

On the European Knowledge of Sanskrit

Lecture delivered in Hangchou Buddhist Academy (20.10.2018, revised January 2022) by Jürgen Hanneder

In the following lecture I shall first discuss the beginnings of Sanskrit Studies in Europe and dwell a little on this peculiar context for a lexicography of the Sanskrit language before introducing one recent attempt to contribute to the field.

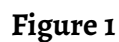
The European knowledge of Sanskrit in the early 19th century is an interesting phenomenon. A variety of factors had to work hand in hand to effect it and without some initial misunderstandings and wrong expectations it would perhaps have never turned out as it has.

But let us start with what we could call the prehistory of Sanskrit studies in Europe. The first European to learn Sanskrit was the missionary Heinrich Roth, a German born Jesuit, who travelled to India in the 1650s. He learned Sanskrit in Agra and composed a Sanskrit grammar in Latin,¹ which was highly sophisticated, but remained unpublished. The next missionary to study Sanskrit was Johann Hanxleden, also a Jesuit, now from the German North, who left us with a *Grammatica Grandonica*—the name is derived from “Grantham” for the Sanskrit characters.² Not long after Hanxleden's death the Carmelite missionary Paulinus a Sancto Bartholomeo, alias Filip Vezdin, came to South India. Contrary to his predecessors he was lucky to publish his attempt at a Sanskrit grammar called *Siddharubam* (1790), which was based on that of his predecessor. From the perspective of later Europeans interested in Sanskrit the *Siddharubam* seemed strange—Schlegel surmised it was not proper Sanskrit—, because being used to Bengali and Devanāgarī letters and a Bengali pronunciation the first European Indologists had problems with the South Indian presentation of Sanskrit texts by Paulino.

All these early attempts at making a Sanskrit grammar available in Europe encountered one major problem. They were written, as it were, without a contemporary context, for there were no imaginable recipients and no immediate purpose for such pioneering works. These early grammars were impressive starts and could

¹ Müller 1993, p. 148–155. ² The facsimile edition of his grammar contains a rich historical introduction. See Van Haal 2013.

Up to this time Europe had developed some ideas about India, often from travel



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reports, but since there was no access to written sources, the information was superficial and often mistaken. One example for this would be the wildly confused ideas about the Veda: Since European missionaries were mostly working in the South, one candidate for the Veda was the so-called Tamil Veda, the collection of hymns of the Tamil saints. Then there was the so-called *Ezourvedam*,³ which some thought was the French translation of the *Yajurveda*. Though it sounds absurd today, this book gained a high profile, because it was brought out in France with the help of Voltaire, one of the leading intellectuals in the 18th century. The book seemed spectacular, since there one could read even in French how proximate the ideas of ancient India were to European culture. Especially to hear of a rejection of idolatry, one of the big issues in the colonial view of Indian religions, in a pre-Christian Indian text was viewed as spectacular. Of course those who did read Sanskrit realized that this was unlikely and the text therefore suspicious. Already Paulinus wrote in 1791 that the actual *Yajurveda*⁴ contained ritual texts, whereas the *Ezourvedam*⁵ was written by an unknown missionary. When Indologists started to investigate the sources some time later it was found out that this was indeed correct. The work had no Sanskrit original; it had been written by a French missionary in French and then translated into an unconvincing Sanskrit. The *Ezourvedam* was in other words a literary forgery.

Many strange imaginations about India current at the time found their way into print and later became items for amusement, when Indological research started to stand on firmer ground. August Wilhelm Schlegel writes about one such idea from the widely read travelogue by Sonnerat⁶ in a highly amusing style:⁷

Sonnerat has many niceties to relate from a gruesome war between “Brachmanen” and “Bramen”, in which half of India's population perished and eventually the “Bramen” came out victorious. He has created mighty enemies for the Brahmins (“Brahmanen”), whose name is in fact still the same as in the times of Alexander, through a corruption of their own name. It is almost as if a historian would report about a war of extinction taking place between “Franzosen”

³ See Rocher 1984. ⁴ *Yagiurvédam, non autem Ezourvédam, praecepta sunt Samscrdamica Brahmanica, quae ritum docent* [...], op. cit., p. 315. ⁵ [...] *codex est manuscriptus cuiusdam Missionarii Indici* [...] *ibid.* ⁶ Sonnerat 1808. ⁷ Schlegel 1827, p. 52.

(the German name for the French) and the Frenchmen.⁸

Only gradually it became clear that earlier European literature about India with their monsters⁹ had to be dismissed and a real, source-based study of Indian culture was called for.

In the 18th century Sanskrit became more important for the British for practical reasons. Despite the fact that the court language and the legal language in colonial India was still Persian, knowledge of Sanskrit was increasingly necessary for Hindu (“Gentoo”) law. But the wider interest in Sanskrit was limited to administrative purposes, it was not an academic one, as an end in itself. So the language was taught in the college of the East India Company, whereas universities did not want to spend money on a Sanskrit philology. When the first English Sanskrit chair was established in Oxford in 1832, it was through the endowment by one Colonel Boden, made with the explicit purpose of converting the Indian “heathens” to Christian faith. This was not at all an appropriate start for an academic field of study, but the British study of Sanskrit culture had found its way outside the academia.

In this respect I will just mention two employees in the East India Company who had learned Sanskrit in India, that is Thomas Colebrooke¹⁰ and Alexander Hamilton,¹¹ since both were decisive factors in the development of a European philology of Sanskrit. Colebrooke was widely read in all segments of Sanskrit literature, he had spent a substantial amount of money for setting up a manuscript collection, which became an important library for European academics. His advice was highly valued and his publications remained standards for a long time. When his works were disregarded, as in the case of the Veda, on which he had written the first article, this probably meant that one was heading in the wrong direction.

When in India, both scholars were more integrated into Indian society than was possible in later times. They were married to Indian wives, had children with them, and their immersion in Indian culture resulted in a more intimate and positive view of Indian culture than that of many of their British peers. Both lamented the British

⁸ “Sonnerat weiß eben daselbst viel artiges von einem grausamen Kriege zwischen den Brachmanen und den Bramen zu erzählen, wobei die halbe Bevölkerung Indiens umgekommen, und die Bramen zuletzt Sieger geblieben seyen. Er hat den Brahmanen, die sich noch heute eben so nennen, wie zur Zeit Alexanders, aus der Verderbnis ihres eignen Namens mächtige Gegner erweckt. Es ist grade, als wenn ein Geschichtsschreiber von einem Vertilgungskriege zwischen den Franzosen und den Frenchmen meldete.” ⁹ See Mitter 1977. ¹⁰ Rocher 2011. ¹¹ Rocher 1986.

disinterest in Indian culture. Once Hamilton wrote in an article in the *Edinburgh Review* of 1811, where he desperately ridiculed the economical outlook combined with a cultural ignorance:¹²

Would an accurate translation of the Purāṇas, in the least curb the ambition of Buonaparte? What effect could the most profound commentary on the Veda have, in procuring for the nation a wise, a strong, and an energetic ministry? Would the price of candles be sensibly reduced, by the most luminous disquisition on the Hindu Triad? [...] Nay, we could not even conjecture what argument Brahmā himself could use at the Alien-office, to prevent his being ordered to quit the country, until six months after the conclusion of peace, – or at least until the resumption of cash payments by the Bank.

After returning from India Hamilton came to Paris in 1803 to catalogue the collection of Sanskrit manuscripts there. Now Paris, with its old university was then as it is now an interesting meeting place for scholars. When Hamilton was there, he was attached to one house in rue de Clichy, where Friedrich Schlegel and his wife Dorothea lived and where an interesting group met: the German writer Wilhelmine de Chézy, since 1805 the wife of the first Paris Sanskritist Antoine-Léonard de Chézy, or the Cologne art collectors Boisserée. Schlegel was trying to widen his scope by learning Persian but then took the opportunity to learn Sanskrit under the guidance of Hamilton. The result was the first real Indological book written in German, called *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier*, which was based on original texts rather than on inadequate translations and fanciful travel reports.

Meanwhile the European background for the study of Sanskrit had changed. Interested readers had come to know the *Bhagavadgītā* in the English translation of Wilkins (1785) and the *Śakuntala* translated into English by William Jones (1807). There was also a wide-spread expectation that the oldest Indian religion was monotheistic, and thus more compatible with Christianity than previously known. Furthermore a new literary movement started by the brothers Schlegel at the end of the 18th century—before their Indian phase—had shown that classical canons of criticism could not be applied to world literature. The literary production of every country and every time had to be judged by its own merits, not merely weighed against classical (European) standards. Its main theoretical head was

¹² Rocher 1986, S. 103.

August Wilhelm Schlegel, the later professor of Sanskrit in Bonn and real founder of an academic Indology in Germany. Schlegel had put the romantic program into practice by translating literature from English, but also from various Romance languages that were not previously taken as high literature, into German. When he turned to Sanskrit later, he explained in a letter to the German poet Goethe that it was only natural for him, after exhausting as it were European literature, to expand his literary interests beyond Europe and focus on India, where he was sure to find enough material.

A number of German scholars at the time took the chance to learn oriental languages in Paris and added Sanskrit to the mix. Soon another important change took place. After the first Sanskrit chair in Europe was established, that is, in 1815 in Paris, German universities were faced with the question, whether they wanted to keep up with the latest developments. Some universities first rejected the idea, as for instance the university of Würzburg, which did not want to employ Franz Bopp on what they called a luxury professorship of Sanskrit. But in 1819 August Wilhelm Schlegel started with Sanskrit in Bonn, Kosegarten in Jena, and Bopp in Berlin, and many more were to come. The unusual constellation in Europe was that while England, as the leading colonial power, had direct access to India, was extremely hesitant to start an academic Indology beyond pure language acquisition in the colonial institute, it was France, which had just a small colony in India, that started academic Indology, and strangely Germany, which held no Indian colonies at all, was following so quickly that it was soon to dominate the subject in many fields, as for instance lexicography.

But let me first return to how these European pioneers learned Sanskrit. I will pass over both the early missionaries and the English Sanskritists, for they could learn Sanskrit in India from materials that are now unknown, and probably from a teacher.

The sources for the Paris Sanskritists were an anonymous European sketch of the grammar, along with the grammar of Vopadeva and the *Amarakoṣa*, all of course in the form of manuscripts, which had to be hand-copied by each learner. The author of the grammatical sketch was not known at the time. When the manuscript was investigated much later, the grammar turned out to be from the same person who brought a collection of manuscripts to Paris, the French Jesuit missionary Jean-François Pons.¹³ Apart from this, there were a few new English printed grammars,

¹³ See Müller 1993, p. 155–160.

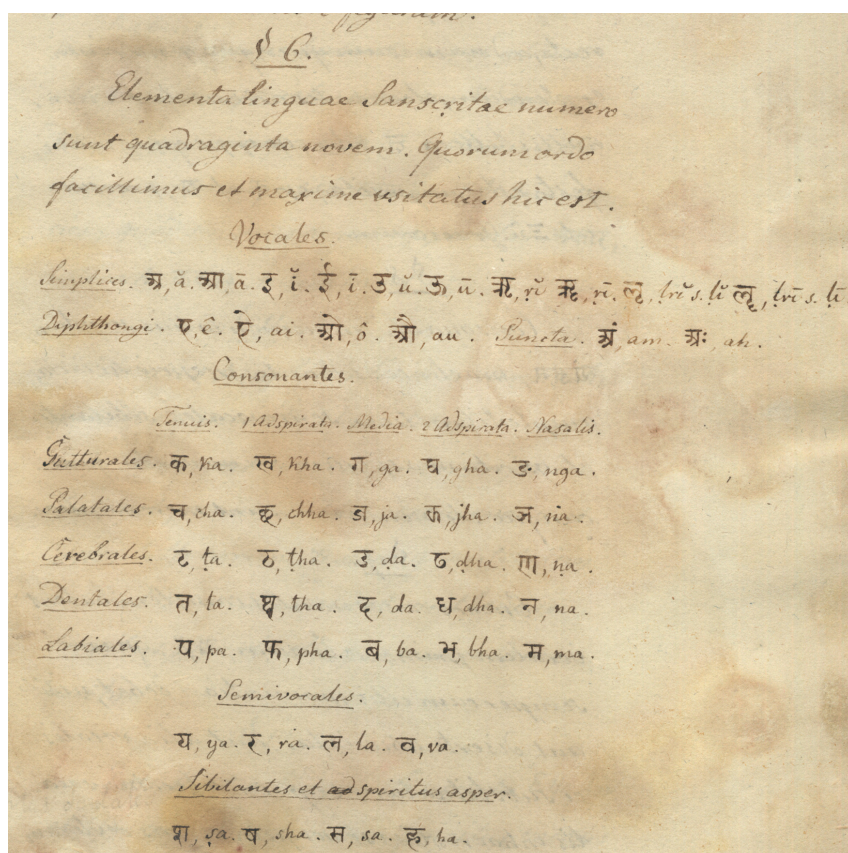


Figure 2 Page from Schlegel's autograph of his Sanskrit grammar

as that of Charles Wilkins in 1808, and that of Henry P. Forster in 1810. Scholars who worked with these materials usually tried to produce a better grammar, if only for the sake of teaching their students. The one by Schlegel, for instance, has been forgotten, but is available in his archive in Dresden.

Another important tool was an index of verbal roots, here is the copy by the hand of Schlegel:

Learning Sanskrit without a bilingual dictionary must have been quite difficult. In 1807 Colebrooke's edition of the *Amarakoṣa* appeared, which had a word index that could be used as a sort of dictionary. And finally, in 1819, Horace Hayman Wilson's Sanskrit-English dictionary appeared. The work was actually prepared by a staff of Pandits from unclear sources and is, despite being a milestone at the time, only

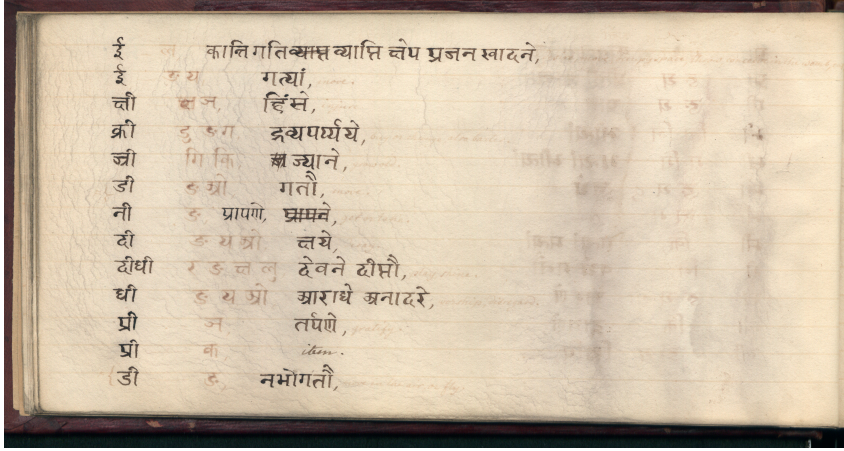


Figure 3 Page from Schlegel's autograph of his index of verbal roots

of limited value for research. For, as research scholars soon noted, this dictionary somehow covered a few thousand years of literature without giving the material a historical perspective. For academic research a dictionary on historical principles, which preferably should show the change in meaning of a word with appropriate quotations from dated texts, was called for. This was eventually carried out by Otto Böhtlingk, a student of Schlegel and of his successor Christian Lassen, who worked mostly in St. Petersburg. In three decades he almost single-handedly produced the two Sanskrit-German dictionaries which are still the basis of all others, the so-called larger Petrograde dictionary, actually a thesaurus with quotations (St. Petersburg 1855–1875), and a little later the smaller, but more comprehensive dictionary without quotations (St. Petersburg 1879–1889).

What is less well-known is that the wide-spread Sanskrit-English dictionary of Monier-Williams (Oxford 1899, first edition 1872) is not only largely dependant on Böhtlingk, but has a few serious disadvantages.¹⁴ And both share the problem that technical terms are not adequately treated, – here the dictionary of Apte (Poona 1890) is far superior.

With this I shall jump into the second part of my lecture about the present state of European Sanskrit lexicography. Speakers of German have the advantage of being

¹⁴ For this see Roland Steiner: “Woher hat er das? Zum Charakter des Sanskrit-English Dictionary von Monier-Williams”. In: *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 170 (2020), p. 107ff.

able to use Böhrtlingk's dictionary, which for its clarity and precision is preferable to that of Monier-Williams. If one adds Apte's Dictionary, which is indispensable for reading Śāstra and Schmidt's *Addenda* (*Nachträge zum Sanskrit-Wörterbuch in kürzerer Fassung*, Leipzig 1928), the coverage of materials is not bad at all. But beyond this there are many specialised dictionaries, several Vedic dictionaries, Edgerton's *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary*, and so forth. Then there are innumerable smaller indices either appended to editions of texts or in monographical works.

Looking through all of these additions when searching for the meaning of a word has long become impossible, and thus the lexicographical work done in the last century is remaining beyond our ken, a state of affairs surely quite unsatisfying. A few years ago these observations led to an attempt to make a new type of dictionary.

A Dictionary of Addenda: Nachtragswörterbuch des Sanskrit (NWS)

As every philologist of Sanskrit knows, many scholars have in their textual work gone beyond the existing lexica and have become lexicographers themselves. They have established new meanings from their own reading of texts, from definitions in commentaries, or a systematic comparison of passages. Many editions of works, many translations and studies thus contain small lexicographical articles, sometimes but not always unlocked by helpful glossaries. These indices are scattered among the available literature, are often not easy to find, and almost impossible to use systematically. Certainly not too many researchers had the leisure and the discipline necessary to produce a private index of a larger number of such addenda. Only one published attempt to collect such addenda is known and this is Schmidt's *Nachträge*,¹⁵ a substantial supplement to Böhrtlingk's petrograde dictionary. But after the publication of this volume, specialised and other dictionaries and glossaries naturally continued to appear, but no update or continuation of Schmidt's work was ever attempted.

In the course of prolonged efforts to edit a variety of Kashmirian works my colleague Walter Slaje in Halle and myself had frequent discussions about the feasibility of a collection of this scattered lexicographical knowledge. It was clear that such a collection would greatly facilitate our daily editorial work and surely be useful to further Sanskrit lexicography. When we added up all the published addenda we

¹⁵ Schmidt 1928.

had in mind, and when Katrin Einicke did a more systematic search, it became clear that there was much more material than expected and certainly more that could be fitted into one of the typical three-year projects funded by the *German Research Community* (DFG), the main institution in Germany when it comes to funding academical projects in Indology. However, the alternative, to devise a long-term dictionary project, seemed to have various disadvantages. One was practical: It would not be for a long time that we or anyone else could actually benefit from the work, but we wanted something that would be of use even after a few years. One other disadvantage was that such large-scale dictionary projects are very difficult to acquire. German institutions are not very keen on funding such projects that do not tend to end at any foreseeable point in time. Of course there are exceptions also in Germany. The dictionary of German dialects in my home university Marburg, apparently the largest project in the humanities in Germany, has an open-ended funding, but since we are talking about Sanskrit, not much was to be expected. What seemed reasonable was the funding for a three-year period, so we had to make an efficient plan to have an online lexicon up and running after three years.

We therefore decided to produce no more than a dictionary of addenda, called *Nachtragswörterbuch des Sanskrit* (NWS) “Addenda Dictionary of Sanskrit”. In it lexical items from scattered published addenda are collected and quoted in short where necessary to be compatible with a dictionary format. The most important task was of course that every lexicographical entry had to be checked against the main dictionary, that is, Böhtlingk's dictionary, for only new words, new meanings, or new attestations in original texts were to be recorded. The aim was to supplement our reference dictionary, but keep duplicates to a minimum. Eventually we had around 150 addenda for inclusion, some of which turned out to be useless on closer inspection. Usually this became clear, while looking up the textual references of suspicious lexical entries. Quite a few items that we had originally selected were thus eventually excluded. But we added others, so the final number is around 170.

Some of these addenda are quite short, others are in fact specialised lexica, as for instance Graßmann's Vedic dictionary (*Wörterbuch zum Rgveda*, 7.389 entries), Edgerton's dictionary (*Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary*, 16.877 entries), and so forth. A complete list can be found in the online dictionary itself.¹⁶

The different stages of the work were kept comparatively simple, since we ex-

¹⁶ <http://nws.uzi.uni-halle.de/dictionaries?lang=en>

pected, quite correctly by the way, that complications would arise on their own. Apart from selecting the addenda that were worthy of inclusion, we had to decide on how to quote the addenda, establish a routine for entering data, and for correcting online. All this was put into a software system devised especially for the purpose by the Halle computing department, which was an important component of the project.

When it came to details there was after all a bit more lexicographical work to be done than expected. Most importantly, one had to judge the quality of the addenda, usually by checking the references given and by reading the Sanskrit text the new meaning was taken from. To give a practical example for what could happen in such case: The Italian Indologist Pisani found a new word *dhvanij*, supposed to mean “great noise”, which seemed highly suspicious. When we looked at the text that Pisani had scoured for new meanings, we found a single passage, where the author had encountered a compound *dhvaniḍambara*. It was difficult to believe, but the author had obviously not understood that this was a compound formed by the words *dhvani* and *ḍambara*. What he apparently recognised was *ambara*, which in turn left him with a new word *dhvanij*. We hoped that this was the most spectacular and hopefully singular lexicographical failure and followed the established practice to mark the entry as wrong, in order to deter users from wasting any time with it.

Some addenda were ideal for our purpose, since they contained just lists made up of a lexical item, a translation and a reference. Entering these into the online form provided by of our software was simple, for it would automatise some of the steps and reduce errors, for instance by automatically copying the source information to the next item, giving available options from a selection menu, and keeping the underlying xml-data hidden from sight. In retrospect it seems that this was probably the key to success.

In other cases the problem was that the authors of addenda did obviously not have later users in mind, or simply ignored that their work would ever have practical relevance. One highly interesting work on Vedic lexicography by the German Vedicist Neisser contained a wealth of material, but it did not give new meanings and references, rather each word was discussed in lengthy articles, weighing the arguments for and against a certain interpretation given by his predecessors. In doubtful cases Neisser described the previous lexicographical work in all details, but did not even commit to any side. To extract his own opinion from this was an extremely time-consuming task. Then there was the problem that the dictionary

of Böhrtlingk has some peculiarities, not followed by later authors, most notably his idiosyncratic spelling of verbal roots, which meant that all addenda had to be mapped to Böhrtlingk's system. In the end things were not as simple as one would have hoped.

One problem remaining is the European multilingualism of the addenda, which is involuntarily highlighted by the Tantric lexicon *Tāntrikābhidhānaśa*, which contains entries in English, French and German. But this could not be helped. Incidentally, the multilingualism is not only a problem for the user, it appears to have been problematic for some authors of addenda as well. One earlier French author gave the English translation “fought” for the word *yudhita*, a word which no one would search. Here we departed from our general principle to merely quote, but not alter the essential information in the addenda without any change, and corrected to “fought”.

In the end the plan worked out astonishingly well. Looking back I think it was an ideal combination between an ingenious and time-saving interface devised by our colleagues from the Halle computing department and a group of devoted lexicographers, in Halle there were Katrin Einicke, who was the main redactor, Anette Wilke and Ines Siegfried, in Marburg there was Mitsuyo Demoto. After three years we had not only done everything we had promised, but more, and we could announce a new online Sanskrit dictionary, the so-called *Nachtragswörterbuch des Sanskrit* (NWS) “Addenda Dictionary of Sanskrit”.

Furthermore we could add one detail that would make the website of the online dictionary¹⁷ more useful. Our dictionary project had started with a symposium of lexicographers at the *Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur*, Mainz,, in which also Thomas Malten (Cologne) was present. Malten had devoted many years to producing searchable online versions of most of the Sanskrit dictionaries available, the *Cologne Digital Sanskrit Dictionaries*.¹⁸ Since he expected that his work was unlikely to continue after his retirement, he provided us with the data for the Petrograde dictionary and that of the addenda of Schmidt. So we decided to produce a search interface that would combine these the three dictionaries. Our online dictionary therefore allows a simultaneous search in three dictionaries, the NWS itself on the left, the Böhrtlingk dictionary in the middle and the addenda of Schmidt on the right. It has to be noted that our versions of Böhrtlingk and Schmidt are not identical

¹⁷ <http://nws.uzi.uni-halle.de> ¹⁸ <http://www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de>

to the Cologne version. The Halle computing department has not only produced a new presentation and updated the search environment, we have also continued to correct typos. Our version has in other words become a new *śākhā* of Malten's pioneering work.

At present the NWS contains roughly 107500 entries. Although the lexicon in principle ignores what is already given in Böhtlingk there is some inevitable overlap. Since four persons were working on different articles at the same time, some overlap even between parts of the NWS was unavoidable. And of course, some entries are quite unspectacular and might, for instance, contain just note that a word is now attested in another gender. Nevertheless the number is impressive, when held against the ca. 150000 entries in Böhtlingk and the 12000 entries in Schmidt's addenda.

As to the future of our dictionary, I can say that some works are continuing, at present the additions made in Monier-Williams' dictionary are being added. Still the NWS is just a tool for research scholars, not an integrated proper dictionary. Ideally one should, in a second step, use the addenda to update the Böhtlingk dictionary, but this may be wishful thinking coming from Germany. At present not only here Indology is being reduced by yearly cuts, and there seems to be a consensus that the subject can only survive by following specific popular trends. It might be that Sanskritists are stuck with the NWS for some time.

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