Historical Literary Languages

Keshav Ravi

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Abstract

Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, and Arabic have each had an immense influence on the cultures around them. Whether by religion, war, or trade, they spread far past their own countries' borders. Here, I describe each language and its history, as well as how it affected languages around it.

Contents

Introduction

You will notice, when reading or studying literature from the Classical period, that certain languages are used above others. In the Western world, "classical" usually means Greek or Latin, but a broader meaning applies. The definition accepted here is that classical languages are literary languages, used not only in their country of origin, and mainly for writing.

I say mainly because, although both Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, and Arabic had separate spoken forms that were used by the people of their respective empires[1], they were spoken in their written form by the upper class.

Other classical languages used as linguae francae existed in Asia at the time, often widespread due to their use as liturgical languages, or languages of a religion: Sanskrit was used by Hindus and Mahāyana Buddhists, Classical Arabic by Muslims, and Pāḷī [2] by Ṭheravādā Buddhists.

Grammar

Most ancient languages are synthetic – this means that they use word endings[3] to express linguistic concepts. The -s ending is an ending which indicates the plural, but, otherwise, English is fully analytic.[4]

One notable feature of synthetic grammar is the case system. This system substitutes inflectional endings for prepositions. For example, "of the years" is *annorum* (from *annus*[5]) in Latin and "with the elephant" is *gajena* (from *gaja*). In Greek, specifically the first few stanzas of Aeschylus's (Αισχύλου) *The Persians*, we have κακῶν (kakón, "of vices" – Gen. pl. Of κάκη). Additionally, adjectives must "agree" (or have the same endings – more on that later) with nouns in gender, case, and number[6].

One warning though: not all adjectives have exactly the same endings. Although the Latin *agricola*, "farmer", is in the mostly feminine First Declension, it is masculine and adjectives that apply to it must have a masculine ending. Therefore, *novus agricola*: "new farmer". This book attempts to highlight certain points concerning four classical languages – Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, and Arabic –, focusing on their history and structure, as well as not only what they have in common, but also their differences.

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[1]i.e. "Vulgar" Latin, vernacular/Koine Greek, the Middle Indic Prākṛts and the varied Arabic dialects

[2]A Middle Indic language and therefore a descendant of Sanskrit

[3]Not always — See **Arabic**

[4]Most of the West Germanic languages, of which English is one, started as synthetic and became more analytic over time – ranked from lowest to highest in order of most extreme change in structure, they are German, Dutch, and English.

[5]*annus* is the stem, the word from which endings are derived

[6]Number will be familiar to English speakers, though, besides singular and plural, some languages have/had a dual number, indicating two objects.

1 Latin

Latin was first the language of the Roman Empire. Its origin is, like that of the people who spoke it, debated. What is known is that a certain people arrived in Italy around 753 BCE (though this date is likely not exact[8]) and settled along the Tiber River.

The inhabitants of the area at the time were known as the Etruscī in Latin and the Τύρρενοι (Týrrhenoi) in Greek. The Romans were heavily influenced by the Etruscans, as they are called in English, and the two cultures merged around the first century BCE. Except for a few inscriptions, little text survives in Old Latin, but these are enough to give linguists an idea of the language. Although the earliest known instance of Old Latin in writing uses the Greek alphabet, changes occurred over the centuries and Greek characters were modified into the modern Roman or Latin alphabet, which is what this book uses.

1.1 Roman Writing

Literature in Latin is quite extensive, as with Greek, though somewhat flawed. Virgil, Horace, Ovid[9] wrote poetry with the former's work considered propaganda, Cicero was a (possibly unscrupulous[10]) orator, and Caesar wrote dubious third-person accounts of his own exploits.

1.2 Vulgar Latin

Roman power soared as time went on, and the city of Rome became the center of a vast empire. Naturally, the language spread as well, and it changed considerably. Before we move on to this subject, it must be noted that even in Rome there was no "Standard" Latin. The elite spoke Classical Latin, but there was yet another form, known by the misnomer[11] of Vulgar Latin. Vulgar Latin was

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[7]A language's own name for itself.

[8]It is in legend supposedly the date Romulus (Remus was, of course, killed by him) founded Rome.

[9]In Latin, respectively, Publius Vergilius Maro, Quintus Horatius Flaccus, and Publius Ovidius Naso

[10]He may have invented and denounced Catiline's conspiracy to help himself rise in rank

[11]Based on Cicero's name for it: *sermo vulgaris*, but *vulgaris* means "common", not "vulgar". It therefore would be better named Common Latin.

simpler, with slight differences in vocabulary. For example, "horse" is *equus* in Classical and *caballus*[12] in Vulgar Latin.

It was Vulgar Latin, not the Classical literary form, that the legionaries of the Roman Army spoke, and it was Vulgar Latin that was brought to the Roman provinces.

Of course, the conquered inhabitants of these provinces made their own changes to the language. These changes resulted in the Romance languages: French, Italian, Spanish, etc. Vocabulary from native languages entered as well. The conquered Gauls (Vercingetorix had been executed[13] by then) added words from their Continental Celtic tongue to their dialect (which became Old French), as did others.

1.3 Aftermath

But after the fall of the Roman Empire? The Eastern Roman empire abandoned their language and (the Byzantines) spoke a form of Koine Greek. However, Latin was still heavily used in other parts of Europe, due to Roman influence. It was the language of upper class literature and of science for all of the Middle Ages. Many Latin Vulgate Bible manuscripts from the Middle Ages survive as well.

Latin has also left a heavy impression in languages not closely related to it. When the Roman emperor Claudius started a Roman settlement in Britain, hundreds of Latin words entered English, and Latin again entered English, though through one of its descendants (Norman French).

In modern usage, Latin is extinct, except for one major part of science: nomenclature. All scientific names are Latin, Latinized Greek, or both. To use a well known example, *Tyrannosaurus rex* is a combination of the Greek Τύραννος σαυρος, "tyrant lizard", and the Latin *rex*, "king". **A Final Note**: *ph, th, and ch* were pronounced as aspirates (not as *f, θ, and Eng. "ch"*) in native Latin vocabulary and Greek loanwords.

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[12]The source of the French *cheval*, the Italian *cavallo* and all the other Romance words for this animal.

[13]According to Roman law at the time, a rebel or other enemy who surrendered of their own accord would be spared. Therefore, Vercingetorix's execution was unlawful.

2 Greek

ENDONYM:
Ἑλληνική
CLASSIFICATION:
Indo-European, Grœco-Phrygian
CASES: 5
DECLENSIONS: 3
DUAL: No
MOD. DESCENDANTS:
Mod. Greek

Although almost everyone reading this document will have heard of the Ancient Greek language, few know how it works, sounds, and what it actually is.

2.1 Classification

- Indo-European

  - Graeco-Phrygian

It is Indo-European, and is usually grouped with the poorly documented Phrygian language, mentioned by Herodotus. In vocabulary it is closest to Latin, but in grammatical structure it resembles Sanskrit to a greater extent.

2.2 The Workings of Greek Grammar

Greek grammar has some interesting features that would be unfamiliar to even those who know a language like Latin. Besides the regular stuff (case system, adjective-noun agreement, etc.) Greek has such things as the dual number[14], the definitive article, and a set of word order rules so flexible they cease to be considered rules.

On dual, Ancient Greek didn't use this number commonly, as Sanskrit did, except in the oldest of Greek inscriptions. It was a rare thing that only poets (like Homer) occasionally used — It occurs in Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War* only thrice.

Something very interesting to grammarians is that Greek has a definitive article (the equivalent of the word *the* in English — the indefinitive article is *a/an*). Sanskrit and Latin nouns are ambiguous in this respect, and one has to guess the article from context.

Although the general consensus is that Greek is harder than Latin, its fellow member of the former high school curriculum, I disagree: Let's look at the grammar — as to declensions, Greek has three and Latin has five, and four

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[14]Contrary to popular belief, the dual is only used with two things that naturally go together, like two hands or two wings

cases to Latin's five (if you don't count the vocative in either). In addition, generally Greek is more regular, while in Latin, the same cannot be said. In Latin, the ending *-um* can mean, in the 3rd Declension, nominative or accusative singular, and many authors use it for all the declensions' genitive plural.

2.3   Literature

Classical Greek is rich in writings in all subjects, and many great philosophers[15] used the language. One writer has said that Greek lends itself far better to poetic expression than Latin, perhaps reflecting the differing priorities of the two civilizations. This claim is open to skepticism, as the Greeks too had a strong military presence in the ancient world, but the first part is quite true.

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[15]This is itself a Greek-derived word.

3 Sanskrit

ENDONYM:
संस्कृतम् (*saṃskṛtam*)
CLASSIFICATION:
Indo-European, Indo-Iranian, Indic
CASES: 8
DECLENSIONS: 5[16]
DUAL: YES
MOD. DESCENDANTS:
Hindi and other modern Indic languages

The Sanskrit language first appears in a group of Hindu religious texts known as the *Vēdās*. Because of this, the oldest form of Sanskrit is usually known as Vedic Sanskrit, though the name "Old Sanskrit" is also used. Vedic Sanskrit was one of the earliest languages to descend from Proto-Indo-European and, interestingly, may have used tone in a minor way.

Most Sanskrit texts, however, are in Classical Sanskrit. The Classical form was codified by grammarian Pāṇini in a work known as the अष्टाध्यायी (*Aṣṭād-hyāyī*). Due to Pāṇinī's exacting standard for the grammar of the language, Classical Sanskrit is very regular, and highly synthetic. Almost all concepts are expressed through inflection[17].

Sanskrit is most closely related to Avestan, its sister language in the Iranian branch of the Indo-Iranian family. It is one of the only languages to preserve extensive use of the dual number, though Arabic does as well[18].

Sanskrit uses eight cases:

1. Nominative

2. Accusative

3. Instrumental
   The instrumental case indicates the English "with"

4. Dative

5. Ablative

6. Genitive

7. Locative
   Expresses location (e.g. "in, on")

8. Vocative[19]

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[16]10 if you count some that are too similar to be considered separate.
[17]*Inflection* can refer to tone, but in this context it means affixes.
[18]To a certain extent only
[19]The vocative has no Sanskrit name, and is sometimes not considered a case

3.1 Literature

Literature flourished in the Classical period, as Sanskrit became the lingua franca of Southeast Asia and the liturgical language of Hinduism, Mahāyānā Buddhism and Jainism. Many scientific and mathematical works were published. With multiple calligraphic styles used throughout the subcontinent and other scripts (see **Writing Systems**), Sanskrit has a rich manuscript tradition.

3.2 Writing Systems

Sanskrit has been historically written in many scripts besides Devanāgarī: Some of these were closely related to Devanāgarī (eg. Nandināgarī), but others were completely separate.

The oldest Indic writing system was Brāhmī. Believed to be of Semitic origin, Brāhmī was composed of lines and suitable for inscriptions. Semitic calligraphy also influenced Kharoṣṭī, one of Brāhmī's descendants. It is written right to left in a flowing, cursive-like style.

And not all of these scripts were Brāhmī-derived: A script called **Granthā** was used to write Sanskrit inscriptions in South India, where the Tamil script could not represent complex consonants.

It was an expanded version of the Tamil script that had the necessary sounds and ligatures. The modern Burmese script is Granthā adapted to writing on palm leaves.

4 Arabic

ENDONYM:
الْعَرَبِيَّةُ (*al-'arabiyyāh*)
CLASSIFICATION:
Afro-Asiatic, Semitic, North Arabic
CASES: 3
DECLENSIONS: NO
DUAL: YES
MOD. DESCENDANTS:
Modern Standard Arabic

Arabic is a Semitic language and the liturgical language of Islām. The Arabic literary standard is Classical Arabic as used in the Qur'ān, though Mod. Stand. Arabic slightly differs from this form.

The Arabic script is believed to derive from cursive varieties of Aramaic. It is an *abjad*, an alphabet lacking vowels(itself an Arabic word), though vowel diacritics are used in the Qur'ān and elementary grade texts. Written left to right, the script is used for Urdu, Persian, Turkish (at one point), etc. The Arabic script is believed to have descended from Nabatean, though the resemblance is not at all obvious.

Arabic has two dialect groups: South and North, Classical Arabic being Northern. The Southern Arabic dialects are so different that some consider them a separate language.

4.1 Calligraphy

Arabic has a long history of calligraphic masterpieces. There are three main styles: Kufic, Naskh[20], and Nastaliq. Naskh and Nastaliq are used in Persian, and only Nastaliq in Standard Urdu and Pashto[21]. The oldest Q'urān manuscripts, on the other hand, are in Kufic, notably the **Blue Q'urān**.

Other calligraphic forms include Diwani, used by the Ottoman Turks, and T̲ulut̲, which is based on Kufic.

4.2 Grammar

Arabic has a unique root word system. A three-letter consonant set forms the root, and vowel patterns are added on. For example, *kitāb*, "book", is formed from the root *k-t-b*, with the *-i-ā-* pattern. Verbs and other words are formed in much the same way.

The language has only two tenses: perfect and imperfect.

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[20]Naskh is, interestingly for a cursive script, considered sans-serif, as it lacks hooks.
[21]*Pakhto* in Pakistan, where the older *sh* and *zh* sounds have been lost

4.3 Literature

The extent of literature in Classical Arabic was due to Arabic conquest of nearby countries. Persia and Turkey began to use the Arabic script (though Turkey later dropped it), and both languages became filled with Arabic loanwords. Arabic literature went through a Golden Age of scientific and literary works as many countries used the Classical standard.

4.4 Loanwords

Besides languages like Persian and Ottoman Turkish, Arabic also influenced French, English, Spanish, and Portuguese. The *al-* prefix in some words (such as *alfalfa* or the Spanish *algodón*) is the remnant of the Arabic definitive article. Interestingly, the word *algorithm* is a Latinization of *Al-Khwarizmi*[22], who created *al*gebra.

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[22]Fully, in Arabic, Muḥammad ibn Mūsā al-Khwārizmī – Moḥammad ben Musā Khwārazmi in Persian

Summary

Learning about the history of these languages helps us understand connections between them. The reasons for phenomenæ found can help explain similar occurrences in current languages as well, therefore important to the study of modern linguistics.