Sinhala and Tamil alphabet cards: Introduction

This document is designed to supplement the Sinhala and Tamil alphabet cards. It has two purposes: to provide a guide for anyone who wishes to use the cards as a tool for learning Sinhala and/or Tamil scripts, and to explain some choices of words which might seem controversial.

Three separate documents introduce the Sinhala and Tamil alphabets in more detail, and the phonetic system used to transcribe the words.

The Sinhala set consists of 40 cards, the Tamil set 35. The front of each card shows one Sinhala/Tamil letter, together with an illustration of a related word; the back shows the letter again, together with the example word, written three times: in Sinhala/Tamil script, in phonetic transcription, and in English. In each case, the target letter is highlighted in red in Sinhala/Tamil script, and so is the corresponding letter/syllable in the phonetic transcription. Thus each card enables the learner not only to learn a Sinhala/Tamil letter (and see how it is used in the context of a word), but also to learn a new word, what it means, how to pronounce it, and how to write it in Sinhala/Tamil script.

There is nothing original about the idea of illustrated alphabet flashcards. But the Sinhala and Tamil alphabets pose certain challenges which do not apply to English. The English alphabet has a fixed number of letters (26), each of which can be easily illustrated with a corresponding word: A for apple, B for ball, through to Z for zebra. The only letter which causes slight inconvenience is X, which has to be either represented by a less frequent word (X-ray, xylophone), or placed in non-initial position (box, taxi).

The first question with Sinhala and Tamil is which letters to include. The full Sinhala alphabet consists of around 60 letters, many of which are rarely used. A shorter version consisting of common letters which are normally introduced in children's alphabet books has around 36 letters. But this version doesn't include several common letters such as ෂ (sh), ශ (sh), ච (ch) and ෆ (f). We decided to include these letters, as well as the irregular but common ළු (lu), bringing the total to 40.

The Tamil alphabet is more straightforward, with a total of around 35 letters. We decided to leave out the initial ஔ (au) on the grounds that it is uncommon and almost impossible to illustrate, and also the ∴ப (f); but we included the ஸ்ரீ (shrī), and the irregular ஃ (ɒu/ʈu) as a separate letter (total: 35).

When it came to the choice of words to represent each letter, there were two main considerations. The first was to choose words which could be illustrated effectively, so that the cards would be attractive, colourful and varied. Secondly, there had to be a strong correlation between the word and the picture. As far as possible, the words should be everyday items, immediately recognisable and closely associated with the corresponding picture. So all of the words are nouns, and most refer to animals and birds, fruits and vegetables, flowers, everyday objects, etc. There are also a few cultural references: the

Sinhala set includes *dagoba*, *bo leaves* and *Vesak lanterns*; the Tamil set includes *kovil* and *pottu*, as well as the goddess Lakshmi and the god Krishna.

As far as possible, the words chosen <u>begin</u> with the target letter. But this is not always possible: the Sinhala nasal consonants ම් (*mb*), ඳ (*nd*), ඞ (*ng*) and ඬ (*nɖ*) never appear in initial position, and neither do the Tamil middle and back consonants ள (ʟ), ழ (ʟ), ன (n), ண (ɴ) and ற (ʀ). In these cases (and a few others), the letter appears in non-initial position in the word, and this is reflected in the red highlighting of the letter in the word itself.

Two choices might seem controversial. Firstly the decision to include English words such as *shirt*, *fan* and *chocolate* (in the Sinhala set) and *helmet*, *strawberry* and *ice cream* (in the Tamil set). These items were chosen partly because they fit with the main considerations of being easily illustrated and instantly recognisable, and because it is difficult to find other appropriate words to represent these particular letters. Like any language, both Sinhala and Tamil have a long history of borrowing words, both from each other, and from Hindi, Malay, Portuguese, Dutch, etc. Borrowings from English are simply the latest example of this, and because there is no common colloquial Sinhala/Tamil equivalent to these words, they are definitely here to stay. Language purists may not like it, but these words reflect the contemporary reality of Sinhala and Tamil usage.

(An exception perhaps is *shirt*, for which there is a Sinhala equivalent, *kamisaya* – also a loan word from an earlier era! But the English word *shirt* is more common in contemporary spoken Sinhala.)

The second "controversial" choice was the decision to include a number of words in which the target letter is <u>modified</u> in the example word, e.g. <u>*huna, lena, pol gaha*</u> (Sinhala) and <u>*kovil, tenir, rubay*</u> (Tamil). The obvious preference is to use the letter unmodified, e.g. <u>*naya, vattakka, yatura*</u> (Sinhala) and <u>*mayil, pattam, nandu*</u> (Tamil).

However, it would be impossible to find appropriate words for all the letters without using modified forms in some cases. We decided to take a "liberal" approach on this question, choosing a number of words in which the target letter is modified, even where an alternative word with the target letter unmodified might have been possible, e.g. <u>*balla*</u> for <u>*bo kolaya*</u> (Sinhala) and <u>*kaludei*</u> for <u>*kovil*</u> (Tamil). This decision had two advantages. Firstly it gave us much greater flexibility in choosing words which could be attractively illustrated and easily identified. Secondly, it allowed us to show not only the letters themselves, but also the ways in which those letters can be modified to make different vowel sounds. This is reinforced by the convention of highlighting in red the target letter (and the corresponding syllable in the phonetic transcription) on the back of each card. In fact, every common vowel modifier (in both languages) is represented somewhere in the words chosen.

To see how this works in practice, see the separate pdf documents which introduce the Sinhala and Tamil alphabets in more detail.