Phonetic Characters in Tamil

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INTRODUCTION

Tamil is a very ancient language with a rich heritage and literature. Over the centuries some changes have been made to the script. These changes consist of not only modification of existing glyphs of the Tamil characters but also introduction of new characters like the Grantha characters. The introduction of Grantha characters was done so that many of the Sanskrit words adopted and used in Tamil could be written in the Tamil script. For any language to survive it should be flexible and willing to adopt words from other languages as and when necessary. A primary example of such a language is the English language which has adopted words from many languages. By doing this the English language has only enriched itself. It has not lost its identity as some may fear. The Tamil script is essentially phonetic / syllable based and unlike the English language it has structured pronunciation rules. When we adopt words from other languages we should be in a position to pronounce them correctly. It is with this perspective in mind , this paper presents the concept of Phonetic characters in Tamil. This paper also deals with the problem of Spoken Tamil versus Written Tamil.

NEED

We are at a point of time in history when technology has reduced the once 'Huge World' to 'A Global Village'. Communication and Computer technology has made instant communication between peoples of the world possible. International Commerce and travel is the order of the day. Because of this there is a need for people to communicate with people speaking different languages. Even though English can be considered to be a common language, there is a great advantage to be derived by speaking to a person in his native language. One can learn to speak many languages, but learning the scripts of those languages is a little more difficult. Hence if it is possible to write the words of that language by using our own script, it will greatly help us. For example there are several singers who sing in Tamil and still don't know the Tamil script. They simply write down the words in their language and read it out. This sometimes creates difficulty in correct pronunciation of the words. This is due to the fact that the script system for a language is usually developed keeping the needs of that language alone in mind.

When we mispronounce a word it is possible that the other person does not understand us and sometimes they may also misunderstand what we are trying to convey. This problem is magnified when we travel abroad. Many international travelers have a habit of carrying a translation book along with them. These books usually have the translated words printed using the native script. Hence it is likely that one mispronounces these words if they cannot be written properly in the native script. For example the English words 'bat' and 'pat' are written exactly the same way in Tamil. Just imagine the plight of a Tamilian who is using a translation book !

Today technological advances are taking place all over the World and new words are being coined in different languages. If we have to quickly learn and benefit from these advances we will necessarily have to adopt these words and write them correctly in our own language.

It would be a very big advantage if we adopt suitable changes to our script system to enable phonetically correct writing of foreign words. One example of a language that has adopted such a system is the Japanese Language. In fact the Japanese have evolved a totally different script called the 'Katakana' for writing foreign words. This is because the basic 'Kanji' script used by the Japanese is not phonetic based. But Tamil is already phonetic based. Hence it is easy to change the Tamil script to accommodate different basic sounds.

Another aspect which needs to be looked into is the big difference between Written Tamil and Spoken Tamil. There are a number of words that are not pronounced the way they are meant to be during the course of normal day to day conversation. Typical examples are அவன், அவள், மிளகாய், மிளகு etc. There are many more words that can be added to this list. At present there is a growing tendency among people to write words as they are pronounced. While doing so they conveniently ignore long standing conventions. A typical example of this would be the word கிளப்பு which is normally pronounced as கௌப்பு This can create a confusion about pronunciation while reading because it will normally be read as 'kouppu'. Hence it would be helpful if we can make suitable changes to our script to enable this flexibility without causing any confusion.

PHONETIC SCHEME

All tamil characters have their origin in the Uyir and / or Mei characters. Hence in order to introduce a basic sound 'ga' in Tamil, the easiest way would be to introduce a different Mei character for this sound along with the 13 Uyirmey characters that are associated with this Mei character. This means an addition of 13 more characters to the Tamil Script, which already has 313 charcters. This way every addition of a basic sound increases the number of characters by 13. This would be a huge burden on the Tamil Script. Hence the concept of 'Sound Modifier' can be used. In this scheme three different Modifier Characters can be introduced. One will be a Mei Modifier, the second will be an Uyir Modifier and the third will be an Uyir-Mei Modifier. By adding these three basic modifier characters to the script system many different sounds can be introduced into Tamil.

MEI MODIFIER

This modifier character changes or modifies only the mei component of the character preceding it.

Shape of the Mei modifier : ⌄

க = ka	கⱴ = ga	காⱴ = gaa
ச = sa	சⱴ = cha	சாⱴ = chaa
ட = da	டⱴ = ta	டாⱴ = ti
டˑ = it	டˑⱴ = id	
த = tha	தⱴ = dha	தீⱴ = dhii
ப = pa	பⱴ = ba	புⱴ = bu
ஜ = ja	ஜⱴ = za	ஜⴲⱴ = zuu

URIR MODIFIER

This modifier character changes or modifies only the uyir component of the character preceding it.

Shape of the Mei modifier : ⌃

கா = ka	கா⌃ = ka as in cat
கோ = koo	கோ⌃ = ko as in cot
பா = paa	பா⌃ = pa as in pat
போ = poo	போ⌃ = po as in pot

This modifier is also used for another purpose. It merges or concatinates the sound of the Akaram Eeria Mei letter preceding it with the Uyir-Mei letter succeeding it.

Uyir Modifier as a Concatinating Symbol

க⌃ஹா = khaa	as in Khan
க⌃ஷி = kshi	as in Meenakshi
ஸ⌃கூட = shuu	as in School

This feature will provide conjunct consonants capability to the Tamil script without the need for separate glyphs. This ofcourse gives the Tamil script the capability to represent many new sounds in the Tamil language. Generally words in Tamil do not begin with a Mei character. This feature helps us to follow that rule and we can avoid using a Mei character as a first character of

a word. e.g. We can avoid writing the English word 'school' as 'ஸ்கூல்'. If we desire we can also avoid the entire கூழி series.

UYIR-MEI MODIFIER:

This modifier character changes or modifies both the mei and Uyir components of the character preceding it.

Shape of the Uyir-Mei modifier: o

கோ = khaa   கோ0 = go as in got

பா = kshi   பா0 = ba as in bat

as can be seen in the examples above the Uyir-Mei modifier not only changes the Mei component of the character preceeding it, but also its Uyir component.

EXAMPLES

Here are some samples of how these modifiers can be used for writing some foreign words and names :

pat   = பா^ட்

pad   = பா^ட்ʋ

bat   = பா0ட்

bad   = பா0ட்ʋ

got   = கோ0ட்

cot   = கோ^ட்

chord = கோ^ர்ட்ʋ or கோ^ர்^ட்ʋ

Khan = க^ஹ்ரான்

Ghana = கʋஹரானா

Zeebra = ஜீʋப0ரா

consortium = கன்சோʋர்ட்டியம் or கன்சோʋர ்ட்டியம்

Modifiers in Tamil words : In the case of Tamil words that are pronounced differently in Spoken Tamil, we could use the uyir modifier to denote this. For example :

அவன் pronounced as அவெ்ன்ˆ

அவள் pronounced as அவள்ˆ

கிளப்பு pronounced as கௌளப்பு

In the first two cases the Uyir Modifier makes the ன் and ள் semi silent. In the last example the uyir modifier differentiates between கௌ (kou) and கௌˆள (keLa).

SORTING ORDER

Having introduced the above characters into the script, the next issue would be the sorting order. The positioning of the modifier character is after the parent Tamil character. This helps to group these modified characters along with the parent or base character. The three modifiers should be given a weight soon after the Uyir letters. If this system is followed then the following sorting sequene will be obtained

க கா கோ கௌ காˆ கோˆ காப கோ௦

ச சா சோ செள சாˆ சோˆ சாப சோ௦

CONCLUSION

By introducing just three modifier characters and without any change to the existing glyphs we will be able to get rid of the confusion that may arise in pronunciation of not only foreign words but also in Tamil words. It will go a long way in making Tamil a truly 'International Language'.

Author : The author is a partner of M/s Palaniappa Bros., which is one of the leading Tamil book publishing houses in Tamil Nadu. He is a Production Engineer with a Masters degree in Business Administration specialising in Finance and Information Systems. He has been involved in the fields of Font and Software development and DTP for over 15 years.