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Language – by Sue

Sinhala (also called Sinhalese or Singhalese) is the mother tongue of the Sinhalese ethnic group which is the largest in Sri Lanka. It belongs to the Indo-Aryan branch of the Indo-European languages.

Sinhala is spoken by about 16 million people in Sri Lanka, about 13 million of whom are native speakers. It is one of the constitutionally recognised official languages of Sri Lanka, along with Tamil. Tamil is a classical language and the oldest of the Dravidian language family and spoken by the Tamil population of Sri Lanka. It is also spoken by Tamils in India, Malaysia and Singapore. As of 1996, it was the eighteenth most spoken language, with over 74 million speakers worldwide.

It is about Sinhalese that I am writing as it is the most commonly heard language in Sri Lanka, apart from English, which is used in government offices, business, tourism, taught in schools and a proficiency in English is seen by many to be the gateway to advancement. Indeed some Sri Lankans refuse to speak Sinhalese to others as they use it as a tool to assert their superiority. We were driving down a flooded road once and had to turn back as it became impassable and on the way we met a family in a big black Mercedes. We flagged it down and Sid told the owner, a large and westernised Sri Lankan, what the problem was and he refused to listen until Sid spoke English even though it was obvious everyone in the car understood Sinhalese.

The irony of it was that while he was trying to impress me with his education, I couldn't understand his English! This is because whilst English is widely spoken in Sri Lanka it is not English as we know it. Grammatically perfect, complete with extensive vocabularies the 'Singlish' you hear, is not easily understood as it comes with Sinhalese speed and intonation and a linguistic style of its own. You can often find yourself the only English speaker in a room where everyone is speaking English, and still be unable to understand anything or even more embarrassingly, having to ask your guide to translate someone's correct Singlish into English for you. But once you learn Sinhalese, even a little, you become aware of why it sounds like it does and it gets easier over time to understand it. But beware of phones as the speed of speech and the sound distortion over a telephone line make it well nigh impossible most of the time.

I am also writing about Sinhalese as I have experienced it as an English speaking person, learning from Sri Lankans who live in Liverpool and those I have met in Sri Lanka. So I suppose my vocabulary is a mixture of Scouse Sinhalese – thanks to Chandi, Indika, Chaminda, Madooma, Latha and the children Sudeera and Satusha - native dialect and usage, together with formal book learning and language tapes with a little bit of bad language thrown in which many of the locals who come along with us as guides, seem to delight in teaching me!

But Sinhalese is brilliant! It is the language we would invent now, if we had a blank sheet of paper to start all over with. By that I mean, it is:

- economical- you don't bother with 'please' or 'thank you' – they are implicit in the body language and sentences are very short as in 'Sue come,' and 'We go'.

- easy with tenses – the present and future tense are the same in spoken Sinhalese so you don't have to change verb endings. This can be a little confusing sometimes but context is all.....
- you can pretty much put the words in a sentence in a variety of orders and still be understood, but one of them is not the English order!
- phonetic – once you understand the script, it is consistently phonetic so you can always sound out the way a word is to be pronounced even if you don't know what it means. This is far better than English which has thousands of exceptions to its pronunciation.
- every vowel and consonant is sounded so there is no gliding over letters as in English, where we would not sound the second of our double letters. Try 'little' or 'bigger' if you doubt me. In Sinhalese a word with double letters is sounded for each letter eg. 'Malla' – or flower is 'Mal-la'.
- many modern words take the English word with 'eka' on the end. Like 'bus eka.'

On the down side:

- the numbers are a pain to learn as they are a mouthful for even native born Sinhalese speakers. You try getting your tongue around: 'dhah-hah-hah-thah-tah' (14) and 'dhah-hah-hah-thah'(17) or even distinguishing between the two on a bad telephone line...
- many verbs are very similar so it is hard to remember which is which. For example: 'genova' is 'bring', 'ganova' is 'take', and 'denova' is 'give.'
- some sounds are impossible for the English speaker, such as 'pipingna' or 'cucumber' which is pronounced, sort of like this: 'pippin niaow' (think 'miaow' but say 'niaow'.)

But Sinhalese has its joys and peculiarities too for there is one way of saying 'yes', the word 'Ou' which sounds like 'oh' and several ways of saying 'no', from 'epa' to 'neh', or 'na' or 'onay nae'. You also need to remember the letter 'v' is pronounced 'w'. And if you hear the phrase 'prasnaeyak nae' or 'no problem' then you can be sure there certainly is one - which says something about a culture where offence is always avoided and sometimes in defiance of all reason.

And there are wonderful differences to English which can take ages to explain as whilst everyone knows how to use the word, people can have trouble agreeing how and when and why it is the way it is. One year it took nearly a fortnight for everyone to give me a rule for when I used the word 'gedi' and when I used 'palathuru'. They are both words for fruit. If you ask for a single piece of fruit like an apple, you ask for it by name but add the word 'gedi' on the end, thus apple fruit. But if you are referring to an apple which is part of an array of fruit, say in a fruit bowl, you ask for a piece of fruit or 'palathuru'. Easy?

Sinhalese is also spoken very fast – faster than Italian – and it is very hard when you are learning to know where one word stops and another starts. Try this: 'ingree si kah thaah kah rah nah lah mun bah laah gahu naah kenek mah mah so yaah gahn neh ko hen dhah'. 'Where can I get an English speaking baby sitter?' – you never know when that one might come in useful..... But unless you understand the answer, it won't be very helpful at all!

And a word of warning - when you do have the confidence to have a go at Sinhalese, don't be upset when people look at you blank. The first time I said something in Sinhalese everyone was so surprised they stood with their mouths open and I felt mortified as I thought I'd got it wrong, or worse, said something rude. But it was because Sri Lankans are so used to foreigners speaking English that they did not recognise the sounds I was making as Sinhalese, even though they were correct. Now they are used to me coming out with the odd phrase and sentence, hear me and are really happy!

Getting to grips with it...

The key for me was learning the writing and the sounds. When you first see the symbols you think they are all the same and that you will never distinguish between them. I struggled for months and nothing went in. Then one day, it clicked and I have never looked back since and believe me it was worth the effort as I can

now read street signs, newspaper headlines and write people's names in the sand in remote villages – and everyone loves that.

The huge difference between our type of writing (using letters) is the fact that in Sinhala you are writing SYLLABS instead of letters, in other words writing phonetically. So you are not writing one letter after another, but a combination of letters or in sounds (phonics). It is very similar to shorthand.



This is a basic letter 'a', but it has six different sounds according to the script which is put next to it.



aa



ae




aae

– get the idea?

Here's an example of how it works with the sign for the sound of 'm' – remember - think sounds not letters. Because every consonant sound has an 'a' sound after it unless you tell it otherwise, then this is 'ma'.




= ma

If you write this sign twice, you get  , which sounds like 'mamma' and it means 'I'.

Let's stick to the sign "ma" and explore it a little bit. If you want to change the 'a' sound to something else like 'i' we add a loop to the top of the sign ('i' is a high sound so that helps you to remember this) and we get:



=mi

We can try to make even an "mu" out of our sign. The "u" is a pretty deep sound, so we add a loop at the bottom of our sign :  =mu. Be aware there is an edge at this loop on the bottom right side.

And this is just the beginning. Once you get the hang of the logic of all this I am sure you will be as fascinated as I am about the signs and beauty of such a logical language.

To help you make a start...

Here are some useful phrases but the pronunciation needs to be heard. Some websites which can help are listed below and books I have found indispensable but the best way to learn Sinhalese is from native speakers. Contact your local authority and ask for the details of their community development team who work with Sri Lankans in the area and they should be able to help you.

Can you give me something to drink?

Mata monawahari bondadenda puluwanda?

Will you come with me?

Oya mageeth ekka enawada?

Where should I go?

Mama kohetada yanda oni

What can I do?

Mama mona karandada?

Thunuruwan Saranayi! (May the triple gem bless you!)

Sinhala websites

[http://www.sinhala-online.com/sinhalese-writing-1-Writing+Sinhala+\(%7Bma%7D\).html](http://www.sinhala-online.com/sinhalese-writing-1-Writing+Sinhala+(%7Bma%7D).html)

<http://www.speaksinhala.com/>

<http://www.sinhalapage.com/>

<http://www.languagewizard.co.uk/shop/?language=291> - Interactive CD

Sinhala books

Lonely Planet	Sinhala phrasebook	ISBN 0-86442 597 -X
Arjuna Hulugalle Dictionary	Language Companion	ISBN 955-8035-02-5
Stamford Lake Publication	Let us speak Sinhala	ISBN 955-658-057-3 Book and two CDs

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