

Punctuation and the Sanskrit Language

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Abstract

Today, almost all the written languages in the world use punctuation marks. Origin of these can be traced as long as 2500 years ago in Europe. But the standardisation of them can be attributed to the evolution of print technology. Now it looks like punctuation is an essential part of a written expression in any language. In this globalised world, English being the international language is imitated for its punctuation marks by almost all the languages of the world, including Sanskrit.

INTRODUCTION

Most of us must have come across the following statements which change the meaning with the use of punctuation. An English professor wrote the words “a woman without her man is nothing”, on the white board and asked his students to punctuate it correctly. All of the males in the class wrote: “A woman, without her man, is nothing”. All the females in the class wrote: “A woman: without her, man is nothing”. It shows the powerful function of punctuation particularly in written language.

WHAT AND WHY OF PUNCTUATION?

Punctuation is a mark used in written language that divides sentences and phrases for clarity and comprehensibility. Full stop (.), comma (,), colon (:), semicolon (;), question mark (?), exclamation mark (!), apostrophe (’), hyphen (-), dash (—), ellipsis (...), oblique (/), quotation marks (‘ ’, “ ”), parentheses (()), square brackets ([]), are the punctuation marks used to indicate various meanings to written expression to disambiguate. Even underline, capitalisation,

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italics, space between words and paragraph fall under wider definition of punctuation. These symbols are widely used in most of the written languages (syllabic) around the world with some variations. In oral language, these are served by accent and pauses.

HISTORY

Most of the ancient languages like ancient Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, Tamil, etc., did not use punctuation marks and earliest citation of a few punctuation was found in Jordan¹ around 5th century B.C. Indian manuscript tradition shows that texts were written without any punctuation marks or even spaces between words and sentences. This perhaps was the reason behind different readings of the Vedas as *saṃhitā pātha* and *pada pātha*, (former as unpunctuated and undifferentiated and latter with pauses and punctuations).

Panini's *Aṣṭādhyāyī* also perhaps was written without any breaks which was later on divided into different *sūtras* (formulae) and left scope for further *yogavibhāga* wherever felt necessary to accommodate unsolved examples. In first century B.C., Patañjali and many subsequent grammarians have imagined many elided sounds (letters) in between two *sūtras*, e.g., (ॠ) ऋडिति च, लिङ्याशिष्यङ् (ल), हलन्त्यम् (ल), अस्तिसिचस् स् अपृक्ते and so on.

In 17th century A.D., texts of Sanskrit and Marathi started using full stop marks (I) and (II) at the end of sentences in prose and poetry

respectively. Metres having 4 lines were also divided by (I) mark after 2nd line, but did not serve the purpose of punctuation as many words of the sentence of the 1st half occurred in the later half.

If at all Sanskrit ever had punctuation, it can be only Vedic accent marks of *anudātta* and *svārīta* horizontal (-) and vertical (I) strokes respectively. Besides, kampa marks 1 and 3 for short and long vowels respectively. *Padapātha* of Vedic texts had marks of perpendicular stroke (I) and *avagraha* mark (s) for distinguishing words and compounds respectively which can somehow be called as punctuation. But, Vedic marks of accentuation and *Padapātha* are usually not considered as punctuation.

Punctuation has the purpose of aiding in understanding and correct reading by division of text into sentences, clauses and words. While Vedic accentuation serving these purposes gives meaning to words and compounds, it also aids for correct pronunciation of words.

Unique to accent mark is, it is applied to each and every syllable of a text. It is not an indicator for pause but pattern of pronunciation. Punctuation plays a role at word, clause and sentence levels. Accentuation, over and above these, has role at phonological and morphological levels. Punctuation by its presence gives emotions to word and sentence while accentuation within the word is as vital for meaning

as grammar. Rules of accentuation play a role in almost all grammatical operations like *sandhi*, *samāsa*, *kāraka*, noun, verb, indeclinable, etc. So, role of accentuation encompasses punctuation and other layers of language as far as Vedic language is concerned. However, post-Vedic Sanskrit language lost the tradition of accentuation, so much so that distinction among the pronunciation of *udātta*, *anudātta*, *svarita* and *pracaya* is completely forgotten, let alone application of these. Without application of accentuation, Sanskrit language was open for ambiguity. Still early classical literature like *Rāmāyana*, *Mahābhārata*, literature of *Bhāsa*, *Kālidāsa*, *Śūdraka* or shastric texts like *Nirukta*, *Mahābhāṣya*, *Nāṭya Śāstra*, etc., were successful doing away with ambiguity.

But later on around 6th century² ambiguity became an ornament for the speech, *viz.* *śleṣa* and scholars freely used this in their literature to exhibit their scholarship. However, ambiguity was limited to deliberate use of the scholars. It had never been a weakness of Sanskrit language in spite of no use of accentuation or punctuation and what is more, all the *sūtra* and *bhāṣya* literature thrive on disambiguity. By definition itself, *sūtra* is a statement with minimum possible syllable, without ambiguity and avoiding problems of over-application and under-application.

PUNCTUATION IN SANSKRIT

While punctuation is indispensable for languages like English, it

should be examined why and how it has never been a part of Sanskrit language. It will not be wrong to say that even today barring a few, most punctuation marks can be avoided in Sanskrit writing.

1. Use of Full Stop (./)

The need for punctuation was perhaps first felt for marking the completion of a sentence; for which a full stop was introduced across the languages. Sanskrit shastric tradition, instead of talking about a pause in utterance or a mark for written form, discusses about completion of sense in order to complete the sentence. So, various shastras define what a sentence is, e.g., वाक्यंपदसमूहः.....आकाङ्क्षायोग्यतासन्निधिश्चवाक्यार्थज्ञाने हेतुः (Tarkasamgraha), कारकान्विता क्रिया वाक्यम् (Amarakosa), तिङ्सुबन्तचयः वाक्यम्, परस्पराभिसम्बन्धः पदसमूहो वाक्यम् (Traditional linguists), आख्यातं साव्ययकारक-विशेषणं वाक्यम्, एकतिङ्, (Mahābhāṣya). Thus, when a sentence is understood with its full context, the end of it is obviously understood even without a punctuation mark. This could be the reason why our manuscript tradition never bothered about using a full stop mark to denote the completion of a sentence. It was just left to the reader to decide on the completion of sense. Though in prose, full stops are seen in later manuscripts and printed texts, but verses in Sanskrit are not written with any mark irrespective of the number of sentences in it³.

2. USE OF SPACE

The space between words also becomes redundant and many times

restricted by rules of case-ending, compound and *sandhi*. The *sandhi* rule in a sentence, though optional, restricts the use of space and thus makes that redundant. For example, a phrase in *Bhagavad Gīta* – कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते (meaning – you have rights only on your acts) can be optionally written as कर्मणि एव अधिकारः ते. Here if *sandhi* is applied, there is no scope for space. Even without *sandhi*, if words are joined together, space is just for convenience of reading and not for grammatical correctness, as words can be recognised and separated through their case-endings. Further, space is ruled out in compounds of multiple words. For example, राष्ट्रियशैक्षिकानुसन्धानप्रशिक्षणपरिषद्. (in Sanskrit), which is written as राष्ट्रीय शैक्षिक अनुसन्धान एवं प्रशिक्षण परिषद् in Hindi (National Council of Educational Research and Training) is without any space though the words both in Hindi and Sanskrit are same. If we have to use space, each word will require separate case-endings, such as राष्ट्रिया शैक्षिकस्य अनुसन्धानस्य प्रशिक्षणस्य च परिषद्. Giving space within a compound without adding case-ending is not allowed in Sanskrit and with case-endings, space between words is dispensable.

3. Use of Comma (,)

The frequently used punctuation mark is comma, which is used to separate the items in a list or to show where there is a slight pause in a sentence. It doesn't only help the reader in clear reading, but also affects the meaning of a sentence,

for example, 'eats shoots and leaves'. If this sentence part is punctuated with a comma, *i.e.*, 'eats, shoots and leaves', the meaning is completely changed. While the former is a narration about Panda an animal, eating shoots and leaves; the latter is about a person who eats, fires bullets and leaves the place. Had that been the case in Sanskrit language, the sentence would be खादति अङ्कुराणि पत्राणि च. No punctuation would affect the meaning. This is due to the basic difference of syntax of both the languages. English having positional pattern of syntax, place in the syntactical structures carries the meaning of subject, object, etc., and punctuation plays the role for positioning the clauses. Sanskrit being completely inflectional in nature, meaning of the words and its relation with other words in the sentence is decided by the case-ending suffixes. Alteration of word order in the sentence does not affect the meaning. So, role of punctuation is scarce. Moreover, rules of *sandhi*, *samāsa* and use of particle 'ca' make use of comma even redundant in Sanskrit. For example, in the sentence पत्रं पुष्पं फलं तोयं यो मे भक्त्या प्रयच्छति (meaning – who offers me leaves, flowers, fruits and/or water with devotion...), there is scope for application of comma for the list of four items. But, that is done away with by the application of *sandhi* rule that gives the form as पत्रमुष्पम्फलन्तोयं. So, when not even space between the words is required, how can there be application of punctuation mark.

Though the above-mentioned phrase has no spaces between the words, but it is still considered to have four separate words and this is recognised by the case endings, 'अम्', with each one. This could also be expressed in compound form as पत्रपुष्पलतोयानि, which is just a single word and so the scope of comma is totally ruled out. Normally, this kind of group of words is written and said with the use of particle 'ca' (which in this case is not mentioned due to poetic liberty) as in पत्रं पुष्पं फलं तोयं च, 'ca' at the end of the list with same case-endings serves the basic purpose of comma.

4. Use of Question Mark (?)

Let us examine the use of question mark (?). It is widely used for interrogative expressions, but it is not necessary everywhere, even in English. Questions beginning with 'wh' words actually do not require the mark (?) as there is no ambiguity without that. For example – 'who are you', 'where are you living', 'what is your name', etc. Even without question mark, sentences are not ambiguous. Sentences beginning with helping verbs also make questions without ambiguity, like 'Are you mad', 'Do you mind' and so on. Only in case of informal dialogues, sentences in affirmative structure having intonation of question need a mark (?) in order to differentiate from a normal expression, such as "Everything alright?" for "Is everything alright?". But in English, question mark is invariably used for all sorts

of direct questions (However, this is purely author's idea and assumption, can be contested).

Similarly, in Sanskrit, derivatives of the stem 'कम्' are used for 'wh' words of English, such as – कः/का (who), कम् (what) कतमं (which), कुत्र (where), कदा (when), कं/कां (whom), कस्य/कस्याः (whose) and कमिथम् (why). Words केन, कस्मै, कस्मात्, कस्य, कस्मिन् are used for phrases, by whom, from what, for whom and in what, respectively. When these words are used, the sentences become unambiguously questions. Unlike in English, these words can be placed anywhere in the sentence without affecting the notion.

For the other format of question in English, *i.e.*, by beginning the sentence with a helping verb whose answer is mostly 'yes' or 'no', the indeclinable 'अपि' is used in Sanskrit. For example, 'Are you fine', is said as 'अपि भवान् कुशली'. In both the languages, question mark is dispensable as there is no ambiguity, but still it is used in written English. This is one of the rare cases where Sanskrit language has a fixed word order. If the indeclinable, 'अपि' is used at the beginning of sentence that forms a question to be answered in 'yes' or 'no' and if it is used elsewhere, it means 'also' or 'too'. For example, 'भवान् अपि कुशली' or 'भवान् कुशली अपि' would mean 'you are also fine'.

5. Other Punctuation Marks

Below are the usages (not exhaustively) of some other punctuation marks in English with Sanskrit expression.

Colon (:) – These are our options: we go by train and leave before the end of the show; or we take our vehicle and see it all. In Sanskrit, it can be like – वयं रेलयानेन गच्छामः प्रदर्शनस्य समाप्तेः पूर्वम् आगच्छामः अन्यथा स्वकीयं यानं स्वीकुरुमः पूर्णं पश्यामः च इति अस्माकं वकिल्पम्. Purpose of colon is met with the use of the indeclinable word 'इति'. The main clause can be placed at the end preceded by इति; the main clause followed by 'यत्' at the beginning can also convey the same notion. इति (meaning 'thus') and यत् (meaning 'that') are generally used in such types of expression.

Semicolon (;) – This is used to separate two main clauses which is conveyed by 'च' in Sanskrit.

Example – The sun was already low in the sky; it would soon be dark. सूर्यः गगने अस्ताञ्चलं प्रति गतः शीघ्रं च अत्र तमसाच्छन्नं भवेत् ।

Exclamation mark (!) – This is used at the end of a sentence expressing surprise, joy, anger, shock or other strong emotions. These emotions are expressed by various particles in Sanskrit without any mark, such as 'अहो', हा, अरे, इ, उ, अहह and so on and so forth.

Apostrophe (') – This along with 's' indicates that a thing or person belongs to somebody. Example – my sister's husband. This is actually shortened form of genitive case conveyed by 'of'. It has no scope at all as case-ending is mandatory in Sanskrit. Here it is translated as 'मम भगिन्याः पतिः' or at the best, it is shortened to make a genitive compound as 'मम भगिनीपतिः'.

Though the list of punctuation marks is not exhausted or all the variant usages of those marks are detailed here with examples, it is understandable that nature of Sanskrit language does not require or allow (largely) the use of punctuation.

CONCLUSION

Although in print form, we use punctuation marks in Sanskrit language, it is more for easier reading than to disambiguate. Historically, except Vedic accentuation marks, Sanskrit writing tradition never used punctuation marks until 17th century perhaps with the revolution of print in paper. Sanskrit language by its nature explains the end of words and sentences and so never needed spacing or marks. One who is well-versed with the nature of language can easily distinguish words and sentences from continuous and uninterrupted lines. But, by the time other languages evolved and traditional shastric study of Sanskrit diminished, written form of the language borrowed and adopted some punctuation marks from the West for easier comprehension of ordinary readers. Still unpunctuated expression is made in metric poetries by the scholars. Punctuations are used in prose only.

Although the basic purpose of punctuation is to both disambiguate and for easier reading, it serves only the latter for Sanskrit. As far as disambiguation is considered, punctuation is not very useful as

it is done by other means and in many cases it has no scope at all in Sanskrit. However, it can be said that no language is completely devoid of ambiguity, be it Sanskrit or English. For example, Sanskrit expressions like विद्या विनयेन शोभते can be विद्या विनये न शोभते, पार्वती-परमेश्वरौ can be पार्वतीप-रमेश्वरौ in unbroken writing.

Similarly, in English even with punctuation, ambiguity cannot be completely ruled out. For example— I love you too. The word ‘too’ can be

construed with ‘I’ as well as ‘you’. This can be translated in Hindi both ways, i.e., ‘मैं भी तुम से प्यार करता/करती हूँ’ and मैं तुम से भी प्यार करता/करती हूँ. Even punctuation cannot disambiguate here. Only context or accent can convey the desired meaning. So, should we teach punctuation is the question. Just for the sake of clarity and easier reading we can use space between words and a full stop at the end of sentence. No other form of punctuation is natural to Sanskrit language.

End Notes

1. The oldest known document using punctuation is the “Mesha Stele”, i.e., an inscribed stone set up around 840 B.C. by king ‘Mesha’ of Moab (a kingdom located in modern Jordan).
2. Time of the Mahākāvya Kirātārjunīyam of Bhāravi.
3. For example, the first verse in the prologue of the play ‘Mudrārāksasa’ by Viśākhadatta in 4th century:

धन्या केयं स्थिता ते शिरसि शशिकला किं नु नामैतदस्या
नामैवास्यास्तदेतु परिचितमपि ते विस्मृतं कस्य हेतोः।
नारीं पृच्छामि नेन्दुं कथयतु विजया न प्रमाणं यदीन्दु-
देव्या निहोतुमिच्छोरिति सुरसरितं शादयमव्याद्विभोर्वः॥

The verse consists of 7 sentences without use of any punctuation.

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