

Prakrit languages

Prakrit languages, (from Sanskrit: *prākṛta*, “arising from the source, occurring in the source”) Middle Indo-Aryan languages known from inscriptions, literary works, and grammarians’ descriptions. Prakrit languages are related to Sanskrit but differ from and are contrasted with it in several ways.

First, a distinction is made between speech forms considered to be correct or standard (referred to as *śabda*) and those that are considered incorrect or nonstandard (*apaśabda*). Forms called *śabda* are Sanskrit items and have been described by grammarians, chiefly Pāṇini (c. 6th–5th century bce); these forms are language components that are said to be adorned or purified (*saṃskṛta*) by adhering to particular grammatical principles. For example, a form like the Sanskrit *gauḥ* ‘cow’ (nominative singular) is explained by grammarians as composed of a base *go-* and an ending *-s* before which the vowel of the base (*-o-*) is replaced by *au*; the word-final *-s* is then replaced by *-ḥ* because it occurs before a pause. Alternative terms, such as *gāvī*, *goṇī*, *gotā*, and *gopotalikā*, are nonstandard and were thus deemed ineligible for description in Pāṇini’s grammar. Starting at least with Kātyāyana (4th–3rd century bce), grammarians have considered the use of standard forms to lead to merit and have thus distinguished them from coexisting but nonstandard Middle Indo-Aryan usage. In addition, Patañjali (2nd century bce) and others held that nonstandard forms are corruptions (*apabhraṃśa* ‘falling away’) of acceptable correct forms (see Apabhramsha language).

The Sanskrit name for Prakrit, *prākṛta*, is derived from the Sanskrit *prakṛti* ‘original matter, source.’ There are two major views concerning the way in which Sanskrit and Prakrit are associated. One holds that the original matter in question is the speech of the common people, unadorned by grammar, and that *prākṛta* thus refers to vernacular usage in contrast to the elevated register of Sanskrit usage. This is one of several views noted, for example, by Nami Sadhu (11th century ce) in his commentary on Rudraṭa’s *Kāvyaḷaṅkāra* (“Ornaments of Poetry”), a 9th-century treatise on poetics. It is also the usual explanation accepted by Western linguists. In contrast, the view most commonly held by Prakrit grammarians holds that the Prakrit languages are vernaculars that arose from Sanskrit.

These distinct views of the origin of the Prakrit languages are also associated with cultural differences. Grammarians of Prakrits who assume that Sanskrit is the source language and formulate rules of change that treat Prakrit forms as derived from Sanskrit forms act in consonance with the traditions in which the Sanskrit Vedas have the highest religio-philosophical status. Indeed, Sanskrit is deemed *daivī vāk* ‘the speech of the gods’ in such works as the *Kāvyaḍarśa* (“Mirror of Poetry”) of Daṇḍin (6th–7th century). In contrast, grammarians of the Middle Indo-Aryan language Pali operate simply with Pali terms and do not derive these from Sanskrit. This is consonant with the Buddhistic tradition, which does not accord the Vedas and Sanskrit such exalted status. At another extreme, there is the view espoused by the Jains, who, as noted by Nami Sadhu (himself a Śvetāmbara Jain), consider Ardhamāgadhī, the language of the Jaina canon, to be the source language for Sanskrit. Modern scholars usually treat Pali and the languages of the Aśokan inscriptions as early Middle Indo-Aryan languages that are distinct from other Prakrits.

Prakrit vernaculars varied from region to region and were named accordingly; each vernacular was also associated with particular groups in literary compositions. The *Kāvyaḍarśa* and similar texts distinguish four major groups, with the identity of each implying a combination of language and culture: Sanskrit, Prakrit, Apabhraṃśa, and mixed. Of the various Prakrits recognized—such as Śaurasenī, Gauḍī, and Lāṭī—the highest status was granted to Māhāraṣṭrī. The dialects of cowherds and such are subsumed under Apabhraṃśa, which in this scheme is treated as a distinct medium. As the poeticist Daṇḍin notes in the *Kāvyaḍarśa*, this differs from the term’s technical usage among grammarians, in which *apabhraṃśa* is opposed to *saṃskṛta*, as noted above.

Another scheme, proposed in the 12th-century *Vāgbhaṭālankāra* (“Vāgbhaṭa’s Poetic Embellishment,” which actually deals with a broad range of topics in poetic theory), uses a fourfold division comprising Sanskrit, Prakrit, Apabhraṃśa, and Bhūtabhāṣā. This last, otherwise known as Paisācī, is the language of Guṇāḍhya’s *Bṛhatkathā* (“Great Collection of Stories”), a lost text that is the source of the later *Bṛhatkathāmañjarī* (“Anthology of the *Bṛhatkathā*”) by the 11th-century Kashmiri Kṣemendra and the *Kathāsaritsāgara* (“Ocean of Rivers of Tales”) of Somadeva, also a Kashmiri of the 11th century but later than Kṣemendra. Furthermore, there is a drama composed entirely in Prakrits, Rājaśekhara’s *Karpūramañjarī* (9th–10th century), titled after its heroine Karpūramañjarī.

In general, however, dramas employ both Sanskrit and various Prakrits. Treatises on drama, starting from Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* ("Treatise on Dramaturgy"; the date of the text is disputed but possibly 2nd century bce), specify which language particular characters or classes thereof are to use. Sanskrit is thus defined as the language of refined, educated, upper-class men, while women of equal status and refinement are to use Śaurasēnī except when singing verses, in which case they use Māhārāṣṭrī. Māgadhī is used by men employed in a king's harem, while other servants of a king use Ardhamāgadhī, and so forth, with detailed assignments provided for each character type. What makes this convention particularly noteworthy, however, is that a reversal in usage is allowed when warranted by circumstances. The most famous example of this is the fourth act of Kalidasa's *Vikramorvaśīya* ("Urvaśī Won Through Valour"), where Purūras' switch from Sanskrit to Apabhraṃśa is used to demonstrate his descent into madness at having lost Urvaśī. Another example is Mālatī's switching from Śaurasēnī to Sanskrit in the second act of Bhavabhūti's *Mālatīmādhava* ("Mālatī and Mādhava"; c. early 8th century). Commentators give various reasons for this, among them that it is meant to show she is to die soon, thus changing her essence, or to demonstrate her learned nature.

The use of different Prakrits for different sorts of personages in dramas doubtless represents the adaptation to literary convention of different regional varieties that were vernaculars at one time. Apabhraṃśa too later became a literary vehicle of its own, in poems associated predominantly with Jain authors.

George Cardona in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*