

## Dhivehi Writing

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Dhivehi (or Divehi) is spoken by about 230,000 people in the Republic of the Maldives in the Indian Ocean, where it is the official language. Approximately 10,000 more speakers live on the island of Minicoy (India), where it is known as Mahl or Mahal. It is an Indo-Aryan language, most closely related to Sinhala of Sri Lanka, but not mutually intelligible with it. The earliest documents (ca. 1200 C.E.) are in *Evēlā* ‘ancient’ script, written from left to right, similar to the Sinhala script of the time. This developed into a script called *Dives* (or *Divehi*) *Akuru* ‘island letters’, also written from left to right. It has been supplanted, since the early seventeenth century, by

TABLE 50.3: *Dhivehi Consonants (thaana)*

Letter	Translit.	Official	Value	Name	Letter	Translit.	Official	Value	Name
ހ	h	h	[h]	Haa	ތ	t	th	[t]	Thaa
ޝ	š	sh	[ʃ]	Shaviyani	ލ	l	l	[l]	Laamu
ނ	n	n	[n]	Noonu	ގ	g	g	[g]	Gaafu
ރ	r	r	[r]	Raa	ޯ	ñ	gn	[ɲ]	Gnaviyani
ބ	b	b	[b]	Baa	ސ	s	s	[s]	Seenu
ލް	l̥	lh	[l̥]	Lhaviyani	ޅ	ɖ	d	[ɖ]	Daviyani
ކ	k	k	[k]	Kaafu	ޅ	z	z	[z]	Zaviyani
އ	–	Ø	Ø	Alifu	ޅ	ʈ	t	[t̪]	Taviyani
ވ	v	v	[v]	Vaavu	ޞ	y	y	[j]	Yaviyani
މ	m	m	[m]	Meemu	ޞ	p	p	[p]	Paviyani
ފ	f	f	[f]	Faafu	ޅ	j	j	[j]	Javiyani
ޅ	d	dh	[d]	Dhaalu	ޅ	c	ch	[c]	Chaviyani

the current script known as *Gabulī Tāna*, or simply *Thaana (Tāna)*, which is written from right to left (like Arabic, which is also used among the Islamic population). The script has undergone changes in shape since then, but retains its essential character. During the administration of President Naseer, an official Roman script was developed, which proved unpopular; since the accession of President Gayoom, Thaana has been used almost exclusively.

While influences of Arabic and of other South Asian scripts are present, Thaana is unique in character. The basic alphabet has 24 consonantal characters, of which the first nine are derived from the numerals 1–9 of Arabic, and the second nine from an older set of local numerals. The remaining six letters are mainly adaptations of earlier ones or Perso-Arabic borrowings, and appear primarily in loanwords. The location of *p* and retroflex *ʈ* among this latter group can be attributed to a sound change by which inherited intervocalic [p] and [t̪] became respectively [f] and [ʃ] (a retroflexed *sh*-like sound, and sometimes a retroflex voiceless flap), so that the present [p] and [t̪] between vowels represent reborrowings.

### The symbols

The consonantal characters are shown in TABLE 50.3. The current order of symbols is reflected in this table, but there have been changes from time to time (Geiger and

TABLE 50.4: *Dhivehi Vowels (fili)*

Fili	◌َ	◌̄	◌ِ	◌̄̄	◌ُ	◌̄̄	◌_	◌̄̄	◌_	◌̄̄
Translit.	a	ā	i	ī	u	ū	e	ē	o	ō
Official	a	aa	i	ee	u	oo	e	ey	o	oa
Name	aba fili	aabaa fili	ibi fili	eebee fili	ubu fili	ooboo fili	ebe fili	eybey fili	obo fili	oaboa fili

Bell 1919, De Silva 1969). The manner of writing the independent vowels and the vowel order are shown in TABLE 50.4.

Like other South Asian languages, Taana writes vowels as diacritics on consonants. Atypically, however, consonant letters do not carry an inherent [a]. The presence of a vowel, including [a], is specified by a diacritic on the consonant character. There are ten vowel diacritics or *fili*. The *fili* for [i] and [i:] are written below the consonant character, e.g. *ni*, *nī*, all others above it. e.g. *na*, *nu*, *ne*. The markings ◌\_ a, ◌\_ i, and ◌\_ ū are direct borrowings from Arabic, and have been augmented for the vowel inventory of Dhivehi. Long vowels—except in the case of ◌\_ o and ◌\_ ō—are written by doubling the diacritic. A consonant with no vowel is indicated by the consonant symbol marked with an eleventh *fili* ◌\_ , called *sukun*.

One symbol, *alifu*, though listed among the consonants, represents no specific sound, but is used as a neutral base for *fili*. When marked with a vowel diacritic, it is used to write that vowel word-initially or immediately following another vowel, thus, *irugai* ‘time (locative)’ (note the right-to-left order). Alifu with *sukun* ◌\_ writes a word-final glottal stop, as in *fa°* [faʔ] ‘sawteeth’. Double consonants are generally written by using alif + *sukun* preceding the consonant being lengthened: *ba°dalu* [baddalu] ‘meeting’, *ba°te°* [baʔteʔ] ‘eggplant’. Double nasals, however, are written with *n* + *sukun* preceding the nasal: *en°me* [emme] ‘only’.

The symbols *ṣ* and *t* with *sukun* have special characteristics: they represent the glottal stop word-finally, but before another consonant represent doubling of that consonant. Thus *raṣ°* ‘island’ and *aṣ°ḍiha* ‘80’ are pronounced [raʔ] and [aḍḍiha] (the change of *d* to retroflex ḍ results from the preceding retroflex consonant). However, in either position, a -y- offglide is pronounced on the vowel preceding *t* + *sukun* (ṣ). Thus *rat°* ‘red’ is [rayʔ], and *at°puḷu* ‘hand (honorific)’ is *ayppuḷu* [ajppuḷu]. Like Sinhala (SECTION 36), Divehi has prenasalized voiced stops, which contrast with the corresponding nasal plus stop. These are written as *n* (without *sukun*) plus the stop, and sometimes without the nasal represented at all, even though it is there when spoken. Thus [ka°ḍu] ‘sea’ is *kanḍu* or *kaḍu*.

Diphthongs are written by writing the second member as an independent vowel, i.e., alifu with the relevant diacritic. The first part is written in the usual way, i.e., as a diacritic on alifu (for word-initial diphthongs) or on the relevant consonant; hence *ais°* [ais] ‘having come’, *fai* [fai] ‘leg’.

TABLE 50.5: Additional Characters Used in Transliterating Arabic (*tiki jehē tāna*)

Letter	Arabic	Transliteration	Letter	Arabic	Transliteration
هـ	ح	ḥ	هـ	ث	ṯ
ز	خ	ḫ	ح	ط	ṭ
ص	ع	ʿ	ع	ق	q
ڤ	غ	ġ	ش	ش	š
ڦ	و	w	ص	ص	ṣ
ڨ	ذ	ḏ	ض	ض	ḏ

In writing Arabic loanwords, Arabic letters are commonly used, but there is an additional set of characters, called *tiki jehē tāna*, formed by adding dots to already existent Taana characters. that has been created for that purpose. and the government encourages its use in Taana documents. These are given in TABLE 50.5.

On the whole, Taana fits the phonology of the language very well, and M. W. S. De Silva has gone so far as to call it “perhaps the most scientific alphabet in South Asia” (1969: 208). As the text sample shows, the fit is very close, though there are some non-direct phonological representations as described earlier.

#### SAMPLE OF DHIVEHI

In normal speech, word-final glottal stop generally assimilates completely to the following consonant, except before vowels and *h*, where it becomes the velar nasal [ŋ], as illustrated in line 4.

inaṽamid	°šakamak	ūgadnu	em°ne	uri	ēḷu	°sog	°šaham
°šakamak	ūgadnu	em°ne	uri	ēḷu	°sog	°šaham	?°emak °nok
ne	ē.ḷu	e	°negifihin	°ne	iaguri	itad	°ne īnav °šakamak
						?°enihik	īneḷu nafih

1. *Transliteration:* mahaš° gos° uḷē iru en°me undagū kamakaš°
2. *Transcription:* maha? gos uḷe: iru emme u°dagu: kamaka?
3. *Colloquial:* mahag gos uḷe: iru emme u°dagu: kamakad
4. *Gloss:* fish.to going being time most difficult thing.a.to

1. dimāvanī	kon°	kame°?	mahaš°	gos°	uļē	iru	en°me	undagū
2. dima:va:ni:	kon	kame?	maha?	gos	uļe:	iru	emme	u°dagu:
3. dima:va:ni:	koŋ	kame?	mahag	gos	uļe:	iru	emme	u°dagu:
4. encountering	which	thing	fish.to	going	being	time	most	difficult
1. kamakaš°	aļugaŋdumen°naš°	vanī	en°	dati	irugai	en°		
2. kamaka?	aļuga°dumenna?	vani:	en	dati	irugai	en		
3. kamakaŋ	aļuga°dumenna?	vani:	en	dati	irugai	en		
4. thing.a.to	us.to	is	bait	scarce	time.in	bait		
1. nihifigen°	e	uļē.	en°	hifan°	uļenī	kihine°?		
2. nihifigen	e	uļe	en	hifan	uļeni:	kihine?		
3. nihifigeŋ	e	uļe	en	hifaŋ	uļeni:	kihine?		
4. not.having.caught	that	being	bait	to.catch	is.being	how		

‘When you go fishing, what is the most difficult situation you encounter?’

—When we go fishing, the most difficult thing that happens to us is when the bait fish are scarce and we don’t get the bait. —How do (you) try to catch bait fish?’

—After De Silva 1969: 202.

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