

**Sanskrit:**

**The Old Indic Language and Literature from the “Oral Poetry” of the Vedas up to the present day. Historical dimensions, geographical diffusion, cultural impact**

A Talk at the Department of Sinology of the *Institut für Orient- und Asienwissenschaften*,  
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Abstract

1. Old Indic is the most ancient language form of Indo-European immigrants on the Indian subcontinent commonly designated as “Indo-Aryans” (as different from the various language groups autochthonous in Ancient India before the beginning of the Indo-European invasions).

1.1. On the level of internal chronology, the *Old Indo-Aryan* period *sensu stricto* extends between ca. 1200 and 600 BC; being mainly attested in the Vedas, it is therefore called Vedic Indic. This is the only period in which Old Indic was a living language used by native speakers in all spheres of their lives and activities. Its internal periodization includes Earliest Vedic, Old, Middle and Young Vedic. On the level of text transmission, we have to do with one of the most impressive representatives of oral literature: starting with the oldest Hymns of the Ṛgveda-Saṃhitā (= Rig-Veda) from the end of the Second millennium, to continue with other voluminous corpora of ritual literature like Saṃhitās, Brāhmaṇas, older Sūtras, ending up with the old Upaniṣads. The most extraordinary features of the Rigveda are its volume of 108 000 verses and its oral transmission, from gurus to students, within selected Brāhmaṇic families, in the course of more than three millennia – practically in an invariant form, with no serious modification. The reason of this invariability is to be found in the rigorous oral education in sacred knowledge which are going to be discussed in detail in the talk.

1.2. The Vedic period has been completed by one of the earliest and perhaps the luckiest attempts in history of literary languages to codify and grammatically standardize a linguistic period shortly before its extinction and to use it as both *lingua sacra* (of several religions!) and *lingua franca* of a huge, constantly expanding cultural territory. Responsible for this standardization was Pāṇini’s Grammatical Doctrine of Eight Chapters (Aṣṭādhyāyī), perhaps from the late 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. From this moment on, we speak of Sanskrit in the proper sense: it is based on the youngest stage of Vedic after its meticulous standardization as a *lingua sacra* by native Indic grammarians. In this largely petrified form, Sanskrit lives on from the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC up to present day as the main cultural, sacred and literary language of the classical Indian civilization, coexisting and competing with Middle and Modern Indic languages.

1.3. The talk will give an outline of Epic Sanskrit (ca. 500 BC – ca. 350 AD) and Classical Sanskrit (between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, partly with fluctuant borders), the period of Late Antiquity and Earlier Medieval Sanskrit (ca. 350–1200 AD), the Medieval and Early Modern Sanskrit (ca. 1200–1800), the language of philologists, commentators and compilers, a standardized pan-Indian Sanskrit, functioning both as *lingua sacra* and *lingua franca*, up to Modern Sanskrit (from ca. 1800 onwards) that unites works of scholars, literates and reformers.

2. Against the simplified opinion that Sanskrit means the “classical language of Hinduism”, another exquisite feature of Old Indo-Aryan is that it represents the language of no less than four main spiritual doctrines of pre-modern Southern and Eastern Asia, one of which makes part of the world religions of today:

2.1. Vedic Old Indic used to be the living language of *Brāhmaṇism*, the religion of the sacred corpus of the Veda. Classical Sanskrit, an already ‘dead’ language, was elaborated to the stage of a *lingua sacra* of “*Hinduism*”, in which were compiled the mythological and religious texts of classical and modern *Viṣṇuism* and *Śivaism* with their numerous branches.

2.2. Beside Pāli, Sanskrit is one of the primary language forms of *Buddhism*, too. The idiom of Buddhist literature in the early centuries AD called Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit spread later on as a *lingua franca* from South and South-East Asia up to the Tarim basin, Eastern Turkestan / Xinjiang, Tibet, China and the utmost East of Asia. Sanskrit is one of the sacred languages of various forms of syncretistic esoterism that represent an area of intersection of traditional spiritual ideas of pre-IE autochthonous populations of India with Śivaism and Buddhism:

2.3. Later on, they became independent religious doctrines and live forth, for instance, in classical and modern *Tantrism*; beside well-known tantras of Śaiva origin we find Indian Buddhist tantras whose originally Sanskrit texts, transmitted by Vajrayana Buddhism, were frequently translated and continued in Nepalese Newar Buddhism, Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, Chinese Esoteric Buddhism and Japanese Shingon Buddhism.

2.4. To remain on the Subcontinent, Sanskrit, again, has been used by the adepts of *Jainism* since its beginning, alongside with various Middle Indic (Prākṛit) languages, mostly thanks to the mission of Jaina monks as conservers and transmitters of literary and scholarly traditions between the various Indian religions. Due to the vision Jains had of cultural continuity, a number of Sanskrit (even Vedic) texts has been literally saved from oblivion or brought to a written form for the very first time: while, e.g., early Brāhmaṇism demonized any form of written fixation of the Vedas as profanation of the divine knowledge, the Jain culture is fundamentally connected with writing.

3. Ever since its very early years, Indian Studies as well as Indo-European philology and linguistics have been concerned with the question of possible ‘synergetic effects’ between archaeological research and linguistic reconstruction. The talk will give a sketch of the significance that the linguistic and literary corpora compiled in Sanskrit exhibit for our knowledge of the cultural and social history of the Ancient Indians, with two fall studies on the material of the most ancient Vedic sacred texts, ritual practices and *Realienkunde*.