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Kannada language and its grammatical tradition

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Kannada language and its Characteristics

Kannada is the regional as well as official language of Karnataka state. The number of people speaking Kannada is about 4.5 crores and at least 1.1 crore of people have Kannada as their second language. It is generally estimated that the number of people who speak Kannada is about 7 crores and this estimation has been very popular taking into consideration of the language spoken by Kannada people settled at various places elsewhere in the world [1]. Kannada has been accorded the status of a classical language by the Government of India, because of its antiquity and richness of linguistic and literary credentials. There are at least about twenty dialects in Kannada and Kannada language is vividly spoken in different ways in different parts of Karnataka.

Kannada happens to be a distinguished language enjoying several special features. Some of the specialties of the language could be highlighted here : 1. Next to Sanskrit and Tamil, Kannada is the oldest language in India. 2. Like many other languages of India, Kannada is also written as it is spoken and spoken as it is written. It is phonetic in nature. 3. Sri Vinoba Bhave, a distinguished national leader and a language and literature specialist had wholeheartedly extolled that Kannada script is the queen of world scripts. 4. The *vacana* literary tradition was a significant development in Kannada literature which reflected the progressive feature of Indian psyche, particularly, that of the Kannadigas and it was a unique contribution to world socio-religious movement where people from all classes and communities of the society contributed for the well being of the mankind. 5. Similarly, the *Haridasa bhakti* movement of the 15th century was an invaluable contribution to uplift the aspects of *bhakti* or devotion and render classical and popular music more acceptable across the mainstream of our social life. 6. It is significant to note that the modern socio-political concepts of class struggle and social disparity were discussed at length in works like *Rāmadhānyacarite* of Kanakadasa, a well known devotional poet of the sixteenth century. 7. Christian missionary Rev.Kittel was at the helm of compilation of a Kannada-English dictionary popularly known as Kittel's Dictionary as early as 1894. 8. It is generally given to understand that the first encyclopaedia was prepared in old Kannada which was subsequently translated into Sanskrit later as *Śivatattavaratnākara*. One could also recollect Kannada poet Chavundaraya's *Lokopakāra* in this context which was no less than a treasure and a storehouse of knowledge. 9. The highest number of Bharatiya Jnanapith awards have been secured by Kannada authors till now (seven).

Antiquity of Kannada language

Kannada, as mentioned earlier, is one of the most ancient languages in India. Scholars differ with respect to the antiquity of this language. However, one could find an attitude among the scholars of most of our languages to take back their language as much as possible in the timeline and feel proud about it. A word '*isila*' is traced in an Asokan inscription which one of our renowned scholars D.L.Narasimhachar considers to be a Kannada word and attempts to prove that Kannada must have existed since 3rd century B.C [2].

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¹ Figures at a Glance 2011 Provisional Census Data. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India. Retrieved 17 September 2011

² Venkatachala Sastri T.V.(Ed.) Kannada Adhyayana Samstheya Kannada Sahitya Charitre, Kannada Bhasheya Prachhenate, D.Vijaya p.678

In 1899, the Biblical Archaeological Association found some documents or papyri at a place called Oxyrhynchus which consisted a Greek play. It seems that the play contained some unfamiliar words spoken by local groups which have been designated as Kannada words by noted scholar M.Govinda Pai. On the basis of the possible date of the papyri, Pai tries to establish that Kannada must have existed as early as 200 B.C. Satavahana Hala was a king who belonged to the 1st century B.C. in whose Prakrit work *Gāthāsaptasatī* several words like *atta*, *potta*, *tuppa*, *pettu*, *tirai* are found which Govinda Pai has tried to establish as Kannada words^[3]. In a Buddhist text called *Lalitavistār*, mention has been made about a number of Indian scripts among which *Kānari* is also one and scholar Panduranga Desai has considered it to have been none other than Kannada script. On the same lines, we could take into consideration a text on geography written by Ptolemy of Alexandria in which reference has been made to places like Kalakeri, Mudgal, Badami etc. This also clearly indicates about the existence of Kannada region as well as language since the dawn of the new millennium. It is possible to assess that at least Kannada must have existed in spoken form and occasionally used in inscriptions and folklore.

Halmidi inscription of the Kadamba period (450 A.D.) is said to have been a clear indication of the existence of Kannada as a Kannada word and construction like *pettajayan* could be observed there. Later in the Badami inscription of Kappe Arabhatta (700 A.D.) we come across a *tripadi*, a metrical composition consisting of three lines. This much of development leads us to accept without any hindrance that Kannada must have existed in fifth or sixth century A.D.

Kannada grammatical tradition

In spite of the fact that scholars have put forth their attempts to take Kannada to centuries before Christ, nothing prevents us to accept the prevalence of Kannada at least since fifth century. Any language naturally should have existed centuries before attaining its written level. Gradually, Kannada went on taking its own place in inscriptions and Kannada words began to be occasionally used in Sanskrit, Prakrit and Apabramsha languages and literatures. The use of any such language must have been monitored by grammatical rules to maintain its integrity and flawless continuity. However, we don't get any clear evidence of a full fledged Kannada grammar which might have existed during those days.

Kavirājamārga (850 A.D.) enjoys the status of being the first full-fledged textual work in Kannada. It has been established that the work was written by Srivijaya though traditions assigned its authorship to King Nripatunga, his patron and mentor. *Kavirājamārga* is an *alamkāra gramtha*, a rhetoric work which closely followed the Sanskrit rhetoric texts by Bhamaha and Dandin. The author, however, has dealt in brief about the Kannada language, its grammatical features as well as its use in his work. This more or less looks like a harbinger to the tradition of Kannada grammars. *Śabdasmṛti* and *Bhāṣābhūṣaṇa*, works by Nagavarma II are perhaps the first full-fledged grammars in Kannada language. It is also significant to note that even in Sanskrit literary tradition, works pertaining to rhetorics contain some deliberation on language use and grammar as they are fundamental in the fabric of any literary composition. From this point of view, the author of *Kavirājamārga* gets the credit of having been the first grammarian in Kannada.

It is also observed that several other old and medieval Kannada authors have evinced interest on writing grammars. Poet Janna (13th cent.) has indicated that his predecessor Ranna (10th cent A.D.) had written a grammar. But, it is not clear whether Ranna of the *ratnatrayas* (the trio) who wrote *Sāhasabhīmavijaya* himself wrote this grammar or some other author of the same name had put forth his efforts in this direction. Similarly, Nagavarma II has indicated in his *Karṇāṭaka bhāṣābhūṣaṇa* while providing examples for Nayasena's *dīrghokti* (long statements) that the latter had also written a Kannada grammar. In this case also, it is difficult to assess whether it was the famous Nayasena (12th cent.) who wrote *Dharmāmṛita* was its author or some other Nayasena. M.V.Sitaramiah considers this Nayasena to have been a different person referred in Mulagunda inscription (11th cent.). This critic considers that the said grammar was written in Sanskrit. Had this grammar become available, then this Nayasena, a predecessor to Nagavarma II would have been the first grammarian in Kannada. In the absence of this grammar one cannot simply jump to such conclusions.

Keeping in view all the facts and speculations deliberated above, *Śabdasmṛti* of Nagavarma II (c.1050 A.D.) seems to have been the first grammar of the Kannada language. However, this text is also not an independent work by itself. It is the first chapter of *Kāvyaśālokana*, a rhetoric work of Nagavarma II. This is a little ahead of *Kavirājamārga* and the author has dealt about Kannada language and grammar prettily in more detail. Though being a part of another text, *Śabdasmṛti* looks no less than any independent composition. More than this, it is written in Kannada and deserves all kudos to be declared as the first grammar of the Kannada language.

In fact, Nagavarma's *Karṇāṭaka bhāṣābhūṣaṇa* is the first complete Kannada grammar written in Sanskrit. On the lines of *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, *Siddhāntakaumudī* etc., this grammar has also been written in *sūtra* and *ṛitti* style. It has also got commentaries by other scholars^[4].

Kesiraja's *Śabdamaṇidarpaṇa* (1260 A.D.) is probably the most well known and masterly grammatical work in Kannada. Among the grammars which existed earlier, *Śabdasmṛti* was an epitome of a grammar and *Karṇāṭaka bhāṣābhūṣaṇa* was written in Sanskrit. Another later work on grammar *Śabdānuśāsana* was also written in Sanskrit. Probably writing in the medium of Sanskrit might have been popular in the scholarly world those days. But Kesiraja's *Śabdamaṇidarpaṇa* carved its own niche among the grammars of the Kannada language because of its language, style and presentation. Even today, for an authoritative study of old and medieval Kannada language and literary works, Kesiraja's grammar has proved to be of immense value. Later in the 17th century, Bhattakalanka wrote a grammar called *Śabdānuśāsana* which was also in Sanskrit and hence proved to be earmarked for scholars who knew Sanskrit. It could not become an endearing work for a layman or the one who did not know Sanskrit^[5].

Kannada grammars of the modern period

During the modern period, in the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many of those who wrote Kannada grammars were Europeans. We have seen from the pages of history how Europeans came to India and how they elevated themselves from the position of mere businessmen to rulers of this country. We have seen dark periods under the British rule

³ Venkatachala Sastri T.V., Kannada Adhyayana Samstheya Kannada Sahitya Charitre, Kannada-Prakrita p.260

⁴ Introductory note to Nagavarma's Karnataka Bhasha Bhushana was edited by Rev F.Kittel and published in 1884. 1985 Edition

⁵ Encyclopaedia of Indian literature - vol 1. 1987 Sahitya Akademi. P.476

where the lives and freedom of Indians were at stake and how difficult it was to throw out those shackles and become independent. Apart from these agonies and dark spots, as Indians, we were adequately benefitted due to the advent of Europeans from the point of view of modern thoughts, literature and culture. Not that we had anything less in these fields, but we enjoyed additional advantages because of this communion. They also, as scholars and learned people, gave us a lot from the point of view of literature, knowledge, culture and life style and knowingly or unknowingly, we adopted a number of things from them during the latter part of their rule in India prior to independence. Among the scholars who visited India, many were missionaries. Their main occupation was preaching the Bible and spreading Christian religion, but yet they learnt our languages, studied our ancient and medieval texts. They wrote handbooks of learning our languages and grammars. They brought out books in vernaculars for our elementary schools and convents. Thus the contribution of Europeans, especially missionaries, from the point of view of language, literature, culture was invaluable which provided us a strong opening to the twentieth century world at large.

William Carey, a British missionary wrote a book *The Grammar of the Karnatak Language* in 1817. John Mackerel also wrote *A grammar of the Karnatak Language* in 1820 which was published from Madras. Thomas Hudson, Ziegler, Krater and others also wrote their own Kannada grammars. It is to be noted here that the Kannada grammars written by the Europeans and the missionaries were in English and they were written for their own community people to learn the local language as a part of their administrative requisite. They were not of much use to our people during those days. We could also recall the studies and writings of M.B.Emineau, T.Burrow, William Bright, Thomas Hudson, H.C.Jenson and others who contributed to Dravidian languages.

It was Srirangapatnam Krishnamacharya who wrote his modern Kannada grammar *Hosagannaḍa nuḍigannaḍi* in simple language and style in 1830^[6]. Ferdinand Kittel not only edited and published Kesiraja's *Śabdamañidarpaṇa*, but also he wrote two simple grammatical works on the lines of Kesiraja employing *sūtras*. Besides, in 1903 Kittel himself wrote his *A Grammar of the Kannada Language*. In 1914 Herald Spencer brought out his *A Canarese Grammar*. All these books were fairly useful for the British in India to learn Kannada.

The scenario of the modern age has entirely become different. There have been tremendous changes in our teaching and learning not only languages, but everything in general. The authorities have prepared syllabi for each and every standard and books are being prepared to meet the syllabi requirements and the students are being taught accordingly. Thus, writing independent grammatical treatises highlighting the author's learning, individuality and insight have become less in number and the present grammars have become syllabi-oriented. Even among such grammars a few have been very much popular and maintain their historical importance. B.Mallappa's *Śabdādarśa*, (1930), A.N.Narasimhiah's *Kannaḍa Prathama Vyākaraṇa* (1949), T.N.Srikantiah's *Kannaḍa Madhyama Vyākaraṇa*, (1956), Shivanand Joshi's *Sulabha Hosagannaḍa Vyākaraṇa* deserve special mention here. During the early decades of the 20th century, the University of Mysore brought out *Kannaḍa Kaipidi* which was a source book on grammar and allied subjects of learning.

N.Ranganath Sharma's *Hosagannaḍa Vyākaraṇa* and T.V.Venkatachala Sastry's *Hosagannaḍa Vyākaraṇa* have been very much useful for students. M.V.Sitaramiah has written a very useful treatise *Prācīna Kannaḍa Vyākaraṇagalu* which throws light on various Kannada grammars of earlier periods^[7]. Kannada grammar and language are being studied from the point of view of linguistics and comparative studies these days and a number of scholars have contributed in this direction among whom A.N.Narasimhiah, G.S.Gai, B. Ramachandra Rao, R.C.Hiremath, H.M.Nayak, Chidanandamurthy, A.K.Ramanujan, H.P. Nagarajiah, Kushalappa Gowda, D.N.Shankara Bhatt, H.S.Biligiri, B.B.Rajapurohit, U.P.Upadhyaya, S.V.Nadakarni, J.S.Kulli, S.N.Sridhar and others deserve special mention.

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⁶ Prajavani Kannada Newspaper Pustaka Vimarsh 24-2-2013

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