

[encyclopedia.com](https://www.encyclopedia.com)

Giovanni Paolo Pannini | Encyclopedia.com

Encyclopedia of World Biography

11–14 minutes

Panini

Renowned for his writings on classical Sanskrit grammar, Panini (c. 450–350 B.C.E.) established the linguistic rules for the spoken Sanskrit of his day. His treatise *Astadhyayi*, considered the first major work on grammar in any language, was fodder for many later Indian grammarians and is still studied by both Eastern and Western linguists today.

Although it is known that Panini was born in Shalatula, a small town near Attock on the northwestern Indian peninsula in what is now Pakistan, historians remain uncertain as to the exact dates of Panini's birth and death. One theory, supported by internal references that indicate Panini had contact with or was at least aware of Greek civilization, place his life after the year 327 B.C.E., when Macedonian [Alexander the Great](#) reached northwestern India. However, historical evidence supports limited contact between the two civilizations as early as the sixth century B.C.E. Commentaries based on Panini's work and written by Indian grammarians Katyayana and Patanjali, who probably lived in the third or fourth and perhaps even in the late second centuries B.C.E., help define Panini's lifespan as well. The natures of these commentaries place Panini well before either Katyayana or Patanjali, causing some scholars to believe Panini to have lived as early as the seventh century B.C.E. As speculation varies wildly, it seems most reasonable to place Panini around the fifth century B.C.E., the midpoint of this wide range. The scant details of Panini's life are, however, completely overshadowed by the importance of his work, a Sanskrit grammatical treatise called the *Astadhyayi*, or "The Eight-chaptered," which is considered to be the most important work

in the development of Sanskrit and one of the most important works in the history of any language.

The Birth of a Language

Sanskrit is the classical language of India and the [mother tongue](#) of most of the languages currently spoken on the Indian subcontinent. In Sanskrit, the word for grammar means "analysis," reflecting the fact that the Indians of the ancient world considered grammar to be an important field. As Harold G. Coward and K. Kunjunni Raja explained in the *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies: The Philosophy of the Grammarians*: "Grammar was recognized from the earliest times in India as a distinct science, a field of knowledge with its own parameters that distinguished it from other sciences such as astronomy, architecture, agriculture, and the like." The impetus to study grammar came from the dominant religion of India: Hinduism. Arthur A. MacDonell described this beginning in *A Sanskrit Grammar for Students* thus: "The first impulse ... was given by the religious motive of preserving intact the sacred Vedic texts, the efficacy of which was believed to require attention to every letter." The importance of Panini's work on grammar thus lay not only in the linguistic, but also the philosophic realm.

While Panini's treatise dictated the laws that would govern classical Sanskrit, he was not the first grammarian; in the *Astadhyayi*, Panini mentions ten earlier authorities, and scholars believe there were many more. MacDonell commented that, "aided by the great transparency of the Sanskrit language, the ancient Indian grammarians had by the fifth century B.C.E. arrived at scientific results unequaled by any other nation of antiquity." However, as Coward and Raja observed, "no authenticated works of any of these pre-Paninian writers have come down to us, and it is difficult if not impossible to say which, if any, of Panini's rules may have been taken from his predecessors." Regardless of how much or how little Panini derived his work from earlier sources, his *Astadhyayi* is a revolutionary work. Indeed, in his introduction to a modern edition of the *Astadhyayi*, Sumitra M. Katre noted that, because of the book's "importance, all earlier works in this field gradually disappeared. Panini's *Astadhyayi*, in its turn, became the focal point of much critical and explicatory work over the last two millennia." Even subsequent grammatical works, which

relied heavily on the *Astadhyayi*, have been largely disregarded by recent Sanskrit scholars in favor of Panini's text.

Format and Content of the *Astadhyayi*

In discussing Panini's work, Katre observed that the *Astadhyayi* "is the earliest extant descriptive grammar of Sanskrit as currently spoken during [Panini's] time ... in the north-west region of India (now Pakistan). His extraordinary perception of linguistic facts covered, however, a wider region, since he not only refers to the earlier stage of the language as occurring in Vedic literature, but also spreads over the northern and eastern parts of India whose regional variant he also notices in his majestic sweep." MacDonell described Panini's text as "at once the shortest and fullest grammar in the world." Panini sets forth about 4,000 statements regarding the proper composition of Sanskrit in a very brief, almost algebraic format, relying on *sutras*, or terse statements normally intended for memorization. These sutras provided students in Indian societies relying on oral, as opposed to literary, learning with a common way to transmit knowledge. This reliance on oral recitation has caused problems for the *Astadhyayi*'s legacy, however. Katre noted that "This was proper as long as the texts were transmitted orally from teacher to pupil in an unbroken line of descent. But this seems to have been broken at some time ... thus to a large extent the interpretation of each sutra depends largely on the great commentaries." In fact, some scholars believe that even such basic concepts as word meanings were not originally a part of the *Astadhyayi*, but were later added by commentators.

The *Astadhyayi*, for all its brevity, follows a well-defined format. As MacDonell explained: "Book i. contains the technical terms of the grammar and its rules of interpretation; ii. deals with nouns in composition and case relations; iii. teaches how suffixes are to be attached to verbal roots; iv. and v. explain the same process with regard to the nominal stems; vi. and vii. describe the accent and phonetic changes in the formation of words, while viii. treats of words in a sentence." This setup is not, however, stringently adhered to; Panini inserts unrelated rules which typically do follow a related train of thought, or which can be more effectively explained outside the context of the book to which they truly belong. The eight books or chapters referred to in the

title of the *Astadhyayi* are further subdivided into quarter-chapters, with each chapter containing a number of sutras. Katre further described this by noting that "Panini has attempted to arrange his sutras under two major headings: [the first] a general rule which encompasses the largest number of linguistic items and [the second] an exception which covers a smaller group not subject to the general rule." These organizational systems, presumably intended to ease memorization, did not necessarily lend themselves to written clarity, however; thus, there have been many attempts to reorganize Panini's work made by more recent grammarians.

Panini's rules of grammar rely on two simple concepts: that all nouns are derived from verbs, and that all word derivation takes place through suffixes. However, Panini does depart from these guidelines in some instances. Words which do not conform to verbal derivation he collected and incorporated into a separate list. MacDonell commented that such words "were often forcibly derived from verbal roots by means of a number of special suffixes.... Panini refers to all such words as ready-made stems, the formation of which does not concern him." To the extent that the *Astadhyayi* addresses word meanings, Panini also chooses to accept the dictates of common usage over those of strict derivation. Raja recorded that the grammarian "says that the authority of the popular usage of words ... must supersede the authority of the meaning dependent on derivation. The meanings of words (the relations between word and meaning) are also established by popular usage." Panini's preference for examining the language as it was truly spoken, instead of adhering completely to intellectually defined rules, exemplifies the innovation of his work.

Later Commentators Added to Panini's Work

Ancient commentators provide us with important perspectives on the *Astadhyayi*. Katre commented that "nearly a thousand treatises have been produced during two millennia since ... [the *Astadhyayi*] was composed by Panini." The two seminal treatises on the *Astadhyayi* are Katyayana's *Varttikas* and Patanjali's *Mahabhashya*. These two texts are closely linked, despite having being written over a century apart—as mentioned earlier, Katyayana lived in the third or fourth century B.C.E., while Patanjali lived during the second half of the second century B.C.E. In *India's Past*, MacDonell noted

that Patanjali's commentary, the *Mahabhashya*, "does not discuss Panini's rules, but Katyayana's varttikas ... are short criticisms on about one-third of Panini's sutras." Despite the lack of specific discussion, Patanjali's work is generally considered to be the finest ancient commentary on the *Astadhyayi*.

More recent treatises on Panini include Vamana and Jayaditya's *Kasika*, which, unlike the *Mahabhashya*, addresses the full text of the *Astadhyayi* and dates from around the seventh century; Ramacandra's 15th-century *Prakriyakaumudi*, or "Moonlight of Method," which reorganizes Panini's text into a more understandable format; and Bhattoji's 17th-century *Siddhanta-kaumudi*, or "Moonlight of Settled Conclusions," which also attempts to simplify Panini's format. Another important seventh-century work that draws on Panini, the *Vakyapadiya* by Bhartrihari, "regrouped all previous ideas ... developing a whole theory of language from the point of view of semantics, psychology, and symbolism," according to Alain Dan  lou in *A Brief History of India*. MacDonell commented in *A Sanskrit Grammar for Students* that "A belief in the infallibility of Panini ... has often led ... interpreters, from Patanjali onwards, to give explanations of Panini's rules." These explanations have more often seemed more akin to justifications, as the brevity of the *Astadhyayi* has sometimes obscured Panini's true intent or led to muddled interpretation.

A Monumental Work

The preeminence of the *Astadhyayi* in the development of not only Sanskrit, but of the grammar of all languages, cannot be denied. As Katre observed, "In a work of such magnitude which covers every aspect of the author's speech community ... there is indeed much scope to find some overstatements as well as understatements. But none of this takes away from the credit which is due to Panini who, in this astounding work, has set up a model which is fully adequate to cover every aspect of the language described." J. N. Mohanty argued in *Classical Indian Philosophy* that "It is possible that no other Hindu intellectual achievement has been able to surpass Panini." Predating even the early Greek's examination of language, Panini's work continues to exert influence in the realm of linguistics 2,000 years after its composition.

Books

Coward, Harold G., and K. Kunjunni Raja, *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies: The Philosophy of the Grammarians*, [Princeton University Press](#), 1990.

Daniélou, Alain, *A Brief History of India*, translated by Kenneth Hurry, Inner Traditions, 2003.

Kulke, Hermann, and Dietmar Rothermund, *A History of India*, third edition, Routledge, 1998.

MacDonell, Arthur A., *A History of Sanskrit Literature*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1900.

—, *A Sanskrit Grammar for Students*, third edition, [Oxford University Press](#), 1927.

—, *India's Past*, [Oxford University Press](#), 1927.

Mohanty, J. N., *Classical Indian Philosophy*, Rowman & Little-field, 2000.

Panini, *Astadhyayi*, translated by Sumitra M. Katre, University of Texas Press, 1987.