analysis of language to identify the basic building blocks of language and a synthesis of those building blocks. More formally, Grammar is the system of rules, implicit in a language, governing the structural and functional relationships of the language including word components, phonology, morphology and syntax. Syntax refers to rules governing how words combine to form phrases and sentences. Morphology refers to the process by which word components – roots, stems, prefixes, affixes etc – combine to form words. Phonology, a more technical and narrower term of linguists, is the study of 'sound systems' of a language. To give an example, in English, phonology studies along with stress and intonation, why words English words are pronounced the way they are.

Grammars of some languages include pronunciation, word meaning and etymology; but Indians have treated the science of pronunciation and etymology separately. A particular feature of the Indian tradition is the close relationship between religion (more a 'way of life' as viewed by the practitioners) and these sciences. The study of these is clubbed with the study of scriptures and the basic texts are considered divine in inspiration.

Pāṇini's Aṣṭādhyāyī is the text meant when one refers to the grammar of Sanskrit without any qualification. This is called Aṣṭādhyāyī because it contains eight chapters; each of these is further divided into four quarters. In total, there are 3,978 sūtras. The reference to a sūtra has three parts: '1.4.14' refers to the 14th sūtra in the fourth quarter of the first chapter. This text, composed more than 2,400 years ago, remains the most comprehensive grammar of Sanskrit and is still taught and studied in a slightly re-arranged manner in India and elsewhere. It is also one of the most comprehensive grammars of any language in the world. Yet for such a comprehensive grammar, it is remarkably short,

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only as long as 1,000 ślokas. To give an idea of how long this is, it would fit into fifty A4 sheets, typed normally. This extreme terseness is mainly due to the nature of the sūtra-type of literature. A sūtra, usually translated as aphorism, is extremely terse – often being unintelligible – and indicates the key aspects or essence of the subject matter. For a sūtrakāra, it is famously said, half a syllable saved is as valuable as begetting a son. With such extremely terse construction, collections of sūtras are indeed short. However, the conciseness of the Aṣṭādhyāyī is also on account of a) the most basic or fundamental level at which the problems of grammar were considered and answered, b) the ingenuity of its structure as seen by the use of 'pratyāhāras' and the order in which the sūtras have been arranged. Each of these aspects of the Aṣṭādhyāyī is fascinating in its own right and would be treated at some length at the appropriate place. Pratyāhāras are notational abbreviations formed by combining the first and last letters of the portion of text being referred to.

In addition to Pāṇini's work, three other works – all related and closely dependent on the Aṣṭādhyāyī – need to be mentioned with respect to grammar. They are the vārtikas by Kātyāyana or Vararuchi, the bhāṣya by Patanjali, and the rearrangement into chapters by Bhattoji Dīkṣita in the form of Siddhāntakaumudī. An edition of the Mahabhāṣya contains the original sūtras, the vārtikas and the bhāṣya; similarly Siddhāntakaumudī contains the original sūtras, many of the vārtikas, and notes by Bhattoji Dīkṣita. The aspect of rearrangement in the Siddhāntakaumudī is best explained after discussing the ordering of the sūtras in the Aṣṭādhyāyī.

Apart from Paninian grammar, there are other grammars of Sanskrit before Pāṇini and after Pāṇini as well, and aspects of those grammars are still used in addition to the main body of the Paninian grammar. For instance, the visarga does not have the status of a character in Paninian grammar; yet, in all Indian languages, not merely Sanskrit, the anusvāra (bindu) and visarga find a place in the varṇamāla at the end of the vowels.

Sanskrit grammar is also the model/source for grammars of other Indian languages. While this author is not acquainted with any grammar other than that of Telugu, Sanskrit and English – with maybe some exposure to the grammar of Hindi – one gets a sense that other Indian languages like Bengali and Marathi borrow many bits of their grammar, in addition to the vocabulary, from Sanskrit. In Telugu, the situation is that grammatical terminology is imported wholesale from Sanskrit, though the meaning of the term is sometimes inappropriate. For instance, the infinitive is called the 'tumun-anta' in Sanskrit, as an affix called tum[un] is attached at the end of a verb-stem to form the infinitive, as in gantum (to go) and paṭhitum (to read). The infinitive is called the tumun-anta in Telugu as well, though the affix which is actually attached is 'ku' as in povuṭaku (to go) and caduvuṭaku (to read). This is so because the meaning associated with tumun-anta as the infinitive has transcended the etymological meaning of 'ending in tumun'. If the situation is such in a language with about 2,000 years of existence and 1,000 years of high quality literature, one could well imagine how strong the influence would be on the later languages belonging to the same branch of Indo-European languages as Sanskrit. The first Tamil grammar, the Tolkappiyam, is said to be based on aindra grammar, a precursor to Paninian grammar.

Thus, we see that Sanskrit grammar is at once one of the oldest grammars, one of the tersest, one of the most comprehensive, and verily the specimen nearest to a 'perfect grammar' that humanity has.

Pre-Paninian and Post-Paninian Grammar

Some ancient texts mention eight grammars including the Paninian, and some mention nine texts. According to one tradition when Brihaspati taught grammar to Indra, he set out to teach every form of every subanta and tiṅganta. Indra is supposed to have improvised upon this by separating the prakṛiti and pratyaya, the base and the affix. The aindra vyākaraṇa is not purely mythological (nor is the Brihaspati vyākaraṇa); some traces of it are indeed found. As mentioned earlier, the Tamil grammar Tolkappiyam is based on Indra's grammar. We have presently available, ten prātiśākhyas, all of which are some sorts of grammar, if mainly vedic. That apart, Pāṇini himself mentions ten grammarians: Āpiśāli, Kāśyapa, Gārgya, Gālava, Cākravarmaṇa, Bhāradvāja, Śākaṭāyana, Śākalya, Senaka and Sphoṭāyana. Other texts mention 15 grammarians before Pāṇini. All in all, according to Mahamahopadhyaya Sri Pullela Sriramachandrudu (in the introduction to his Telugu translation of the Laghu Siddhāntakaumudī, the introduction being based on Yudhiṣṭhir Mīmāṃsaka's 'Saṃskṛit vyākaraṇ kā itihās'), about 85 pre-Paninan grammarians can be identified.

Then, there are internal evidences to suggest that some of the sūtras in Aṣṭādhyāyī are actually earlier sūtras used without change by Pāṇini. A proper discussion of the internal evidence requires a good knowledge of grammar. At this point, it would suffice to say that Pāṇini's work is best thought of as a culmination of generations of effort, rather a work entirely by Pāṇini.

As it were, the development of grammar did not end with Pāṇini, though such an accusation is often hurled at Pāṇini. Most unusually in the sūtra-vritti-bhāṣya tradition, when Kātyāyana or Vararuchi wrote the vritti on the sūtrapāṭha, he corrected Pāṇini, sometimes subtly and sometimes directly; and Patanjali who wrote the Mahabhāṣya further improvised. The present form of the Aṣṭādhyāyī is usually the text finalised in the Kāśikā, written in the eighth century after Christ, though it is possible to identify most changes done by the Kāśikākāras. Glosses on commentaries, explanations of glosses and so on kept appearing up to the sixteenth century till the Siddhāntakaumudī was composed by Bhattoji Dīkṣita. Bhattoji Dīkṣita is quite orthodox and does not admit anybody other than the munitrayam – Pāṇini, Vararuchi and Patanjali – as an authority on grammar.

The Aṣṭādhyāyī, initially in its original form, and in the last four hundred years or so in the form of Siddhāntakaumudī, stands out as the brightest star. Even so, it has to be appreciated that this is a result of a continuous process of observation, theorisation, discussion and refinement that happened across vast distances in time and place and that is has been built upon, refined further and improvised mainly in its application, after its composition.

The Types of Sūtras in the Aṣṭādhyāyī

The sūtras of Aṣṭādhyāyī are classified under six heads: sanjñā, paribhāṣā, vidhi, niyama, atideśa and adhikāra. Some add a seventh head, nisedha.

The most common rule is the vidhi, operational rule. These describe the normal processes of grammar.

A sanjñā sūtra is a definition which introduces new technical words. For example, 1.4.14 (suptiñāntam padam) defines a word as something ending in either a sup or tiñ, both of which are technical words referring to case-affixes and verb-affixes. The names 'sup' and 'tiñ' are themselves formed by combining the first syllable of the case-affixes with the last 'it' of the last case-affix and by combining the first syllable of the verb-affixes with the last 'it' of the verb-affixes. We observe that this convention is exactly similar to the way pratyāhāras formed using the Māheśvara sūtras.

Rules which establish such conventions are called paribhāṣa rules, or metarules, or rules of interpretation. 1.1.46 (ṣaṣṭhī sthāneyogā) gives the rule of interpretation when a word is used in the genitive case, ṣaṣṭhī vibhakti. Normally, ṣaṣṭhī vibhakti is used to convey the sense of possession, as in rāmasya bāṇam, rāmabāṇam, relation in place, comparison, nearness, proximity, change, collection, component member and others. The present sūtra clarifies that in the sūtras of Aṣṭādhyāyī, whenever a word occurs in ṣaṣṭhī, without any qualification, it will assume the meaning of 'in the place of'.

The adhikāra sūtras are usually translated as headings. For instance, 2.13 (prākkaḍārātsamāsaḥ) states “all the terms that we shall describe from this point up to the sūtra 2.2.38 (kaḍārākarmadhāraye) will get the designation of samāsa or compound.” Similarly, 3.1.1 (pratyayaḥ) states that the third, fourth and fifth chapters deal with affixes. Thus, we see that the validity of adhikāra sūtras extends over many sūtras. Thus, in a sense they are super-vidhi sūtras. These are marked with a svarita tone, so that a student might know which sūtras extend their influence. In printed texts, some notation or the other, such as marking adhikāra sūtras in bold print, is followed.

An extension rule extends the operation of a rule to a given item as well. An example would be out of place in an introductory essay, such as this, but suffice to say that unlike an adhikāra sūtra, the application of an extension sūtra is much more restricted, usually to one sūtra.

A niyama sūtra restricts the application of a previous rule. This marks exceptions to the vidhi rules. A nisedha sūtra is a negation. For instance 1.1.9 (tulyāsya prayatnam savarṇam) defines savarṇas as those which have a comparable effort in producing the varṇa. The immediate next sūtra, 1.1.10 (nājjhalau) clarifies that vowels and consonants cannot be savarṇas.

Based on these rules, a vritti is made of the sūtras. A vritti is a complete, intelligible sentence which gives the intent of the sūtra.

The Arrangement of Sutras in the Aṣṭādhyāyī

The Aṣṭādhyāyī was composed in the days when such texts were learnt by heart first and then the application was understood, practiced and mastered. Consequently, it is expected that all the nearly 4,000 sūtras be applied simultaneously in a given situation to determine the correct grammatical transformation. In case more than one sūtra is capable of being applied, but there is a conflict in the force of such competing sūtras, usually the latter prevails. Depending on the type of sūtra, the order of preference in case of conflict varies. The order of preference for different types of sūtras is clearly laid out.

The exception to the above arrangement is spelt out in 7.2.1 (pūrvatrāsiddham) which states that the earlier sūtras be treated as not valid. Thus, in the first seven chapters and a quarter (referred to as sapādi, with the quarter), the sūtras are applied progressively, one after other to a given situation; in the last three quarters (the tripādi) the same arrangement continues, but with the sūtras in the first seven chapters and a quarter not being valid.

The application of Aṣṭādhyāyī to a given situation requires considerable intellectual prowess, so much so that not all word forms are settled. Even after it was applied competently for a number of centuries, it is possible to launch into a discussion of what the correct form of a particular word is. The scope for Śāstrārtha discussion on even such a simple matter as how should 'rupees five hundred' be expressed in Sanskrit is considerable.

Such difficulties gave rise to the need for a simpler way to study the Aṣṭādhyāyī. Early attempts were to re-organise it under subject-matters, prakaraṇas. These attempts, over many iterations spread across centuries reached a perfect shape in the sixteenth century in the form of Siddhāntakaumudī.

The Siddhāntakaumudī

The Siddhāntakaumudī, composed in the 16th century by Bhattoji Dīkṣita, rearranges the 3978 sūtras of the Aṣṭādhyāyī under various groupings, more similar to a modern book of grammar. Along with the sūtra is given a short explanatory comment by Bhattoji Dīkṣita. The key job done by these comments or notes is point out application of other sūtras along with the present one, or where other seemingly contradictory rules are not applicable.

This has become so popular that for the last four hundred years, the Aṣṭādhyāyī was mainly studied in the form of the Siddhāntakaumudī, not in its original form. Swami Dayanand Saraswati, the founder of Ārya Samāj, promoted the study of Aṣṭādhyāyī in its original form more than a hundred years ago. Notwithstanding the sustained efforts of

Āryasamājis ever since, Siddhāntakaumudī with its derived texts, mainly the Laghu Siddhāntakaumudī remains the most popular text for learning grammar.

Bhattoji Dīkṣita himself wrote a commentary on Siddhāntakaumudī called Praudhamanorama, where he establishes that only Pāṇini, Kātyāyana and Patanjali may be accepted as authorities on matters of grammar. There have been other commentaries on Siddhāntakaumudī, including a couple – bṛihacchabdaratna and laghuśabdaratna by the grandson of Bhattoji Dīkṣita, Hari Dīkṣita.

The Siddhāntakaumudī includes commentary on the uṇādi sūtras, phiṭ sūtras and liṅgānuśāsanam, apart from the commentary on māheśvarasūtras and the Aṣṭādhyāyī.

Conclusion

Thus we see that over a few centuries the Vedic language got refined into Sanskrit with a most impressive grammar being evolved in the form of Pāṇini's Aṣṭādhyāyī at least two and a half millennia back. It might not be incorrect to say that the grammar of Sanskrit is the oldest, shortest and the best grammar of any language in the world. The ideal of dividing a language into components and rules governing how the components interact with each other has been perhaps achieved best in Sanskrit.

With such extra-ordinary sophistication, perfection really, it is not a wonder that grammar acquired canonical status, and Pāṇini, the equivalent of Sainthood. Great as Pāṇini was, the grammar in its final form is most likely a culmination of the efforts of generations of grammarians over a few centuries. It is equally true, contrary to general perception, that grammar evolved after Pāṇini as well, incrementally in its rules, application and interpretation of rules; and dramatically in pedagogy – method of teaching.