



## ISJS NEWSLETTER

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### Speak Up

#### APABHRAMSA 2.0: FROM MANUSCRIPTS TO MEMES

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If you thought Apabhramsa was just some dusty medieval language locked away in palm leaf manuscripts, think again. This so-called “broken speech” of the past is basically the OG version of WhatsApp forwards, Hinglish tweets, and Gen Z slang. Yes, Apabhramsa walked so that “LOL,” “ROFL,” and “idk bro” could run.

Back in the day, Sanskrit was the polished Oxford English of the subcontinent – formal, elite, and slightly intimidating. Prakrit was the everyday tongue, more relaxed, like chatting with your aunt on the phone. And then came Apabhramsa, the rebel child. It mixed things up, bent grammar rules, and basically said: “I’m not here to impress the scholars, I’m here to talk to the people.” Sound familiar? That’s exactly what memes and TikTok slang are doing today.

#### Dialects, Accents, and the Prakrit Puzzle

You might be surprised to learn that there are well over five distinct Prakrit dialects; some claim this number to be over twelve! So, which “Prakrit” do you want to learn? The choice is almost like picking which English accent you’d like to master.

- Perhaps you fancy sounding like Sir Michael Caine with his Cockney accent:  
*I 'ad uh lovely 'oliday, fanks.*  
/aɪ 'æd ə 'lʌvli 'ɒlɪdeɪ fæŋks/  
(I had a lovely holiday, thanks.)
- No? Maybe you want to sound like you’re a part of the Peaky Blinders and speak with a Brummie accent:  
*Ee's got a noice cah.*  
/i:z 'gəʊ ə 'nɔɪs ka:/  
(He has got a nice car.)
- No, no! You want to speak Estuary English like Ricky Gervais:  
*You be'uh cau ya mum.*  
/ju: 'bɪə kɔ: jə mʌm/  
You better call your mom.



And just as English learners often choose between Cockney, Brummie, Estuary, or Modern Received Pronunciation (RP), students of Prakrit had choices too. Modern RP, also known as “BBC English,” is sometimes thought of as the “standard” British accent. Similarly, in ancient India, certain Prakrits became “standardised” in literary use, while others remained closer to everyday speech.

Take youth language. Every generation reinvents speech, and Apabhramsa was medieval youth slang gone mainstream. Imagine a 12th-century poet dropping verses in Apabhramsa while the Sanskrit pundits clutched their pearls. Fast forward: Gen Z drops “sus,” “yeet,” or “delulu” into conversation, and boom – parents are confused, teachers are annoyed, but the vibe is immaculate. The 2025 Dictionary.com Word of the Year “6-7” has been raising palms as well as raising eyebrows.

### **Jainism and the Early Voices of Apabhramsa**

When Jainism enters the linguistic story, the plot thickens. The first Apabhramsa author was Joindu (c. 8th–9th century CE), a Jain poet whose verses predate Raidhu (c. 15th century CE) by several centuries who is said to be the first one composing in Apabhramsa. Joindu’s compositions remind us that Apabhramsa was not a degraded offshoot of Prakrit, but rather a vibrant medium capable of carrying spiritual insight and philosophical depth. Jain authors, ever attentive to accessibility, embraced Apabhramsa precisely because it spoke in the idiom of the people. Where Sanskrit often functioned as the polished language of the elite, Apabhramsa allowed ethical and devotional ideas to circulate in marketplaces, monasteries, and households. In this sense, Joindu’s pioneering work demonstrates how a so-called “vernacular” could become a vehicle of profound cultural transmission.

Jainism has always emphasised accessibility – whether through Sanskrit texts, Prakrit scriptures, Apabhramsa poetry, or vernacular preaching. Joindu’s pioneering work shows that Apabhramsa was not merely slang but a sacred medium, capable of carrying ethical and spiritual truths. In this sense, Apabhramsa was both rebellious and reverent, both meme and mantra.

### **Translation, Technology, and the Future**

Poor Apabhramsa was constantly accused of being “corrupt” or “impure.” Today, Google Translate feels the same pain when it tries to decode Hinglish: “*Kal party hai, full on masti hogi*” (Tomorrow is the party, there will be full-on fun). Machines still struggle with the glorious chaos of hybrid languages. But here’s the catch – what was once dismissed as linguistic messiness actually became the foundation of modern Hindi, Gujarati, Marathi, and more. So, maybe our emojis and abbreviations are just future classics waiting to happen. Imagine scholars in 3026 writing dissertations on the deep philosophical meaning of “😂” (which was the Oxford Word of the Year in 2015).

I must say that Apabhramsa thrived because it absorbed influences from multiple communities. It was a mash-up, a remix, a linguistic Spotify playlist. Today, we see the same thing: Hinglish,



Spanglish, and even “Globish” (simplified English for international use). Languages don’t die when they mix – they evolve, they party, they go viral.

Apabhramsa teaches us that language is not a museum piece – it’s a living meme. It thrives when it refuses to stay in its lane, when it dares to be messy, funny, and a little rebellious. The medieval poets who wrote in Apabhramsa were basically the stand-up comedians of their time, sneaking everyday speech into literature. And today, your WhatsApp group chat might be doing the same cultural work – minus the palm leaves, plus a lot more emojis.

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