

# Learning Sanskrit as a sacred language in the West: A narrative study

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## Abstract

**Aims and objectives:** This exploratory study investigates experiences and perceptions of Sanskrit language learning in Western non-heritage learners by analysing their language learning narratives.

**Methodology:** Sanskrit language learning narratives were elicited through unstructured interviews.

**Data and analysis:** Four Italian adults at a Sanskrit language Saturday class in Italy volunteered to participate: The teacher and three students, all yoga practitioners. Narratives were analysed using a combination of structured, thematic, and discursive approaches based on Riessman's dialogic/performance approach.

**Findings:** Sanskrit appears to be a sacred language to these learners, as it is the language of ancient philosophical or spiritual texts, and its sound has special effects on the mind and body. They learn Sanskrit to access texts in the original language and appear to have internalised Sanskritic views of perfection of the sounds of Sanskrit, their effects, and the joy of Sanskrit. Their approach to learning Sanskrit is at the interface of Western and Sanskritic traditions, as they embrace Western grammar-translation and Sanskritic teacher-disciple oral transmission and ignore the Western communicative approach and Sanskritic rote memorisation.

**Originality:** This is the first investigation of Sanskrit learning in non-heritage Western settings and one of the first to investigate the learning of a sacred language. Yoga practitioners are a hitherto unexplored population in language learning research. A narrative approach facilitates the exploration of participants' meaning-making and understanding.

**Significance:** The study contributes to the emerging field of research on the learning of sacred languages, revealing some similarities and differences between learners of Sanskrit and other sacred languages. It shows that narrative approaches are suitable for researching sacred language learning.

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## Keywords

Sanskrit, sacred language, language learning histories, language learning

## Introduction

The Sanskrit language is central to spiritual, philosophical and religious traditions that are of great interest in the West, such as yoga. Still, we know almost nothing about the learning of Sanskrit in the West. Our detailed literature search could not locate a single English-language peer-reviewed publication about Sanskrit learning in non-heritage settings in the West and only found occasional mentions in studies of spiritual and religious beliefs.

This exploratory study is the first empirical investigation of Western non-heritage learners of Sanskrit. It adopted a narrative approach to gain insights into the learners' perspectives on the language and language learning processes. Having analysed the language learning narratives of four Italian adult learners attending the same Saturday classes, we argue that:

- These Sanskrit learners are located at the interface between Sanskritic and Western approaches to the Sanskrit language and language learning and teaching.
- They study Sanskrit for philosophical or spiritual purposes, not only as a means to access original-language texts but also because the sound of the language has special characteristics and effects, in line with Sanskritic traditional views of Sanskrit. Being the language of revered ancient texts and having special features are characteristics of a sacred language.

In the following sections, we review research relevant to Sanskrit language learning in the West, describe and justify our aims and methods, present and discuss the two overarching themes we extracted from the narratives, and finally draw implications and proposals for further research.

## Background

### *Sanskrit as a sacred language*

The Sanskrit language appeared in writing around 1500–1200 BC in the Vedas (Cardona, 2007), collections of hymns only accessible to priests (Pollock, 2006). Later (300–1300), classical Sanskrit became the literary and scholarly language of the South Asian elites (Pollock, 2006), and modern Sanskrit is a written and spoken language in India (Cardona, 2007). In this article, we use 'Sanskrit' to refer to the sacred language and 'Sanskritic' to the culture and civilisation expressed in that language.

At the heart of Sanskritic traditions is the notion that the sound of Sanskrit is sacred (Beck, 1995). Considered of superhuman origin, transcendent, eternal, and unchangeable (Filliozat, 2000), Sanskrit was perfected (*saṃskṛtā*) by grammarians to preserve it (Pollock, 2006). It is a sacred language in Vedic, Mahayana Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism traditions and the only language of *mantras* (overtly or covertly repeated sacred utterances, Smith, 2005).

As a noteworthy feature, it is the spoken word that is transcendent, not the language or its written form (Filliozat, 2000). Mantras vibrate in tune with the nature of their referents, positively affecting bodies and minds, and any human can attain transcendental consciousness through hearing and chanting mantras (Lowitz & Datta, 2009). Given the sacrality of sound, precision is paramount, both in production and in oral transmission. Vedas and Sanskrit alike are perfect and eternal because they were passed on orally – recited, chanted – from teacher to student, without change, as

change means corruption (Filliozat, 2000; Spolsky, 2003). Indeed, writing was ignored for thousands of years in favour of oral transmission (Rao, 2014), and although written texts can support memorisation, a knowledgeable teacher is needed to learn sounds correctly (Fuller, 2001).

The traditional teaching of Sanskrit, first documented in the 7<sup>th</sup> century (Tull, 2015), reflects a model of knowledge transmission based on the direct teaching of a disciple by a knowledgeable scholar (*pandit* or *guru*, the latter being enlightened). Teaching requires a personal relationship between teacher and student and is adapted to each student's needs, for instance, by using stories to explain complex ideas (Mishra & Vajpayee, 2008). The teaching of Vedas consists of recitation and linguistic (syntactic and morphological) analysis, and learning consists of rote learning (Wujastyk, 1981). Learning Veda is a lifelong process, and a good teacher is a lifelong learner (Broyon, 2008). In today's India, Sanskrit is taught with Western approaches, but some traditional teaching and pandits remain.

### *Sanskrit learning in the West*

In so-called 'Western' countries – a cultural milieu including North America and Western Europe – Sanskrit has long been studied by linguists as the putative source of European languages and by humanities and social sciences scholars (Tull, 2015) as the language of Sanskritic culture (culture written in Sanskrit). To meet Westerners' needs, a Western approach to the study of Sanskrit was developed already in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, replacing the teacher-disciple oral transmission with textbooks, and Sanskritic grammatical explanations with Latin-based ones (Tull, 2015).

Nowadays, Westerners study Sanskrit because of interests in linguistics, classics, religions, literature, or – crucially here – yoga (Biltoo, 2022). Sanskrit is central to yoga (Sathaye & Winther, 2020), being the language of its texts (*Yoga Sūtras*; *Bhagavad Gītā*), *mantra* (including *om*), and terminology (*mudrā*, 'hand gesture'; *āsana*, 'posture'). Yoga originated as a set of physical, mental, and spiritual practices linked to religious traditions. However, to make it attractive in the West, it was secularised (De Michelis, 2008) and presented as a physical activity consisting of postures, breathing, and sometimes mindfulness, aiming at physical and mental wellbeing (Dutt & Selstad, 2022), after eliminating mantra chanting, references to gurus, and translated text reading (Antony, 2016) because yoga is rejected if perceived as a religious practice (Brown, 2019). Sanskrit being perceived as non-secular, Sanskrit terms were often replaced with English terms (Antony, 2016), and the learning of Sanskrit was eliminated from yoga practice (Jain, 2014).

In the West, yoga is accepted as a spiritual practice (Antony, 2014). Many Westerners who take yoga for wellness purposes later discover its spiritual side in their search for self-exploration and transcendence (Cagas et al., 2022), and spirituality becomes a main motivation (Park et al., 2016). Spiritually-oriented Western practitioners may well develop an interest in Sanskrit, but this has not been investigated.

### *The present study*

This is the first investigation of adult learners of Sanskrit as a sacred language in a Western context. Such research can contribute to the emerging field of sacred language learning, for two reasons. First, research on Sanskrit can contribute to sacred language learning researchers' efforts to capture similarities and differences across sacred languages (Bassetti, in progress, 2023). This is because Sanskrit, on the one hand, shares some characteristics of other sacred languages, such as being a scriptural language and attaching importance to correct pronunciation (similar to Quranic Arabic, see Gade, 2004), on the other hand, it is peculiar in its views on the transcendent importance and effects of its sound, its disregard for written texts, and its views of the teacher's role.

Second, Sanskrit is an important sacred language (Bennett, 2018), and although the number of its learners in the West is unknown, it is increasing (for instance, the teacher interviewed for this study reported a sevenfold increase in his student numbers in 20 years). We then opened the road to researching adult learners of Sanskrit as a sacred language by targeting a hitherto unresearched population, namely Western yoga practitioners.

The study is the first to use narratives to study sacred language learning. Narratives offer a privileged view of learners' perceptions of the language, the learning experience, and the learning process, promoting a better understanding of the singularities associated with sacred language learning and of its development in time. Indeed, narratives have been profitably used to research both language learning (Benson, 2005) and religion and spirituality (Gockel, 2013). We elicited narratives using unstructured interviews, as the lack of structure allows the interviewee to narrate what they consider relevant. Given the exploratory nature of this study, we adopted an analytical approach that allows a thorough investigation of the learning experience, inspired by Riessman's (2008) dialogic/performance approach to narratives, which is based on the premise that narratives are composed and received in contexts, conveying information about an individual, group, society, and culture. Riessman's hybrid approach facilitates the exploration of different layers of meaning interacting within the narrative.

## Methods

This exploratory study adopted a narrative approach to investigate the individual experiences of four Western adult learners of Sanskrit, whose language learning narratives were collected using unstructured interviews.

### The context

Bibliothèque (from *biblioteca*, 'library', and *tè/the*, 'tea') is a cultural association devoted to Indian culture in Rome, based in two large rooms: a library-cum-classroom and a tearoom-restaurant. It is an eclectic space featuring a shop sign in devanagari-looking roman letters, patio windows separating Indian furniture and decorations inside from a typical Italian piazza outside, and Indian teas accompanied by muffins or scones. Bibliothèque hosts cultural events showcasing Indian and Italian artists, publishes books, and offers Indian culture courses such as ayurvedic massage.

On Saturdays, it hosts two Sanskrit language sessions. In the morning class, students study the language – phonology, grammar, vocabulary – and translate texts. In the evening session, they read aloud, chant, and listen to the teacher's analysis of extracts from the *Bhagavad Gītā* (a dialogue between a prince and Vishnu, possibly dated 1<sup>st</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> century, from the Mahābhārata). The teacher sits at a large teak table with elephant-shaped legs, with a flipchart and a computer for distance students; students sit around the table or facing it, holding a book, some with food or tea, surrounded by bookcases displaying books about Indian philosophy, spirituality, and religions.

### The narrators

The four narrators were Iacopo, a Sanskrit teacher with 20 years of experience, and three of his students – Margherita, Elsa, and Daniela. Margherita has been studying Sanskrit for 10 years, Daniela for 5, and Elsa for 3. Like most students on the course, the three are yoga practitioners. Despite demanding careers – Margherita is a musician, Daniela an archaeologist – they have been practicing yoga for a long time: Daniela for 15 years and Margherita, a qualified yoga teacher, for 20.

Margherita – a friend of Bassetti – was recruited directly, and the others volunteered after the project was advertised in the course. Data collection ended when nobody else volunteered (an additional written narrative was too short to be included). Narrators selected self-attribution or pseudonymisation of their story (names are real, except Daniela). Iacopo checked his interview translation, and Margherita provided feedback on the analysis. The University of Birmingham provided ethical approval (ERN19-1814A).

### *The narrative interviews*

Each narrator told their Sanskrit language learning story to Bassetti in their native Italian in a single session, online because of the pandemic, between January and March 2022. The researcher asked the narrator to tell the story from their first encounter with the language, listened, providing only non-directive probing (humming, recasting), and asked open questions if the narrator requested input or stopped talking. The mean interview duration was 41 minutes, ranging from 28 (Elsa) to 52 (Margherita). Interviews were translated by a qualified Italian-English translator specialising in Buddhism and yoga traditions, and Bassetti, an Italian native and former translation manager, checked translations against audio-recordings.

### *Research team and analysis*

Bassetti is an applied linguist who researches bilingualism/multilingualism and language learning, mostly with quantitative methods. Reinboldt is a sociolinguist and qualitative researcher interested in identities and social discourses (re)presented in the narrative of experiences. These different backgrounds allowed the exploration of the language learning and its sociocultural aspects. Both had minimal knowledge of Sanskrit or yoga prior to this study and read the literature just before and during the analysis.

The analysis followed a few back-and-forth steps (Riessman, 2008). First, we read the translated transcripts independently and repeatedly. We analysed each transcript separately to identify the ordering of events, themes, and people made relevant by the narrator. We interrogated structure and contents (events, themes) and looked at instances of broader narratives or discourses employed in the meaning-making process, such as perceptions of the language and different learning processes. After producing four single analyses, we cross-analysed them to identify commonalities and differences, producing a thematic analysis with themes being constantly revised and refined. Guided by the dialogic/performance approach described above, we included rich contextual details known to us (of the participants, their backgrounds and settings) and aimed at representing participants' voices as much as possible. Throughout this period, we met weekly to discuss the analyses, co-authored and commented in shared online drafts, and linked the findings to the literature on language learning and sacred languages.

### **Findings and discussion**

In our analysis, we explore two aspects that appear to underpin much of the narrators' sense-making and that stood out to us as specific to the learning of Sanskrit. First, these Sanskrit learners are located at the intersection of and draw from both Sanskritic and Western language learning and teaching traditions. Second, they have internalised Sanskritic views of Sanskrit being the language of spiritual and philosophical texts and a unique language with unique effects.

In the report discussed in the following sections, to privilege the narrators' voices and maintain the text's flow, their (translated) words are represented in *italic* and often interwoven with the text.

At the same time, more extensive passages are numbered for reference and marked with quotation marks. The original language of the numbered passages is available in the online Supplemental Materials.

### *The Western Sanskrit learner at the intersection of Western and Sanskritic traditions of language learning and teaching*

The first overarching theme that can be identified in these narratives is that to these learners, the Sanskrit language and its learning and teaching are at the interface between Western and Sanskritic traditions. Narrators encounter Sanskrit within two contexts: in a Western and secular context as a classical language related to Western classical languages and as the language of Sanskritic spiritual and philosophical traditions. Also, as language learners, they are singularly placed at the intersection of Western and Sanskritic traditions of language learning and teaching. These themes are developed in the following sections.

### *The Sanskrit language between Western classical languages and Sanskritic philosophical and spiritual traditions*

(1) *There was a motivation purely connected to the academic side of it, however after that there's also been a matter of great fascination because that was the language of the Vedas, of yoga.* [Iacopo]

The narrators generally encountered Sanskrit both in a secular and Western context, at school or university, as a classical language that reputedly originated the European languages, and as the language of Sanskritic philosophical and spiritual traditions. This reflects the dual role Sanskrit has historically played among Western scholars.

Elsa and Margherita first heard about Sanskrit around age 14, while attending Latin or Classical Greek classes at a *liceo classico* (a humanities-focused type of high school), where Sanskrit was presented as a classical language that reputedly originated Indo-European languages. Margherita's (2) '*first teacher of Latin and Greek used to mention Sanskrit all the time as the root of the Indo-European languages*'. Elsa recalls that (3) '*every few lines of the Greek textbook it said . . . common Sanskrit root*'. This is probably not unusual in Italy, where 10% of high schoolers currently attend a *liceo classico*, and another 25% study Latin (Istat, 2022).

It was starting yoga practice that led the three narrator students to first hear the sounds and words of Sanskrit. Hence, the first direct encounter with the language was in the context of Sanskritic traditions. For Elsa, the *curiosity and motivation to study* Sanskrit arose when she started practicing yoga because (4) '*since the first classes I went to, the term they used was always Sanskrit . . . they would chant mantras in Sanskrit*'. As she deepened into yoga practice, it seemed *essential* to study Sanskrit to (5) '*really know what the pronunciation was*'. When Margherita took up yoga, (6) '*this was the first encounter*', as the '*word yoga is Sanskrit, so that was the first . . . little seed*'. She '*began to hear the sounds of Sanskrit words*' because '*yoga, mudrā, and also karma, and all the basic words . . .*' are in Sanskrit, '*even . . . the most basic mantra om – om is Sanskrit*'. She then took up Buddhism classes, where she (7) '*kept encountering*' Sanskrit terms and '*really slipped into it*'. She started studying Sanskrit by herself, slowly studying word formation because it was *very important* to her to know the meaning of words, mantras, and position names and (8) '*knowing how to pronounce their names*'. This '*helped her a lot to make sense of what she was doing, otherwise these words remain just sounds*'.

Daniela also encountered Sanskrit both in the context of Western classical languages and of Sanskritic traditions, but her story develops in the opposite direction, as she first encountered it as



the language of Sanskritic philosophy, and then in relation with Western languages. As many yoga practitioners, and as Margherita, Daniela took up yoga for physical exercise. She decided to try yoga (9) *‘instead of going to a gym’*, but *‘from there a journey started, because I came across this discipline, I liked it very much, I thought that it was a journey that could suit me’*. As her yoga practice was evolving, she started reading texts about yoga and its philosophy, then decided to study Sanskrit, and eventually enrolled at Bibliothèque. However, 15 years after that first encounter, she started feeling (10) *‘the need to go back to studying the origin of Sanskrit and Indo-European languages with an archaeological approach’* and is now studying *‘the origin and formation of Indo-European languages . . . combining methods from theoretical archaeology and linguistics, sociology, anthropology’* and has developed interesting theories about the development of these languages.

Iacopo describes taking up Sanskrit as an undergraduate module within a degree in linguistics. However, he clarifies that at that point, he already knew about Sanskrit as the language of Hare Krishna philosophy. The (11) *‘environment of [his] teenagerhood had been permeated by the philosophy and culture of the Hare Krishna’* because of his father’s involvement with the devotees, and he himself had become a devotee in his final year of high school. Although he studied Sanskrit within a degree in linguistics, he (12) *‘was a special student because he was a devotee student’*.

To summarise, all the narrators encountered Sanskrit both in a Western context and within the context of Sanskritic spiritual/philosophical traditions, albeit with different modalities and directions. These two types of encounters reflect the historical dual role of Sanskrit in Western scholarship, as a classical language related to Western languages and as the language of Sanskritic philosophical, religious, and spiritual traditions.

### Embracing Western and Sanskritic traditions of language learning and teaching

(13) *I was expecting [to study Sanskrit] the way I study Greek; instead I found myself in this craziness.*  
[Elsa]

Elsa’s first encounter with a Sanskrit class was *a bit shocking*. Her first visit to Bibliothèque happened during an evening session. She expected *something more like university*, but instead, she recalls, (14) *‘I found myself among people performing Kirtan [a musical shared recitation] with drums, cymbals and what have you . . . and they were chanting’*. Elsa’s ironic account hints at a common theme: Narrators study Sanskrit using the Western traditional grammar-translation approach and also adopt Sanskritic traditions of language learning and teaching. These two traditions are well exemplified by the two Saturday classes they attend. In the morning class, Daniela explains, they *are . . . going over part of the grammar*, and they *translate literary texts*. The focus is on grammar and translation, although other aspects of language are presented, including calligraphy. In the evening reading session, they read aloud (15) *‘the way they do it in India, pada pada, word for word’*, explains Margherita, *‘the maestro chants it and we repeat it. So word by word, then verse by verse, then three verses . . . he teaches us this thing by chanting and we chant, he chants and we chant, then he chants the whole thing’*. The chanting can be accompanied by music – the ‘craziness’ described by Elsa earlier (under the section head “Embracing Western and Sanskritic traditions of language learning and teaching”).

The students agree that the best approach is to study Sanskrit like a classical language because it fits their purposes. Daniela is *studying Sanskrit as a dead language* because her *main interest is . . . to be able to access the . . . Upanishad*. They, therefore, adopt the traditional techniques and tools of grammar-translation. Elsa *would compare studying Sanskrit to studying Greek and Latin* and finds learning grammar and translating in class *absolutely good*. Margherita *bought a lot of*

grammar books and has various vocabularies because Sanskrit is a bit like Greek, it requires huge dictionaries. Far from being based on oral transmission, learning is supported by 'Western' language learning resources, such as printed dictionaries and grammar.

At the same time, the narrators appear to have embraced and enjoy the Sanskritic traditional practice of listening and repeating. They have also internalised aspects of Sanskritic approaches to learning/teaching in general, not only language learning/teaching, for instance, the use of tales to exemplify complex concepts. Among other examples, Iacopo explains the concept that Sanskrit learning is a lifelong enterprise by recounting the story of Indra, who keeps going back to school for a 100 years.

Unhelpful traditions are ignored or rejected, whether the Western communicative approach or the Sanskritic rote memorisation. The narrators, who would have experienced the communicative approach in the context of foreign language learning, reject speaking the language as an aim. Daniela knows that there are spoken Sanskrit courses and places where Sanskrit is spoken, but she *never had any expectation of learning spoken Sanskrit*, and Elsa notices that some teachers speak Sanskrit among themselves but rejects the practice outright. Rote memorisation, central to Sanskritic language learning practices, is never mentioned. They memorise mantras but do not appear to consider memorisation as an educational tool, although they probably experienced it in primary school (for poetry, multiplication tables, toponyms), and some also for classical language learning (declensions, conjugations). Memorisation must be accompanied by meaning to be acceptable, and Margherita, unsatisfied with this approach, had a 'Western' need for understanding: (16) *'I didn't want to repeat a nonsense singsong, and there were starting to be too many nonsense singsongs . . . I also [want to] know the meaning, maybe because I am a Westerner, my "monkey mind" as they call it in India absolutely wanted to know what these words meant'*. Margherita also shrugs off the tradition of excluding females from studying Sanskrit study (which still exists, Broyon, 2008) as a thing of the remote past.

Apart from embracing Sanskritic traditions of learning and teaching, these narrators also seem to have internalised Sanskritic views of the teacher as a knowledgeable and caring individual. Across the narratives emerges the strong impact of encounters and interaction with key individuals, such as yoga and Sanskrit teachers, who are knowledgeable and have a relation with the student, or impacted their life in one way or another. These key individuals are very knowledgeable, but knowledgeability is not enough, and very 'academic' teachers are admired for their knowledge but considered unsuitable. There has to be a personal relationship to make these individuals influential and good teachers. Such individuals are often called *maestro* – an honorific term for a teacher, not the neutral *insegnante* commonly used for language teachers or, indeed, for postural yoga teachers. To the best of our knowledge, such a strong impact of important figures is not typical in language learners. Instead, it is remindful of the Indian concept of a teacher (*pandit* or *guru*), an especially knowledgeable individual who takes a special interest in their disciples (Mishra & Vajpayee, 2008).

Iacopo took up Sanskrit as an optional module at university following advice from a Hare Krishna devotee, who suggested it would be useful to provide the devotees with *references to the original language of the texts*. This influential individual was *one of Iacopo's main reference points*. He was knowledgeable, being a *direct disciple of Prabhupada*, and he had a *very beautiful relationship* with Iacopo, being a *family friend*. Later, a professor who *has always been a reference point for everybody* sent Iacopo to study with another professor, who was considered an *excellent teacher* and who *always was very professional* but also *always very friendly and kind, and beyond professionalism, there was this closeness, and he also took Iacopo to heart* because they were from the same part of the country. All these key individuals have two characteristics: huge knowledge and taking Iacopo to heart. This is the Indian teacher-disciple relationship in its essence.

Iacopo has now taken over this role for his own students. He modestly and indirectly informs us that he is knowledgeable: He has *been divulging Sanskrit for 20 years*, and already 10 years ago,



his former Sanskrit professor at a major university told him, (17) *'You have stolen my trade'*. He also tells us he takes a close relationship with his students, as he says, (18) *'I draw a lot of inspiration from my students . . . I identify a lot with what they are doing, because it is what I was many years ago'*. He also keeps learning, (19) *'I try to be the best I can and keep my enthusiasm alive'*, another indicator of good teachers in Sanskritic traditions (Broyon, 2008).

Indeed, Iacopo is a major reason why Margherita took up Sanskrit. She *used to eat at Bibliothèque and was increasingly attracted to the world of Indian culture, and they offered classes on all sorts*; so it sounds like she could have taken another direction, but she *was beginning to notice this teacher, Iacopo. Iacopo is not a traditional teacher*; he has an unusual religious background and is a very sweet, humble, and nice person. He is very knowledgeable, having studied with a *great professor*. However, Margherita makes it clear that immense knowledge is not enough. She contrasts Iacopo with someone else who has written many books and *is a giant* but is not like her *maestro* Iacopo, for whom *everything always has a spiritual, universal meaning*. Another strong influence in Margherita's life is a *yoga maestra* who always used Sanskrit words in her classes. She not only influenced Margherita to study Sanskrit but also changed her life. Margherita says, (20) *'over the 15 years with my maestra, I saw myself transformed completely, much more than with any psychologist . . . That is incredible'*. Daniela also talks about the importance of her encounters with such teachers, as (21) *'their personal experience is an enormous enrichment'*. Again, we see knowledge and personal relationship with and impact on the student.

Although nobody mentions the words *pandit* or *guru*, from the way narrators talk about the crucial role of teachers, it appears that they have internalised Sanskritic views of the teacher-disciple relationship, with the exception of Elsa, who appears as an outlier here as elsewhere. Often an encounter with a knowledgeable, caring individual – a *yoga maestro*, a Sanskrit *maestro*, a devotee – determines a change or development. Narrators often refer to their Sanskrit teachers as *maestro*, which is not a neutral word, being suitable for a spiritual teacher but not for a language teacher. Margherita alone uses the word *maestro* 30 times. Later, commenting on the findings of this study, she explains that a yoga teacher is a *maestro* if s/he covers spiritual aspects. When s/he only teaches postural yoga, that is an *insegnante*. What they call *maestro* is a teacher who is very knowledgeable and often takes a personal interest in the student. This probably reflects Sanskritic models they have encountered as learners of Sanskrit or of yoga, although the tradition requiring yoga adherents to defer to a guru has been removed from Western yoga (Jain, 2014).

In conclusion, these are reflective and sophisticated language learners who make the best of both the Western and Sanskritic language learning traditions. Having encountered Sanskrit in both contexts, they adopt what they like and need from both traditions (grammar-translation, repetition, illustrative tales), internalise novel views (the knowledgeable, caring *maestro-pandit*), and ignore what they do not like or need (the communicative approach, rote memorisation, gender roles), in their special position at the interface of two cultures.

## **Learning Sanskrit as a means to access spiritual-philosophical sources and to enjoy the effects of its sound: Internalising Sanskritic views of the nature and effects of the Sanskrit language**

(22) *So at a rational, intellectual level, having an interest in these texts, being able to approach those texts with a knowledge of the nomenclature, of the terms, a deeper knowledge of the language, that was the rational aspect, so the first desire, but there has also been an emotional, irrational aspect to it, connected to the sound of this language which I found extremely fascinating.* [Daniela]

This quotation perfectly captures the second overarching theme that can be identified in these narratives. The narrators' Sanskrit language learning is rooted in a quest for knowledge, as learning

the language grants access to spiritual and philosophical texts in the original language – as is often the case with sacred language learning – but at the same time, learning the language allows the correct pronunciation of its sounds, as the sound of Sanskrit has special characteristics and effects on body and mind – a peculiarity of the Sanskritic traditions which the narrators have embraced entirely.

### *Sanskrit as the means to access spiritual and philosophical texts*

(23) *Studying the sacred language Sanskrit allows me to get close to this kind of philosophy, which I find of immeasurable value to me.* [Daniela]

Although they have different specific spiritual or philosophical interests, the main reason narrators began studying Sanskrit, are studying it, and intend to continue studying it is to access Sanskrit texts.

As evidence, Iacopo started reading translated texts in high school, when, as a Hare Krishna devotee and Bhakti ('devotion') yoga practitioner, he *was very passionate about studying Veda texts, the Bhagavad Gītā and the Srimad Bhagwatam*. These were well-translated – he praises the latter as *a compelling translation with a really beautiful commentary that is deeply lived and felt* – but he took up Sanskrit at university to access the original texts for himself and fellow devotees. For Margherita and Daniela, after developing an interest in Indian spirituality and philosophy because of their yoga practice, learning Sanskrit became crucial to access original-language texts. Daniela, who was reading translated texts, *stumbled over a peculiar text about Tantrism (The Serpent Power)*, whose footnotes included *excerpts and quotations in transliterated Sanskrit*. She continues, (24) *'from there, this pulsion of mine towards Sanskrit was born'*. Today, her main interest *is still the same: to be able to access the Vedic texts, the Upanishad*. She reads them for her own pleasure, and she *likes to compare different translators and their translations of the same terms*. Margherita similarly says, (25) *'it's fantastic to be able to translate a text without intermediaries, one bit at a time, to be able to do this by myself. . . it's something I find amazing'*. Only Elsa does not mention reading texts; her main purpose is to learn correct pronunciation. Yet, among the narrators, she has the shortest history of Sanskrit learning, at just 3 years, and one can speculate that she may slowly develop deeper interests in future, as many yoga practitioners do (Cagas et al., 2022).

Although narrators generally aim at reading Sanskrit texts, there was interindividual variation. First, narrators presented their interests as spiritual or philosophical. Margherita is unabashedly spiritually-oriented. She uses the word *spiritual* and its declinations 18 times to qualify paths, communities, cities, meanings, purposes, symbols, as well as spirituality tout court. She talks about her *svadharma* ('my task, my mission in this world, part of my spiritual path') and has no qualms saying that the *Bhagavad Gītā is like the Gospel for Christians* and that Vishnu is the avatar that is closest to Christ. At the opposite end of the spectrum from Margherita, Elsa distances herself from spirituality: (26) *'there is much about spirituality, in the sense that many people who go there are on this spiritual path. . . I would define my approach as more secular, so to speak'* (here 'secular', *laico*, is used as antonym of spiritual). Iacopo presents his interests as philosophical throughout, from *the philosophy of the Hare Krishna* of his teenagehood through his university-time interest in *oriental philosophies* (a typical title for such university modules in Italy, generally encompassing Indian and Far Eastern tradition), and speaking of the present, he states, (27) *'I have always tried to keep my philosophical interest alive, because it is what gave me the original motivation to study the language'*. Second, narrators are interested in a variety of philosophical/spiritual traditions – tantrism, Anusara yoga, Theravada Buddhism, to name just a few – and their interests change over time. These individual quests reflect an approach 'where individuals pick and choose' different

traditions, resulting in ‘a hybrid mixture’ of beliefs and practices (Turner, 2011, p. 148), probably best explained within the inner seeking of the spiritual but not religious (SBNR; for SBNR in Italy, see Palmisano et al., 2021). Sanskrit is a tool in this individual and independent quest for meaning. Finally, learning Sanskrit also addresses material needs, including understanding etymologies, keeping the mind active, and providing relief to the loneliness of the pandemic. As one of the narrators perhaps inadvertently puts it, she uses Sanskrit ‘for her own purposes’.

### *Internalising Sanskritic views of the nature and effects of the sounds of Sanskrit*

(28) *All these sounds that really make you concentrate, they bring you into that vibration, it is a medicine, so there is beauty, there is the benefit, the joy, it gives you a sense of joy.* [Margherita]

Learning Sanskrit not only gives narrators access to the meaning of philosophical or spiritual texts, terms, and mantras, but it is also crucial for the correct production of the sounds of the language. Narrators appear to have internalised Sanskritic views of the nature and effects of the sounds of the Sanskrit language. They all attributed special qualities to its sound and discussed its effects, including strong positive emotion and particularly joy. Sanskrit is then valued as the language of spiritual and philosophical traditions and as a special language with powerful effects.

The sound of Sanskrit is beautiful and has many positive effects. *The study of the sound* is what *really made Iacopo fall in love with the language*. As shown in the extract under this section heading, Daniela was irrationally fascinated by the sound of Sanskrit. For Elsa, chanting mantra, with others or alone, or listening to mantra is something she feels in her body *in a really intense way*, something she *loves very much and that does her good*, that (29) ‘*gives you much joy . . . a really, really strong emotion of liberation*’. Margherita also says that the sound is beautiful and lists its benefits in her aforementioned quotation (extract 28): Concentration, healing, beauty and joy.

Sanskritic traditions strongly influence narrators’ views of the effects of Sanskrit and, unlike the language learning traditions discussed previously, these are not integrated with Western traditions. What makes Sanskrit peculiar is that its sound is believed to be perfect and to affect the body and mind, and narrators appear to have internalised this view. Reading, chanting, and cantillating are important, not just because *these texts were meant to be transmitted orally*, as Margherita says (see Rao, 2014) but crucially because the sound of Sanskrit has powerful effects. This reflects Sanskritic views of the transcendental nature of spoken Sanskrit (Beck, 1995), as the effects are limited to the spoken, not the written, language. In this context, precise pronunciation is fundamental. As Elsa explains, the vibration of mantras *is specific and fundamental*, and *for a mantra to work in a specific way*, accurate pronunciation is fundamental, *it is the base of everything*. This reflects Sanskritic views of the centrality of orally transmitted, precise, unchanging production of sound (Filliozat, 2000) and that mantras are only powerful if produced orally. This is peculiar to Sanskrit, and rather distinct from views of oral transmission and of the effects of the sonic dimension of other sacred languages (see for instance, Eisenlohr, 2018, for Quranic Arabic).

Sanskrit causes strong positive emotion, but the recurrent term joy (*gioia*), used by all except Daniela, stood out, as it is infrequent in Italian but rooted in Sanskritic traditions. While, in Western tradition, joy is caused by external factors, such as gifts or achievements (Casioppo, 2020; Watkins, 2020), here joy is an emotion that can be cultivated and achieved through different practices and an aim to be achieved in life (Bhatt, 2018). Margherita shows awareness of the origin of her views, as she explicitly links the joy of Sanskrit to Sanskritic traditions by using a Sanskrit term – (30) ‘[the sound of Sanskrit] *gives you a sense of joy, ananda means joy*’ – citing a mantra, ‘*anando ’ham, which means “we are happiness, we are joy”, which is what you get when you study this language*’.

Narrators' concept and use of the term *gioia*, as well as *maestro* discussed earlier, shows their knowledge of Sanskritic traditions, which is reflected in their repertoire – the means of communication they know how to use and why (Blommaert & Backus, 2013). The term *joy* (and *maestro*) is dialogised – infused with particular meanings associated with the traditional texts – as utterances, and words are bound to time, space, and people operating dialogically in the creation of meaning (Bakhtin, 1981). Its presence in narrators' repertoires demonstrates their engagement with spiritual and philosophical traditions, their affiliation with a particular community of practice, and the polycentricity of their learning experience (Blommaert & Backus, 2013).

## General discussion and conclusions

This research explored narratives of four Western non-heritage learners of Sanskrit. Findings confirm the narrators' understanding of Sanskrit as a sacred language because it is the language of revered spiritual and philosophical texts and because of the special nature and effects of its sounds. Over time, these narrators developed an interest in Sanskritic philosophical or spiritual traditions, and learning Sanskrit becomes important as the means to access these sources in their original language. They also internalised Sanskritic views of the sacrality of the sounds of Sanskrit and their positive effects on body and mind, resulting in positive emotion, particularly *gioia* (joy). Having encountered different approaches to language learning and teaching from both Western and Sanskritic traditions, they adopt some – but not all – and 'pick and mix' approaches to suit their language learning needs. Among Western traditions, they adopt grammar-translation but reject the communicative approach; among Sanskritic traditions, they embrace oral transmission from a knowledgeable teacher (a *maestro*, not an *insegnante*) and the listen-and-repeat approach to pronunciation and reading but ignore the role of rote memorization. It is not always clear how conscious these processes are. However, there is no denying that encountering Sanskrit has affected narrators' views of the language, its learning and teaching, its effects, and ultimately their lives.

Intergroup differences between sacred and non-sacred languages, and intragroup similarity and diversity within sacred languages, are why Bassetti (in press), (2023) argues that sacred language learning deserves to become a sub-field of language learning/acquisition. This study supports these views. First, the findings are particular enough to justify distinguishing the learning of sacred languages from the learning of modern and classical languages. While classical languages are also studied to access ancient texts, there is no equivalent of the physical and emotional resonance of the sounds of Sanskrit or the centrality of the teacher-student relation to the development of the learning experience. Second, findings confirm that there are enough commonalities to justify researching the learning of sacred languages as a single category of language and enough diversity to justify studying each of these languages separately and establishing their differences. Sanskrit, on the one hand, shares some characteristics of other sacred languages, such as being the language of important spiritual, philosophical, and religious texts, and the importance of accurate pronunciation; on the other hand, it displays peculiarities, such as the transcendence and the effects of sounds and mantras and the importance of their oral transmission. As argued by Bassetti (in press), (2023), future research should then pursue both the study of the learning of sacred languages as a category of language learning and the study of the learning of each sacred language separately to find commonalities and differences.

Finally, looking at methodology, this study shows that oral narratives are good sources of evidence for researching sacred language learning. Previous research had shown narratives' suitability for researching both language learning and religion and spirituality; the present study brought these two lines of research together. With its emphasis on the learner and on development over time, the

narrative approach allowed us to capture not only commonalities and diversity in the four narrators' experiences and meaning-making but crucially their development, as they encounter Sanskrit in a Western and a Sanskritic context, discover different Sanskritic spiritual and philosophical traditions, and internalise some aspects of the traditions they encounter and ignore or reject others. Given the individual trajectories and the continuous development of Sanskrit learners' quests for knowledge, underscored by their Sanskrit learning, a narrative approach is indeed particularly apt.

Future research should build on this preliminary study to further investigate Sanskrit learning among both yoga practitioners and other groups of Sanskrit learners. Researchers could use purposive sampling to investigate gender and other individual differences. These narrators were middle-aged high-SES female students, reflecting this group's well-documented preponderance among Western yoga practitioners (Park et al., 2015). However, it is unclear why none of the male students on the course volunteered to participate. Western populations other than yoga practitioners should be investigated, including Hare Krishna devotees, other religious groups, and heritage learners, as extant research on language acquisition and use in immigrant and heritage communities barely mentions their Sanskrit learning (for instance, Pillai, 2020; but see Souza & Lytra, 2023). Finally, future research could continue using narratives, as we did, and extend our findings by adopting other emic approaches.

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## Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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