

3. The Shapes of Telugu

Telugu uses Telugu script, a script distinctly different from Devanagari script in which Hindi and Sanskrit are written. Telugu script is also distinctly different from Tamil and Malayalam scripts. It does have some resemblance to Kannada script.

Telugu letters are "roundish" in shape and most of the vowels and consonants can be written by taking a circle as a base shape and modifying that shape. The order of the strokes is not uniform across the letters; for some, it is clockwise and for others, it is counter clockwise. The procedure on how to write Telugu letters is illustrated in Figure 1. In this figure, the alphabet is shown in the traditional order. Read the alphabet left to right, top-to-bottom, just like you read English.

Telugu script is written left to right. It is best to practice writing on a narrow ruled paper. Conceptually, you need three units of depth, created by four horizontal lines on a ruled paper, to write one line. Fit the central part of the character between the middle two lines and use the space above for "superscripts" and the space below for "subscripts," as shown in Figure 2.

Telugu script is syllabic in the sense that vowels are represented differently in different contexts; the syllabic (primary) context and the intra-syllabic (secondary) context. That is, vowels have one form when they appear in a stand-alone form and in a different form when they appear in conjunction with consonants. In conjunct forms, the consonant symbol dominates and the secondary form of the vowel appears either as a "subscript," "superscript," or an "appendage to the right" of the consonant. (See sample shown in Figure 2.)

The characters of Telugu alphabet are listed below in the traditional order, accompanied by the RTS transliteration being used in this book.

1. Vowels

Primary Symbol	Pronunciation	Secondary Symbol	...Telugu Name...	...Meaning...
A	a	TBD	ta-la-ka-TTu	Headband
	A	TBD	dI-rghaM	Elongation
I	i	TBD	gu-Di	Loop
	I	TBD	g. dI-rghaM	Long L.
U	u	TBD	ko-mmu	Handle
	U	TBD	k. dI-rghaM	Long H.
	R	TBD	va-Tra-su-Di	Crooked Spiral
E	RU	TBD	v. dI-rghaM	Long CS
	e	TBD	e-tvaM	You are 'e'
	E	TBD	E-tvaM	You are 'E'
O	ai	TBD	ai-tvaM	You are 'ai'
	o	TBD	o-tvaM	You are 'o'
	O	TBD	O-tvaM	You are 'O'

	au	TBD	au-tvaM	You are 'au'
A	aM	TBD	a-nu-svA-raM	??
A	a@h	TBD	??	vi-sa-rga

When written left to right, the first column appears as below.

A. , l, , U, , (,), E, , , O, , , A , A

Note 1. The vowels , (R, RU) are placed within bold-faced boxes in the table and within parentheses in the list beneath the table. In these days, these two vowels are rarely used, and are often replaced by , , (ru, rU) although purists frown at this practice.

Note 2. A word about A . This “double zero” symbol occurs only as a conjunct. In a small number of Sanskrit loan words the sound produced by A becomes necessary. The beginner can ignore this.

Dropping the vowels , and A from the Telugu alphabet should not cause undue hardship.

Note 3. It is possible to minimize the use of (ai) , and (ou) by replacing them, wherever possible, by A (a-yi) and A (a-vu). The consequence of this action is not catastrophic. However, the secondary (intra-syllabic) forms of these two vowels remain in popular use.

Note 4. For the purposes of this introductory book, only the following twelve vowels in their primary and secondary form and the collateral vowel with the symbol ‘o’ will be used.

A, , l, , U, E, , , O, , , A .

2. Consonants

Traditionally consonants are presented in an array comprised of five rows and five columns, followed by a miscellaneous assortment of additional consonants and semi-vowels. There is a well researched phonetic reason behind this arrangement and it will not be elaborated here.

As consonants cannot be pronounced in their stand-alone state, it is customary to list the consonants in their conjunct form with the vowel a (A) as shown below. The symbols shown below are the primary symbols for consonants. All the other consonant-vowel combinations are listed in the next subsection.

	Voiceless ...unaspirated...	Voiceless ...aspirated...	Voiced ...unaspirated...	Voiced ...aspirated...	Nasals
	plosives	plosives	plosives	plosives	
<i>Velars</i>					
(Gutterals)	ka	kha	ga	gha	M~ma
<i>Pre-Palatals</i>	ca	cha	ja	jha	~na
<i>Retroflexes</i>					
(Cerebrals)	Ta	Tha	Da	Dha	N Na
<i>Dentals</i>	ta	tha	da	dha	na
<i>Labials</i>	pa	pha	ba	bha	ma

Semi-vowels: (ya); (ra); (la); (La); (va)

Sibilants: (Sa); (sha) (sa)

Glottal: (ha)

Note 5. There are two consonants in the second row that respectively follow (ca) and (ja) (not shown), are the dental equivalents of the palatals and . These consonants appear in archaic books and almost all dictionaries carry them. When written, they carry a marker over their heads. These markers, introduced by C. P. Brown, are more like diacritical marks to indicate pronunciation. Indeed there is really no need for them because every native Telugu speaking person knows, from the context, how to pronounce these letters in a word. (See the rule given in Chapter 1, Sec. 3(a), (c)).

Note 6. The consonants M and never occur in isolation. Whenever the letter M (~ma) occurs in such archaic spellings like M (vA~mmayamu), it is replaced by the new spelling (vAMgmayamu). The consonant (~na) occurs only in conjunction with (ja) as in (j~na) but never with any other consonant - at least in Telugu. Although some arguments can be made to drop its usage altogether, current conventions are followed and this symbol is retained for the present.

Finally, (~r) is dropped, just as Brown's dictionary did and many others are doing.

3. Writing Pure Consonants

As Telugu is a vowel-ending language, there is rarely a need for words that end in a pure consonant. However, due to the influence of other languages, especially English and to some extent Sanskrit, now-a-days there is a frequent need to write words that end in a consonant. Writing consonants in their pure form is illustrated below.

, k[^]; x, g[^]; Ū, c[^]; Ŷ, j[^]; etc.

Notice that the pure consonants are written with a base symbol plus a special marker, \ called pollu (literally, husk). These same consonants, when combined with the vowel A (a) present themselves as follows:

, ka; , ga; , ca; , ja; etc.

Notice that the consonants here (and most often) are written with a base symbol plus a special marker called *talakaTTu*, headband.

4. Writing Telugu Alphabet

Now that you are introduced to the sights and sounds of Telugu, let us arrange the letters of a subset of the alphabet, that we plan to use in this book, in their standard order.

Vowels. The 12 regular vowels and the one collateral vowel we propose to use in this book:

A, , I, , U, , E, , , O, , , A

Consonants. The 32 consonants we propose to use in this book:

Traditionally consonants are presented in an array comprised of five rows and five columns, followed by a miscellaneous assortment of additional consonants and semi-vowels, in a sixth row. The sequence in which these consonants are presented has a scientific basis, rooted in phonetics.

<i>ka-group</i>	ka	kha	ga	gha	^M ~ma
<i>ca-group</i>	ca	cha	ja	jha	~na
<i>Ta-group</i>	Ta	Tha	Da	Dha	N Na
<i>ta-group</i>	ta	tha	da	dha	na
<i>pa-group</i>	pa	pha	ba	bha	ma
<i>Semi-vowels</i>	ya	ra	la	La	va Sa sha sa ha

In the above array, consonants are not written in their "pure" form; they are written in the way they would appear if the "pure" form consonants are combined with the first vowel, A(a).

Special Symbol. A special symbol we still need is *pollu* necessary to represent pure consonants.

Note 7. The special symbol denoted by “o”, called *anusvAraM*, produces the “m” sound. It is a popular sound and many words of Telugu end with that sound. The other special symbol is called *pollu*. This always occurs with a pure consonant sound and is very useful while transliterating English words in Telugu script.

5. Letters that Deviate From a Pattern

Notice that some of the letters closely resemble each other. For example (Tha) and (ra) look alike except that the former has a dot in the middle of the “belly”, or circular part. Similarly (tha) and (dha) look alike except that the former has a dot in the middle of its “belly.”

The letters (pa) and (va) look alike except that in the former the “check mark” does not touch the rest of the latter. Similarly, the letters (sa) and (na) look alike except that in the former letter the “check mark” does not touch the rest of the latter. Finally the letters (ya) and (ma) look alike except that the circle at the left-most part is bigger in the former than in the latter.

A careful study of the shapes of the aspirated consonants reveal that their shapes are not derived from their unaspirated counterparts in a consistent manner. For instance, study the pairs , ; , ; , ; , ; and observe how the aspirated form is derived from the unaspirated form. Now compare the pairs: , ;

, ; , ; , ; , . Here the shapes of the aspirated forms bear no obvious resemblance to the unaspirated forms. One exception to this pattern is the , pair; here, to produce the aspirated version not only a "spike" was added to the bottom of the symbol but also a "head band" was added. This, obviously, is a logical inconsistency. Similar consistency deviations will be found when we study consonant-vowel combinations in the next chapter.

6. Vocabulary Session

1) The following two-syllabic words are some of the simplest. They are of V-CV form, that is, a vowel followed by a consonant-vowel combination. Read them aloud first and then listen to the recording.

A a-la wave
 A-Ta game
 I-ga house-fly

2) The following two-syllabic words are formed with a Ca-Ca format. Here “Ca” means “any consonant followed by the vowel A a.” Read them aloud and then listen to the recording.

ka-la dream
 ta-la head
 ja-Da braided hair
 ga-Da bamboo staff
 la-ya rhythm

3) The following words are formed with a {Ca}, formation. Here the braced parentheses implies that the “Ca” pattern is repeated several times. Read them aloud and then listen to the recording.

ka-la-pa lumber
 pa-la-ka slate
 pa-Da-ka bed
 na-Da-ka gait
 na-Da-ta character
 ma-Da-ta fold
 A a-Ta-ka attic
 ta-la-ga-Da pillow

4) The following words are formed with a Ca-Cao formation. Here the ‘Cao’ syllable is very typical of colloquial Telugu, the “o” simply means the ‘M’ sound. Read them aloud and then listen to the recording.

ka-laM pen
 ba-laM strength
 ta-raM generation

5) The following mono-syllabic words are of V (vowel) format.

A that, those
 I this, these
 E what?, which?

Exercises

1) Read aloud the vowels and consonants shown in Section 4. Read them at least 5 times aloud. Seek the help of an associate for correct pronunciation. Can you memorize their sounds after 5 readings? If not try five more times.

2) *The following letter pairs resemble each other in shape. Make sure you identify each of them correctly. (* means answers given at the end of the book)

, ; , ; , , O, , , , A,

3) Say the following words aloud and ask an associate to help correct the pronunciation.

A a-la wave

va-la net

ka-la dream

ka-La art

A-ba greed

O o-ka a, an

pa-na-sa jackfruit

na-va-la novel

maM-Ta flame

vaM-Ta cooking, cuisine

paM-Ta harvest

E eM-Da sunshine

daM-Da garland

4) Say the following simple sentences aloud and ask an associate to help correct the pronunciation.

E ka-laM which pen?

I ka-laM this pen

U I kA-laM this season

I ta-raM this generation

A gaM-Ta that bell

O o-ka a, an

pa-na-sa jackfruit

na-va-la novel

maM-Ta flame

vaM-Ta cooking, cuisine

5) *Transliterate the following words into Telugu script. (The English meanings of the words are given in the parentheses.) Write the transliteration and say it loud

- A (wave)
 (art)
 (braided hair)
- I (sand)
 (threshold)
- U (squirrel)
 (outside)
 (pair)
 (head)
 (machine)

Appendix 2.

The following anecdotes would only be of historical interest and the beginner can safely skip this.

- a.) Historians believe that writing was first employed in India for pragmatic reasons - for correspondence and business - and only by degrees came to be applied to literary use. Most of the Indian (largely, Hindu) scriptural and religious matter was transmitted by oral tradition alone.
- b.) When the time came to put the matter in writing, the script of choice to write the Sanskrit scriptures was Devanagari (dE-va-nA-ga-ri literally means “belonging to the city of the Gods”).
- c.) The theory of the Devanagari, as well as other Indian modes of writing, is syllabic and consonantal. That is, it regards as the written unit, not the simple sound, but the syllable (a-ksha-ra).
- d.) The standard manner in which the alphabets are written, in all Indian languages, is first a list of vowels, each of which constitutes a syllable by itself. Consonants are shown by combining them with the first vowel. The assumption is that the consonant precedes the vowel. If more than one consonants precede a vowel, their components are traditionally combined into a single compound character to represent a single syllable. This author, following the modern trend, did not follow this tradition in the strictest sense; at times the constituent consonants are written separately.
- e.) While writing, in most Indian languages, the tradition was to string the words together into one long linear structure. This author, following the modern trend, tried to write the individual words and word clusters with spaces in between.
- f.) Indian grammarians call the different sounds and the characters representing them by the word **ka**- (KAraM), which means maker, and appending this to the sound of the letter. Thus the sound of A, (a) is called **Aka** (akAraM). The sound of (ka) is **-ka** (ka-kAraM). So are **-ka** , **-ka** (ma-kAraM, ya-kAraM), etc. The only exception to this rule comes with the consonant **ra**. This is not called **ra-ka** (ra-kAraM); instead, this is simply called (ra) or (rE-pha). After Telugu introduced an

additional 'r' sound in the shape of the former is called ordinary 'r' or (sAdhu rEpha) and the
latter, the 'cart variety r' or (Sa—ka-Ta rE-pha).

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