

General information about the Kannada language

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Summary: This article (part of a planned teaching manual) provides the reader with some introductory information about the history, significance, and structure of the Kannada language.

The Dravidian languages

Kannada belongs to the Dravidian family of languages. Dravidian is the sixth largest language family in the world, and most of the Dravidian languages are spoken in the southern half of India, where the overwhelming majority of Dravidian speakers live. The historically and from the point of view of the numbers of their speakers most important languages of the family are the four great literary languages of South India: Tamil, Kannada, Telugu and Malayalam, which have literary histories reaching back to the beginning of the Common Era (Tamil), the 10th century (Kannada)¹, the 11th century (Telugu) and the 13th century (Malayalam). Besides these four literary languages, twenty-five more languages are considered to belong to this family according to the present state of research. These have either no or very little written literature. Among them the larger ones, with more than one million speakers, are Tulu, which is the general lingua franca of a generally highly educated population in southwest Karnataka and northern Kerala, although only half a dozen older literary works are known to exist in the language,² and among the many tribal languages Gondi and Kurukh. The many smaller tribal languages are spoken across the length of India up into Nepal, and one geographically interestingly isolated member of the family, Brahui, is spoken in the western part of Pakistan.

No genetic relationship between the Dravidian languages and other families has been demonstrated, although there have been many attempts to find one. Earlier theories proposed a relationship with Elamite, the Uraltaic languages, Korean, Japanese, even Basque. At the root of most of such theories lie certain structural features of Dravidian, especially its agglutinative character (see below, p. 7). There are indications that the Dravidian languages, like the Indo-European languages of northern India, have origins

¹ When it is said that the earliest Kannada literature dates back to the 10th century, this refers to the first completely extant literary work, the *Kavirājamārga*, a work on poetics, that contains many fragments of earlier works that now are lost. The very earliest literary fragment in Kannada is found in the Halmidi inscription (4th century CE, if not older), which proves that already at that time there must have been a refined literature in the language. Some Kannada words have been found in a Prakrit inscription of the 3rd century CE, and the German Indologist E. Hultzsch identified Kannada in the text of a Greek play, the Charition mime, in an Egyptian papyrus from the 2nd century CE.

² In earlier times a Tulu script was in use, which strongly resembles Malayalam script. Nowadays there are efforts to cultivate Tulu as a medium for of the region, using Kannada script, after the example of German missionaries, who undertook the study of the language towards the end of the 19th century.

outside India, and that Dravidian migrated into South Asia around 6000 BCE, probably from the region which today is known as Iran. Still today there are persons in India who refuse to accept Dravidian as a separate linguistic family for fear of supposed social and political implications, and who wish to believe that these languages too are derivatives of Sanskrit. There is a long history behind this thought; however, the theological and politically ideological objections of the religious orthodoxy and of ultra-right-wing politicians cannot undo the linguistic fact that the Dravidian languages are structurally to an important extent radically different from the Indo-European. It is true that they have borrowed many words from other languages, especially Sanskrit (Tamil the least; Kannada has borrowed more, Telugu still more, and Malayalam more than all the others), and Kannada, Telugu and Malayalam have also undergone the influence of Sanskrit in their phonemic system (see below), but the vocabulary for everyday actions and objects is clearly totally unrelated to Indo-European, and in several respects the grammar is so categorically different from that of Sanskrit, that a detached linguistic observer immediately realizes that one is dealing here with something basically different. To say that languages like Kannada or Malayalam are derived from Sanskrit is linguistically and historically just as wrong as saying that English and Dutch are derived from Latin.³

In spite of this basic unrelatedness, it is customary in modern linguistic descriptions of the Dravidian languages to use a terminology that is largely borrowed from Indo-European grammar. Also in this manual, such terminology is used: thus there will be mention of grammatical cases such as nominative, instrumental etc., and of verb forms like present, perfect etc., but the learner must be aware that the linguistic reality that is thus described is perhaps not always precisely that which one would expect behind those terms. The objective of the present course is to teach the learner basic standard Kannada, but also to acquaint him with enough theory that he will be able, if he so wishes, to continue further studies on his own with the help of other linguistics materials, hence it is useful to be accustomed to the usual terminology, even if it is not always completely satisfactory. One should think of these grammatical terms as mere labels: labels which in some cases mean almost exactly what is signified in the other (i.e., original Indo-European) context, but in some other cases less exactly so. The functions of all the grammatical features of the language will in any case be explained in detail, with illustrative examples. The learner will have to learn to think in terms of some fundamentally different grammatical categories that are unknown in the languages of the Western world. For instance, Kannada (like other Dravidians languages) has no relative pronouns, but preferably uses a certain construction with a special verb form, the so-called 'relative participle', for creating complex sentences where Indo-European uses relative clauses. This may sound daunting in the beginning; but for a few hundred million people this is utterly normal, and it can be learnt by anybody.

Due to its long history of literary cultivation, Kannada has attained a degree of refinement and precision that is matched hardly not only by other Dravidian languages, but hardly by any other Indian language.

³ Actually, it is still more wrong, since the Germanic languages are a sub-family of the larger Indo-European family to which Latin and the other languages of the Romance sub-family belong, whereas even such a very distant relationship cannot be assumed for the Dravidian languages and Sanskrit.

A very brief survey of older Kannada literature

At present, the Indian republic has recognized two dozen languages for official purposes,⁴ such as in public administration and courts of law. Among these languages, Kannada is the living language with the second oldest literature in the Indian subcontinent. Its literary history spans the period from the 10th century to the present, though the literary cultivation of the language evidently began much earlier.⁵ It is customary among historians of Kannada literature to name the earlier periods in Kannada literary history after the predominant religion to which most authors adhered whose works from those respective periods have remained extant. The whole of Old Kannada literature has been written by Jaina authors, and hence some historians speak of the 'Jaina period'. This is the period that is commonly considered the 'golden age' of Kannada literature, with authors such as Pampa, Ranna and Ponna (the so-called *ratnatraya* or Three Jewels), who were to remain models for many generations to come. The language of this period cannot be read by modern speakers of the language without special training, since significant changes in grammar, particularly morphology, occurred in the course of the 12th century, which marks the beginning of the *Vīrasaiva* period with the famous *vacana* literature by mystics and religious reformers such as Basava, Allamaprabhu and Akka Mahādēvi. From this point in the history of the language onwards, grammatical changes are very few, and much of the *vacana* literature is still read today by native speakers without the need of special aids for comprehension.

With the coming of British colonial rule, the Kannada-speaking region of India was divided over several administrative units: Madras Presidency, Bombay Presidency, and also the princely states of Hyderabad and Mysore. In all these units Kannada was a minority language, except in Mysore, and hence Mysore naturally became the geographical stronghold of Kannada-language culture. Kannada literature found patronage at the Mysore court, and not long after the founding of the first three modern Indian universities by the British in Madras, Bombay and Calcutta, the maharaja of Mysore founded the University of Mysore, where Kannada was to receive special attention.⁶ It is probably for this reason that standard literary Kannada is often referred to as 'Mysore Kannada', although the spoken language of the city is not quite the same as the written norm.

Dialects of Kannada

Linguists at the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL)⁷ in Mysore have identified nine regional dialects of the language; but besides these regional variations, there also exist a number of social dialects, which again can be subdivided into a still larger number of caste dialects, all of which are distinct from each other on the basis of differences in

⁴ Among these are Sanskrit, the foremost classical language of the Indian subcontinent, and English, the most influential of the erstwhile colonial languages, which Indians think of as their 'window to the world'. The number of official languages increases continually.

⁵ See the footnote on p. 1.

⁶ It should be noted, however, that the *oldest* department of Kannada studies is in the University of Madras.

⁷ The national Indian institute of linguistics.

lexicon, pronunciation and grammar. The differences between all these dialects are, however, in very many cases so subtle that native speakers of Kannada are hardly aware of them, and thus from a practical point of view these classifications, although they have a real basis, are often of a rather academic nature.

In practice, one can broadly distinguish three regional varieties of Kannada: southern (with the cities of Mysore, Bangalore and Shimoga as important centres), northern (with Dharwad as its most prominent cultural centre), and western or coastal (with Mangalore as the largest urban concentration). The peculiarity of the coastal region is that by far most inhabitants of the area do not speak Kannada as their mother tongue: most of them speak Tulu, Konkani or Malayalam, and all learn Kannada as a second language in school. Many of them are literate only in Kannada, while speaking a different language in the home. Because it is a consciously acquired language, following a formal norm from outside the region, this coastal Kannada (also commonly referred to as ‘Mangalore Kannada’) is uniform and also in its spoken form is very close to the literary language.⁸ The spoken variety of southern Kannada carries with it the prestige of being spoken in the large, wealthy urban centres of Mysore and Bangalore, and is nowadays spread through television: Kannada soap operas tend to set in the affluent social environment of Bangalore city. On the other hand, the language of these large urban centres has in recent decades undergone a process of very fast corruption through an unhealthy influence of English, which is the ‘master language’ of the urban *nouveaux riches*; especially Bangalore Kannada is polluted with unnecessary English words and a sometimes shocking impoverishment of grammatical usage.⁹ The area around the central Karnatakan city of Shimoga has a refined and unpolluted form of this southern variety of Kannada. Whereas this southern Kannada (also called ‘Mysore Kannada’, after the city that is considered the main cultural centre of Karnataka) is sometimes jocularly referred to as *hemgannaḍa* or ‘women’s Kannada’, because of what is considered is generally gentle accent, northern Kannada is *gamgannaḍa* or ‘men’s Kannada’: indeed it sounds rhythmically a bit more gruff, and the short unstressed vowels, especially the short *a* and *u*, tend to be weakened to the kind of neutral vowel which in linguistics is called a ‘shwa’ (similar to the so-called ‘silent e’ in a French word like *le*), or like the blunt vowel like the ‘u’ in an English word like ‘but’, which also gives the northern language a ‘masculine’ snappiness. ‘Dharwad Kannada’, as this language is also known (but which is certainly not limited to the city of Dharwad and its surroundings) differs markedly from Mysore and Mangalore Kannada in its vocabulary, including many more loanwords from Urdu and Marathi as well as words of indigenous origin that are not in use elsewhere in Karnataka.

Differences between social dialects are rather fluid and are not so immediately apparent as, for instance, in neighbouring languages like Tamil and Tulu. And in any case it is historically totally wrong to call written literary Kannada the ‘language of brahmins’, as certain less educated persons from lower castes do: literary Kannada is largely the creation of Jainas and Virasaivas, and not of brahmins. In certain areas, there are hardly

⁸ The truly native Kannada of the coastal region, such as one hears in the area around Kundapura, or the caste dialect of Havyaka brahmins, differs quite strongly from the written norm.

⁹ This corrupting influence of English is found in all living Indian languages, especially in the urban concentrations. The case of Bangalore is perhaps more extreme due to the city’s international economic significance.

any differences in speech between the members of different social groups.

In this book, the standard literary language is taught. Several learners' manuals teach 'spoken Kannada' in the mistaken assumption that most learners first of all wish to speak Kannada and not read it, and hence a 'spoken variety' of the language is 'more practical'. What this means in practice is that such manuals teach a regional variety which may or may not be easily understood in other regions of the Kannada-speaking area. Literary Kannada is, however, a true standard that is understood by educated speakers everywhere. It is the language of all non-belletristic writing and of broadcasting. Although there are noticeable differences between the written and spoken varieties of the language (as in every language spoken by a larger number of people), there is no such thing as diglossia in Kannada, such as is the case with the closely related Tamil.¹⁰ In Kannada, one can speak exactly the way one writes without making oneself sound ridiculous (and in fact the averagely highly educated population of central and south-western Karnataka speaks almost exactly as it writes).

Kannada script

Almost every literary language of India has developed its own script, and Kannada, being the living language of the sub-continent with the second oldest literature, is no exception. Like almost all the Indian scripts, Kannada script too is ultimately derived from the ancient Brahmi script. This means that the script is syllabic in structure: what appears to the reader as a single 'letter' is actually a syllable, either a vowel or a combination of a consonant and a vowel. The basic consonant signs represent the combination consonant + the short vowel 'a'. Combinations of consonants are written by means of subscript secondary consonantal signs.

The phonemic system of Kannada, and Kannada spelling

Each language is, among other things, a system of sounds. It is also a system of meanings, and certain differences between sounds are considered meaningful while other such differences are considered not meaningful. Therefore a conceptual distinction is made in linguistics between sound or *phones* on the one hand and, on the other hand, *phonemes* or categorical sound differences that, within the particular language, demarcate differences in meaning. Every language has its own *phonemic system*, which may or may not be like the phonemic system of another language.

It is necessary for the learner to internalize the phonemic system of the language which he is learning. For instance, in English, the vowel in the word *bet* not only sounds different than the vowel in the word *bat*, but also causes these two words to be recognized as totally different words by a competent speaker of English. Many other European languages, e.g., German and Dutch, do not know this phonemic difference, and mother tongue speakers of such languages must learn that English does have this difference, if

¹⁰ In Tamil, the written norm was grammatically fixed in the 13th century and is the basis of the literary language still today, while the spoken language of course continued developing.

they wish to understand spoken English correctly. (Similarly, English speakers who learn Dutch or German must learn that Dutch *ee* and *ei*, and German *u* and *ü* are different phonemes.) When a speaker confuses phonemes, he runs the risk of not being understood by his listeners, either because what he says makes no sense, or because what he says makes sense, but not the sense which he intended (which is worse than not being understood at all).¹¹

Most difficult, for most Europeans learners of Indian languages, are the *retroflex consonants*, so called because they are pronounced with the tongue folded back (retro-flexed) so as to have the tip touch the roof of the mouth. This gives these consonants the ‘typically Indian’, ‘thick and heavy’ sound that characterizes the English speech of many Indians.¹² Most Europeans do not realize that the ‘dental *t*’ and the ‘retroflex *t*’ (written *ṭ* in Indological transliteration, with a subscript dot to indicate retroflexity) are two fundamentally different consonants and not just two variations of one consonant.

Another very important feature of the phonemic system of Kannada is *prosodic length*. Many European languages also distinguish between so-called ‘short’ and ‘long’ vowels and syllables, but length is more often than not the decisive audible difference. In English, for instance, the so-called ‘long *i*’ is not merely longer than the ‘short *i*’, but is qualitatively entirely different (it is in fact not a single vowel, but a diphthong). In Kannada, there may be a slight qualitative difference between long and short vowels in the speech of many speakers, but it is the difference in length that really matters. A Kannada syllable may be long either due to the presence of a long vowel or due to a vowel that is prosodically long because it is followed by a double consonant.¹³ Thus *baḷi* means ‘proximity’, *baḷli* means ‘creeper’; *kaḍu* means ‘intense’, *kāḍu* (written with a macron over the vowel in Indological transliteration to indicate length) means ‘forest’.

Aspiration (the audible puff of air after a plosive consonant¹⁴) is written in Kannada script, but historically it is a borrowing from Sanskrit and not an essential part of the language. Many native speakers of Kannada do not bother to clearly distinguish between aspirated and unaspirated consonants in their speech. Nevertheless, it is recommendable that the foreign learner try to distinguish between them: firstly, it is generally appreci-

¹¹ To give one example: in Kannada, the words *hēḷu* and *hēlu* both are verbs, the only audible (and graphically visible) difference being that the first has a retroflex *ḷ*, pronounced with the tip of the tongue touching the roof of the mouth, and the second has a dental *l*, with the tip of the tongue touching the teeth. European languages do not know such a difference, yet it is important to know that Kannada recognizes the difference not only as phonetic, but also a phonemic one. This means that the two letters ‘l’ are totally different, as different as an English *p* and *k* are. The first verb means ‘to speak’, whereas the second one means ‘to shit’.

¹² To many Indians, the English *t* and *d* pose a phonemic difficulty. Almost all Indian languages distinguish between plosive consonants that are dental (i.e., where the stream of breath is interrupted by the tip of the tongue touching the front teeth or a part of the mouth close to the front teeth) and that are retroflex; but the English consonants are neither, but alveolar (i.e., the tip of tongue is positioned further back than is the case with dentals, but not quite as far back as is the case with retroflexes). The Indian then subconsciously decides between the two possibilities which he knows from his own language, and as a rule chooses the retroflex. This is similar to the speaker of German who does not recognize the voiceless and voiced sounds that both are written in English as *th*, and pronounces them *s* and *z*.

¹³ In Latin this would be called *positione longus*, ‘long by position’.

¹⁴ This is very prominent at the beginning of stressed syllables in languages such as English and German. Compare the two letters *p* in a word like *paper*: the first is aspirated, the second is not.

ated by native speakers, even when they themselves do not make the distinction, and secondly, it helps the learner memorize correct spelling.

Unlike in the Latin alphabet, the alphabetical order in the Kannada *varṇamāle* is rational and simple. First come the vowels, and then come the plosive consonants in groups of five (voiceless, aspirated voiceless, voiced, aspirated voiced, nasal) according to the point of articulation (guttural, palatal, retroflex, dental, labial); then follow the two semivowels, the trill and the lateral *l*, then the three sibilants, and finally the aspirant *h* and the retroflex *ḷ*.¹⁵ The order is as follows:

a ā i ī u ū ṛ e ē ai o ō au
k kh g gh ṅ
c ch j jh ṇ
ṭ ṭh ḍ ḍh ṇ
t th d dh n
p ph b bh m
y r l v
ś ṣ s h ḷ

Some lexicographers treat the combination *kṣ* as a separate consonant and place this at the very end of the alphabet.

Two more letters of the alphabet do not represent independent sounds, but are writing conventions, borrowed from Sanskrit. One is the *anusvāra* (written *ṁ* in transliteration) which usually represents the so-called *homorganic nasal*: this is the nasal which, in consonant clusters, is articulated in the same place in the oral cavity as the plosive consonant which follows it (for instance, *ṁp* is pronounced ‘mp’; *ṁt* is pronounced ‘nt’; *ṁḍ* is pronounced ‘ṇḍ’). Elsewhere, the *anusvāra* is pronounced like *m*. The other such letter is the *visarga* (written *ḥ* in transliteration). It occurs exclusively in a few rare Sanskrit loan words. In Sanskrit this stood for an original *s* or *r* under certain special circumstances and was variously pronounced. In modern Kannada, it is usually pronounced as an *h* followed by a short repetition of the vowel that precedes it (for example, *punahḥ*, meaning ‘again’, is pronounced ‘punaha’).

Finally, the vowel *ṛ*, which follows *ū* and precedes *e* in the alphabet, stands for the ‘vocalic *r*’. This too occurs only in a few Sanskrit loan words. It was originally pronounced like the ‘er’ in words like *father*, *brother* as pronounced in Scotland, or like *vader*, *broeder* in Dutch, with a trilled *r*. In modern Kannada, it is variously pronounced as *ru* or *ri*.

Agglutination

The Dravidian languages are usually described as being of the *agglutinative type* and similar to e.g. the Uraltaic languages and Japanese. Very briefly, the structure of these languages can be described as follows. Sentences consist of words. Some of these words

¹⁵ This unexpected position of the retroflex *ḷ* is due to the fact that classical Sanskrit, from which Kannada has adopted this order, does not have this consonant. Cf. the position of the accented vowels such as *â* etc. at the end of the Swedish variety of the Latin alphabet.

are simple, i.e., they are single units in themselves that cannot be further analysed, but in the case of Kannada such words are relatively very few. Most words are composite: either they are compound words, consisting of more than one word that could be used independently, or they consist of basic words of which the meaning is modified by means of suffixes. These suffixes are not words in their own right, and as a rule they can only be used as modifiers. More than one suffix can be appended to the initial root word, that can be considered the main carrier of meaning of the complete word. In agglutinative languages, this modifying of meaning by means of suffixes is the main means of creating syntactic order. There are no prefixes or infixes, and only extremely rarely does the root word change.

A few examples will help to clarify this principle. The verb root *kare* means ‘to call’. This can be used as a non-honorific imperative, i.e., the form that is used as an order in non-formal circumstances towards persons towards whom one need not show any special respect. (Thus the sentence *Avanannu kare!* means “Call him!”) If one wishes to be more polite, a suffix is added to the verb root, namely *iri*. (This is linked to the verb by the semi-vowel *y* to make the resulting word easier to pronounce. The resulting sentence *Avanannu kareyiri!* can be translated: “Please call him”). But perhaps the speaker does not wish to issue an order, and instead wishes to make a simple statement, e.g., that he called somebody. *Kare* is a regular verb of the so-called second verb class (there are two verb classes in Kannada, easily recognizable by the vowels in which the verb roots end). Such verbs form their past stem by means of the suffix *d*. The speaker in our example is speaking about an action (‘calling’) which he performed himself, therefore another suffix is added to indicate that ‘I’, the grammatical first person singular, is the agent: this suffix is *enu*. The resulting word *kare-d-enu* means “I called”. *Avanannu karedenu* means “I called him”. The suffix *aru* is the suffix for the third person plural (‘they’), and so the sentence *Avanannu karedaru* means “they called him”, and *Avanannu karedanu* means “he called him” (the suffix *anu* indicates the third person singular masculine, ‘he’). Pronouns indicating the agent also exist, and in short sentences such as these can be used, although their omission is not considered incorrect or unclear, since the personal suffix of the verb suffices to indicate who the agent is (like in Italian, Portuguese or Spanish); *Nānu avanannu karedenu* does not really mean anything different than the earlier *Avanannu karedenu* (*nānu* means ‘I’). The word *avanannu* is another example of how the agglutinative principle works. *Avanu* means ‘he’; the suffix *annu* indicates the grammatical accusative case, which in most cases means the direct object of the sentence; thus *avanannu* (the final *u* of *avanu* is elided when the accusative suffix is added) means ‘him’. The word *taṅgi* means ‘younger sister’; *Taṅgiyannu karedenu* means “I called [my] younger sister”; *taṅgi karedenu* would make no sense, and also *avanu karedenu* would be grammatically wrong.