

On the Construction of the Aṣṭādhyāyī

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While the Aṣṭādhyāyī shares an impressive number of formal concepts and devices with contemporary linguistics, others are conspicuously missing, such as hierarchical syntactic constituent structure, strict modular separation of components, grammatical relations such as subject, object, and indirect object, syllable structure, and the cyclic interaction of phonology and morphology within words. Would introducing these or other additional analytic tools have made it possible to further enhance or simplify Pāṇini's remarkable treatment of Sanskrit grammar? Answering this question involves going beyond simply interpreting the grammar to comparing it with hypothetical alternative versions of it in a kind of reverse engineering process. My preliminary conclusion is that no enrichment of the descriptive apparatus would have significantly improved the treatment of the material actually covered in the Aṣṭādhyāyī, but it could have made it possible to extend its coverage to aspects of the language that it does not address (such as word order and clausal subordination). This is consistent with the hypothesis that Pāṇini aimed only for maximal coverage and simplicity, without any prior theoretical or methodological commitments other than what comes with the śāstric tradition, and that he elaborated its descriptive apparatus hand in hand with the analysis as its increasing coverage required. The discrepancies in technique that have been noted between different parts of the work could then also be explained without appealing to multiple authorship.