



Humanities & Social Sciences

Andrew Ollett

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Andrew Ollett, Associate Professor at the University of Chicago in South Asian Languages and Civilizations, was trained in classical Greek and Latin before turning to Sanskrit and other South Asian languages. He completed his Ph.D. dissertation at Columbia University in 2016. He was a member of the Harvard Society of Fellows and joined the University of Chicago in 2019.

Prof. Ollett's major works include *The Mirror of Ornaments* (Alaṅkāradappanō): A Prakrit Work of Poetics; *Language of the Snakes: Prakrit, Sanskrit, and the Language Order of Premodern India*; and the edition, translation, and annotation of the Prakrit novella *Lilavai* by Kouhala. He is the co-founder of NESAR—*New Explorations in South Asia Research*.

Prof. Andrew Ollett's work in progress includes a comprehensive study of classical Sanskrit theories of meaning and an edition and translation of the Kannada grammar of poetry, *Kavirājamārgam* (with Sarah Pierce Taylor).



The Infosys Prize 2025 in Humanities and Social Sciences is awarded to Prof. Andrew Ollett for his outstanding work as a philologist, linguist, and intellectual historian of India and the leading scholar of the Prakrit languages in this generation. His book, *Language of the Snakes*, is a magisterial analysis of the cultural roles of Prakrit in tandem with Sanskrit and the Indian vernaculars over the last two thousand years. Ollett is a profound and creative scholar of classical Indian philosophy of language, especially semantics and pragmatics.

Scope and Impact of Work

Prof. Andrew Ollett's work is a model of philological depth and insight and a superb contribution to the intellectual history of South Asia over the last two millennia. His book, *Language of the Snakes* (University of California Press, 2017) presents a powerful, context-sensitive analysis of the many roles of the Prakrit languages, including Apabhramṣā, in relation to Sanskrit and the vernaculars from the earliest beginnings of Prakrit through the eighteenth-century Prakrit plays and extended poetic novels produced in Kerala and elsewhere. The book is a highly original essay on understanding the language order, to use Ollett's term, throughout South Asia over this immense stretch of time.

Prof. Ollett's work has also made central contributions to linguistics, particularly the study of semantics, pragmatics, and syntax, by lucidly presenting the rich theories of Indian philosophers of language writing in Sanskrit, including Kumārila Bhaṭṭa and the little-known Śālikanātha Mīśra, shrewdly assessing many of the key figures in this field of Indian thought, for theoretical plausibility both in its formal aspects as well as their application to the analysis of literary texts. Apart from completing this project on Indian theories of meaning, he is now working with Sarah Pierce Taylor on the grammar and poetics of the earliest stratum of medieval Kannada.

Andrew Ollett's contribution to the cultural and intellectual history of India is clearly of relevance to scholars of ideas in any human civilization. In particular, the overlapping or parallel concepts and also the striking divergences among Indian philosophers of language and modern linguists and cognitive scientists constitute a fertile field for study and experiment.

For scholars working in any of the South Asian languages and literatures, in any historical period including modernity, Ollett's definitions of shifting language orders have become fundamental to further research. The range of his linguistic abilities and the scope of his textual analyses and explications are exceptional, and his interdisciplinary interests have influenced colleagues from other humanistic disciplines, as was clearly the case during his years at the Harvard Society of Fellows. He is also the co-founder of NESAR—*New Explorations in South Asia Research*.

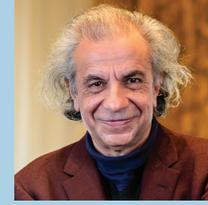
Expanded Citation

Prof. Andrew Ollett, is one of the finest philologists and cultural historians of South Asia in this generation. He is the leading scholar of Prakrit language and literature in the world and probably the finest connoisseur of Prakrit poetry since medieval times. Prof. Ollett's magisterial book, *Language of the Snakes: Prakrit, Sanskrit, and the Language Order of Premodern India* (2017), offers an historical grammar and analysis of the cultural roles of Prakrit in relation to, indeed interdependence with, Sanskrit and the vernaculars over the last two thousand years.

Ollett has, in addition, produced a pathbreaking edition and translation of the great early-ninth-century Prakrit novella of Kouhala, *Lilavai* (Murty Classical Library of India, 2021) as well as several penetrating essays on Indo-European linguistics, classical Kannada poetics, manuscript technologies, and the philosophy of language in the Sanskrit sources, with pioneering studies of Śālikanātha Mīśra and Kumārila Bhaṭṭa, among other pivotal figures.

Andrew Ollett's linguistic mastery and knowledge is breathtaking, ranging from detailed contributions to the study of Sanskrit, Prakrit, Kannada, Tamil, Old Javanese, and Chinese, to say nothing of his knowledge of the modern European languages and his training in Greek and Latin.

Jury Chair
Akeel Bilgrami



I extend my warmest congratulations to Andrew Ollett on being awarded the Infosys Prize 2025 in the Humanities and Social Sciences. As chair of the jury, I read with great admiration (and instruction) a very wide swathe of your writing, including *Language of the Snakes* and your Paris Lectures on pre-modern Indian theories of meaning—a corpus to be truly proud of, and to build on for what I expect will be equally significant contributions in your field in the future.

Contextualizing an ancient language

Language as culture and tradition

The Kenyan scholar Ngugi wa Thiongo once wrote, "Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world."

The discipline of linguistics helps us understand how language works on a theoretical level. The discipline of philology studies language as it is used in texts, especially historical texts, whether oral or written.

A discovery of languages

Andrew Ollett is an expert in Prakrit, a group of languages from ancient India. Like Sanskrit, it was a language of literary culture and used across South Asia, from Kashmir to Tamil Nadu, and from Sindh to Bengal, and was also known in Cambodia and Java. Traces of Prakrit can be found in many modern Indian languages such as Kannada, Gujarati, Marathi and others. Ollett's work explores the cultural role of Prakrit, its rise and decline through the centuries.

The Welsh scholar and judge William Jones's 1786 translation of Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntala* or *Recognition of Śakuntalā* introduced Sanskrit and Prakrit to the Western world. In this text, as in Indian stage-plays more generally, Prakrit is used for the speech of women and lower-status characters, while characters of high status speak Sanskrit.

