

From Maatar to Mother: Seeing Sanskrit

Jayakumar S. Ammangudi

“How are your Sanskrit studies going?” asked Indira, a dear friend.

Over the years, attending Sanskrit classes, I used to be fascinated as I began sensing similarities between many English words and Sanskrit words. I would sit in Sanskrit classes trying to come up with similar sounding English words, just for fun!

So, I replied, “Well, the sentence you spoke connects with Sanskrit in two ways. The word ‘Sanskrit’ itself is an anglicised form of the Sanskrit word ‘*Samskrtam*’, which means “that which is done well, complete”. Then, the verb ‘go’ likely derives from Sanskrit root ‘*ga*’ “to go”. For example, that which ‘goes (moves) in the sky’ is called *Khaga* (Kha stands for space or sky). Hence a bird or an airplane is called *Khaga*. A reptile or snake is called *Uraga* because it ‘goes/moves on its chest (“*ura*”)’. And *durga* means “one whose presence makes sadness go - *dukham gacchati!*” That is how my Sanskrit is going!”

“That is fascinating.”

There are many words in English such as Guru, Mantra, Pundit, Swami and Avatar that are direct copies of the original Sanskrit terms. For example, since there is no concept equivalent to Karma in the western worldview, the word “Karma” has been copied into the English lexicon as is. There are other words in English which are believed to belong to English, but on deeper analysis seems to originate from other languages such as Latin, or, in the case of my interest, Sanskrit.

“I have heard that Sanskrit is the mother of all languages”

“You may be correct. But I do not know enough to prove that. What attracts me is the word ‘mother’, and words representing the closest kith and kin. Take a look:

Sanskrit	English
Pithar पितृ	Father
Maathar मातृ	Mother
Bhraathar भ्रातृ	Brother
Svasar स्वसृ	Sister
Duhitar दुहितृ	Daughter

“Stop! These words look almost identical in both languages!”

“Isn't it? Mere coincidence? I wish somebody researches into this. By the way, ‘Stop’ is not an ordinary word either. It likely derives from the root ‘*sthaa*’ which is firmly entrenched in Sanskrit and English. ‘*sthaa*’ refers to “cessation of motion”. Take a look at these words in Sanskrit:

Sanskrit	English
Sthiram स्थिरम्	Steady, stable, steadfast, static
Sthaanam स्थानम् , Sthalam स्थलम्	State (Place), Station, Seat
Sthiti स्थितिः	Status, Stay
Sthaapanam स्थापनम्	Establish, Stabilize

“Wow! You seem to be building a new vocabulary.”

I am just trying to connect. Talking about ‘vocabulary’, do you find anything common in these words - vocal, voice, vocative, vociferous, vocabulary, invoke and revoke”? “Something related to speech!”

Yes, and the Sanskrit root we are looking for is “*vaach*” in the sense of ‘speaking’. For example:

Sanskrit	Meaning
Vaak वाक्	speech
Vaachaa वाचा	By speech
Vaakyam वाक्यम्	That which is spoken
Vaachaspati वाचस्पतिः	Master of one’s speech = scholar
VaaNi वाणी	What emanates from the vocal apparatus - Speech, song, etc.
Uvaacha उवाच	“(He, She) Said”. As in “Shree Bhagavaan uvaacha” in the Bhagavad Gita.
Vaktaa वक्ता	Speaker

“This is looking marvellous”.

I told you. Wait, you just introduced another Sanskrit word. Let us take a look at 'look', it looks curiously close to 'Lok'.

Sanskrit	Meaning
Lok लोक्	to see, look, perceive

We can now see why 'world' is called "Loka" in Sanskrit - "that which is perceived (by a conscious being)". Thus "Bhu Loka" (The earth), "Indra Loka" (the world belonging to Lord Indra), etc. Also, notice that "Locate" has the meaning "to see or spot".

"You are driving me crazy."

On the contrary, "you" has always been driving me crazy! In Sanskrit "you" is 'tvam'. There seems to be no connection between "you" and "tvam"! Let me explain this dilemma.

If we look at Personal Pronouns in general, this is what we find:

English	Sanskrit
They	Té ते
My, Me	Mé मे
She	Saa सा
That	Tat तत्
It	Idam इदम्

"The words seem to be almost identical!"

That is correct. That is why, I have been wondering about the apparent disconnect between the words "you" and "tvam". To unravel this, we need to investigate. In Sanskrit, a noun has a native form, such as "krishna". Then, it undergoes transformations before it can be used as a word in a sentence. The various relationships of a noun, such as "Krishna (the subject)", "by Krishna" (Krishna, the agent), "to Krishna" (recipient), "from Krishna" (giver), "Krishna's" (possession), etc. appear in Sanskrit as single words, as in "krishnah", "krishnena", "kriShNaaya", "krishnaat", and "krishnasya" respectively.

Let us tabulate all these forms:

	Example	Singular	Dual	Plural
Nominative	You went to school	Tvam त्वम्	Yu vaam युवाम्	Yo oyam यूयम्
Instrumental	I went with you	Tvayaa त्वया	Yu vaabhyaam युवाभ्याम्	Yu shmaabhiH युष्माभिः
Ablative	I got a gift from you	Tvat त्वत्	Yu vaabhyaam युवाभ्याम्	Yu shmaabhyam युष्मभ्यम्
Dative	My salutations to you	Tubhyam तुभ्यम्	Yu vaabhyaam युवाभ्याम्	Yu shmaabhyam युष्मभ्यम्
Possessive	This is your book	Tava तव	Yu vayoH युवयोः	Yu shmaakam युष्माकम्

Pay attention to the numerous “**Yu**”s. It must have been easier to adapt this simpler abbreviation “**Yu**” for second person singular “you” into English!

“Oh my God! It is cruel of the British to have made us believe that English is superior to the **divine** Sanskrit...”

Hmm. The British. That deserves a whole new chapter. You mentioned ‘cruel’. Could “cruel” derive from the Sanskrit word **kroora**? And Cruelty from **kroorataa**? Wouldn’t it be nice to know how **kroora** morphed into **cruel**? Or, how the word “divine” which you invoked, may have derived from “**daivam**”? Perhaps a research topic for somebody?

“Are you suggesting that English is a cut-and-paste of Sanskrit?”

Not at all. You are the one insisting on bringing Sanskrit into our discussion, not me. Paste is **piShTa**, and cut is **kRitta** in Sanskrit.

Sanskrit	Meaning	English
PiShTa पिष्ट	Kneaded, squeezed, ground	Paste
Pesha पेष	Paste	Paste
Kartanam कर्तनम्, Krtta कृत	Cut off, cut	Cut
Kartari कर्तरी	Cutter, Scissors	Cutter

“You are making me feel that English is same as Sanskrit.”

English is definitely not the same as Sanskrit, but “same” seems to be the same as “sama” just as “name” could be derived from “naama” ! “You’ve licked Sanskrit clean.”

Sanskrit is an ocean where one can dip oneself for a lifetime. “Lick” appears to be derived from “lih”. For example, the “Chyaavanpraash” that many Indians are familiar with or the chocolate candy that you lovingly stroke in your mouth is called “lehyam”; literally, “that which is to be licked”.

“Are you suggesting a new method to navigate Sanskrit?”

I think there is an opportunity. The purpose of this article is to stoke a deep interest in Sanskrit. Too often, we are told that Sanskrit is dead, or Sanskrit is an “Indo-European Language”. Who decides? Can Sanskrit not stand on itself? Isn’t it an Indian Language first and foremost? After William Jones exclaimed the sophistication of Sanskrit (“more perfect than the Greek and more copious than the Latin”) and its relationship to German, Greek, Latin and other languages, it was quickly proposed that they were part of an “Indo-European Language family”, whose root would be a “Proto-Indo-European” (PIE) language. To date, a PIE has not yet been found. This leads me to believe Sanskrit to be a unique and an independent language originating solely in India.

Back to your question of navigating Sanskrit, “navigate” is a combination of two Sanskrit words:

Sanskrit	Meaning	English
Naavah	Ship, boat	Navy, Naval, etc.
Gatih	Movement	
Navagatih	Movement of ships	Navigation

A google search reveals numerous references with countless examples of English words with Sanskrit origins: ignite ← agni; Know ← jnaa; bandana, band ← bandana, bandha; orange ← naaranga; punch (drink) ← pancha (five - ingredients). I want to caution you that I have not researched the origins discussed in this article. I am merely surmising based on apparent similarities. I would not be surprised if many of my observations are proved to be correct. I welcome insights from readers. The purpose of this imaginary dialogue is to spur interest in Sanskrit, or “Devabhaasha”, the “Language of the Gods”.

“Vande maataram!”, said Indira.