

## Part - I

# 1. The Sounds of Telugu

The best and fastest way to learn the sounds is to seek help from a native Telugu speaker. The next best thing is to find a source of recorded voices such as an audio recording. For the sake of completeness, the Telugu alphabet is introduced below using traditional linguistic jargon. Do not let the jargon intimidate you. If the jargon is too stylistic, ignore it and just follow the examples. The rest of this chapter is devoted to the sounds of Telugu. In the next chapter, we will learn how to write Telugu.

## 1. Articulatory Configurations

A popular way of defining the sound produced during an utterance of a vowel is to identify the tongue hump position ( i. e., front, mid or back) and tongue hump height (high, mid or low) within the vocal tract. Thus there are front vowels, mid vowels and back vowels. Consonants are likewise grouped into nasals, stops (voiced and unvoiced), fricatives (voiced and unvoiced) and affricates.

The following outline description of Telugu sounds will assist the student to articulate and distinguish them. Regular practice and attention to the pronunciation of native speakers is essential.

## 2. Vowels (Listen to the Recording: Chapter 1, Section 2)

*Telugu Vowels - A, , I, , U, , E, , , O, , , A*

### 2A. Sounds of Vowels

In Telugu, there are five vowel groups (more or less like the five vowels of English). For each English vowel sound, there is a corresponding group of Telugu vowel sounds. Indeed, the first six Telugu vowels are traditionally read in groups of two: the short vowel and the long vowel. The next six are read in groups of three: short, long and the diphthong - a combination of two vowels. First, consider the first three pairs shown hereunder.

**A, a**

A low-mid or mid-central unrounded vowel, similar to the first de-stressed vowel in the English verb *subject*, or to the vowel in English *but* or *son*. This is simply an utterance from the expanded throat.

There is no corresponding semi-vowel for this.

The lower case “a” is the Roman equivalent for this short vowel in the RTS (Rice University’s Transliteration System). Throughout this book we use the RTS transliteration and this system is explained in detail in a separate chapter.

**, A**

A low central unrounded vowel, similar to the first vowel in English *father*.

The upper case “A” is the RTS equivalent for this long vowel.

**l, i**

A quite high front unrounded vowel, rather like the vowel in English *sit*. This, along with its associated semi vowel, , ya, is somewhat palatal.

The lower case “i” is the RTS symbol for this short vowel.

**, I**

A high front unrounded vowel, rather like the vowel in English *seat*.

The upper case “I” is the RTS symbol for this long vowel.

**U, u**

A quite high back rounded vowel, rather like the vowel in English *put*. This, along with its associated semi vowel, , va, is somewhat labial.

The lower case “u” is the RTS symbol for this short vowel.

**, U**

A high back rounded vowel, rather like the two vowels in English *food* or the first vowel in the word *rule*.

The upper case “U” is the RTS symbol for this long vowel.

This completes the vowel sets that come in groups of two: short and long versions.

Note 1. The A and are the dominant vowel sounds of the language, being about twice as many as all the other vowel sounds combined. The l and are, in turn, twice as numerous as the U and . Although no carefully conducted research results are available, it is suspected that in each of the three vowel groups identified here, the short vowel sounds are perhaps twice as numerous as the long vowel sounds.

**, R**

Retroflex flap. The tongue is retroflexed, but the tip instead of making firm contact with the roof of the mouth, is flapped quickly forward, touching the roof of the mouth very lightly and finishes behind the upper teeth. This has no direct equivalent in English. This sound is somewhere between (ri) and (ru) and can be approximated by the 'r' sound in *crystal*.  
The combination "Ru" is the RTS symbol for this vowel.

Note 2. Usage of this vowel, in its primary form, is practically extinct; you will seldom find this in modern writings. Nevertheless it is shown here because its secondary form is still widely in use to create sounds like *ri* in Krishna. Some approximate this with the sound of (ru), which is obtained by combining the consonant (ra) and the vowel U(u), but purists frown at this practice. In this book, this vowel will not be used.

## **E, e**

A high-mid front unrounded vowel, similar to the vowel in *they*.  
The lower case "e" is the RTS symbol for this short vowel.

This vowel is the first of a group of three vowels. While reading the alphabet, these three vowels are read as a group: e, E, ai.

## **, E**

A high-mid front unrounded vowel, rather like the first vowel in English *angel*.  
The upper case "E" is the RTS symbol for this long vowel

## **, ai**

The sound represented by the digraph *ai* is frequently a low to low-mid front unrounded vowel, rather like the *ai* sound in *aisle*, or the sound of the last two vowels in *buy* and *die*. The student can replace this diphthogonal sound by the monophthogonal type of pronunciation where *ai* is replaced by *a + i* (A + I). This choice, although not accepted by purists, is often found in modern writings.  
The two-letter combination in lower case "ai" is the RTS symbol for this diphthogonal vowel.

## **O, o**

A high-mid back rounded vowel, rather like the vowel in English *go*.  
The lower case "o" is the RTS symbol for this short vowel.

This vowel is the first of a group of three vowels. While reading the alphabet, these three vowels are read as a group: O, , (o, O, au).

## **, O**

A high-mid back rounded vowel, rather like the vowel in German *Sohn* .  
The upper case “O” is the RTS symbol for this long vowel.

**, au**

The sound represented by the digraph *au* is frequently a low to low-mid to mid back rounded vowel, rather like the sound of 'ow' in *cow* , and *clown* . The student can replace this diphthogonal sound by the monophthogonal type of pronunciation where *au* is replaced by *a + i* (A + U). This choice, although not accepted by purists, is often found in modern writings.

The two-letter combination in lower case “au” is the RTS symbol for this diphthogonal vowel.

**A , aM**

This is a very important and often occurring support syllable in Telugu. Called, A  $\frac{1}{2}$

( *anusvAraM* ), this is not a stand-alone symbol; it always occurs in conjunction with a vowel. For this reason, this symbol can be thought of as a suffix to a vowel. Many spoken Telugu words end with this sound. This is represented in writing by a ‘o’ after a vowel or a consonant-vowel pair. For example, if this is written with the first vowel, it looks like A and is pronounced as “am.”

The upper case M is the RTS equivalent of this symbol.

### 3. Consonants (Listen to the Recording: Chapter 1, Section 3)

**Telugu Consonants -**

, , , , M  
**ka, kha, ga, gha, ~ma**

, , , ,  
**ca, cha, ja, jha, ~na**

, , , , N  
**Ta, Tha, Da, Dha, Na**

, , , ,  
**ta, tha, da, dha, na**

’ ’ ’ ’  
**pa, pha, ba, bha, ma**

’ ’ ’ ’ ’ ’ ’ ’  
**ya, ra, la, va, Sa, sha, sa, ha**

### 3A. Sounds of Consonants

The Sanskrit name for consonants is “vyaM-ja-na” ( *manifestar* ). By definition, a consonant cannot be pronounced without the help of a vowel. Therefore, the vowel A (a) is used as the default vowel that goes with consonants shown on the alphabet chart.

Consonants are now introduced below in phonetic groupings, *not in* the traditional alphabetical order, shown above.

**(a) The unvoiced unaspirated plosives , , , , (ka, ca, Ta, ta, pa). Here (ca) is an affricate.**

**, ka**

Velar plosive, similar to unaspirated plosive in English *skin* .

**, ca**

Pre-palatal affricate. The closest English equivalent is *ch* in *church* , but with a minimum of aspiration.

Note 3. There are two types of pronunciation for this letter. When this consonant is combined with the vowels I , , E, (i, I, e, E) then this is always palatal. When this consonant combines with the other vowels, it is always dental. To make a distinction between these two sounds, C. P. Brown suggested that a diacritical mark be placed on the top of one of these. For the purpose of this book, this subtle distinction is ignored.

**, Ta**

Retroflex plosive. The closest English equivalent is the unaspirated *t* in *steam, stop* , etc. The tongue tip is retroflexed so that its underside touches the roof of the mouth, usually further back than in the case of English *t* (in which case the tongue tip touches the alveolus or the ridge behind the teeth).

**, ta**

Dental plosive. The closest English equivalent is the first syllable of *thirty*. Here the tongue tip touches the teeth, not the ridge behind the teeth. It is important that the student should master the pronunciation of *t* and other dental sounds in Telugu and distinguishes them from the corresponding retroflexes.

**, pa**

Bilabial plosive, similar to the unaspirated *p* in English *spin*.

**(b) The unvoiced aspirated plosives , , , , (kha, cha, Tha, tha, pha). Here, (cha) is really an affricate.**

These aspirated consonants correspond to the five unaspirated consonants in item (a) above. Their pronunciation will give no difficulty to most English speakers. However a special precaution should be observed by making a careful distinction between *Tha* ( ) and *tha* ( ).

Note 4. As an aside, it is instructive to observe that, under the influence of English, the pronunciation of the bilabial plosive *ph* ( ) is going through a transformation. In modern usage, the bilabial plosive *ph* (which is normally pronounced with the lips tightly closed at the beginning of the articulation) is frequently replaced by the bilabial fricative (in which the lips are very slightly parted and the upper teeth touching the lower lip at the beginning of articulation of the sound, almost producing an 'f' sound.)

**(c) The voiced unaspirated plosives , , , , (ga, ja, Da, da, ba). Here, (ja) is really an affricate.**

**, ga**

Velar plosive, as in English *go*.

**, ja**

Pre-palatal affricate; similar to English *j*.

Note 5. There are two types of pronunciation for this letter. When this consonant is combined with the vowels *i, I, e, E* ( , , , ) then this is always palatal. When this consonant combines with the other vowels, it is always dental.

**, Da**

Retroflex plosive, similar in sound to the first syllable of English *duck* . Comments similar to those used for *Ta* above are valid here also.

**, da**

Dental plosives, similar in sound to the first syllable of English *thus* . Comments similar to those used for ( ta) above are valid here also.

**, ba**

Bilabial plosive, as in English *b* .

**(d) The voiced aspirated plosives , , , (gha, Dha, dha, bha). Here jha is really an affricate.**

These are difficult for non-Indians as well as some native Telugu-speaking people. The difficulty stems from keeping both plosive and aspiration voiced.

**(e) The nasals M, , N, , (~ma, ~na, Na, na, ma)**

**M, ~ma**

Velar nasal. Similar to the final consonant sound in English *sing* or the sound of “ng” in *finger* . Do not let the RTS representation guide you in pronouncing this syllable.

Note 6. To this author's knowledge there is one Telugu word (that too, borrowed from Sanskrit) where this consonant is used. The beginner is best advised to ignore the existence of this letter.

**, ~na**

Pre-palatal nasal. The closest sound is the Spanish sound “ña” in *La Cañada* or “ñ” in *Español* . Do not let the RTS representation guide you in pronouncing this syllable.

Note 7. To this author's knowledge, this consonant occurs in Telugu, only in conjunction with the

consonant j. Many people have difficulty pronouncing this conjunct j + ~na ( + ). The resulting pronunciation is not gya, as many Hindi-speaking people utter and not gna as many not so well-educated Telugu people pronounce. This is best learned with the help of an instructor. Proper pronunciation of this conjunct is a hallmark of erudition.

## N, Na

Retroflex nasal. Many people may experience difficulty pronouncing this, particularly distinguishing the sound from the dental nasal n, na. The closest American pronunciation is like the ‘n’ in the English word, *turn* .

**, na**

Dental nasal; as in English *nose* .

**, ma**

Bilabial nasal; as in English *mother* .

**(f) The semi-vowels , ya, and , va**

**, ya**

Palatal semi-vowel; similar to the y in English *yard* .

**, va**

Labio-dental semi-vowel. While articulating this, the upper teeth just touch the lower lip and the lips are not rounded. This is pronounced rather like the English v in *very* .

Note 8. Many Telugu speaking people routinely ignore the distinction between the sounds of English ‘v’ and ‘w’, as such va sometimes sounds like wa .

**(g) Voiced alveolars ra, , r”, ” and la,**



**, ra**

Voiced alveolar or post-dental with a weak roll. Similar to the Scottish rolled *r* . The tongue tip merely touches the alveolar ridge once toward the end of the articulation.

**”, r”**

Voiced alveolar or post-dental with a roll. Similar to the Spanish rolled *r* . The tongue tip merely touches the alveolar ridge once toward the end of the articulation.

Note 9. This letter is facing extinction and is being replaced more and more by ( r). This letter will not be used any more in this book.

**, la**

Voiced alveolar or post-dental lateral, similar to the *l* in *lick* .

**, La**

Retroflex voiced alveolar. There is no equivalent sound in English; the closest sound is like the ‘l’ in English *girl* .

**(h) The sibilants , Sa; , sha; , sa**

These three sounds are very similar yet distinct. The distinction is best understood by listening to a native speaker.

**, Sa**

Voiced pre-palatal fricative; similar to English *sa* in *Saxons* .

**, sha**

Voiceless retroflex fricative; similar to English *sh* in *shower* .

, **sa**

Voiceless alveolar or post-dental fricative. Similar to English *s* in *surround* .

**(i) Other sounds**

, **ha**

Voiced glottal fricative. The closest English sound is *h* in *hall* .

## 5. Comments

(1) *ta* ( ) is not a common sound in English. More common is *tha* ( ), as the *th* in *thud* and *thunder*.

(2) In the next chapter you will get a chance to practice the distinction between *da* ( ) and *Da* ( ), and *ta* ( ) and *Ta* ( ).

(3) *Na* ( N) would be a difficult letter to pronounce as there is no equivalent sound in English; the nearest being the sound of ‘n’ in *tur n*. One way to practice this is to first say the dental nasal *na* ( ) as the first consonant in *nose* and then utter the *na* sound again by retroflexing the tongue. The result would be fairly close to *Na* ( N).

(4) *La* ( ) is also a difficult letter to pronounce as there is no equivalent sound in English; the nearest sound is the sound of ‘l’ in *gir l* The sound *La* ( ) is to *la* ( ) as *Na* ( N) is to *na* ( ).

## Exercises

(1) Go back to the section on vowels and read aloud all the vowels. Repeat this at least 5 times and see if you can memorize them.

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