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Constructing and Deconstructing Pāṇini's Grammar: The Role of Commentators

How could one ever read Pāṇini without the help of a teacher or the support of commentaries? Without even a hint of the linguistic material on which every single aphorism is based, the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* is practically a dead letter. Pāṇini's grammar has been used in various ways and for various purposes for over two thousand years and commentators have played crucial role in adapting this text to the ever-changing linguistic needs without changing the wording of the individual rules. On the other hand, it is precisely in recent years that the debate has arisen as to whether commentators—beginning with the earliest ones, Kātyāyana and Patañjali—actually understood the complex, but also fluid and exquisite, architecture of this monument to human linguistic genius, and whether linguistic world around them was comparable to the one in which Pāṇini operated.

Some doubts about the latter point emerge in the works of several modern Pāṇinian scholars, including Madhav M. Deshpande, one of the giants on whose shoulders many contemporary authors have built the edifice of their innovative research. It was Deshpande who drew the scientific community's attention to the context of bilingualism that characterised the age of commentators, when Sanskrit users were commonly Prakrit speakers. In his view, it was the doctrine of “the theology of eternal Sanskrit”—shared by Vyākaraṇa, Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā systems—that prevented the commentators and all the scholars dealing with the analysis of language from addressing the issue of bilingualism in a clear manner.¹ Moreover, it forced them to analyse the phenomena of Prakrit languages through the perspective of their relationship with Sanskrit and viewing them as various local outcomes of its degeneration. The sociolinguistic notion of “diglossia” is in fact also at the core of several insightful reflections by Jan Houben, who explained in a modern and brilliant way the paradox already pointed out by Renou (1956: 84) and inscribed in the mentioned descriptive pattern, according to which Prakrits were considered to be derived from the eternal Sanskrit, while it is clear that they are documented in epigraphy prior to the latter (Houben 2018: 11).²

A significant doubt regarding the absolute reliability of the reading of the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* proposed by commentators, including the earliest ones, has been raised by another of the giants of Pāṇinian studies, namely Paul Kiparsky. In 1979 he published his revolutionary *Pāṇini as a Variationist*,³ in which the traditional, homogenising interpretation of three indeclinable expressions, namely *anyatarasyām*, *vā* and *vibhāṣā*, commonly interpreted by the commentators as equally conveying the sense of “optionally”, was replaced by three distinct values, respectively matching the English adverbs “optionally”, “preferably” and “marginally” (i.e. “preferably not”). The impact of this reading

¹ See, for example, Deshpande 1985: 145; 2018: 15.

² Especially interesting on the sociolinguistic approach to the Ancient and Middle Indo-Aryan languages are Houben 1996a and Houben 1996b.

³ Ed. by S. D. Joshi, Pune: MIT Cambridge (Mass.)–Centre of Advanced Study in Sanskrit, University of Poona.

of Pāṇini's grammar as fruit of a philological interpretation of Pāṇini's grammar itself, tested through the single rules and the linguistic materials which these rules account for, was huge. Even today, more than half a century later, not all scholars accept this method of trying to go beyond the commentators' level of interpretation of the *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, while those who have adopted it nonetheless acknowledge the valuable arguments of the commentaries.

However, the stimulating and in-depth debate that emerged from the discussion of this interpretation of Pāṇini's approach to optionality, as well as the broader question of whether it is preferable to adhere closely to the commentators' interpretations or to adopt a more open approach that allows for independent analysis, has been really fruitful.⁴ Additionally, the way in which the Vaiyākaraṇas handle the metarules (*paribhāṣās*) that were never stated by Pāṇini himself but widely cited and often applied by the later traditions, indirectly points to the approach taken in Pāṇini's grammatical work. Since the purpose of Pāṇini's metarules is just to limit the scope of a wider (and commonly accepted) metalinguistic principle that would otherwise be taken into account in interpreting the text, it is indeed legitimate to postulate that Pāṇini does not enunciate all the metalinguistic principles he presupposes to be valid, but only the ones he deems strictly necessary, leaving the others implicit. Nonetheless, commentators and later grammarians seem to have produced an excessive and not always justifiable number of metarules by relying on several patterns to legitimate them. First of all, they single out in the grammar itself some so-called *jñāpakas*, i.e. "indications", lit. "[linguistic items] which make something else known", which often boil down to some supposed redundancies in Pāṇini's text that can be justified—or rather, are no longer redundant—if the principle at stake is assumed to have been accepted by Pāṇini. Otherwise, a *paribhāṣā* can resort to a commonly accepted everyday norm or practice (*lokanyāyasiddhā*), to logical reasoning

⁴ The earliest steps in such a debate are insightfully recorded in Cardona 1999: 162–179.

(*nyāyasiddhā*), or to the utterances of authoritative and reliable persons (*vācanikī*) (Candotti and Pontillo 2018: 516–518).

Indeed the term ‘commentators’ in the title does not exclusively refer to authors who present themselves as exegetes of the original text or of a subsequent version of it.⁵ In fact, the term also encompasses all those authors who have commented on texts that are not necessarily of a grammatical nature, but who make extensive use of grammatical knowledge to clarify individual forms, interpret the meaning of sentences, or assess the acceptability of particular reading variants.⁶ Sometimes the aim of these technical sophistries is just to propose an interpretation of the commented text that better reflects some new contexts. At other times Pāṇini’s grammar is simply mentioned because of its prestige, as an authority that lends weight to a point of view and enhances the commentary itself.

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that commentarial activity was one of the principal means by which Sanskrit intellectual culture transmitted and generated knowledge. In doing so, commentators have created a sort of an ever-growing “Pāṇinian system”, which has absorbed the new normative standards without explicitly rejecting the previous stages. Consequently, when studying the “Pāṇinian system” a diachronic approach is especially useful in singling out the specific features and purposes of grammar in each age.

The present collection of articles partly originates from the seminar, which took place on 9–10 May 2025 at the Institute of Oriental Studies, Jagiellonian University, organized by Lidia Sudyka, and brought

⁵ It is also worth pointing out that even in the modern age India, commentaries and their authors have served as major agents in the vernacularization of knowledge. Acting as linguistic and intellectual bridges, they have translated pan-Indian, cosmopolitan systems of knowledge, not only the grammatical ones, into regional languages, thereby making complex epistemologies accessible to wider audiences. For more about commentarial engagements with Sanskrit works and their influence on Hindi literature see Williams 2024.

⁶ This specific genre of commentaries with their “four services”, i.e. *padaccheda*, *padārthokti*, *vigraha*, and *vākyayojanā* was masterfully illustrated by Tubb and Boose in 2007 and more recently with reference to the commentaries on the *mahākāvya* texts by Klebanov 2016 and 2020.

together a group of researchers eager to exchange views on the above mentioned subjects and an audience interested in learning from their expertise.⁷ The articles, which stemmed from seminar presentations and subsequent discussions, are complemented by contributions from other researchers, resulting in a volume that brings together work of both emerging and established scholars, with various competences of relevance not only to Sanskrit grammatical heritage, but also to Indian Zoroastrian communities and the reception of Pāṇini's grammar in Indo-European linguistics.

This collection concentrates on a historically oriented analysis of commentators belonging to different contexts in terms of time and space and particularly on the different strategies they used and the relevant toolboxes they created. Some of the authors undoubtedly marked crucial turning points in the history of Indian thought, such as Kātyāyana with his linguistic fact-checking attitude, Patañjali who radically changed the notion of the minimum significant linguistic unit, and the Prakriyā-grammar authors who shifted the pattern of explanation from the older substitution-based frame to a derivational one, better suited to the new usages of grammatical science to teach the language from scratch.

A rarely discussed but highly significant topic, namely the liberty taken by some authors in dealing with Pāṇini's grammar, was singled out by **Chettiarthodi Rajendran** (University of Calicut) as the subject of his article titled "Sanskrit Beyond Pāṇini: Pluralistic Perceptions of Grammar in *Apāṇinīyapramāṇyasādhana*", which in a lucid manner paves way for understanding the contents of this intriguing treatise written in the form of a letter. Authored by Melputtūr Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭatīri, a scholar poet of Kerala, who lived at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries, the letter reiterates and defends scholarly postulates presented in his earlier work *Prakriyāsarvasva*, in favour of a pluralistic view of language and grammar. As argued by Sheldon Pollock in his article on Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭatīri's *Apāṇinīyapramāṇyasādhana*

⁷ The project which allowed this meeting to take place was funded by the Strategic Excellence Initiative Program at the Jagiellonian University, Kraków.

(“A Demonstration of the Validity of Non-standard Sanskrit”), its author “challenged two millennia of Sanskrit thinking about language—the language of the gods, after all—by arguing for the first time that ‘It is by relying on established usage, previous grammars, but also by reasoning that intelligent people establish authority’” (Pollock 2016: 18).

A real gem in this series is **Paul Kiparsky**’s (Stanford University) article, which encapsulates the author’s seminal work on linguistics and Pāṇinian philology. As is well known, the scholar has presented academic community with some of the most ingenious and revolutionary reinterpretations of Pāṇini’s grammar. His work is held in great esteem by both older and younger generations, particularly for the unrivalled balance the author maintains between a fruitful dialogue with tradition and an independent approach to the rules within the system in which they are framed. After an extremely interesting historically oriented introduction to a new approach to the analysis of the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* in relation to its commentators, and a chapter devoted to revise the main principles used by the commentarial tradition on Pāṇini’s grammar, the author concentrates on showing how the opposition between the *siddha* and *asiddha* principle, applied to the whole text, allows the readers to avoid relying on both these traditional principles and some recent assumptions such as Rajpopat’s reinterpretation of rule A 1.4.2.

The study of the strict tradition of commentary on Pāṇini’s grammar is the subject of four further articles. “Remarks on Negation through the Ages or How Should We look at Sanskrit Grammatical Tradition?” by **Malgorzata Sulich-Cowley** (University of Warsaw) focuses on a selection of historical interpretations of the phenomenon of negation. The article adopts an unconventional yet intriguing perspective to address a key question in this field of research, namely whether the Pāṇinian tradition may be considered a unitary tradition or rather a complex assemblage of divergent interpretations that include innovations and even errors.

“Pāṇini’s Semantic Hierarchy, or How to Remove the Commentarial Dust from A 2.3.15” by **Davide Mocci** (Kyoto University/University of Cagliari) challenges Patañjali’s hypothesis that the infinitive suffix *-tum* signifies *bhāva* (“action”), on the grounds that such an interpretation

would make A 2.3.15 a redundant provision. His work represents an elegant exercise in methodology, in that the commentaries on Pāṇini are regarded as having extraordinary heuristic value, whilst the entire system of the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* is explored with a certain degree of independence, aided by comparison with other formal grammars.

The ideal dialogue between Pāṇini and his commentators continues in “The Rejection of the Variationist System: How Commentators Interpreted Pāṇini’s General Rule on *taddhita*-derivations (A 4.1.82)” by **Tiziana Pontillo** (University of Cagliari), where—in line with the crucial work by Bhate published in 1989—one of the consequences of a recently proposed un-traditional re-interpretation of A 2.1.1 is analysed, namely the reading and the practical application of the general rule devoted to the formation of secondary derivative nominal stems (A 4.1.82).

More broadly, on the basis of his fresh reading of rule A 1.4.2, **Rishi Rajpopat**’s (University of Macau) article, “Why Does the Tradition Approach the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* the Way It Does? Some Methodological Reflections about Pāṇinian Studies”, discusses the current state of Pāṇini studies, particularly with regard to traditional teaching attitudes and practices in the Indian educational context by examining the interpretative risks that may arise from a purely traditional approach to Pāṇini’s grammar that relies solely on commentaries. Although one may disagree with the author’s views and proposals, the article has its strengths and will hopefully provoke an interesting and productive scholarly response.

Valentina Ferrero’s contribution is devoted to the new generation of Pāṇinian grammar, namely the so-called *navya vyākaraṇa*. In her paper, “*Laghupāṇinīyam*: the Relevance of a *navya vyākaraṇa* Text in Kerala with a Special Reference to the *sarvanāman* Section”, she offers a clear and systematic account of the distinctive features of this grammar composed in accessible twentieth-century Sanskrit by Rājārājavarma, known as the Kerala Pāṇini.⁸ Her reflections are situated

⁸ More about A. R. Rājārājavarma, a poet and scholar, can be found for example in Pierdominici Leão 2025.

within the framework of the project “How Hard Can a Dead Heart Beat? Reflections on Modern Sanskrit Literature”, funded by the National Science Centre of Poland and carried out at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, in cooperation with Ganesh U. Thite and Chet-tiarthodi Rajendran. This article forms part of her earlier, broader research project on *sarvanāmans* and arises from the need to present a new and original study of this grammatical category, with the aim of reasserting its importance. Although pronominal stems occupy a distinctive place throughout the history of Sanskrit grammatical literature, the subject has yet to receive sustained and detailed scholarly treatment.

Taken as a whole, this special issue of *Cracow Indological Studies* highlights the versatility of the subject of the Vyākaraṇa with all the commentaries produced within this rich tradition, the history of which is intertwined with that of linguistics, philosophy of language, literary studies and several sciences. An extremely interesting case of interaction between grammatical description and literary practice, more specifically between a rule of the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* that provides a special restrictive use of *Ātmanepada* endings and a passage in Bhāravi’s *Kirātārjunīya*, is the focus of a brilliant article by **Andrey Klebanov**, titled “When Poetic Usage Becomes Normative: On the Interpretation of A 1.3.37”.

Another pair of *śāstras*, namely Vyākaraṇa and Mīmāṃsā, are at the core of **Monika Nowakowska**’s (University of Warsaw) contribution, titled “Kumārila’s Engagements with the Pāṇinīyas—Towards any Future Study of Vyākaraṇa’s Presence in Bhāṭṭa Mīmāṃsā”, in which she demonstrates in a most interesting way how Patañjali’s *Mahābhāṣya* was one of the most influential inspirations for Kumārila’s arguments.

The time-honoured interaction between indigenous grammar and historical linguistics is the subject taken up by **Dariusz Piwowarczyk** (Jagiellonian University) for his contribution titled, “The Reception of the Indian Grammatical Tradition in the Indo-European Linguistics—the Concept of the Root, the Ablaut and the Laryngeal Theory”, with two key targets that are really significant for Indo-European studies,

namely the reception of the notion of 'root' and the reinterpretation of the Ablaut system in light of the discovery of laryngeal sounds.

The original experiment represented by the article "Patterns of Substitution in the Zoroastrian Sanskrit Translation of *Ogamadecā*: Linguistic Features of Parsi Sanskrit" by **Oskar Podlasiński** (Jagiellonian University) offers a valuable examination of the advantageous strategies, as well as the shortcomings, of the approach taken by the Sanskrit translators of the Iranian treatise mentioned in the title. His article pays special attention to the deviations from Pāṇini's grammatical framework while placing distinct emphasis on the device of substitution. In doing so, it sheds light on the linguistic features of Zoroastrian Sanskrit translations and their broader Indo-Iranian cultural and textual context.

We believe that the articles collected in the current volume of *Cracow Indological Studies* constitute a valuable contribution to Indology: they illuminate a range of important phenomena, reflect a particular stage in the ongoing research, and at the same time stimulate further discussion, raise new questions, and encourage the search for answers.

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