

Introduction to the phonetic system for writing Sinhala and Tamil

This document introduces the phonetic system which I use to write Sinhala and Tamil, and the Sinfonetic font which I developed to transcribe Sinhala and Tamil phonetically. This is the system which is used to transcribe the words in the illustrated Sinhala and Tamil alphabet cards. It was also used to show the pronunciation of Sinhala and Tamil words in my book, *A Dictionary of Sri Lankan English*; and in the trilingual children’s book *Keerthihan’s Kite* (in the phonetic transcriptions of the Sinhala and Tamil versions of the story at the back of the book).

There is no generally accepted way of writing Sinhala and Tamil phonetically, which can be confusing for the learner. I have found my own system to be simple, clear and user-friendly, but unfortunately it is not necessarily consistent with other systems which you might come across elsewhere. In the longer term, it is advisable to learn the Sinhala and Tamil scripts, especially since both scripts are themselves “phonetic”, reflecting the pronunciation very closely.

1. Vowels

phonetic symbol	English example	Sinhala letter	Sinhala example	Tamil letter	Tamil example
a	cup	අ	arəliyə	அ	annāsi
ā	car	ආ	āta	ஆ	āmei
æ	cat	ඇ	æś	-	-
ǣ	jam	ඈ	ǣya	-	-
e	bed	ඒ	eluwa	எ	erumei
ē	(long e)	ඒ	ē	ஏ	ēni
i	sit	ඉ	ittǣva	இ	ilei
ī	seen	ඊ	ītaləyə	ஈ	ī
o	hot	ඔ	oruwə	ஓ	ottagəm
ō	horse	ඌ	ōlu	ஔ	ōnān
u	put	උ	unə	உ	udumbu
ū	boot	ඌ	ūra	ஊ	ūdā
ə	about (note 1)	-	sarəmə	-	paṭṭəm
ǣ	bird (note 2)	-	-	-	-

Notes:

1) The neutral vowel ə is very common in both Sinhala and Tamil, although neither language has a separate letter to represent it, and no words begin with this vowel. It is also very common in English (where it is referred to as “schwa”) – for example in the first syllable of words like *about* and *around*, and in the last syllable of words like *father* and *mother*.

2) The long vowel \bar{a} exists in English in words like *bird*, *world*, *church*. It is found in Sinhala and Tamil in English loanwords like *shirt* and *German*. It also exists in Tamil as a colloquial variation on long vowels when they are followed by a back consonant, e.g. $v\bar{a}n\bar{u}m$ for $v\bar{e}n\bar{u}m$. (I tend not to use this symbol when transcribing Sinhala and Tamil, unless I want to demonstrate a specific colloquial variation such as this.)

2. Consonants

1) Front and back d and t:

phonetic symbol	Sinhala letter	Sinhala example	Tamil letter	Tamil example
d	ද	dāgæbā	த	ūdā
t	ත	tæmbili	த	tēnīr
ɖ	ඳ	vesak kūbu	ட	kubei
ʈ	ඪ	tayəɾəyə	ட	poṭṭu

The “front d” (d) is somewhat like the voiced English *th* as in *this* and *that*, but pronounced as a “stop” rather than a “fricative” (i.e. with the tongue in the same place between the teeth, but without forcing air between the tongue and the teeth as in the distinctive English *th* sound). The “front t” (t) is somewhat like the unvoiced *th* as in *think* and *thought*, and it is often transcribed as *th*.

The “back d” (ɖ) is somewhat like the English *d* as in *dog*, but pronounced with the tongue further back on the roof of the mouth. The “back t” (ʈ) is somewhat like the English *t* as in *tea*. (Note that Tamil script only has one letter for ɖ and ʈ, and another for d and t.)

The distinction between d/ɖ and t/ʈ is common to Sinhala and Tamil, and to most Indian languages, but it can be difficult for speakers of European languages to hear the difference between them.

2) Tamil consonants which do not exist in Sinhala or English:

phonetic symbol	Tamil letter	Tamil example
ɭ	ழ	vāleippəɭəm
ɳ	ழ	kannāɳi
ɻ	ழ	irāɻ

In addition to the “back d” (ɖ) and “back t” (ʈ), which are common to Sinhala and Tamil, Tamil also has a “back l” (ɭ), a “back n” (ɳ) and a “back r” (ɻ). These letters are pronounced with the tongue towards the back of the mouth. They are difficult to pronounce in isolation, but in context they can often be identified by the effect they have on the preceding vowel.

3) Sinhala consonants which do not exist in Tamil or English:

phonetic symbol	Sinhala letter	Sinhala example
mb	ඹ	ambə
nd	ඳ	handə
ng	ඟ	gangə
nd	ඳ	hondə

These four “nasal” consonants are pronounced like “two consonants in one”. For example, the letter **mb** is neither an m, nor a b, but pronounced rather as if you are trying to say both at the same time!

3. The Sinfonetic font

The Sinfonetic font can be downloaded from this website. It is based on Comic Sans, but with the modifications below designed for writing Sinhala and Tamil phonetically:

computer key	phonetic symbol	Sinhala example	Tamil example
x	ə	sarəmə	paTTəṁ
q	æ	tæmbili	nælləṁ
shift + a	ā	kākka	āmei
shift + e	ē	lēna	tēnīr
shift + i	ī	shrī lankāvə	mīn
shift + o	ō	ōlu	kōvil
shift + u	ū	ūra	pūnei
shift + q	æ̃	ittæ̃va	-
shift + x	ə̃	shə̃t-ekə (= shirt)	və̃num (= vēnum)
shift + t	Ṭ	ṭayəṟəyə	poTTu
shift + d	Ḑ	vesak kūḐu	kudei
shift + l	L	-	vāleippəLəṁ
shift + n	N	-	kannāḐi
shift + r	R	-	irāL

Note: The Sinfonetic font does not have the letters x or q, or capitals A,E,I,O,U, or capitals T,D,L,N,R. When typing, if I need one of these letters (for example, to write the name of a person or place, or an English word such as *taxi*), I simply revert to Comic Sans.

To see an example of the Sinfonetic font in action, go to the sample pages from *Keerthihan's Kite*: the phonetic transcription of the first 3 pages of the Sinhala and Tamil versions of the story are available on this website, together with audio files of the same passages.

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