

# PROBLEMS IN LEARNING SINHALA AND TAMIL AS SECOND LANGUAGES

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## *Introduction*

There are two major language communities in Sri Lanka, namely, the Sinhalese and the Tamils. Language has been a vexed problem in Sri Lanka for long. Generally, Sinhalese don't seem to like learning Tamil and Tamils too don't seem to like learning Sinhala. Although Tamil had at one time influenced the Sinhala language (both in its literary and grammatical works) to some notable extent, the linguistic as well as social contacts between the Sinhalese and the Tamils have today turned to be very narrow. Had to early Sinhala- Tamil bilingualism spread all over in its early form and prevailed todate in Sri Lanka, the language question would have been a different one.

As a means of overcoming this apathy in second language learning, liberal scholars and the government emphasised occasionally at different times, the need and the importance for both the major communities in Sri lanka to learn each other's language in order to foster communal understanding, harmony and goodwill. But never a serious attempt was made by either of the two groups, nor proper facilities were provided by the Government to encourage teaching and learning of Sinhala and Tamil as second languages.

In recent times a start was made by the former External Services Agency of the University of Sri Lanka to organize courses in Sinhala and Tamil, and materials were prepared by linguists. But unfortunately within a few years of starting these courses, they were abruptly abandoned.

The author of this paper having participated in the above programmes gained some experience in teaching Tamil to Sinhalese and also gained some profeciency in Sinhala language. With this experience an attempt is made in

This paper to discuss the major phonological problems in learning Sinhala by Tamil speakers and in learning Tamil by Sinhala Speakers. It is hoped that a study of this nature will help foster second language teaching and learning in Sri Lanka.

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1. For a broad comparison of the phonological systems of Jaffna Tamil and Sinhala see Karunatilake, W.S., Suseendirajah, S. 1973. Phonology of Sinhala and Sri Lanka Tamil - A study in contrast and Interference, Indian Linguistics, Vol.34, No:3, Poona, India, and Mrs. R. Kailainathan, Sept. 1979, A contrastive study of Jaffna Tamil Phonology and Sinhala Phonology. Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment for the Degree of Master of Arts in Linguistics. University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka.

*The Phonemic inventory of Jaffna Tamil is as follows:*

**Vowels:**

	Shorts			Long		
	Front	Central	Back	Front	Central	Back
high	i	(ɨ)	u	ii	(ɨɨ)	uu
mid	e	(ə)	o	ee	(əə)	oo
low	ɛ		ɔ		ɛɛ	ɔɔ

**Consonants**

	Labial	Dental	Alveolar	Retroflex	Palatal	Velar
Stop	p	t	T	ʈ	c	k
Nasal	m		n	ɳ		
Lateral			l	ɭ		
Trill			r			
Continuant	v				y	

The phonemic inventory of Sinhala is as follows.

**Vowels**

	Front	Short General	Back	Front	Long Central	Back
high	i		u	ii		uu
mid	e	ə	o	ee	(əə)	oo
low	æ		ɔ	ææ		ɔɔ

**Consonants:**

	Labial	Dental	Alveolar	Retroflex	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Stop	p	t		t		k	
vd	b	d		d		g	
Affricates					c		
vd					ʈ		
Pre-nasalized							
vd stops	b̄	d̄		d̄		ḡ	
Nasals	m		n		ɲ		
Fricative	f	s			s'		h
Semi-vowels	v				ɻ		
Laterals			l				
Trill			r				

Now let us discuss the problems from the point of the Sinhala speakers.

**Vowels:**

The front vowels /i/ /ii/ and /e/ /ee/ of Tamil are centralized to (ɨ) (H) and (a) (aa) respectively under certain specifiable conditions. Sinhala does not have the above allophonic assignments of /e/ / ee / and /i/ /ii/, and as a result the Sinhala Speakers pronounce the vowels /e/ / ee/, /i/ /ii/ as the same, that is, without centralization in the above environments.

In Tamil the vowels /u/ and /uu/ have the unrounded allophones [ʏ], [ʉ] respectively in the non-initial position of the word. This feature is lacking in Sinhala, and as a result the Sinhala Speakers tend to replace these by the rounded allophones [u], [uu] respectively.

The vowel /ɛ/ of Tamil is slightly higher than the Sinhala /æ/. As a result the Sinhala speakers, replace the /ɛ/ of Tamil by their /æ/ in their speech in speaking Tamil.

### **Consonants:**

#### **Single occurrences:**

The consonant system of Tamil shows certain important contrasts that are not obtained in Sinhala. As to the stops what is structurally quite significant is the six way contrast in Tamil, with the alveolar /T/ as the marked feature, which is absent in Sinhala even allophonically. Therefore the Sinhala speakers usually replace the word initial /T/ of Tamil by their retroflex sound /t/, in the intervocal position the single /T/ of Tamil is pronounced as an alveolar flap /r/ by the Sinhala speakers.

The feature of retroflexion with reference to the nasals and laterals is phonemic in Tamil, whereas it is only allophonic, and not well marked in Sinhala. As a result, the Sinhala speakers replace the Tamil /n/ by the alveolar /n/, and the Tamil /l/ by alveolar /l/ of Sinhala

In Tamil, /p/ and /t/ are phonetically realized as [β] and [d] respectively in the intervocal position. Mostly Sinhala speakers replace these by the corresponding voiced stops /b/ and /d/ when they speak Tamil. The Tamil velar consonant /k/ is phonetically realized as [x] intervocally. Usually the Sinhala speakers replace the velar consonant /k/ by their glottal fricative /h/ or voiced velar [g] in this position.

#### **Consonant sequences:-**

As to consonant Sequences there are two problematic areas:

- (1) Geminates, specifically alveolar /TT/, trill /rr/, retroflex /nn/ and /ll/. The Sinhala speakers replace the alveolar /TT/ by retroflex /t/, alveolar trill /rr/ by single /r/, retroflex /nn/ and /ll/ by alveolar /nn/ and /ll/ respectively.

- (2) Dissimilar clusters involving the structures
- (a) dissimilar stops
  - (b) non - homorganic nasal + stop

Tamil shows a wider range for dissimilar stop clusters than Sinhala. Generally the Sinhala speakers assimilate the two stops regressively in their speech. Sinhala does not have the non-homorganic nasal + stop. As a result they replace the non-homorganic nasal + stop by the homorganic nasal + stop in their Tamil speech.

Examples for both vowel and consonant pronunciations are given below:-

Tamil words phonemic transcription		Sinhalese speakers' pronunciation	Expected Tamil pronunciation
ɪɪ̃	'to lay'	[idu ?]	[ɪdɪ̃]
vɪɪ̃	'let off'	[vidu?]	[vɪdɪ̃]
vɪɪ̃ɪ̃	'house'	[viidu?]	[vɪɪ̃dɪ̃]
uppu	'salt'	[uppu? ]	[uppɪ̃]
ɔɪ̃	'to take'	[edu ? ]	[adɪ̃]
əɔɪ̃	'manuscript'	[eedu?]	[aadɪ̃]
kəɪ̃	'to spoil'	[k'edu?]	[kadɪ̃]
kəɔɪ̃	'evil'	[k'eedu ?]	[kaadɪ̃]
vəɪ̃	'craker'	[vedi?]	[vadɪ̃]
Təniɪ̃	'two'	[r éndu? ]	[Tandɪ̃]
TaatiTi	'night'	[raattiri?]	[TaatiTi]
neeTTI	'y'day (yesterday)	[néétu? ]	[neeTTɪ̃]
mɛ Tam	'tree'	[mārān]	[m ɛ Tam ]
ɛ Tɛ	'half'	[aræ?]	[ ɛ T ɛ ]
ɛ Tici	'rice'	[aerisi ]	[ ɛ Tisi ]
		or	
palam	'fruit'	[p'alān]	[paɫam]
p ɛ lam	'strength'	[P'alān]	[pɛ lam ]
puli	'tamarind'	[P'uli?]	[Puli]

puli	'tiger'	[p'uli?]	[puli]
Kɪnarɪ	'well'	[k'ināru?]	[kɪnarɪ]
paŋam	'wealth'	[P'ānān]	[paŋam]
paakam	'share'	[P'aagān]	[paaxam]
		or	
		[paahan]	
makan	'son'	[māgān]	[naxan]
		or	
		[māhān]	
makal	'daughter'	[māgal]	[naga]
		or	
		[māhal]	
capam	'course'	[caabān]	[caabam]
pakɛl	'day' [time]	[p'ahal]	[pakɛl]
		or	
		[p'agal]	
ulakam	'world'	[ulahān]	[ulaxam]
		or	
		[ulagan]	
veTTi	'victory'	[vetti?]	[veTTi]
poorraan	'(he) drops'	[p'oor,āān]	[poorraan]
kallɪ	'toddy'	[k'allù]	[kallɪ]
anne	'elder'	[ānnæ?]	[anne]
	brother		
kɛTpɛnɛ	'imagination'	[kappānæ]	[kɛTpɛnɛ]
ɛnbɪ	'love'	[āmbu?]	[ɛnbɪ]

## ***Problem from the point of the Tamil speakers***

### ***Vowels:-***

In Tamil /i/, /ii/ do not occur before retroflex consonants and /rv/, /e/, /ee/ do not occur before retroflex consonants and before /p/, /k/, /m/, /v/ and /rv/. /a/ does not occur before /T/, /n/, /l/ and /y/. The long vowel /aa/ does not occur before /T/, /r/, /rc/ and final /r/. In the non-initial positions the rounded allophone [u] of /u/ never occurs.

As a result of these restrictions the Tamil speakers replace the Sinhala /i/, ii/ by their /ʌ/, /ʌ/, Sinhala /e/, /ee/ by /ə/, /əə/, Sinhala /a/, /aa/ by /ε/, /εε/, \*Sinhala /ə/ by /ə/ in the said environments. In Tamil the central vowel /ə/ and the back vowel /a/ are free variants in word final position unlike in Sinhala where they contrast. As a result the Tamil speakers when speaking Sinhala, pronounce these contrasting sounds as free variants in the final position, thus disturbing the phonemic code of Sinhala.

### ***Consonants:***

***The major areas of difficulties for the Tamil speakers are as follows:***

#### ***Stops:***

The voiced stops occur in the initial and intervocal positions. Generally the Tamil speakers are not used to pronounce the voiced stops in these positions. Therefore they replace the voiced stops by the corresponding voiceless stops. Although the voiceless stops occur initially in both languages they are marked by a slight aspiration in Sinhala. The absence of the said feature in Tamil makes the Tamil speakers to pronounce the said sound as fully un-aspirated. This does not disturb the phonemics of Sinhala, but functions as a mark of identity.

The pronunciation of the word-final voiceless stops in Sinhala is yet another problematic area for the Tamil speakers. Usually the Tamil speakers are used to pronounce the borrowed words as say for instance, from English, with a vocalic - release /ʌ/ after the final voiceless stops. This habit is to be observed when Sinhala words with word -final voiceless stops are pronounced.

The contrast of pre-nasalized stops vs nasals plus voiced stops (e.g. b̄ ≠ mb, d̄ ≠ nd, ḡ ≠ ng) is not a fact of Tamil phonological structure. As a result, the Tamil speakers never differentiate the full nasal and the pre-nasal-

ized stops in Sinhala. They usually pronounce the pre-nasalized stops as full nasals

Unlike is Sinhala, in Tamil (except a couple of borrowings from English) there are no word - initial consonant sequences. The general tendency among Tamil speakers is to simplify word-initial clusters (of borrowings) either by the insertion of the anaphtxis vowel /i/ or the epenthetic vowel /u/. Epenthesis is found where the clusters begin with a continuant.

Examples for both vowel and consonant pronunciations are given below:

Sinhala words		Tamil speakers'	expected
Phonemic Transcription		pronunciation	pronunciation
miti	'short'	[mʔdi]	[miʔiʔ]
iti	'wax'	[ʔdi]	[iʔiʔ]
idəmə	'land'	[ʔdama]	[idāməʔ]
keti	'short'	[kədi]	[k'etiʔ]
kəɾənə	'doing'	[karana]	[k'əɾənə]
sekku	'oil-mill'	[cəkkʔ]	[sekkuʔ]
kənə	'ear'	[kəna]	[k'ānəʔ]
valə	'pit'	[vəla]	[valəʔ]
pirimi	'male'	[pirimi]	[p'irimi]
api	'we'	[appi]	[apiʔ]
atə	'hand'	[atta]	[ataʔ]
attə	'branch'	[atta]	[attaʔ]
kætə	'ugly'	[kətta]	[k'ætə]
kættə	'a knife'	[kətta]	[k'ættəʔ]
adə	'cry'	[anda]	[adəʔ]
kandə	'eat'	[kənda]	[k'āndaʔ]
kædə	'gruel'	[kənda]	[k'ændəʔ]
kandə	'hill'	[kənda]	[k'andəʔ]
hondə	'good'	[konda]	[hondəʔ]
dæɛn	'new'	[tən]	[daɛn]
kalu	'black'	[kalʔ]	k'alu]
kab	'rhem'	[kaβa]	[k'ənəʔ]
kaha	'yellow'	[kaxa]	[k'ahəʔ]
sneehe	'love'	[sineehe]	[snééheʔ]
prəsəid	'famous'	[pirasidda]	p'rəsiddəʔ]



