



Book Review

Andrew Ollett. (2017). *Language of the Snakes: Prakrit, Sanskrit, and the Language Order of Premodern India*. Oakland: University of California Press. Pp: xi+324. Price: \$39.95. ISBN 9780520296220. Paperback.

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Andrew Ollett's monograph, *Language of the Snakes: Prakrit, Sanskrit, and the Language Order of Premodern India* (henceforth *Language of the Snakes*) is a biography of the Prakrit language, arguing that Prakrit held a central place in the development of high literature in India. A revision of his dissertation from Columbia University, the book conceptualizes a 'language order' in premodern India where Prakrit and Sanskrit are imagined in a 'schema of configuration' that shaped the way language and literature were used in the first millennium CE. The book situates itself within Sheldon Pollock's theory of the Sanskrit cosmopolis and focuses on Prakrit in particular. Ollett develops his argument throughout the book's chapters, with the first chapter defining the terminology of the book—Prakrit, Middle Indic, and language ideology, among other topics. This chapter also contains a helpful précis of the history of the Western reception of Prakrit. The second chapter charts the historical trajectory that led to an explosion of Sanskrit outside the narrow realm of Vedic ritual (i.e., within inscriptions and literature). Here, Ollett emphasizes the origin of the unique features of classical Sanskrit as a "language of power" as expressed in Prakrit (Middle Indic) inscriptions of the Satavahanas (p. 45). Chapter 3 treats the development of Prakrit literature itself in the Satavahana court, arguing that this literature pioneered ideals of courtliness and sophistication that would later come to define South Asian cosmopolitan culture. Chapter 4 focuses on the characteristics of Prakrit, including its 'sweet' sounds, its musicality, semantic indeterminacy, loose versification, and the 'unbound' nature of its verses that lends themselves to wide quotation. The fifth chapter considers how Prakrit was defined, contrasted, and configured vis-à-vis Sanskrit and other languages. This chapter forms the core of Ollett's argument about the language order in premodern India, which he argues is essential to the understanding of classical India framed by Pollock's theory of the Sanskrit cosmopolis. Chapter 6 covers how Prakrit was systematized and came to be known through its grammars, and how the models provided by Prakrit grammar gave regional vernaculars the concepts, and categories to theorize themselves as distinct languages. Finally, chapter 7 describes how Prakrit was 'forgotten', rendered obsolete and superseded by the development of modern language practices and the vernaculars.

Ollett's work is a novel contribution to the study of Prakrit and to our understanding of premodern Indian language practice more generally. It offers a refreshing reappraisal of the relationship between Prakrit and Sanskrit, Sanskritization, the origin of *kavya*, and the various niches that specific literary languages held in premodern India. It also corrects the record about the precise relationship between Prakrit and the Indian vernaculars, pushing back against the presentist tendency of early 20th century linguists and Indologists like Grierson to fold Prakrit and especially *Apabhramsha* (the precursor to modern vernaculars) into anachronistic labels like 'Old Hindi'. The book is also broad in scope, covering various epistemic fields that include epigraphy, history, and high literature. It contains a wealth of original translations from Prakrit and Sanskrit, citing a wide array of texts, many of which are unpublished and available only in manuscript form. Ollett's work is an understated yet solid contribution to the field of linguistics, particularly to language ideology, examining an important

but understudied language from a civilization with perhaps unmatched in its linguistic diversity, and an indigenous tradition of linguistic analysis that goes back thousands of years. However, the present author found that the language order as a paradigm was treated a little lightly in the book. Ollett explicitly draws on the field of language Ideology, and rightly points out that current methods may emphasize reductive Western-centric categories like 'prestige' and 'distinction'—pitfalls, that he navigates by adopting an empirical approach. Ollett does this by examining how Prakrit and Sanskrit were ordered and conceptualized against and alongside each other in premodern texts. In this way Ollett argues he can be 'theory-neutral' while borrowing simultaneously from Language Ideology. The present authors wonders how someone armed with French theory would attempt to deconstruct this.

Language of the Snakes is a welcome and original scholarly work on Prakrit, South Asian languages, and linguistics more generally. This book will be of particular interest to philologists, Prakrit specialists, scholars of Indian languages, and linguists. It is suitable for graduate students and senior research scholars alike.