Preliminary Overview

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Pronunciation: the phonemic system of Kannada – vocabulary – grammar

This section contains some general remarks about Kannada, the Dravidian languages, and language learning in general, to aid the reader in a first orientation before actually learning the language. If the reader already has some basic knowledge about the Dravidian languages and already has had experiences learning Indian languages, this section may be skipped.

Kannada is basically not a very difficult language to learn, but it is useful to point out a few matters to which the average Western learner needs to give special attention. These are summed up below under three headings: **pronunciation, vocabulary,** and **grammar.** This summary will help the learner to gain a brief overview of what to expect, so that he will better understand the wider significance of the various elements of the language while learning. The learner is advised to read the following pages attentively and to pay attention to these features of the language (esp. those listed under pronunciation and grammar) throughout the entire learning process.

Pronunciation: the phonemic system of Kannada

The pronunciation of Kannada is simple, but differs from that of most Western languages in a few important respects.

Retroflex versus dental consonants

Most of the languages of India distinguish between **retroflex** and **dental** consonants. The difference lies in the positioning of the tongue while these consonants are pronounced. Kannada has a *t, d, n* and *l* that sound roughly like in most Western languages: here the tip of the tongue either touches the upper front teeth, or touches the rim immediately behind the upper front teeth (hence *dental*);[1] but Kannada also has consonants that are usually represented in transliteration by means of an underdot: *ṭ, ḍ, ṇ* and *ḷ,* that are pronounced with the tongue curled backwards (hence *retroflex*) so that the tip touches the roof of the mouth, creating consonants of a different quality.[2]

It is of the greatest importance for the learner to realize and remember that dentals and retroflexes are not free variations of the same consonants, but are considered **fundamentally different consonants.** If one pronounces a dental instead of a retroflex, or vice versa, there is a likelihood that a Kannada speaker will not understand, or misunderstand, what one is trying to say. Some examples:

ಹುಳಿ	*huḷi*	sour	ಹುಲಿ	*huli*	tiger
ಓಡು	*ōḍu*	to run	ಓದು	*ōdu*	to read
ಹಳ್ಳಿ	*haḷḷi*	village	ಹಲ್ಲಿ	*halli*	lizard
ಮಣೆ	*maṇe*	stool	ಮನೆ	*mane*	house
ಹೇಳು	*hēḷu*	to say	ಹೇಲು	*hēlu*	to shit

Prosody: syllabic quantity

The prosodic or syllabic quantity of syllables (whether they are short or long) in Kannada is not only audible, but also **carries meaning.** In other words: if one pronounces a short syllable long, or a long syllable short, there is the possibility that one pronounces a non-word or, which is worse, a different word that one did not intend to pronounce.

A syllable is long if (a) it contains a long vowel, indicated in transliteration by a macron over the vowel, or (b) it contains a short vowel that is followed by more than one consonant before the next vowel. (In modern Kannada, every word ends in a vowel.) In the case of a doubled consonant, the speaker must linger on the pronunciation of that consonant.[3] The duration of a long syllable is approximately twice as long as that of a short syllable.

ಬಡಿ	*baḍi*	to beat	ಬಡ್ಡಿ	*baḍḍi*	interest (on money)
ಮಡಿ	*maḍi*	ritually pure	ಮಾಡಿ	*māḍi*	please do

The two following pairs of words are prosodically similar (a long syllable followed by a short one), but whereas in the first word of both pairs the long syllable is long because the vowel is long, in the second word it is because of the doubled consonant, and this difference is heard in pronunciation:

ಹಾಲು	*hālu*	milk	ಹಲ್ಲು	*hallu*	tooth
ದೇವ	*dēva*	god	ದೆವ್ವ	*devva*	spirit

Long vowels in Kannada are pure vowels

Native speakers of English must beware that what are commonly called **'long' vowels in English are not pure vowels, but diphthongs:** the Kannada long *ō* is a real and pure long *o* (approximately twice as long as the *o* in the English *pot*) whereas the English so-called 'long o' (as in the word *load*) is actually an 'o-u', and the Kannada long *ē* is a pure long *e* (approximately twice as long as the *e* in the English *best*) and not like the so-called 'long a' in English (which is actually an 'e-i', as in in the word *made*).

Syllabic stress

In some Western languages, such as English, the stress that is laid on a syllable in a multisyllabic word can be of importance. (In English, for instance, the words 'contest' and 'produce' can be pronounced with

a stress on the first syllable, in which case they are nouns, or on the second, in which case they are verbs.)

In Kannada, there is usually hardly any special stress on a syllable within a word. In longer words, one often hears a slight stress on the very first syllable. The learner is advised to practise this slight initial stress with the help of a native speaker, or by listening to recordings of spoken Kannada (nowadays one can also find these on YouTube and elsewhere on the internet), because this slight stress indicates that a new word is being pronounced in the string of sounds that together form a sentence. Syllabic quantity (see above) is far more important than syllabic stress.

Aspirated consonants

Speakers of English, German, and a few other Western languages are usually unaware that, for instance, the two consonants that are written *p* in English *paper* and German *Papier* are, for the Indian linguistic consciousness, two different consonants. The first *p* in the English word, and the second in the German word, are the first consonants of stressed syllables and are pronounced **aspirated,** i.e., with an audible puff of breath. In Sanskrit, the classical language of South Asia from which Kannada has borrowed many words into its vocabulary, the distinction is of crucial importance.

The more highly educated speakers of Kannada distinguish aspirated and non-aspirated consonants in their pronunciation, and the signs for aspirates and non-aspirates in Kannada script are clearly different; however, the distinction is not essential for the Kannada language, and many speakers do not bother to make clear distinctions in their pronunciation. Aspiration is, nevertheless, a feature that adds clarity to one's speech, and the learner is advised to practise it.

Vocabulary

Kannada is officially recognized by the Government of India as a classical language, and in the course of the many centuries of its history it has freely borrowed words from other languages into its vocabulary. The basic vocabulary of Kannada is Dravidian (for instance, the pronouns, numerals, the names of most parts of the body, the words for family relationships, and most words for common, everyday objects and actions), but already the earliest written records in the language show

the influence of northern, Indo-European languages, namely, Prakrit and, especially, Sanskrit. Most new words that are coined today for new concepts and new objects are based on words and grammatical elements that have been borrowed from Sanskrit. This has happened in all the languages of India, and if one has already learnt Sanskrit or another language containing many Sanskrit words, one can often use a Sanskrit word in Kannada and be understood correctly if one does not know for certain what the Dravidian Kannada word is; sometimes, synonymous Dravidian and Sanskrit words exist. However, one must be cautious when using Sanskrit words which one already knows from other languages, because just like Latin words in Europe, words of Sanskrit origin may mean different things in different modern languages. For instance, the word ಉಪನ್ಯಾಸ *upanyāsa* means 'lecture' in Kannada, but 'novel' in Bengali and Hindi; ಬಲಾತ್ಕಾರ *balātkāra* means 'force, coercion' in Kannada, but 'assault, rape' in Bengali and Hindi.

Other languages from which Kannada has borrowed words are Persian, Arabic, Portuguese, Dutch and, especially in most recent times, English. Whereas the reasons for some borrowings from English are quite understandable, there is an unfortunate tendency among young people and would-be fashionable urban folk to pollute their language with totally unnecessary English words. Especially when these words are pronounced inaccurately (as often happens), they do not improve the clarity and quality of communication. Educated Kannada speakers disapprove of this fashion, and the learner is advised to do the same.

Grammar

The most fascinating part of learning Kannada lies in its grammar. Among the major Dravidian languages, the grammar of Kannada is perhaps the most precise, consistent and refined. Each lesson in this book deals with certain aspects of Kannada grammar in detail, but a very brief survey of the main striking differences between Dravidian and Indo-European grammar is given here, as a general help in orientation.

Word order

The basic word order in Kannada is subject-object-verb (SOV). Adverbial expressions of time, place and mode generally do not appear at

the end of a sentence. Translated word by word, Kannada sentences read like 'you a book borrowed', 'yesterday I him saw', 'I here am', 'you today with him spoke', etc.

The absence of articles

Like most languages of the world, Kannada has no words corresponding to the English 'the' and 'a'. Definiteness or indefiniteness is usually clear from the context.

The agglutinative nature of the Dravidian languages

The languages of the Dravidian family are of a particular linguistic type, commonly termed **agglutinative.** This means that every word carries a basic meaning, and this meaning is modified by means of suffixes.[4] Thus the entire verb system is largely a matter of suffixation, with suffixes that are added to verb roots to indicate tense (past, present, future), person, etc. A Kannada speaker will immediately identify a word such as ಕರೆದೆನು *karedenu* as ಕರೆ *kare* ('to call') + *d* (past tense) + *enu* (first person singular), i.e., call-[past tense]-I = 'I called'; ಹೊಡೆದೆನು *hoḍedenu* as strike-[past tense]-I 'I struck' (from ಹೊಡೆ *hoḍe* 'to strike'); ಬರೆದೆನು *baredenu* as 'I wrote' (from ಬರೆ *bare* 'to write'); ಉಳಿದೆನು *uḷidenu* as 'I remained' (from ಉಳಿ *uḷi* 'to remain'), etc. By using a different final ending (the personal ending), one indicates that a different person is the agent of the verb: for instance, ಕರೆದರು *karedaru* consists of *kare* ('to call') + *d* (past tense) + *aru* (third person plural), i.e., call-[past tense]-they = 'they called'; ಬರೆದರು *baredaru* 'they wrote'; ಉಳಿದರು *uḷidaru* 'they remained', etc.

Similarly, other suffixes indicate the function of a noun or pronoun in a sentence: for instance, any word ending with the suffix *-annu* is a grammatical object, etc.

The use of gerunds in longer sentences

Practically always, a longer sentence in which more than one action is expressed will contain only one finite verb form (namely, at the end of the sentence), and all preceding actions will be expressed by means of gerunds and present participles (these are discussed in lessons 12 and 13). Thus an English sentence such as 'After leaving the building, I crossed the street and boarded the bus' will be translated into

Kannada as ನಾನು ಕಟ್ಟಡವನ್ನು ಬಿಟ್ಟು ಬೀದಿ ದಾಟಿ ಬಸ್ಸು ಹತ್ತಿದೆನು *nānu kaṭṭaḍavannu biṭṭu bīdi dāṭi bassu hattidenu* 'I building having-left street having-crossed bus boarded.'

Grammatical cases

The functions of nouns and pronouns in a sentence are explicitly clarified by means of case suffixes (endings). In Kannada, these case forms are perfectly unambiguous and clear. There are six different cases;[5] this may sound daunting, but in comparison to the complicated case systems of Indo-European languages (such as Latin, Greek, Sanskrit and Russian), mastering the Kannada case system is a triviality: for instance, any word ending with the suffix *annu* is an accusative, any word with the suffix *alli* is a locative, etc.

The absence of relative clauses

Although Kannada does have a grammatical device that resembles the Indo-European relative clause, it is comparatively rarely used. Also, relative pronouns do not exist. Instead, a typically Dravidian verb form with an adjectival function, known as the **relative participle** (see lesson 14) is used. A sentence such as the English 'the teacher who was here yesterday is not here today' will become *nenne illi idda adhyāpaka ivattu illa* 'yesterday here having-been [=relative participle] teacher today is-not'.

The absence of simple negative words

Indo-European languages have simple words and particles that negate the significance of the basic word: in English, for instance, 'nowhere' means 'not anywhere'; 'nobody' means 'not any person'; 'never' means 'at no time', etc. Negation in the modern English verb system is a bit strangely complicated because of the use of the auxiliary verb *to do* (cf. *I come – I do not come*), whereas in other European languages the negation is expressed by means of again another simple word: cf. German *ich komme – ich komme nicht,* Spanish *vengo – no vengo,* Russian я прихожу – я не прихожу, etc.

The Dravidian languages have a totally different way of expressing negation, which always involves verb forms. Besides tenses and modes

that have their counterparts in Indo-European, there is also a fully conjugated **negative mood** of the verb; furthermore, there are two defective verbs that always carry a negative meaning. – This method is perfectly clear and logical, but the Western learner needs a bit of time in order to become familiar with it. The use of these verb forms is explained in lessons 2 and 17.

Sandhi, or euphonic combination

All the literary languages of India follow rules of spelling which reflect changes in pronunciation when certain speech sounds follow each other. These phenomena of change are called **sandhi.** This Sanskrit word has become the common term in linguistics for these phenomena of euphonic combination because the rules in Sanskrit are so many and so complex and were codified by Sanskrit grammarians already in pre-Christian times; but actually every language has sandhi. For instance, when in French the words *la* and *école* are together written not *la école* but *l'école,* or when in colloquial English *he is* becomes contracted to *he's,* we have instances of sandhi.[6]

In previous centuries, Kannada authors abided by the rules of sandhi quite strictly; nowadays, the application of the rules in writing has become more relaxed, but they are always, largely subconsciously, applied in speech. In writing one nowadays could read *pustakada aṃgaḍi* for 'bookshop', but in speech it always becomes *pustakadaṃgaḍi.* similarly, *idu pustaka alla* 'this is not a book' will always become *idu pustakavalla.* It is important for the learner to know the rules of Kannada sandhi. They have been brought together in a separate chapter towards the end of this book.

The most important rule of all for the learner

The absolutely golden rule for the learner is the following: **never switch off your mind.** This of course applies to all learning, but in the area of human communication it is all the more important. Again and again the author of this book has experienced that when translating, students diligently look up words in dictionaries, try to apply grammatical rules in what they think are logical ways, and they finally offer translations that are rather senseless. Students should never forget that speakers, in any language, usually are not interested in communicating raving nonsense.

Especially in conversation, many elements of Kannada sentences can be omitted where in a Western language such as English or German this would be considered utterly impossible. Often the grammatical subject of a sentence is not mentioned, if the context makes it sufficiently clear what the subject is.

The Jayalakshmi Vilas building on the Manasagangotri campus, housing the University Folklore Museum and a museum of Kannada literature

Notes

[1] The corresponding English consonants are, strictly speaking, neither dental nor retroflex, but *alveolar,* because the tip of the tongue touches further back in the oral cavity. This is one aspect of the English accent when most speakers of English speak, for instance, French or German.

[2] In the linguistic consciousness of many Indians, especially when they do not habitually speak English in a Western environment, the English alveolar consonants (which are unknown in almost all Indian languages) sound more like retroflexes than like dentals. For this reason, Indians tend to pronounce English words in a typically 'heavy' or 'thick' way (namely, with retroflexes instead of alveolars, which also affects the quality of vowels that precede these consonants). English loan words in Indian languages are written as though the English consonants were retroflex.

[3] This is clearly heard in some Western languages too, for instance, the doubled consonants in Italian words such as *della, sette* and *otte.*

[4] Also other language families are of the agglutinative type: e.g., Uralic (Finnish, Hungarian a.o.), Altaic (Turkish a.o.). Japanese is another prominent agglutinative language. In the opinion of some scholars of Dravidian, the structural similarities between Uralic, Altaic and Dravidian suggest that these language families ultimately are sub-families within one large super-family; but this theory is controversial.

[5] Traditional grammars mention seven; see lesson 8.

[6] A Kannada grammarian would, more specifically, call both of them instances of ಲೋಪಸಂಧಿ *lōpasaṃdhi,* 'sandhi of elision'.