

Preface



Sign at Bangalore airport. Note that while the official spelling of 'Bengaluru' is used in the lower right-hand corner, the older, better-known spelling is used in the main message

What this book is – What this book is not – The Kannada language (The linguistic significance of the Kannada language – The literary significance of the Kannada language – The historical significance of the Kannada language – The contemporary social significance of the Kannada language – The oldest Kannada literature – Dialects of Kannada – Kannada script – The Dravidian languages – Kannada and Sanskrit) – Some concluding remarks

What this book is

This book is an introductory learner's manual of modern written Kannada: a language of the Dravidian family of languages with a literary history that reaches back at least until the ninth century CE,¹ and the official language of the modern state of Karnataka in southern India.²

The book has developed out of materials which the author wrote for his own use, teaching Kannada in the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (commonly known as the 'LMU', and in the English-speaking world as the University of Munich), Germany. Experience has shown that with four hours of teaching per week, the material in this book can be learnt in three to four months, depending on the aptitude of the students. Although it was designed for classroom use, it can also be used for self-study.

After studying the contents of this book, the learner should be able to read modern non-belletristic texts as well as much modern narrative prose literature with the aid of a dictionary. Some belletristic authors use bits of regional dialect, and poets, especially, like to use linguistic archaisms to achieve special effects; the discussion of such features belongs to an advanced level, and not all of these are mentioned and explained in this book.

What this book is not

As an introductory manual, this book is not an exhaustive study of the whole of Kannada grammar. Although it will occasionally refer to earlier stages in the historical development of the language in order to explain certain peculiarities, it focusses on the **standard modern written** language.³ Therefore, it does not cover all stages of development of the extremely rich Kannada language in detail, nor does it deal with peculiarities of regional or social spoken dialects in detail (although occasionally brief remarks about widespread colloquialisms and widely known features of prominent dialects will be made). Similarly, the reader should not expect this book to explain each and every detail of idiomatic usage in this old and rich language (although some common idiomatic expressions are treated here). Neither is it a phrase book or a manual of conversational Kannada (although a few samples of conversational language are given).

On the other hand, it should be noted that **modern written Kannada is also a spoken language**, and differences between this written, literary norm and most of the spoken dialects are not great.⁴ The written or literary language is spoken in formal situations and also in all such situations where the target audience is supra-regional (for instance, in broadcasting). When one has mastered the written language, one can speak it throughout the entire Kannada-speaking region of India and be understood without making an awkward impression.⁵ Nowadays there is a tendency to produce teaching manuals (not only for Kannada, but also for other Indian languages) that supposedly teach a generally spoken, colloquial language. These 'spoken languages', in my experience, are usually little more than fictions.⁶ The production of such manuals is not only didactically flawed, but in my opinion also shows a strangely limited and also disrespectful view of why one should want to learn an Indian language: as if no serious literature

has been produced in those languages that is worth reading, or as if the only function of those languages can be to prattle a bit with people who are too uneducated to understand simple everyday statements (because that is what such manuals teach) in English, which is *de facto* the one modern language that is spoken throughout the whole of India. If a tourist is interested only in communicating light banalities in India, then some knowledge of broken English is usually enough.⁷ One needs to learn an Indian language in order to understand and to communicate beyond the level of the merely trivial, and the only sensible course of action is to begin with the written standard form of the language.

The present book explains Kannada according to its generally accepted modern written norm, but also includes a chapter on the more widely spread colloquialisms. The only way to learn how to speak any Indian language is to spend much time with speakers of the language, and this means that one will learn the regional and social variety of the language of those speakers. By learning normative written Kannada, one gains a deeper understanding of the grammatical structure, which will enable one, if one so wishes, to later learn any spoken variety of the language which one may need. The material that is discussed in this book will give the learner a firm basis for reading any kind of non-belletristic Kannada prose as well as much belletristic prose and simple poetry. (The author has begun work on a sequel to the present book, containing longer passages from more complex texts and explanations of how to understand and translate them.)

The Kannada language

The linguistic significance of the Kannada language

Kannada belongs to the Dravidian family of languages, almost all of which are spoken in southern India.⁸ Not only is Dravidian one of the largest families of languages in the world as regards its number of speakers, but it is of great interest for the study of general linguistics. Also, the influence of a Dravidian substratum is what has altered the Indo-European languages of northern India (the so-called Indo-Aryan languages) in such a way that they are recognized as a separate sub-family within Indo-European.⁹

There is a persistent belief that among all the Dravidian languages, Tamil is the oldest and most typically Dravidian. This belief is based

on the lexical purism of literary Tamil and the apparent fact that the oldest extant works of literature in Tamil are the oldest in any Dravidian language. However, the oldest fragments of Kannada literature are not very much younger, and there is reason to believe that in certain linguistic respects Kannada is more conservative than Tamil is.

The literary significance of the Kannada language

Because Kannada has been cultivated as a literary language for at least seventeen centuries, it has had the time to reach a very high level of standardization, precision and subtlety. Still today, it is one of the leading literary languages of India. The most prestigious national literary award, the Jnanpith Award, has until recently been won by more Kannada authors than by authors in any other language, and more often than by authors who write in a language with a comparable number of speakers. For its literary and historical richness, Kannada has been recognized as a 'classical language' by the Government of India in 2008.

The historical significance of the Kannada language

Among all the living languages of South Asia, Kannada possesses the second-oldest literature (after Tamil, a neighbouring Dravidian language). The predominant religion of the nobility in the Kannada-speaking part of India was Jainism, and the literature of the first few centuries of Kannada literary history is almost entirely the creation of Jaina authors. Because most medieval literature in other Indian languages is mainly the creation of brahminical Hindus, Kannada literature provides an 'other voice' and gives researchers glimpses of life and thought in other sections of Indian society of the time. From the twelfth century CE onwards, Viraśaiva authors developed an extraordinary literary productivity, and their work is comparably important for a balanced understanding of medieval Indian religious, social and literary history. The value of the huge volume and diversity of all this material in Kannada has to date remained sadly insufficiently recognized by researchers outside Karnataka.

The contemporary social significance of the Kannada language

Kannada is the sole official language of the south Indian state of Karnataka, which is one of the economically most dynamic and leading

regions of India, particularly the area around the capital city of Bengaluru (previously known under the Anglicized name ‘Bangalore’¹⁰), the ‘Silicon Valley of India’. According to official statistics, Kannada ranks as the eighth-largest language in India according to the number of native speakers;¹¹ however, because of historical reasons and because of its official status in Karnataka, it is used also by many millions of non-native speakers with practically native fluency.

The oldest Kannada literature

At present, the Indian republic has recognized two dozen languages¹² for official purposes, such as in public administration and courts of law. Among these languages, Kannada is the living language with the second oldest literature in the Indian subcontinent. Its uninterrupted literary history spans the period from the 10th century to the present; although the literary cultivation of the language evidently began several centuries earlier, only fragments from older works have remained preserved. It is customary among historians of Kannada literature to name the earlier periods in Kannada literary history after the predominant religion to which most authors adhered whose works from those respective periods have remained extant. The whole of Old Kannada literature has been written by Jaina authors, and hence some historians speak of the ‘Jaina period’. This is the period that is commonly considered the ‘golden age’ of Kannada literature, with authors such as Pampa, Ranna and Ponna (the so-called *ratnatraya* or Three Jewels), who were to remain models for many generations to come. The language of this period cannot be read by modern speakers of the language without special training, since significant changes in grammar, particularly morphology, occurred in the course of the 12th century, which marks the beginning of the Vīraśaiva period with the famous *vacana* literature by mystics and religious reformers such as Basava, Allamaprabhu and Akka Mahādēvi (also known as Mahādēviyakka). From this point in the history of the language onwards, grammatical changes have been very few, and much of the *vacana* literature is still read today by native speakers without the need of special aids for comprehension.

Dialects of Kannada

During British colonial rule, the Kannada-speaking region of India was divided over several administrative units: Madras Presidency, Bombay Presidency, and the princely states of Hyderabad and Mysore. In all these units Kannada was a minority language, except in Mysore, and hence Mysore naturally became the geographical stronghold of Kannada-language culture. Kannada literature found patronage at the Mysore court, and not long after the founding of the first three modern Indian universities by the British in Madras, Bombay and Calcutta, the maharaja of Mysore founded the University of Mysore, where Kannada was to receive special attention.¹³ It is probably for this reason that standard literary Kannada is often referred to as ‘Mysore Kannada’, although the spoken language of the city (like spoken varieties of languages practically anywhere in the world) does not correspond entirely to the written norm.

Linguists at the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL)¹⁴ in Mysore have identified nine regional dialects of the language; but besides these regional variations, there also exist a number of social dialects, which again can be subdivided into a still larger number of caste dialects, all of which differ from each other on the basis of differences in lexicon, pronunciation and grammar. The differences between all these dialects are, however, in very many cases so subtle that native speakers of Kannada are hardly aware of them, and thus from a practical point of view these classifications, although they have a real basis, are often of a rather academic nature.

In practice, one can broadly distinguish three regional varieties of Kannada: southern (with the cities of Mysore, Bangalore and Shimoga – officially spelt Mysuru, Bengaluru and Shivamogga since 2014, which more accurately reflects the actual pronunciation of those names – as important centres), northern (with Dharwad as its most prominent cultural centre), and western or coastal (with Mangalore – now officially spelt Mangaluru – as the largest urban concentration and Udupi, Moodbidre and Dharmasthala as smaller but culturally important centres).

The peculiarity of the coastal region is that by far most inhabitants of the area do not speak Kannada as their mother tongue: most of them speak Tulu, Konkani or Malayalam, and all learn Kannada as a second language in school. Many of them are literate only in Kannada, while speaking a different language in the home. Because it is a consciously acquired language, following a formal norm from outside the

region, this coastal Kannada (also commonly referred to as ‘Mangalore Kannada’) is uniform and also in its spoken form is very close to the literary language.¹⁵

The spoken variety of southern Kannada carries with it the prestige of being spoken in the large, wealthy urban centres of Mysore and Bangalore (the ‘Silicon Valley of India’), and is nowadays spread through television: Kannada soap operas tend to be set in the affluent social environment of Bangalore city. On the other hand, the language of these large urban centres has in recent decades undergone a process of very fast corruption through an unhealthy influence of English, which is the ‘master language’ of the urban *nouveaux riches*; especially Bangalore Kannada is polluted with unnecessary English words and a sometimes shocking impoverishment of grammatical usage.¹⁶ The area around the central Karnatak city of Shimoga has a refined and unpolluted form of this southern variety of Kannada.

This southern Kannada (also called ‘Mysore Kannada’, after the city that is still considered the ‘cultural centre of Karnataka’) is sometimes jocularly referred to as *hemgannaḍa* or ‘women’s Kannada’, because of what is considered a generally gentle accent. By contrast, northern Kannada is called *gamgannaḍa* or ‘men’s Kannada’: indeed it sounds rhythmically a bit more gruff, and the short unstressed vowels, especially the short *a* and *u*, tend to be weakened to the kind of neutral vowel which in linguistics is called a ‘shwa’ (similar to the so-called ‘silent e’ in a French word like *le*), or to a blunt vowel like the ‘u’ in an English word like ‘but’, which also gives the northern language a ‘masculine’ kind of snappiness.¹⁷ ‘Dharwad Kannada’, as this language is also known (but which is certainly not limited to the city of Dharwad and its surroundings) differs markedly from Mysore and Mangalore Kannada in its vocabulary, including many more loanwords from Urdu and Marathi as well as words of indigenous origin that are not in use elsewhere in Karnataka.

Differences between social dialects are rather fluid and are not so immediately apparent as, for instance, in neighbouring languages like Tamil and Tulu. And in any case it is historically wrong to call written literary Kannada the ‘language of brahmins’, as certain less educated persons from lower castes do: literary Kannada is largely the creation of Jainas and Viraśaivas, much less of brahmins. In certain areas, there are hardly any differences in speech between the members of different social groups.

In this book, the standard literary language is taught. Several learners' manuals teach 'spoken Kannada' in the mistaken assumption that most learners first of all wish to speak Kannada and not read it, and hence a 'spoken variety' of the language is 'more practical'. What this means in practice is that such manuals teach a regional variety which may or may not be easily understood in other regions of the Kannada-speaking area. Literary Kannada is, however, a true standard that is understood by educated speakers everywhere. It is the language of all non-belletristic writing and of broadcasting. Although there are noticeable differences between the written and spoken varieties of the language (as in every language spoken by a larger number of people), there is no such thing as diglossia in Kannada, such as is the case with Tamil, an immediately neighbouring language.¹⁸ In Kannada, one can speak exactly the way one writes without making oneself sound ridiculous (as indeed the averagely highly educated population of south-western Karnataka does).

Kannada script

Almost every literary language of India has its own script, and Kannada, being the living language of the sub-continent with the second oldest literature, is no exception. Like almost all the Indian scripts, the graceful Kannada script is ultimately derived from the ancient Brāhmī script. This means that the script is not an 'alphabet' but an *abugida*, syllabic in structure: what appears to the reader as a single 'letter' is actually a syllable, either a vowel or a combination of a consonant and a vowel. The basic consonant signs represent the combination consonant + the short vowel 'a'. Combinations of consonants are written by means of subscript secondary consonantal signs. Other secondary signs are used to indicate that the vowel in the syllable is not a short 'a' but one of several others.

This book contains a separate chapter, towards the end, in which the Kannada script is discussed in detail.

The Dravidian languages

The Dravidian languages are usually described as being of the agglutinative type and similar to, e.g., the Uraltaic languages and Japanese. Very briefly, the structure of these languages can be described as follows. Sentences consist of words. Some of these words are simple, i.e.,

they are single units in themselves that cannot be further analysed, but in the case of Kannada such words are relatively very few. Most words are composite: either they are compound words, consisting of more than one word that could be used independently and otherwise, or they consist of basic words of which the meaning is modified by means of suffixes. These suffixes are not words in their own right, and as a rule they can only be used as modifiers. More than one suffix can be appended to the initial root word, that can be considered the main carrier of meaning of the complete word. In agglutinative languages, this modifying of meaning by means of suffixes is the main means of creating syntactic order. There are no prefixes or infixes, nor does, as a rule, the root word change.

A few examples will help to clarify this principle. The verb root *kare* means ‘to call’. This can be used as a non-honorific imperative, i.e., the form that is used as an order in non-formal circumstances towards persons towards whom one need not show any special respect. (Thus the sentence *Avanannu kare!* means “Call him!”) If one wishes to be more polite, a suffix is added to the verb root, namely *iri*. (This is linked to the verb by the semi-vowel *y* to make the resulting word easier to pronounce. The resulting sentence *Avanannu kareyiri!* can be translated: “Please call him.”) But perhaps the speaker does not wish to issue an order, and instead wishes to make a simple statement, e.g., that he called somebody. *Kare* is a regular verb of the so-called second verb class (there are two verb classes in Kannada, easily recognizable by the vowels in which the verb roots end). Such verbs form their past stem by means of the suffix *d*. The speaker in our example is speaking about an action (‘calling’) which he performed himself, therefore another suffix is added to indicate that ‘I’, the grammatical first person singular, is the agent: this suffix is *enu*. The resulting word *kare-d-enu* means “I called”. *Avanannu karedenu* means “I called him”. The suffix *aru* is the suffix for the third person plural (‘they’), and so the sentence *Avanannu karedaru* means “they called him”, and *Avanannu karedanu* means “he called him” (the suffix *anu* indicates the third person singular masculine, ‘he’). Pronouns indicating the agent also exist and can be used in short sentences such as these, although their omission is not considered incorrect or unclear, since the personal suffix of the verb suffices to indicate who the agent is (like in Italian, Portuguese or Spanish); *Nānu avanannu karedenu* does not really mean anything different than the earlier *Avanannu karedenu* (*nānu* means ‘I’). The word *avanannu* is another example of how the agglutinative principle works. *Avanu* means

'he'; the suffix *annu* indicates the grammatical accusative case, which in most cases means the direct object of the sentence; thus *avanannu* (the final *u* of *avanu* is elided when the accusative suffix is added) means 'him'. The word *taṅgi* means 'younger sister'; *Taṅgiyannu karedenu* means "I called [my] younger sister"; *taṅgi karedenu* would make no sense, and also *avanu karedenu* would be grammatically wrong.

Kannada and Sanskrit

There is a persistent belief among many people in India that Kannada has developed out of Sanskrit (as also all the other Dravidian languages, for that matter). This is nothing more than pious superstition.¹⁹ The many words of Sanskritic origin in Kannada are loanwords, and they cannot serve as proof of a genetic relationship between Sanskrit and Kannada, just as Latin and Greek words in German or English do not prove that German and English are offshoots of Latin or Greek.

However, the Sanskrit language, as the predominant language of the Indian intelligentsia over a period spanning many centuries, has strongly influenced the historical development of Kannada (just as, for instance, Latin has influenced German and English). Therefore the reader will find many references to Sanskrit in this book. Every conversation and every piece of written Kannada contains Sanskrit loanwords, and Sanskrit is the main source of material for coining new words. The truly cultured use of Kannada (and almost all other modern Indian languages) involves some basic understanding of Sanskrit, and for this reason the present author hopes to bring out a concise handbook of the use of Sanskrit in modern languages in the near future.

Some concluding remarks

A new learner's manual of Kannada for non-Indian learners is not published often. The reasons which persons may have for learning a language can differ widely, and the present author has tried to satisfy a variety of interests and wishes. The result, obviously, is a book that most probably also contains information that is of little interest for a certain specific individual reader or the other. It contains a bit of information about earlier historical stages of the language, about general Dravidian linguistics, about social customs and how these are reflected in the language, about idioms, about colloquialisms and dialects; but

all these topics cannot be treated in full detail in a single book. The author hopes that the book will serve as a solid and useful basis for the individual studies of each reader, in whatever direction those studies may lead.

The author wishes to thank his first teachers of Kannada: the late Prof. Kamil V. Zvelebil (Rijksuniversiteit Utrecht, i.e., Utrecht University) and the late Dr. K. Parameswara Aithal (Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg, i.e., Heidelberg University), who laid the base for his understanding of the language. Later, during the seventeen years which he lived there, numerous people in Karnataka helped him improve his Kannada; the author is particularly grateful for the long and intense discussions which he had with *vidyāvācaspati* Bannanje Govindacharya in Udupi.

Several students in Munich made valuable suggestions towards the improvement of the book. Special thanks are due to Christoph Honecker, living in far-away Mysore, who went through the entire text and meticulously pointed out omissions and typing errors through e-mail, and whose questions prompted additional explanations. Further helpful remarks were made by doyens of Kannada studies Prof. T.V. Venkatachalashastry (University of Mysore) and the late Prof. M.M. Kalburgi (Karnatak University, Dharwad), and valuable last-minute comments and suggestions were made by Gil Ben-Herut (University of South Florida). The author hopes that all these persons will look upon this book favourably and that whatever errors and omissions may have eluded his attention will be few, and he will be grateful for constructive criticism and remarks from discerning readers.

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Notes

¹ The earliest completely preserved literary work is from the ninth century. However, the earliest rock inscription, dated approximately 400 CE, shows that Kannada was a refined literary language already by that time.

² For a brief outline of the position and significance of the Kannada language in the world, see p. xi, “The Kannada language”.

³ However, because Kannada is a highly conservative language, knowledge of modern written Kannada gives the learner access to roughly 800 years of literature. The written norm has changed only very little since the twelfth century CE.

⁴ One can only broadly generalize about such matters, because very much depends on a number of variables, such as social background of the speakers, their level of education and culturedness, regionality, etc.

⁵ In this respect, Kannada differs strongly from its neighbouring sister-language Tamil, in which the written normative language differs so much from commonly spoken forms that it is a classical example of what in linguistics is termed 'diglossia'.

⁶ For instance, the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL) in Mysore, India's leading institute of linguistic study, has brought out a series of manuals that are titled *An Intensive Course in . . .* (Kannada, Tamil, Bengali, and others). In my opinion, these books are plainly bad. If one has studied the language of *An Intensive Course in Kannada* and then tries to read a Kannada novel, newspaper or any piece of scholarly writing, one is lost, because that book does not teach the grammatical forms of the standard written language. The Kannada of that manual is a language that shows some particular features of colloquial Kannada as spoken in the large cities of southern Karnataka (Mysore and Bangalore) but is not really spoken anywhere in that form, and certainly not written.

⁷ If a person in the Kannada-speaking part of India cannot understand the minimalistic English that is used for bargaining in the marketplace or in a taxi (if at all such manuals reach that level), then that person is likely to be so uneducated that he only speaks a truly backward rural Kannada dialect, and no amount of book-learning will make that kind of Kannada understandable for a foreign learner.

⁸ For an excellent brief introduction to the Dravidian linguistic family, see Zvelebil 1990, which is also suited for the seriously interested general reader. Andronov 2003 and Krishnamurti 2003 go into great comparative linguistic detail.

⁹ The Dravidian influence is what unites Indo-Aryan and Dravidian to the possibly best known example of a *Sprachbund* or linguistic area.

¹⁰ The new spelling 'Bengaluru', which more closely reflects the true pronunciation of the name of the city, was proposed by the late, famous Kannada writer U.R. Ananthamurthy.

¹¹ See the 2011 census report: <http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011Census/Language-2011/Statement-4.pdf>. Between 1971 and 2011, the number of Kannada mother-tongue speakers reportedly doubled (<http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011Census/Language-2011/Statement-7.pdf>).

¹² Among these are Sanskrit, the foremost classical language of the Indian subcontinent, and English, the most influential of the erstwhile colonial languages, which Indians think of as their 'window to the world'.

¹³ It should be noted, however, that the oldest department of Kannada studies is in the University of Madras.

¹⁴ The Indian national institute of linguistics.

¹⁵ The truly native Kannada of the coastal region, such as one hears in the area around Kundapura, or the caste dialect of Havyaka brahmins, differs quite strongly from the written norm.

¹⁶ This corrupting influence of English is found in all living Indian languages, especially in the urban concentrations. The case of Bangalore is perhaps more extreme due to the city's international economic significance.

¹⁷ To give one example: the word that is written ಎನಿಸುತ್ತದೆ *enisuttade* according to the written standard, meaning 'it seems', can be pronounced [ˈye-ni-sut-te] in Mysore, with an elision of the fourth short vowel, but [ˈaːnɪsːtəːdɐ] in Dharwad, with an elision of the third short vowel.

¹⁸ In Tamil, the written norm was grammatically fixed in the 13th century and is the basis of the literary language still today, while the spoken language of course continued developing.

¹⁹ This belief also has a political dimension and is held especially by a certain kind of Indian nationalists who think that the unity of India is endangered if one admits that Dravidian as a separate language family exists. Linguistically, however, to claim that Kannada is derived from Sanskrit is as ridiculous as to claim that Hungarian and Finnish belong to the Indo-European family.

