

Challenges of Teaching Sanskrit Language

Daya Shakya, Portland, Oregon

Knowing my experience of teaching Nepali and Newah for so many years, the director of Bodhi Tree Language Institute Mr. Richard Robinson asked me whether I am available to teach Sanskrit too. I was stunned and could not say either YES or NO. After a moment I did say 'Yes' based on my linguistic background and experience of teaching multiple languages. Both Newah and Nepali show some sort of link with Sanskrit. Due to the fact is verifiable I was sort of positive to say 'yes', Then an ad went to website and newspapers for marketing. When it became closer to teaching date i.e. Fall, I started stumbling in finding the teaching material. In the mean time, Richard handed over the book 'Introduction to Sanskrit' Part I and II, written by Thomas Egenes, publisher Motilal Varanasi Das, New Delhi, India. This was certainly a gift from god to me. My concern of not finding the material was solved. Besides, I also ordered secondary level school text books used in Nepal through my Japanese friend Kazuyuki Kiryo from Kathmandu. The help I got from both of them inspired me to step in the field of teaching Sankrit. I thank them with respect.

Now, I am more interested to dive into depth of Sanskrit because the experience of teaching has given me tools to dig out its relationship with Latin and Greek which are considered as the sibling languages of Sanskrit. See an example below:

Latin	English	Sanskrit	Nepali	Hindi	Newah
Cornu	Corner	KoNa	Kunaa	Kone	KuN

Although the Latin and English word spells with a /c/ the pronunciation starts with /k/. Have you ever thought of this relationship? Of course not! This relationship is technically called 'cognates'. I became more fascinated in digging out the facts of all language which I know very well and have confidence of teaching to foreigners. To be honest I could recommend to start learning Sanskrit and know the complexity of the language spoken by Aryan ancestors some hundreds years ago. The language used to be the Language of scholars and Pundits whom we have fairly vague knowledge among the young generation in our community, in the realm of Internet, Computer, ipod, i pad, iphone, tablet, e-marketing. Who cares to study of Sanskrit in modern age of high demand of video game right in your finger tips? This has to come from internal interest not by showing a lollipop or crew chow. Whatever the reason could be, I am very much dragged into the complexity of human language based on cultural competency and a discussion on philosophical depth. Every word we use in our daily routine has a deep root of meaningful explanation. Without language no living beings can exist in this world. You just have to pick one see the etymology of the word as above example.

In showing some features of Sanskrit, I was stunned with very basic facts. All languages consist of words for Noun, pronoun, verb, adjective, preposition, adverb, article and conjunction. Some languages do not show the noun words as we see in English. They have to be used as possession and some verbs that can be hardly separated as they are in English. In Sanskrit, the words that come across in chanting verses of text or Mantra can hardly recognize as a single word or suffixed with any grammatical meaning embedded within it. See an example below:

1. Buddham Sharnam Gacchaami I offer my refuge to Buddha

2. Aham Griham Gacchaami I go home

The first sentence is a kind of natural Sanskrit and the second one is creative one based on modern utilization. Perhaps the second one is not even used in spoken Sanskrit. Another feature is strength of showing who is doing what to whom with single person (Singular) more than one (Dual) and many (plural). Grammatically this concept is labeled as the case of speech. Most important feature of Sanskrit is sensitivity in gender such as masculine, feminine and neuter. From the basis of these complexities of noun words the verb also play an important role agreeing with the subject of Singular, dual and plural. Subject has to agree with corresponding number of Objects singular, dual and plural. A set of case sensitive words for /Nara/ 'Man', /Phala/ 'Fruit' and /Nadi/ 'River'. Are listed below to observe how complex in use.

Masculine inflection: Narah, Narau, Naraah, Naraam Naraaya Narena, Naraabhyam Narayoh Naranaam Nara Naraat narebbyah

Neutral Inflection: Phalam, phalena, phale, phalani, phalaaya, phalaih, phalebhyam, phalebhyah, phalaat, phalashya, phalayoh, phalanam, phalesu, phala

Feminine Inflection: Nadi, Nadau, Nadyah, Nadim, Nadii, Nadyaa, Nadibhyaam, Nadibhih, Nadyai, Nadibhyah, Nadyaah, Nadhyoh, Nadinaam, Nadyaam, Nadishu

Above three examples are simply suffixed with case marks (vibhakti) showing singular, dual and plural with sense of nominative(0), accusative(to), instrumental(with), dative(to), Ablative(from), Genitive(of), Locative(in, at , on) and vocative(addressing) equivalent to English language structure of 'prepositions'.

Besides all these grammatical features Sanskrit is also very sensitive in sound assimilation that is known as the SANDHI Rule. This rule applies in compounding two or three words to simplify for smooth flow of chanting the verses. Vowel Sandhi rule is applied in compounding the last sound of first word and the first sound of the second word, The outcome of the third word is significantly appear in different form. A few examples are given here:

Iswaraavataar, Atamaananda, Maharshi, Dineswara, Parameswara, Amritaananda

The rules for consonant sandhi trigger by compounding the words from voiceless to voiced, nasal consonants trigger to nasalized vowels. Some consonants like /l/ /j/ are repeated, a dental nasal/n/ and fricative /s/ becomes retroflex nasal/N/ and retroflex /S/. A sentence is given here to see the change of consonant by the Sandhi rules.

Actual Text: Yasmadgraamaadaagachhaami Tasminraamo vasati

Breaking Sandi: yasmaat-graamaat-aagachhaami tasmin raama vasati

English Translation: I come from the village where Ram lives.

This is simply an example to show how the language works. There is a whole set of rules that bind the grammatical boundary. Every single grammatical rule triggers to adopt the Sandhi rules and show result to completely different from original forms. The beauty of the Sanskrit language can be tasted by analyzing the texts. Scholars believe that this is most accurately used natural human language. We can

also assume that many of Indo Aryan languages including Nepali and Tibeto-Burman languages such as Nepal Bhasa(Newar) are influenced by Sanskrit. For more, to know about the languages of Nepal contact the writer at drasha@aol.com.