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**Cardinal Directions in Sanskrit and Old
Irish Language**

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Cardinal Directions in Sanskrit and Old Irish Language

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Abstract

Spatial orientation was extremely important in Indo-Europeans' life. It was connected with migrations, journeys and religion. Terms of cardinal directions were sacral words. The gap in time between Sanskrit and Old-Irish texts is rather huge, but we can see that the patterns of spatial orientation almost coincide. Indian estates (varna) and social functions in Ireland were also connected with cardinal directions. Social stratification was subordinated to spatial orientation and the solar calendar. The terms of spatial orientation were analysed in linguistic literature and caused some discussions. We can not definitely say, what type of orientation appeared first, but we can make hypothesis about Proto-Indo-European terms of cardinal directions. We also can find some connotations associated with the four main cardinal directions. This research gives us a key to understanding some ancient and medieval ceremonials. It also can help us to find exact translations for ancient texts. For example, in Sanskrit and Old Irish language the word for 'east' also has the meaning 'front', the word for 'west' also means 'back', the word for 'south' also can stand for 'right' and the word for 'north' also associates with 'left'. There are various types of spatial orientation in every culture, and linguistic materials give us a chance to understand, what type was the most important for the Proto-Indo-Europeans.

Keywords: Comparative Indo-European linguistics, Sanskrit, Old Irish, cardinal directions, solar calendar, spatial orientation.

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Spatial orientation was extremely important in Indo-Europeans' life. It was connected with migrations, journeys, religion and social life. Terms of cardinal directions were sacral words. There were special instructions how to build houses, pray, fight and even eat in every culture, and terms of spatial orientation were used in such instructions.

Most Europeans now use the pattern, which can be accounted for the tradition of map drawing. Drawing a map, you should have a steady reference point, and the Pole Star was chosen as an object to orient at. So in our model of spatial orientation north is situated at the top or in front of us. Nowadays we also have reversed maps or South-Up maps. They are often used in Australia, New Zealand and other countries of the Southern Hemisphere. We also have some ancient and medieval reversed maps made by Muhammad al-Idrisi (1154), Andreas Walsperger (1448) and Fra Mauro (1459). We even have one East-Up map, it is Hereford Mappa Mundi (1285).

However, North-Up maps are more widely known.

If we analyze Sanskrit and Old-Irish texts, we find some coincidences in the terms of spatial orientation. Does the comparison of Indo-Iranian and Celtic languages make sense?

- 1 These languages are not closely related;
- 2 the gap in time between Sanskrit and Old-Irish texts is enormous.

Previously such research was undertaken by Joseph Vendryes, Myles Dillon and Victor Kalygin. In their works they came to the conclusion that lots of archaisms can be found at the utmost western and eastern points of Indo-European area. The conservatism of Sanskrit and Old Irish language is to be taken into account. Both languages are conservative and sacred. They were not influenced by any other language and they have rich literary tradition. Coincidences found in these languages can give us a chance to make hypothesis about Proto-Indo-European state of language. Literary tradition gives us a lot of different texts related to various genres and periods, so we can look at the evolution of terms of spatial orientation. Here we have to remember that the quantity of compared languages should be restricted to two or three, because similar archaic constructions can hardly be found in all Indo-European languages.

According to Hinduism and Tantric Buddhism, there are four gods called *lokapāla*, or the Guardians of the Directions. They rule the specific directions of space. Every of them has specific weapons, a consort, a planet and a symbol. *Indra* is the leader of gods, the lord of heaven, the god of weather or war and also the regent of the east. *Yama* is the lord of death and the regent of the south. *Varuna* is the god of sky, of water, of law as well as the regent of the west. *Kubera* is the lord of wealth, the regent of the north and the owner of the treasures of the world. So, in Hinduism the directions of space were connected with important qualities or ideas and also they were religiously significant.

Indian estates (*varna*) and social functions in Ireland were also connected with cardinal directions (Table 1). *Brahmana* are vedic priests and scholars, they belong to the highest estate and are associated with the north. *Kshatriya* are the ruling and military elite, *Indra* is their leader, therefore they are

associated with the east. *Vaishya* are landowners, traders and money-lenders, and their place is in the south. *Shudra* perform functions of serving the other three varna and they are associated with the west. In Ireland we can see a different pattern. *Fis* (druids) are placed in the west, *cath* (warriors) in the north, *bláth* (merchants, landowners) in the east and *séis* (craftsmen) in the south. There is no coincidence here at first sight, but if we look closer, it will be clear that both types of social stratification begin from the directions associated with old age and wisdom and go clockwise. So we can draw a conclusion that social system was subordinated to spatial orientation and a solar calendar.

The terms of spatial orientation were analysed in linguistic literature and caused some discussions. For example, Eric P. Hamp (1974) argues that the most important orientation in Indo-European culture was southwards. He looks at Indian and Irish chariot. Indic warrior was placed to the left of his charioteer. On the contrary, archaeology says that Irish warrior was placed behind his charioteer. The fighter and the charioteer were in corresponding positions, and the warrior's place was more prestigious. In Irish culture the most important person's place was closer to the north and facing south (not only in battles, but also at home). In Indian culture the warrior's place was in the east. So the Indo-European chariot should face south and the most highly valued orientation, then, was southwards. However in agrarian society the sun was extremely important, so people fixed on the rising sun, that is why another type of orientation appeared.

We can see that there were different types of orientation within the bounds of one culture. Alexander Podosinov (1999) argues that there is the same situation in every culture. Different types of orientation used simultaneously in any epoch and the choice was determined by the work or occupation. For example, praying people used to face east, but during a war the army facing south could expect victory. He also says that any work in ancient people's life depended on spatial orientation. According to Chinese ancient manuscripts, every cardinal direction had its own god and goddess and associated with an animal, a colour, a sound and a wind.

It is worth to have a closer look at the terms of spatial orientation in Sanskrit (the examples are given in simplified transliteration):

*I tataḥ samuddhṛtaprāṇaṃ gataçvāsaṃ hataprabhaṃ
nirviceṣṭaṃ çarīraṃ tadbabhūvāpriyadarçanam
yamastu taṃ tathā baddhā prayāto daksīṇāmukhaḥ (Mahābhārata
III. Sāvitrī V.17).*

‘After that his body, immobilized and lifeless, without any shine, became unpleasant; and Yama tied him up and turned **to the south**’.

In the vocabulary by V.Kochergina (2005) the word *daksīṇāmukhaḥ* was translated as ‘facing south’ and ‘facing right’. We can not confidently translate the given passage without background knowledge. What did the authors mean? Did Yama turn to the right or to the south? Indian people believed that the

world of the dead was situated somewhere in the south, and the god named Yama was the Otherworld god. Now we understand that Yama took dead Satyavan to the Otherworld, so he turned to the south.

According to the dictionary, the adjective *dakṣiṇa* can be translated as ‘right’, ‘southern’ and also as ‘dear’, ‘kind’. This is a really strange thing. Can anything connected with the Otherworld be kind or dear? Here we can see the sign of another type of spatial orientation which will be analyzed later.

The adverb *dakṣiṇatas* means ‘to the right’ and ‘to the south’.

*II palāçakhaṇḍe caitasminpanthā vyavārtate dvidhā
tasyottareṇa yaḥ panthāstena gacha tvarasva ca (Mahābhārata III.
Sāvitrī V.108).*

‘There are two roads between these Palash trees, choose **the northern (the left)** one and hurry up’.

The adverb *uttaratas* can mean ‘to the left’ and ‘to the north’, the adjective *uttara* can also be translated as ‘taller’ or ‘higher’.

Other terms of spatial orientation in Sanskrit:

pūrvatas - ‘at first’, ‘ahead’, ‘in the east’;

paçcimatasa – ‘behind’, ‘in the west’.

These terms can be found in earlier texts like Rigveda:

*III vātasyāçvo vāyoḥ sakhātho deveṣito muniḥ
ubhau samudrāvā kṣeti yaçca pūrva utāparaḥ (Rgveda, 10-136)*

‘A steed of the wind, a friend of the wind, an ascetic, inspired by gods,

He lives in both seas: the **eastern** one and the **western** one.’

The adjective *apara* here means ‘western’. It is a synonym to the adjective *paçcima*, but there is a distinction between them. The word *apara* can also be translated as ‘next’, ‘belated’. It makes analogy with the adjective *pūrva* ‘earlier’. So we can conclude that the terms of spatial orientation can also show the sequence of facts in time. Such syncretism isn't strange. In Indian culture time and space are joined together. They make unity. We can understand this if we analyse the character of the goddess *Kālī*. Her name comes from the word *kāla*, which means ‘black’, ‘time’ and ‘death’. Her four hands show four cardinal directions. So, *Kālī* symbolizes the unity of time and place.

Guided by these examples we can conclude that Indian people oriented themselves as if they were looking at the rising sun. So they faced east, the south was on the right, the north was on the left and the west was behind.

If we have a closer look at Old-Irish texts, we find similar pattern.

IV Mhuir n-Iucht anair co h-Erinn (Cóir Anmann, 91).

‘Irish Sea, eastward of Ireland’.

The adverb *anair* can mean ‘ahead’, ‘in the east’ and also ‘before’. Here the translation *eastward* fits better, and the context usually helps us to choose the right version. The adverb *anair* derives from *úr* ‘east’.

Similarly, *aníar* means ‘behind’, ‘in the west’, *íar* - ‘west’ and ‘after’:

V íar cach n-déidhinach (Cóir Anmann, 45) ‘after the next battle’.

The adverb *andess* means ‘on the right’, ‘in the south’; *antúath* – ‘on the left’, ‘in the north’. The nouns for ‘right hand’ and ‘left hand’ – *deisred* and *túaisred* – derive from the same stems. The adverbs *túaiscert* and *deiscert* mark directions:

VI...*déraich a tír acht is airthiur inda iarthur 7 asa tuaisciurt inda deiscert (The Monastery of Tallaght, 133 22)*

‘...devastation of his land **from the east to the west, from the north to the south**’.

We can see a rather harmonious system. There are only two counterexamples. One of them appeared under the influence of European tradition. The word *túas* later gets the meaning ‘on top’, ‘earlier (in the book)’. It is often used in Middle-Irish texts in the phrase *tuas-ráidhte* ‘above-mentioned’.

Another counterexample is that the adverb *antúath* has a synonym, whereas other terms of spatial orientation don't have synonyms. The adjective *clé* means ‘left’ and also ‘sinister’, ‘malign’. Accompanied by the postposition *do* this word in dative case becomes an adverb and gets the meaning ‘on the left’, ‘to the north’.

Conclusion

It is well known that Irish people divided the months of the year among two categories: ‘dark’ and ‘bright’ (Rees A. & B., 1989). Every ‘dark’ month lasted 29 days, every ‘bright’ month – 30 days. Any month, for its turn, had a ‘black’ half and a ‘white’ half. So did the Indians. In ancient Indian calendar every month had ‘dark’ and ‘bright’ halves depending on the moon phases. Irish people used this principle to describe place. The north and the left side (of the island, town, house etc.) associated with chaos and pregnancy preceding the birth. This darkness was described as the beginning of the world, but also it was the end of the world, the death. The Irish thought that the north side is elder than the south one, and also more mysterious, dangerous, inconceivable. The Otherworld usually was placed in the north. Here Irish tradition does not coincide with the Indian one. As we can remember, in Indian literature Yama's kingdom, the Otherworld, was described as a place in the south. However in Middle-Irish literature, when the word *túas* gets a new meaning ‘on top’, it gains some ‘bright’ connotations. In some texts it refers to some divine place above the earth, i.e. for heaven. Otherwise, the Old-Irish system of terms has traces of old pagan tradition and coincides with the system described in

Sanskrit texts. It is also worth to mention that there was a special genre of ancient Indian literature called *digvijaya* ‘the conquest of the Directions’. Every king had to conquer his kingdom to gain the royal status. His journey began from the east and after that he went clockwise (east-south-west-north). This ceremonial conquest showed the unity of time and space. When brothers made the conquest, the eldest one usually went to the west, and here we can see one more parallel with the Irish tradition.

The gap in time between Sanskrit and Old-Irish texts is rather huge, but we can see that the patterns of spatial orientation almost coincide (Table 2). This model is connected with solar cults and solar calendar. There are various types of spatial orientation in every culture, and linguistic materials give us a chance to understand, what type was the most important for the Proto-Indo-Europeans.

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Table 1. *Lokapāla, or the Guardians of the Directions, Indian and Irish estates*

God	Direction	Varna	Irish estates
<i>Indra</i>	the east	<i>Kshatriya</i>	<i>Bláth</i> (merchants)
<i>Yama</i>	the south	<i>Vaishya</i>	<i>Séis</i> (craftsmen)
<i>Varuna</i>	the west	<i>Shudra</i>	<i>Fis</i> (druids)
<i>Kubera</i>	the north	<i>Brahmana</i>	<i>Cath</i> (warriors)

Table 2. *Terms of Spatial Orientation and their Connotations*

Sanskrit adjective (s)	Old-Irish adjective (s)	Meaning	Connotations
<i>pūrva</i>	<i>airtherach</i>	Front, upper, eastern	Light, birth, the Sun, the beginning of journey, heaven.
<i>dakṣiṇa</i>	<i>dess</i>	Right, southern	Kindness, youth (contradiction 'kind place – the Otherworld' inside Indian culture).
<i>apara, paçcima</i>	<i>íartharach</i>	Back, western, further	Darkness, old age, law.
<i>uttaratas</i>	<i>clé, túaiscerthach</i>	Left, northern	Danger, chaos, the death, wealth.