

Sanskrit language,

Sanskrit language, (from Sanskrit: *saṃskṛta*, “adorned, cultivated, purified”) an Old Indo-Aryan language in which the most ancient documents are the Vedas, composed in what is called Vedic Sanskrit. Although Vedic documents represent the dialects then found in the northern midlands of the Indian subcontinent and areas immediately east thereof, the very earliest texts—including the Rigveda (“The Veda Composed in Verses”), which scholars generally ascribe to approximately 1500 bce—stem from the northwestern part of the subcontinent, the area of the ancient seven rivers (*sapta sindhavaḥ*).

What is generally called Classical Sanskrit—but is actually a language close to late Vedic as then used in the northwest of the subcontinent—was elegantly described in one of the finest grammars ever produced, the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* (“Eight Chapters”) composed by Pāṇini (c. 6th–5th century bce). The *Aṣṭādhyāyī* in turn was the object of a rich commentarial literature, documents of which are known from the time of Kātyāyana (4th–3rd century bce) onward. In the same Pāṇinian tradition there was a long history of work on semantics and the philosophy of language, the pinnacle of which is represented by the *Vākyapadīya* (“Treatise on Sentence and Word”) of Bhartṛhari (late 6th–7th century ce).

Over its long history, Sanskrit has been written both in Devanāgarī script and in various regional scripts, such as Śāradā from the north (Kashmir), Bāṅglā (Bengali) in the east, Gujarātī in the west, and various southern scripts, including the Grantha alphabet, which was especially devised for Sanskrit texts. Sanskrit texts continue to be published in regional scripts, although in fairly recent times Devanāgarī has become more generally used.

There is a large corpus of literature in Sanskrit covering a wide range of subjects. The earliest compositions are the Vedic texts. There are also major works of drama and poetry, although the exact dates of many of these works and their creators have not been definitively established. Important authors and works include Bhāsa (for example, his *Svapnavāsavadatta* [“Vāsavadatta in a Dream”]), who is assigned widely varying dates but definitely worked prior to Kālidāsa, who mentions him; Kālidāsa, dated anywhere from the

1st century bce to the 4th century ce, whose works include *Śakuntalā* (more fully, *Abhijñānaśākuntala*; “Śakuntalā Recalled Through Recognition” or “The Recognition of Śakuntalā”), *Vikramorvaśīya* (“Urvaśī Won Through Valour”), *Kumārasambhava* (“The Birth of Kumāra”), and *Raghuvamśa* (“The Lineage of Raghu”); Śūdraka and his *Mṛcchakatika* (“Little Clay Cart”), possibly dating to the 3rd century ce; Bhāravi and his *Kirātārjunīya* (“Arjuna and the Kirāta”), from approximately the 7th century; Māgha, whose *Śiśupālavadha* (“The Slaying of Śiśupāla”) dates to the late 7th century; and from about the early 8th century Bhavabhūti, who wrote *Mahāvīracarita* (“Deeds of the Great Hero”), *Mālatīmādhava* (“Mālatī and Mādhava”), and *Uttararāmacarita* (“The Last Deed of Rāma”). The two epics *Rāmāyaṇa* (“Life of Rāma”) and *Mahābhārata* (“Great Tale of the Bhāratas”) were also composed in Sanskrit, and the former is esteemed as the first poetic work (*ādikāvya*) of India. The *Pañcatantra* (“Treatise in Five Chapters”) and *Hitopadeśa* (“Beneficial Instruction”) are major representatives of didactic literature. Sanskrit was also used as the medium for composing treatises of various philosophical schools, as well as works on logic, astronomy, and mathematics.

Sanskrit is not restricted to Hindu compositions. It has also been used by Jaina and Buddhist scholars, the latter primarily Mahāyāna Buddhists. Further, Sanskrit is recognized in the constitution of India as both a classical language and an official language and continues to be used in scholarly, literary, and technical media, as well as in periodicals, radio, television, and film.

In its grammatical structure, Sanskrit is similar to other early Indo-European languages such as Greek and Latin. It is an inflected language. For instance, the Sanskrit nominal system—including nouns, pronouns, and adjectives—has three genders (masculine, feminine, and neuter), three numbers (singular, dual, and plural), and seven syntactic cases (nominative, accusative, instrumental, dative, ablative, genitive, and locative), in addition to a vocative. However, a full set of distinct forms occurs only in the singular of masculine *-a-* stems of the type *deva-* ‘god’: nominative *devas* (*devaḥ* before a pause), accusative *devam*, instrumental *devena*, dative *devāya*, ablative *devāt*, genitive *devasya*, locative *deve*, and vocative *deva*.

Adjectives are inflected to agree with nouns, and there are distinct pronominal forms for certain cases: e.g., *tasmai*, *tasmāt*, *tasmin* (masculine-neuter dative, ablative, and locative singular, respectively) ‘that one.’

Verbs inflect for tense, mode, voice, number, and person. These may be illustrated by third-person active forms of *pac* ‘cook, bake’ (used if cooking is done for someone other than the agent), including the present indicative *pacati* ‘cooks, is cooking’; the proximate future *pakṣyati* ‘will cook,’ referring to an act that will take place at some time in the future, possibly including the day on which one is speaking; the non-proximate future *paktā* ‘will cook,’ referring to an act that will take place at some time in the future, excluding the day on which one is speaking; the aorist *apākṣīt* ‘cooked, has cooked,’ referring to an act completed in the general past, possibly including the day on which one speaks; the imperfect past *apacat* ‘cooked,’ referring to an act in the past, excluding the day on which one speaks; the perfect reportative *papāca* ‘cooked,’ referring to an act performed in the past, excluding the day of speaking, and which the speaker did not directly witness or is not personally aware; the imperative *pacatu* ‘should, must cook,’ expressing a command, request, or invitation to perform the act; the optative *pacet*, used in the same sense as the imperative; the precative *pacyāt* ‘may cook,’ expressing a wish; and the contrafactual conditional *apakṣyat* ‘if (he) cooked, if (he) had cooked, if (he) would cook, if (he) would have cooked.’ There are also middle forms (‘cook for oneself’) corresponding to the forms just cited: *pacate* ‘cooks, is cooking,’ *pakṣyate* ‘will cook,’ *paktā* ‘will cook,’ *apakta* ‘cooked, has cooked,’ *apacata* ‘cooked,’ *pece* ‘cooked,’ *pacatām* ‘should, must cook,’ *pakṣīṣṭa* ‘may cook,’ *apakṣyata* ‘if (I) cooked, if (I) had cooked, if (I) would cook, if (I) would have cooked.’ There is also a passive, as with the third singular present indicative *pacyate* ‘...is being cooked.’ Early Vedic preserves remnants of an earlier aspectual contrast between perfective and imperfective.

George Cardona, in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*