

LANGUAGES AND SCRIPTS IN THE MALDIVE ISLANDS: CODING AND ENCODING

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The Maldivian language, better known as Dhivehi, is an Indo-European language closely related to Sinhalese spoken in nearby Sri Lanka and other languages found on the Indian subcontinent. Until the eighteenth century, Dhivehi was written in a script characterized by Vitharana (1997) as old-Sinhalese of which the early form is called Eveyla Akuru. It is found in twelfth and thirteenth century inscriptions and underwent a number of changes towards the later form generally known as Dhivehi Akuru or Dives Akuru. A full account of this script, its closest neighbors and its history has been published by Naseema Mohamed (1999).

Eveyla Akuru is a syllabic script written from left to right and was replaced in the eighteenth century by Thaana or Taana, which is considered an alphabet and written from right to left. The adequacy of this latter script for the Dhivehi language has been studied at length by Sugathapala DeSilva (1969), who concluded that it was most adequate from a phonological point of view.

Since the 1970s, the Maldives Islands have become an increasingly popular tourist destination and, despite this foreign influence, the status of Taana has improved. The script is used nationwide and a secondary use of Roman letters seems to be limited to texts for tourist purposes. The Maldivians choose a language, Dhivehi or English, and a writing system, Taana or Roman letters, to publish their messages. The possible basis of these choices is explored in the following examples that were collected on the Maldives in 2003.

Taana

Taana is characterized by DeSilva as “a mixture of both Indic and Semitic (Perso-Arabic) traditions”. By this he means that it has the characteristics of an alpha-syllabary and of the Arabic writing system. The signs of Taana are derived from Arabic numerals and also other numeral signs most likely from an earlier system used on the islands.

A Taana sign consists of a consonant symbol with a diacritic symbol indicating a vowel. One neutral sign with vowel diacritic is used to indicate a single vowel. Contrary to most alphabets, the consonant signs are not used without a diacritic; for these there is a neutral diacritic known as sukun, which consists of a little circle placed above the base sign. In contrast with the alpha-syllabary, the consonant or base signs do not have an inherent vowel, such as *a*, when no diacritic is present. They are simply not used without one. Even the neutral sign used for word-initial vowels is not used without a diacritic. The creative use of the sukun has been described in detail by DeSilva and has made Taana both a phonemically adequate and a generally flexible system that can distinguish long vowels (placing two diacritics), double sonants as well as geminates in recent loanwords (repeating the sign but placing a sukun on the first sign) and geminates in Dhivehi (neutral sign plus sukun followed by the consonant sign with vowel). This flexibility and originality of the writing system is further exemplified by the developments since 1970 when Taana was introduced into all parts of modern Maldivian society and when the English language continued to invade the islands as part of the tourist trade.

The syllabic characteristics of the system are illustrated by a card game known as Akuru Thaasbe in which the script is represented as a syllabary. This language game is based on Scrabble and was developed by Abdulla Sadiq. He had this idea in the 1970s and developed it in the 1980s. A thousand games were printed in the 1990s and it is now readily available in stationary stores. The game has playing cards each printed with a different syllable of the language. A number of possible but highly unusual syllables were excluded. Although Taana is not formally a syllabary, the use of the script in a language game made syllabic cards most convenient.

The use of Taana extends to Maldivian dialects. Dialects are not officially recognized in the Maldives but a convincing example of the versatility of Taana script is illustrated by the Fuamulaku dialect that has significant differences compared to the dialect spoken on Malé (Fritz 2002). It is said that Fuamulaku is written the same as Dhivehi but simply pronounced differently. A visit to this island revealed that at least two street names were found written in the Fuamulaku dialect rather than Dhivehi and that a local poet also used and wrote the dialect. One restaurant featured a name that is written and pronounced in Fuamulaku dialect as *Bilhifeyshe Hotaa*, the expression meaning "hook box". However, the first word of this name is pronounced and