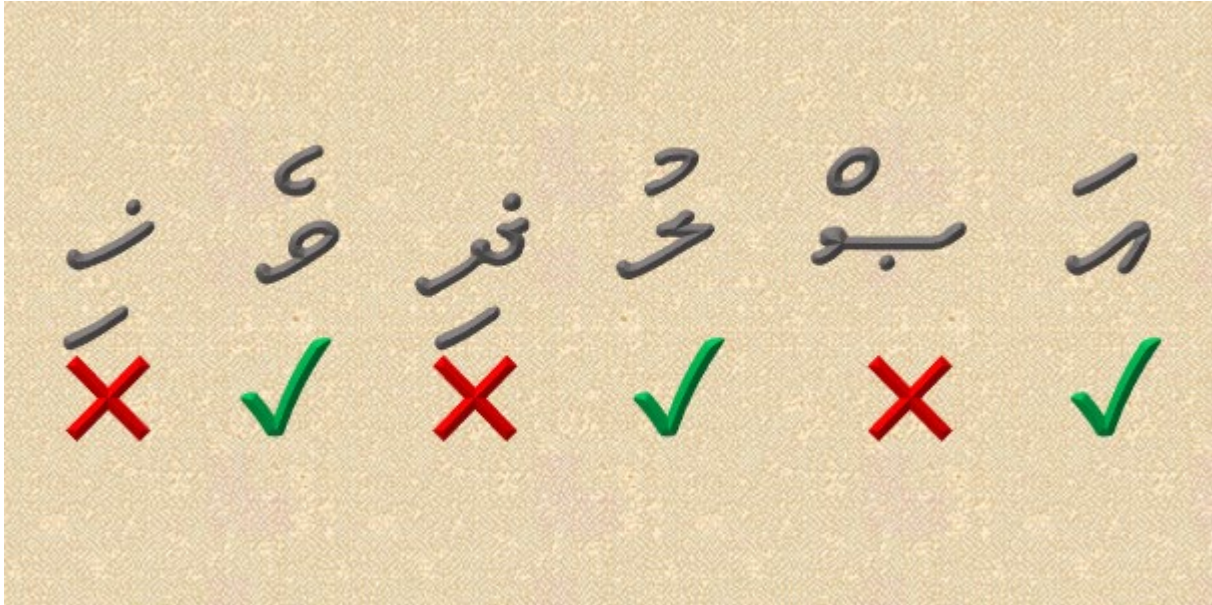


# Phonology

## True Dhivehi – Adventures in Phonology

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The history of language is the history of people; travelling, coming into contact with each other, and exchanging ideas (and often fighting as well). Through this process of conquering and collaboration, languages evolve, borrowing words, concepts and sounds. Dhivehi, like all spoken languages, contains sounds. These sounds have their own histories, and some can be considered more authentic than others. In this post, we will be looking at Dhivehi phonology, and sorting sounds based on their authenticity.

This is a very purist thing to do, which as I have written before is not necessarily the best way to go when it comes to linguistics and language planning, but it does have applications when it comes to word derivation, as I will explain later. Right now, we'll start the sound-sorting. (You may read the article through the following link: <https://thatmaldivesblog.wordpress.com/2018/11/14/true-dhivehi-adventures-in-phonology/>)

### Sounds in Dhivehi

The picture below shows all the sounds that are in Dhivehi (in Thaana and IPA). I say “sounds in Dhivehi” because these are sounds you hear in Dhivehi speech, but they are not all “Dhivehi sounds”.

## Sounds in Dhivehi

ރ	ސ	ޞ	ޙ	ޙ	ޙ	ޙ	ޙ	ޙ	ޙ
/m/	/u/	/ʔ/	/k/	/l/	/b/	/r/	/n/	/ʃ/	/h/
ޞ	ޞ	ޞ	ޞ	ޞ	ޞ	ޞ	ޞ	ޞ	ޞ
/z/	/d/	/s/	/ɲ/	/g/	/l/	/t/	/d/	/f/	
ޞ	ޞ	ޞ	ޞ	ޞ	ޞ	ޞ	ޞ	ޞ	ޞ
/ŋ/	/c/	/ɟ/	/p/	/z/	/t/				
ޞ	ޞ	ޞ	ޞ	ޞ	ޞ	ޞ	ޞ	ޞ	ޞ
/θ/	/ð/	/w/	/ɣ/	/ɕ/	/ʒ/	/x/	/ɦ/		
ޞ	ޞ	ޞ	ޞ	ޞ	ޞ	ޞ	ޞ	ޞ	ޞ
/dʒ/	/sʒ/	/ʃ/	/q/	/ðʒ/	/tʒ/				

The first way we'll divide these sounds is pretty obvious. Even if you had never seen Thaana before, you would probably be able to guess that all those dotted letters at the bottom do not belong with the rest of them. These letters represent sounds that are very new to Dhivehi (they are all Arabic sounds, apart from one). Despite the letters being introduced over 50 years ago, the sounds are still so foreign that most Maldivians will not pronounce them as they are meant to be pronounced. The letters are not even considered part of the Thaana alphabet. I have said before that it is useless even having the letters, but that's besides the point. The point is that those sounds are not Dhivehi at all, meaning that we can separate them, which gives us our next table:

Dhivehi Sounds	Not Dhivehi Sounds
ރ ސ ޞ ޙ ޙ ޙ ޙ ޙ ޙ ޙ	ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ
/l/ /b/ /r/ /n/ /ʃ/ /h/	/ɕ/ /ʒ/ /x/ /ɦ/
ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ	ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ
/t/ /d/ /f/ /m/ /u/ /ʔ/ /k/	/θ/ /ð/ /w/ /ɣ/
ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ	ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ
/z/ /d/ /s/ /ɲ/ /g/ /l/	/q/ /ðʒ/ /tʒ/
ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ	ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ
/ŋ/ /c/ /ɟ/ /p/ /z/ /t/	/dʒ/ /sʒ/ /ʃ/

Of the sounds that are not Dhivehi, some are used more frequently than others. The frequency of use can be used as the basis for further separation, since the more frequently a sound is used, the more integral it is to a language. This next division is based on what I have heard in Maldivian media and everyday speech (Click for full size):

Dhivehi Sounds	Former Dhivehi Sound Reintroduced Via Arabic	Sometimes-used Arabic Sounds	Rarely-used Arabic Sounds	Pretty-much-never-used English Sound
ރ ސ ޞ ޙ ޙ ޙ ޙ /r/ /b/ /r/ /n/ /p/ /h/	ޞ /ʃ/	ڙ ڙ /ɟ/ /x/	ڦ ڦ ڦ /w/ /β/ /ð/	
ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ /t/ /d/ /t/ /m/ /a/ /k/		ڄ ڄ /tʃ/ /ʒ/	ڤ ڤ /dʰ/ /sʰ/	ڄ /ʒ/
ڄ ڄ ڄ ڄ ڄ /z/ /d/ /s/ /t/ /g/ /v/			ڇ ڇ /dʒ/ /tʃ/	
ڇ ڇ ڇ ڇ ڇ /n/ /c/ /p/ /p/ /t/			ځ /tʃ/	

The case of ސ is interesting. It used to be a Dhivehi sound (or at least Dhives Akuru had two distinct letters for ސ and ސ). Then the two sounds merged, and only /s/ remained. During the 60s and 70s, after the introduction of the modern education system, there was a gradual shift and people started differentiating between /s/ and /ʃ/ again. This was most likely due to loanwords coming in from Arabic and English, because people were studying through those languages. Today, most people will pronounce ސ as /s/ and ސ as /ʃ/, but there are still some people, mostly from the older generation who pronounce both as /s/. I've even met someone in their 20s who couldn't pronounce ސ, but she was from an outer island.

The frequency with which Arabic sounds are used is also interesting. The only explanation I have as to why those four sounds are used more than the others is that a) they are relatively easy to pronounce, and b) people think it's worth pronouncing them differently. All the sounds in the rarely used column are either too difficult (like all the "emphatic" consonants) or people pronounce them a different way. For example most people pronounce ڦ as /s/.

As for that English sound (if you don't know IPA, it's the s in 'measure', or a French j), I don't even know why that letter exists. No one even uses it.

Now we turn our attention to the Dhivehi sounds. Even amongst them, there are sounds that are less Dhivehi than the others. Which gives us our next table (click for full size):

Dhivehi Sounds	Borrowed Sounds	Former Dhivehi Sound Reintroduced Via Arabic	Sometimes-used Arabic Sounds	Rarely-used Arabic Sounds	Pretty-much-never-used English Sound
ރ ސ ޞ ޙ ޙ ޙ ޙ /r/ /b/ /r/ /n/ /p/ /h/	ޞ /z/	ޞ /ʃ/	ڙ ڙ /ɟ/ /x/	ڦ ڦ ڦ /w/ /β/ /ð/	
ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ ޞ /t/ /d/ /t/ /m/ /a/ /k/	ڄ ڄ /tʃ/ /ʒ/		ڄ ڄ /tʃ/ /ʒ/	ڤ ڤ /dʰ/ /sʰ/	ڄ /ʒ/
ڄ ڄ ڄ ڄ ڄ /z/ /d/ /s/ /t/ /g/ /v/				ڇ ڇ /dʒ/ /tʃ/	
ڇ ڇ ڇ ڇ ڇ /n/ /c/ /p/ /p/ /t/				ځ /tʃ/	

Let's start with ޞ which makes the sound /z/. While Maldivians may think of this as a Dhivehi sound, it is actually borrowed, and there are three things that give it away:

Firstly, there are no Dhivehi words with this sound that were not borrowed from another language. Maldivians reading this, try to think of one. You can't, because they are all Arabic, Persian or English.

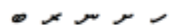













Secondly, there are Dhivehi words which were borrowed from other languages before /z/ became a part of Dhivehi, and they are pronounced with a /d/ instead. For example, *ދަދަދަ* (/ro:da/) and *ނަދަދަ* (/nama:du/) come from Persian *روزه* (/ro:ze/) and *نماز* (/nama:z/). If /z/ was a Dhivehi sound, it would not have changed to /d/ when these words entered the language.

Finally, there are no other closely related languages which have this sound. Sinhalese doesn't have /z/ (which is a huge giveaway that /z/ is foreign to Dhivehi, since it's pretty much a dialect of Sinhalese), and Hindi/Urdu is just like Dhivehi in that all their /z/ words come from Persian and Arabic.

*ޞ* (pronounced /j/) has a similar story. Most words that start with this sound are borrowed from other languages. The Dhivehi words which contain this sound in the middle, usually have it there sort of as a "ghost consonant", or a glide between two vowels. For example, *ޞަޞަޞަ* and *ޞަޞަޞަ*.

Sanskrit words which started with /j/ changed into /d/ in Dhivehi, through the intermediate *ޞ*. For example, Sanskrit *जट्ट* (/ja:tra/) became Dhivehi *ޞަޞަޞަ* (/ɖaʈʈru/). Sinhalese, meanwhile, retained the actual /j/ sound. For example, the word for "go" is *ගො* (/jannə/) in Sinhalese, but *ޞަ* (/ɖa:ŋ/) in Dhivehi.

Ok, so the borrowed sounds are sorted. Everything that's left are the "True Dhivehi" sounds, right? Wrong! Many of the sounds that are left are simply altered versions of existing sounds (a-k-a allophones). They exist in Dhivehi, but only in specific contexts. Therefore, they can be given their own group (click to enlarge):

Dhivehi Sounds	Allophones	Borrowed Sounds	Former Dhivehi Sound Reintroduced Via Arabic	Sometimes-used Arabic Sounds	Rarely-used Arabic Sounds	Pretty-much-never-used English Sound
 <i>sa</i> /i/ <i>sa</i> /i/ <i>sa</i> /i/ <i>sa</i> /i/ <i>sa</i> /i/	 <i>sa</i> /i/ <i>sa</i> /i/ <i>sa</i> /i/ <i>sa</i> /i/	 <i>sa</i> /z/	 <i>sa</i> /j/	 <i>sa</i> /t/ <i>sa</i> /d/	 <i>sa</i> /t/ <i>sa</i> /d/ <i>sa</i> /t/ <i>sa</i> /d/ <i>sa</i> /t/	 <i>sa</i> /z/
 <i>sa</i> /m/ <i>sa</i> /n/ <i>sa</i> /l/ <i>sa</i> /r/	 <i>sa</i> /m/ <i>sa</i> /n/ <i>sa</i> /l/ <i>sa</i> /r/	 <i>sa</i> /j/		 <i>sa</i> /q/ <i>sa</i> /k/	 <i>sa</i> /dʒ/ <i>sa</i> /dʒ/ <i>sa</i> /dʒ/ <i>sa</i> /dʒ/	
 <i>sa</i> /g/ <i>sa</i> /ŋ/ <i>sa</i> /tʃ/ <i>sa</i> /dʒ/					 <i>sa</i> /h/	

A lot of these sounds only occur when other consonants are geminated (doubled).

*ސ* (/s/) is frequently an allophonic variant of *ޞ* (/h/) in Modern Dhivehi. In the vocabulary that Dhivehi inherited from Sanskrit, word-initial and medial *ސ* have changed to *ޞ*. In the Malé dialect, words can end with *ސ* but even this changes to *ޞ* if a suffix is added. If a *ޞ* is geminated, it changes back into a *ސ*. This is why *ޞަޞަޞަ* (which historically would have been *ޞަޞަޞަ*) becomes *ޞަޞަޞަ*, and why *ޞަޞަޞަ* becomes *ޞަޞަޞަ*.

ڤ (/p/) is similar. In Modern Dhivehi, this sound only occurs when ڤ (/f/) is geminated (apart from borrowed words), often after ڤ. For example, ڤڤڤڤ consists of ڤڤ and ڤڤ. Historically, /f/ did not exist in Dhivehi, but at some point prior to the 17th century, /p/ sounds came to be pronounced as /f/.

ڤ (/t/) is the same – it normally occurs when ڤ (/s/) is geminated, because at some point in history, the sound changed. This is why ڤڤڤڤ becomes ڤڤڤڤ, and also why words ending with ڤ change to ڤ when a suffix is added, for example, ڤڤ → ڤڤڤڤ.

ڤ (/c/) and ڤ (/ɟ/) usually occur when suffixes are added to words ending with ڤ and ڤ respectively. For example, ڤ becomes ڤڤ and ڤ becomes ڤڤ. In Addu, the name for Maldives is ڤڤڤ instead of ڤڤڤ. There are however, originally Dhivehi words with ڤ like ڤڤ, but these are relatively rare, which is why I'm still counting it in the allophone category.

ڤ (/d/) is a bit trickier. There are some cases where this sound is a form of the dental stop ڤ preceded by ڤ. For example, ڤڤ is actually ڤڤ and ڤڤ. But then there are also Dhivehi words with the sound like ڤڤ and ڤڤ. There's also the fact that ڤ in southern dialects often correspond to ڤ in the Malé dialect, for example ڤڤ is ڤڤ in Addu. I'm putting it into the allophone category because it's relatively rare.

ڤ (/r/) and ڤ (/ɾ/) are usually allophones of ڤ (/n/) in modern Dhivehi. ڤ usually occurs when adding a suffix to a word ending in ڤ, for example, ڤڤ becomes ڤڤڤ. There are words like ڤڤ and ڤڤ, but in these cases, the ڤ arises because the negation particle ڤ is prefixed to another word. As for ڤ, this sound is typically heard in the Malé dialect before ڤ, as in ڤڤ. In Southern dialects, it is a distinct phoneme. For example, ڤڤ can mean “worm” or “juice/syrup” in the Malé dialect, but in Addu and Fuvahmulah, ڤڤ can only mean “juice/syrup” while ڤڤ means “worm”. I'm counting it as a allophone because it is no longer phonemic for most Maldivians.

Ok, so now the remaining sounds are “True Dhivehi”, right?

Yes, but within those sounds, there are some that are in a way “unique” to Dhivehi. By this I mean that they are not found in related languages, but at the same time they are not borrowed. Instead, they came about through historical sound changes. This gives us our final table with a scale of the authenticity of sounds in Dhivehi:

"Uniquely" Dhivehi Sounds	Dhivehi Sounds	Allophones	Borrowed Sounds	Former Sound Reintroduced Via Arabic	Sometimes-used Arabic Sounds	Rarely-used Arabic Sounds	Pretty-much-never-used English Sound
ڤ ڤ ڤ ڤ ڤ ڤ	ڤ ڤ ڤ ڤ ڤ ڤ ڤ ڤ ڤ ڤ	ڤ ڤ ڤ ڤ ڤ ڤ ڤ ڤ ڤ ڤ	ڤ ڤ	ڤڤ	ڤ ڤ ڤ ڤ	ڤڤ ڤڤ ڤڤ ڤڤ ڤڤ ڤڤ	ڤڤ ڤڤ
More Dhivehi ←							→ Less Dhivehi

ހ is probably the most “unique” out of the four. It evolved from medial ޅ in old Dhivehi and was likely influenced by ॠ consonant clusters in Sanskrit. Some people pronounce it close to a ރ sound, which is why it used to be transliterated ‘rh’. I’ve written a whole post about this unique sound you can read [here](#).

ޅ is unique because it remained in Dhivehi. In related languages like Sinhalese and Marathi, it merged with the alveolar /l/ sound.

ރ evolved from ރ, which did not happen in other languages. Dhivehi is one of the few South Asian languages where this sound is found in native words.

The glottal stop ހ is unique in the sense that it is not found at the coda of syllables in related languages, for example in the indefinite suffix ހ. This is why I put it in the “unique” category, even though technically, it is an allophone of ހ.

So there you have it. We’ve sorted the sounds in Dhivehi from “most Dhivehi” to “least Dhivehi”. Now what can we do with this knowledge?

Like I said at the beginning of the post, the main application of this information is word derivation. More specifically, knowing which sounds are more Dhivehi can help us naturalise loanwords to make them sound less foreign. This expands the Dhivehi lexicon without compromising its “flavour”. It also makes it easier for native speakers to pronounce words. I will explore this in greater depth with examples in a future post.

I’ll leave you with a [link to a document](#) where I got a lot of the information for this post. It uses a lot of linguistic jargon, but it’s worth having a look at if you’re interested in this subject.