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Types of Sūtras in the Aṣṭādhyāyī

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Pāṇini's Aṣṭādhyāyī is called Aṣṭādhyāyī because it contains eight chapters; each of these is further divided into four quarters. In total, there are 3,978 sūtras. The reference to a sūtra has three parts: '1.4.14' refers to the 14th sūtra in the fourth quarter of the first chapter. The sūtras of Aṣṭādhyāyī are classified under six heads: sanjñā, paribhāṣā, vidhi, niyama, atideśa and adhikara. Some add a seventh head, nisedha.

The most common rule is the vidhi, operational rule. These describe the normal processes of grammar.

A sanjñā sūtra is a definition which introduces new technical words. For example, 1.4.14 (suptiñantam padam) defines a word as something ending in either a sup or tiñ, both of which are technical words referring to case-affixes and verb-affixes. The names 'sup' and 'tiñ' are themselves formed by combining the first syllable of the case-affixes with the last 'it' of the last case-affix and by combining the first syllable of the verb-affixes with the last 'it' of the verb-affixes. We observe that this convention is exactly similar to the way pratyāhāras formed using the Māheśvara sūtras.

Rules which establish such conventions are called paribhāṣa rules, or metarules, or rules of interpretation. 1.1.46 (ṣaṣṭhī sthāneyogā) gives the rule of interpretation when a word is used in the genitive case, ṣaṣṭhī vibhakti. Normally, ṣaṣṭhī vibhakti is used to convey the sense of possession, as in rāmasya bāṇam, rāmabāṇam, relation in place, comparison, nearness, proximity, change, collection, component member and others. The present sūtra clarifies that in the sūtras of Aṣṭādhyāyī, whenever a word occurs in ṣaṣṭhī, without any qualification, it will assume the meaning of 'in the place of'.

The adhikāra sūtras are usually translated as headings. For instance, 2.13 (prākkaḍārātsamāsaḥ) states "all the terms that we

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shall describe from this point up to the sutra 2.2.38 (kaḍarākarmadhāraye) will get the designation of samāsa or compound.” Similarly, 3.1.1 (pratyayah) states that the third, fourth and fifth chapters deal with affixes. Thus, we see that the validity of adhikāra sūtras extends over many sūtras. Thus, in a sense they are super-vidhi sūtras. These are marked with a svarita tone, so that a student might know which sūtras extend their influence. In printed texts, some notation or the other, such as marking adhikāra sūtras in bold print, is followed.

An extension rule extends the operation of a rule to a given item as well. An example would be out of place in an introductory essay, such as this, but suffice to say that unlike an adhikāra sūtra, the application of an extension sūtra is much more restricted, usually to one sūtra.

A niyama sūtra restricts the application of a previous rule. This marks exceptions to the vidhi rules. A nisedha sūtra is a negation. For instance 1.1.9 (tulyāsyā prayatnam savarṇam) defines savarṇas as those which have a comparable effort in producing the varṇa. The immediate next sūtra, 1.1.10 (nājjhalau) clarifies that vowels and consonants cannot be savarṇas.

Based on these rules, a vritti is made of the sūtras. A vritti is a complete, intelligible sentence which gives the intent of the sūtra.

The Arrangement of Sutras in the Aṣṭādhyāyī

The Aṣṭādhyāyī was composed in the days when such texts were learnt by heart first and then the application was understood, practiced and mastered. Consequently, it is expected that all the nearly 4,000 sūtras be applied simultaneously in a given situation to determine the correct grammatical transformation. In case more than one sūtra is capable of being applied, but there is a conflict in the force of such competing sūtras, usually the latter prevails. Depending on the type of sūtra, the order of preference in case of conflict varies. The order of preference for different types of sūtras is clearly laid out.

The exception to the above arrangement is spelt out in 7.2.1 (pūrvatrāsiddham) which states that the earlier sūtras be treated as not valid. Thus, in the first seven chapters and a quarter (referred to as sapādi, with the quarter), the sūtras are applied progressively, one after other to a given situation; in the last three quarters (the tripādi) the same arrangement continues, but with the sūtras in the first seven chapters and a quarter not being valid.

The application of Aṣṭādhyāyī to a given situation requires considerable intellectual prowess, so much so that not all word forms are settled. Even after it was applied competently for a number of centuries, it is possible to launch into a discussion of what the correct form of a particular word is. The scope for Śāstrārtha discussion on even such a simple matter as how should 'rupees five hundred' be expressed in Sanskrit is considerable.

Such difficulties gave rise to the need for a simpler way to study the Aṣṭādhyāyī. Early attempts were to re-organise it under subject-matters, prakaraṇas. These attempts, over many iterations spread across centuries reached a perfect shape in the sixteenth century in the form of Siddhāntakaumudī.

The Siddhāntakaumudī, composed in the 16th century by Bhattoji Dīkṣita, rearranges the 3978 sūtras of the Aṣṭādhyāyī under various groupings, more similar to a modern book of grammar. Along with the sūtra is given a short explanatory comment by Bhattoji Dīkṣita. The key job done by these comments or notes is point out application of other sūtras along with the present one, or where other seemingly contradictory rules are not applicable.

This has become so popular that for the last four hundred years, the Aṣṭādhyāyī was mainly studied in the form of the Siddhāntakaumudī, not in its original form. Swami Dayanand Saraswati, the founder of Ārya Samāj, promoted the study of Aṣṭādhyāyī in its original form more than a hundred years ago. Notwithstanding the sustained efforts of Āryasamājis ever since, Siddhāntakaumudī with its derived texts, mainly the Laghu Siddhāntakaumudī remains the most popular text for learning grammar.

Bhattoji Dīkṣita himself wrote a commentary on Siddhāntakaumudī called Praudhamanorama, where he establishes that only Pāṇini, Kātyāyana and Patanjali may be accepted as authorities on matters of grammar. There have been other commentaries on Siddhāntakaumudī, including a couple – brihacchabdaratna and laghuśabdratna by the grandson of Bhattoji Dīkṣita, Hari Dīkṣita.

The Siddhāntakaumudī includes commentary on the uṇādi sūtras, phiṭ sūtras and liṅgānuśāsanam, apart from the commentary on māheśvarasūtras and the Aṣṭādhyāyī. Thus we see that over a few centuries the Vedic language got refined into Sanskrit with a most impressive grammar being evolved in the form of Pāṇini's Aṣṭādhyāyī at least two and a half millennia back. It might not be incorrect to say that the grammar of Sanskrit is the oldest, shortest and the best grammar of any language in the world. The ideal of dividing a language into components and rules governing how the components interact with each other has been perhaps achieved best in Sanskrit.

With such extra-ordinary sophistication, perfection really, it is not a wonder that grammar acquired canonical status, and Pāṇini, the equivalent of Sainthood. Great as Pāṇini was, the grammar in its final form is most likely a culmination of the efforts of generations of grammarians over a few centuries. It is equally true, contrary to general perception, that grammar evolved after Pāṇini as well, incrementally in its rules, application and interpretation of rules; and dramatically in pedagogy – method of teaching.