

Lecture 2: Non-Western Linguistic Traditions

Linguistics tries to describe and explain Language. People have thought, and wondered about language throughout recorded history (and most certainly beyond). As part of human thought, Linguistics was part of philosophy (the ‘Mother of all sciences’) for hundreds, even thousands of years (before it branched off and became a science in its own right). In many cultures, linguistic analysis was part of religious studies and writings (particularly in discussions of the religiously preferred spoken and written forms of sacred texts in Hebrew, Sanskrit and Arabic). However, it appears to our - granted, limited - knowledge that linguistic speculation and investigation have gone on in only a small number of societies.

To the extent that **Mesopotamian**, **Chinese**, and **Arabic** learning dealt with grammar, their treatments were so enmeshed in the particularities of those languages and so little known to the European world until recently that they have had virtually no impact on Western linguistic tradition. Chinese linguistic and philological scholarship stretches back for more than two millennia, but the interest of those scholars was concentrated largely on phonetics, writing, and lexicography; their consideration of grammatical problems was bound up closely with the study of logic.

Modern linguistics is based on European intellectual tradition originating in Ancient Greece. Both India and China had produced native schools of linguistic thought – in fact, some of the achievements of Indian linguists precede equivalent Western developments by almost two thousand years, but European thinkers were not aware of their ideas (there was little ‘international’ travel in those days).

Ancient India: the Vedas

Around 1500 – 1000 BCE, Indo-Aryan tribes settled in the northwestern parts of India. After 1200 BCE, their mainly tribal, pastoral society (aka **Vedic civilization**) spread to the Ganges Plain, becoming increasingly settled and agricultural, with a hierarchy of four social classes, and the emergence of monarchical city-states.

The **Vedic period** (c. 1500 – c. 500 BCE) was the period in Indian history during which the Vedas, the oldest scriptures of Hinduism, were composed. The oldest of them, **the Rigveda**, claims that **vāk** (speech) is god-inspired. Already by 1200 BC, the **oral tradition of reciting the Vedas**¹ word-to-word and sound-to-sound became an essential part of Indian education. Scholars tried to preserve the Vedas in their original form. They wrote many treatises on how to recite and interpret the sacred texts ‘correctly’ (spoken vernaculars at later times were very different from the original language of the Vedas). These treatises present a meticulous analysis of Sanskrit grammar, describing the structure of Sanskrit words by splitting compounds into words, stems, and phonetic units. They represent the beginnings of morphology and phonology, which had a great influence on Western linguistics over 2000 years later. The focus of Indian grammarians, therefore, dictated by the need to ‘freeze’ Vedic Sanskrit in time, was not on linguistic change over time, but rather on the description and analysis of **Sanskrit** (which means ‘perfect’ or ‘complete’).

Sanskrit was an oral language: Amazingly, it was transmitted (through reciting the Vedas) seemingly unchanged for hundreds of years.

¹ The **Vedas** (Sanskrit वेद *véda*, "knowledge") are a large body of texts originating in ancient India. Composed in Vedic Sanskrit, the texts constitute the oldest layer of Sanskrit literature and the oldest scriptures of Hinduism (Wikipedia).

The Sanskrit word *véda* "knowledge, wisdom" is derived from the root *vid-* "to know". This is reconstructed as being derived from the Proto-Indo-European root **uueid-*, meaning "see" or "know" (Ibid.).

The Vedas date to long before the Indo-Aryans could read and write; their *sounds* were considered holy – it was more important that the fine intonations and syllables were preserved, rather than their meaning. This is why it was not considered important to write them down until much later. Actual writing of Vedic/Hindu texts in Sanskrit started much later, and a systematic alphabet, **Brāhmī**, emerged around the 6-5th century BCE:

Brāhmī	Type	Syllabic Alphabetic (main elements are syllables, built of consonants + a vowel: <i>ka, kha, ga, gha</i> , etc.)
	Genealogy	Brahmi
	Location	South Asia
	Time	5th century BCE to 4th century CE
	Direction	Variable (Horizontal)

The Brahmi script is one of the most important writing systems in the world by virtue of its time depth and influence. Most of the earliest historical texts in India are written in Brahmi. The 'Devanagari Script' (देवनागरी), which is now commonly used for Sanskrit, has existed for just over 800 years.

Brahmi	𑀀	𑀁	𑀂	𑀃	𑀄	𑀅	𑀆	𑀇	𑀈	𑀉	𑀊	𑀋	𑀌	𑀍	𑀎	𑀏	𑀐		
Devanagari	अ	ब	ग	घ	ङ		व	द	ड		थ	ठ	य	क	च	ल	म	न	ण
Tamil	அ	ப	க	த	ட		வ	த	ட		த	ட	ய	க	ச	ல	ம	ந	ண
Kannada	ಅ	ಬ	ಗ	ಢ	ಢ		ವ	ದ	ಡ		ಢ	ಠ	ಯ	ಕ	ಚ	ಲ	ಮ	ನ	ಣ
IAST	a	ba	ga	dha	ḍha		va	da?	ḍa?		tha	ṭha	ya	ka	ca	la	ma	na	ṇa

N.B. The **International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (I.A.S.T.)** is a transliteration scheme that allows a lossless romanization of Indic scripts as employed by the Sanskrit language.

Devanagari ([,deivə'na : gəri :]; Hindustani: [d̪e : ʊ'na : gri]; देवनागरी devanāgarī, also called Nagari (Nāgarī, नागरी), is an **alphasyllabary alphabet** of India and Nepal. It is written from left to right, has a strong preference for symmetrical rounded shapes within squared outlines, and is recognizable by a horizontal line that runs along the top of full letters. The Nagari script has roots in the ancient Brahmi script family. Some of the earliest epigraphical evidence attesting to the developing Sanskrit Nagari script in ancient India, in a form similar to Devanagari, is from the 1st to 4th century CE inscriptions discovered in Gujarat. The Nagari script was **in regular use by the 7th century CE** and it was fully developed by about the end of first millennium.

The **Devanagari** script is used for over **120 languages**, including Hindi, Marathi, Nepali, Pali, among others, making it one of the most used and adopted writing systems in the world. The Devanagari script is also used for classical Sanskrit texts. Devanagari script has **47 primary characters**, of which **14 are vowels and 33 are consonants**. The ancient Nagari script for Sanskrit had two additional consonantal characters. The script has **no capital or small letters as in Latin**, and weighs all characters as equal. Generally, the orthography of the script reflects the pronunciation of the language.

Vedanga

Six technical subjects related to the Vedas are known as **vedāṅga** ("limbs of the Veda"). They are regarded as **auxiliary** to the Vedas and designed to aid in the correct pronunciation and interpretation of the text and the right use of the *Mantras* in ceremonials. These subjects are treated in Sūtra literature dating from around 500 to 250 BCE.

The 6 subjects of Vedāṅga include: **Phonetics** (Śikṣā), **Ritual** (Kalpa), **Grammar** (Vyākaraṇa), **Etymology** (Nirukta), **Meter** (Chandas), & **Astronomy** (Jyotiṣa)

The Sanskrit grammatical tradition of **vyākaraṇa** (Sanskrit: व्याकरण, IPA: [vja:kəɾəŋə]) stems from the need to be able to obtain a strict interpretation of the Vedic texts.

The Earliest Indian Grammarians (VIII– VI BCE)

The work of the very early Indian grammarians has been lost; for example, the work of **Sakatayana** (roughly 8th century BCE) is known only from cryptic references by **Yaska** (c. 6th or 5th century BCE). **Sakatayana** claimed that most nouns are derived from verbs.

In his monumental work on etymology, *Nirukta*, **Yaska** supported this view based on the large number of nouns that were derived from verbs through a derivation process that became known as *krit-pratyaya*; this relates to the nature of the root morphemes.

Etymologically, nouns originate from verbs

Yāska also defends the view, presented first in the lost text of **Sakatayana** that, etymologically, most nouns have their origins in verbs. An example in English may be the noun *origin*, derived from the Latin *originalis*, which is ultimately based on the verb *oriri*, "to rise"; this was a source for considerable debate for several centuries.

Yaska also provided the seeds for another debate, on whether textual **meaning** is inherent in the word (Yaska's view) or in the sentence (see **Pāṇini**, and later grammarians, such as **Bhartrhari**). This debate continued into the 14th and 15th centuries CE, and is echoed in debates about **semantic compositionality**.

Yāska defines four main categories of words:

- nāma – nouns or substantives
- ākhyāta – verbs
- upasarga – pre-verbs or prefixes
- nipāta – invariant words (perhaps prepositions)

Words as carriers of meaning: atomism vs. holism debate

As in modern semantic theory, Yāska views words as the main carriers of meaning. This view – that words have a primary or preferred ontological status in defining meaning, was fiercely debated in the Indian tradition over 12 centuries.

According to the **atomist view**, the words would be the primary elements out of which the sentence is constructed, while the **holistic view** considers the sentence as the primary entity, originally given in its context of utterance, and the words are arrived at only through analysis and abstraction.

This debate relates to the atomistic vs holistic interpretation of linguistic fragments – a very similar debate is raging today between traditional semantics and cognitive linguistics, over the view whether words in themselves have semantic interpretations that can be composed to form larger strings (i.e., compounds like *blueberry*, *handkerchief*, *highway*, etc.). The cognitive linguistics view of semantics is that any definition of a word ultimately constrains its meanings because the actual meaning of a word can only be construed by considering a large number of individual contextual cues.

Pāṇini (c. 5-4th c. BC) proposed a grammar for composing meaning from morphemic roots. His ***Eight Books***, translated only in **1891**, was the earliest work of ***derivational linguistics***, as well as the first individually authored treatise on **Sanskrit**. According to some sources, he was born about 520 BC in Pakistan Died: about 460 BC in India. Despite the discrepancy in dates, **Pāṇini's grammar of Sanskrit** was definitely written between **600 B.C.** and **300 B.C.** Panini is famous for his economy of expression – he managed to describe the whole of Sanskrit grammar in just 4,000 consequential aphoristic rules or ***sutras*** (strings), each building on the previous one. These sutras

1. Mapped the semantics of verb argument structures into ***thematic roles***, which express time-space and causal relationships between the major sentence constituents (S/V/O)
2. Provided ***morphosyntactic rules for creating verb forms (conjugations)*** and noun forms whose seven cases generate the morphology of noun inflections (***declensions***)
3. Analyzed how these morphological ***structures are influenced by phonological processes*** (e.g., root or stem modification).

In addition, Pāṇinian grammar also provided a list of 2000 verb roots to which these rules are applied, a list of sounds (the so-called *Shiva-sutras*), and a list of 260 words which were exceptions to his derivational rules.

The phonological structure Panini outlined includes defining a notion of sound universals similar to the modern conception of ***phoneme***, the systematization of ***consonants*** based on oral cavity constriction, and ***vowels*** based on their height and duration. Many scholars believe, however, that it is his idea of constructing word and sentence meanings from morphemes that is 'truly remarkable in modern terms' (Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_linguistics; retrieved March 27, 2010).

In the times after Pāṇini, Indian grammarians also debated whether word-meanings were ***conventional*** or ***eternal*** (same as the ***nomos - physis*** debate in Ancient Greece). They distinguished 3 types of meaning: the ***individual***, or ***concrete*** (*this cow*), the more abstract ***universal*** type (*cowhood*), and the ***image*** (*draw the cow*).

About a thousand years after Panini, **Bhartrhari** (c. 6-7th century AD) developed a remarkably insightful ***philosophy of meaning***. His work ***Vākyapadīya*** (literally, "On Words and Sentences") expounds his doctrine of ***Sphoṭa*** (*bursting, opening*) and states that a **sentence should be interpreted as a single unit** which "conveys its meaning 'in a flash', just as a picture is first perceived as a unity, notwithstanding subsequent analysis into its component coloured shapes" (Robins 1997:173). In other words, he claimed that the sentence is not understood as a sequence of sounds, morphemes and words put together, but transfers its complex and indivisible meaning in a flash, and that the full meaning of each word is only understood in the context of the other words around it.

In the *Vākyapadīya*, **Bhartrhari** views ***sphoṭa*** as the human 'gift of speech' which reveals our consciousness. The notion of "flash /insight" or "revelation" is central to the ***sphoṭa*** concept; it refers to the psychological aspect of speech. Bhartrhari distinguished three levels of ***sphoṭa***:

1. *varṇa-sphoṭa*, at the syllable level, representing an abstraction of sound (phoneme)
2. *pada-sphoṭa*, at the word level, and
3. *vākya-sphoṭa*, at the sentence level.

In verse I.93, Bharṭṛhari states that the ***sphoṭa*** is the universal linguistic type – sentence-type or word-type, as opposed to their tokens (sounds). He makes a distinction between ***sphoṭa*, which is whole and indivisible**, and ***nāda*, the sound, which is sequenced and therefore divisible**. The *sphoṭa* is the causal root, the intention behind an utterance. However, Bharṭṛhari believed that *sphoṭa* arises also in the listener. Uttering the 'nāda' induces the same mental state or *sphoṭa* in the listener - it comes as a whole, in a flash of recognition or intuition (*pratibhā*, 'shining forth'). This is particularly true for *vākya-sphoṭa* or sentence-vibration, where the entire sentence is thought of (by the speaker), and grasped (by the listener) as a whole.

Ancient China

Similar to the Indian tradition, Chinese philology began as an aid to understanding classics in the **Han dynasty** (c. 3d c. BCE). It came to be divided into three branches: **exegesis** (explanation of texts), **script analysis**, and study of **sounds** and reached its golden age in the 17th c. AD. The **glossary *Erya*** (c. 3d c. BCE) is regarded as the first linguistic work in China. ***Shuowen Jiezi*** (c. 2nd c. BCE), **the first Chinese dictionary**, classifies Chinese characters by radicals, a practice that would be followed by most subsequent lexicographers. Two more pioneering works produced during the Han Dynasty are *Fangyan*, the first Chinese work concerning **dialects**, and *Shiming*, devoted to **etymology**.

As in ancient Greece, early Chinese thinkers were concerned with the relationship between names and reality. **Confucius** (6th c. BCE) famously emphasized the moral commitment implicit in a name: "Good government consists in the ruler being a ruler, the minister being a minister, the father being a father, and the son being a son... If names be not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things." (*Analects* 12.11, 13.3). [*'correctness'* of names]

However, **what is the reality implied by a name?** The later Mohists or the group known as School of Names (*ming jia*, 479-221 BCE), consider that *ming* ("name") may refer to three kinds of *shi* ("actuality"): type universals (horse), individual (John), and unrestricted (thing). They adopt a realist position on the name-reality connection - universals arise because **"the world itself fixes the patterns of similarity and difference by which things should be divided into kinds"**.

The study of phonology in China began late, and was influenced by the Indian tradition, after Buddhism had become popular in China. The rime dictionary arranged words by tone and rime ('minimal sets?').

The ancient commentators on the classics paid much attention to syntax and the use of particles. **But the first Chinese grammar, in the modern sense of the word, was produced only by the late 19th century**. It was based on the Latin (prescriptive) model.

Mesopotamia: the Basrah School

Mesopotamia (the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, now part of Iraq) also produced eminent Arab scholars, commonly referred to as the ***Basrah School***:

Asma'il (740-828): he was a scholar and anthologist, one of the three leading members of the Basra school of Arabic philology. A gifted student of Abu Amr ibn al-Alaa, the founder of the Basra school, Asma'il possessed an outstanding knowledge of the classical Arabic language. On the basis of the principles that he laid down, his disciples later prepared most of the existing collections of the pre-Islamic Arab poets. He also wrote an anthology of mostly religious poetry.

Sibawaihi (760-793?) was a celebrated grammarian of the Arabic language.

After studying in Basra, Iraq, with a prominent grammarian **Khalil**, Sībawayh received recognition as a grammarian himself. Sībawayh is said to have left Iraq and retired to Shīrāz after losing a debate with a rival on Bedouin Arabic usage. His monumental work is al-Kitāb (“The Book”) was frequently used by later scholars.

Khalil (718 – betw. 776 & 791 AD): an Arab philologist who compiled the first Arabic dictionary and is credited with the formulation of the rules of Arabic prosody. His dictionary is arranged according to a novel alphabetical order based on pronunciation, beginning with the letter *ayn*.

Al-Farabi (870 – 950 AD) was a brilliant philosopher who wrote more than 100 works; unfortunately, only a small number of them have been preserved. Most of his works are treatises in logic and the philosophy of language (he was particularly interested in the relationship between speech and thought), as well the philosophy of politics, religion, metaphysics, psychology, and natural philosophy.

Most Arabic scholars were inspired by the desire to promote Islam and to preserve the ‘truth’ of the Qur’an:

“...The inspiration for Arabic grammar came from religion; the need for it was created by the commingling within Islam of the Arabs and the non-Arabs. The methods of observation and induction yielded the discovery of the main body of "laws" in the working of language; the only snag was that the laws of language are not so uniform and immutable as the laws of nature” (A History of Muslim Philosophy: Grammar & Lexicography).

“The intellectual activity of the early Muslims stemmed directly from their devotion to religion. The Arabs had throughout been sensitively proud of their language; contacts with foreigners were regarded by them as derogatory to pure Arabism. However, before Islam any corruption of the dialect was but a social drawback; after Islam any lapse from the norm inevitably led to distortion of the sacred text with dire consequences both in this as well as in the next world. Curiously enough, it was Islam itself which brought about the commingling of the Arabs with the non-Arabs on a vast and unprecedented scale. In the very second decade of the Hijrah the Arabs were carried on the crest of a wave of military conquests across the bounds of their homeland to settle down in the neighbouring countries of Iraq, Persia, Syria, and Egypt. At the same time there was a large influx of aliens, mostly prisoners of war, into the principal towns-Makkah and Madinah--of Arabia itself. Before long there appeared for the first time in history a considerable and growing number of neophytes seeking initiation into Arab society with a conscious effort to learn, imbibe, and serve that new religious culture which was only couched in Arabic and had its prototype in Arab milieu. Naturally enough, the inaptitude of these neophytes in the use of the Arabic tongue excited the laughter of the younger folk in Arab households; it also shocked the elders as it amounted to inadvertent profanity and distortion of the Qur'anic verses.’ The corruptive effects on the new generation of the Arabs--the townsmen among them were no less disconcerting; the daily usages marked a sharp decline from the Qur'anic idiom. Thus, there is little doubt that about the middle of the first century of the Hijrah the Muslims were squarely face to face with their foremost literary problem, viz., the need for the preservation of the Qur'an. The Arabs needed reinforcing their own natural way of speech with a discipline of conscious effort; they were also eager, in keeping with the true spirit of Islam, to pass on to the myriads of non-Arabs, who daily swelled the ranks of the faithful, not only the religion and the practices of Islam but also the language as a key to a first-hand knowledge of its primary source or sources (Arab Literature: Grammar & Lexicography; Chapter 2).

A re-cap:**✚ Chinese linguistic thought**

- goes back more than two thousand years
- Its main focus was largely on phonetics, writing, and lexicography
- Grammar was studied as part of *logic* (study of reasoning)

✚ Indian linguistic theory –outstanding scholars:

- **Panini (4th century BC)** viewed Language as an integrated system; opposed Yāskas view that sentences are primary; proposed a grammar for composing meaning from morphemes; described the grammar of Sanskrit in just 4000 rules
- **Bhartrhari (5th-6th centuries AD)** developed the doctrine of *Sphoṭa* (*bursting, opening*) and stated that a sentence should be interpreted as a single unit which conveys its meaning 'in a flash', just as a picture

✚ Linguistic Thought in Mesopotamia (the Basra School: 8th-10th centuries AD)

- Arab scholars were inspired by the desire to promote Islam and to preserve the 'truth' of the Qur'an:
 - **Asma'il** (740-828 AD): he was a scholar and anthologist; he wrote an anthology of mostly religious poetry.
 - **Sibawaihi** (760-793? AD) was a celebrated grammarian of the Arabic language.
 - **Khalil** (718 – btw. 776 & 791): an Arab philologist who compiled the first Arabic dictionary.
 - **Al-Farabi** (870 – 950 AD) was a brilliant philosopher who was particularly interested in the relationship between speech and thought.

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