

Introductory Kannada

Introductory course, LMU (as of August 6th, 2021)

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Contents (clickable links):

- [The Kannada language](#)
 - [Dravidian](#)
 - [A few linguistic characteristics of Kannada](#)
 - [The Indian state of Karnataka](#)
 - [What is taught in this course](#)
 - [The teacher](#)
-

The Kannada language

Kannada (also called ‘Canarese’ in older literature) belongs to the Dravidian family of languages and is the only official language of the south Indian state of Karnataka, with which the Free State of Bavaria has had a partnership agreement for scientific, technical, cultural and commercial exchange since 2007.

The oldest victory fragments of Kannada are from the fifth century CE, and because of its great significance for cultural history, the Indian government granted it the status of a classical language in 2008. Kannada is also recognized as one of the most important (if not the single most important) modern literary languages of India. It is spoken by roughly 55,000,000 people, of which approximately 11,000,000 speak it as a secondary language.

Kannada is probably the oldest known Indian language in Europe: in 1904, the German Indologist E. Hultzsch identified a few Kannada words in an ancient Greek drama that was found in Egypt.

The written language has hardly changed since 12th century. This means that one gains access to primary sources of several centuries of Indian cultural history through the modern written language. No other modern Indian language offers this.

Dravidian

The Dravidian languages are the sixth largest language family in the world. All of the languages of this family are spoken in the Indian subcontinent, some of them also by immigrant communities in other countries. Four of the 27 known Dravidian languages are highly developed literary languages and are spoken by many millions of people. Most of the Dravidian languages are tribal languages, spoken by small communities.

Linguistically the languages of India constitute the South Asian linguistic area, in which the peculiarities of the so-called Indo-European languages of north India can only be understood through a basic knowledge of Dravidian. Wherever the North Indian Indo-European languages differ from other Indo-European languages, Dravidian influence is the usual cause.

A few linguistic characteristics of Kannada

The Dravidian languages are so-called agglutinative languages.¹ This means that almost inflected forms are created by means of suffixes (Other well-known languages of this type are, for instance, Hungarian, Finnish, Turkish, and Japanese). The regularity of the inflections is striking: e.g., every word which ends in *-annu* is in the accusative case and is a grammatical object. Words category, grammatical gender, and number are irrelevant, because the ending is always the same. Thus Kannada does not have the bewildering plurality of forms which are found in many Indo-European languages. Morphology is thus learnt very quickly, and the student can concentrate on other aspects of the language, such as syntax, semantics, idioms et cetera.

The most interesting challenges in learning Kannada are offered by syntax and semantics. Like Turkish and Japanese, Kannada is a very strongly left-branching language,² i.e., attributes always precede that to which they refer. There are no relative pronouns, nor any other relative words, and relative clauses are constructed by means of a special verb form.

Kannada has a script of its own, which developed since the fifth century CE at the latest. This type of script, as all the scripts systems of India that evolved from the ancient Brahmi script, is not an alphabet, but an *abugida*,³ and it represents the pronunciation very accurately.

The Indian state of Karnataka

As mentioned earlier, the Free State of Bavaria has a partnership agreement for scientific, technical, cultural, and commercial exchange with Karnataka. This means that the most intensive and most important relationships between the Free State and India will be those with Karnataka.

1 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agglutinative_language

2 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Branching_\(linguistics\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Branching_(linguistics))

3 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abugida>

But Karnataka is one of the most important parts of India not only from a contemporary economical point of view (especially with its capital Bangalore as the centre of the Indian information technology sector). It has played a role of great importance in the cultural history of India as a whole (in the areas of religion, philosophy, literature, music) and still continues to do so. Karnataka is also a great ecological importance, because a large part of the Western Ghats⁴ (a mountain range which UNESCO considers to be one of the most important biodiversity hotspots⁵ worldwide) lies in Karnataka.

What is taught in this course

The introductory course at the LMU teaches the modern Kannada written language, which has hardly changed over the past nine centuries. Occasionally, there will be references to regional peculiarities that also occur in the written language, and basic patterns of conversation (especially such that are of cultural interest) will be discussed; however, the main focus of the course is on reading and writing the standard language, not so much speaking, or the differences between dialects. Special attention will be given to such cultural peculiarities of the language that lead to insights in fundamental cultural and social differences between Indian and Western thought.

The duration of this basic course is two semesters (Kannada I in the winter semester, Kannada II in the summer semester), four hours (2x2) per week. The medium of instruction is English.

The teacher, and the teaching material

Prof. Dr. Robert Zydenbos of the Institut für Indologie und Tibetologie at the LMU has lived in Karnataka for 17 years, speaks the language fluently, and has spoken in public in Karnataka several times, also in radio and television.

The **learner's manual for the course** was written by him and is available here (downloadable free of cost as a PDF file, but also available as a real book on paper): [Crossasia Books Heidelberg⁶ \(reviewed in *Vijaya Karnataka*, January 28, 2021\)](https://crossasia-books.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/xasia/catalog/book/736)

[How to write Kannada on computers \(in German\)](#)

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[Home page of the LMU](#)

4 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_Ghats

5 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biodiversity_hotspot

6 <https://crossasia-books.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/xasia/catalog/book/736>