

# *A Phonemic Statement of the Sinhalese*

## *Vowels [ə], [a] and [aa]*

**I**N a statement of the segmental phonemes in Sinhalese<sup>1</sup> (1960) we made the following observation on Sinhalese vowels :

"Sinhalese has seven vowel phonemes, /i e a ə u o a/. All seven may occur either short or long; however, /ə/ occurs long only in words borrowed from English, such as /ʒəət/ 'shirts'. The long vowels are slightly different in quality from the short vowels, except /əə/. Phonemically the long vowels may be considered as doubled. In final position unstressed long vowels are usually shortened."<sup>2</sup>

The present paper is a further examination of this statement. The phonemic statement cited above involves the writing of /e/, /a/ and /aa/ where the sounds [e], [a] and [aa] are observed in Sinhalese speech. This representation ignores some relevant information on these Sinhalese sounds, namely, the very low frequency of the environments in which all three sounds occur. This three-term distinction is necessary only if we take into account the one solitary word paradigm, namely, the verb *kəronəva*, 'to do'. If this paradigm is removed from the corpus, the sounds [ə], [a] and [aa] can be handled as one phoneme occurring single or doubled. In this paper I propose to analyse my data to substantiate this point of view by recognizing the frequency factor as a relevant aspect in language.

The environments in which the three sounds under observation occur are given below.

The following words illustrate some instances where these three sounds occur in the same environment:

[kə rə]	'having done'
[kə rə]	'shoulder'
[ka rə]	'marriage'

1. William A. Coates and M. W. S. de Silva, 'The segmental phonemes of Sinhalese', UCR, July-October, 1960.

2. p. 171.

[kəɔ]	‘done’
[kaɔ]	‘time’
[kaal ə]	‘quarter’

Of these [k əɔ] and [kəɔ] are forms of the same word.

Other environments in which these sounds occur are as follows :

(a) In the middle of the word :

CC ə/aa CV <sup>3</sup>	[prəsiddha]	‘famous’
	[praarambhə]	‘initial’
CCa/aaCCV <sup>3</sup>	[prasne]	‘question’
	[klaante]	‘dizziness’
CVC ə/aaCV-	[parəɔ]	‘old’
	[puraamə]	‘ancient’
CVCa/aaCCV-	[balamə]	‘look !’
	[kalaante]	‘dizziness’

(b) At the end of the word :

(i) in disyllabic structures-

CVC ə/aa <sup>4</sup>	[paɔ]	‘place’
	[paɔa]	‘green leaves’
CVC ə/a	[kaalə]	‘quarter’
	[kaala]	‘having eaten’
CVCC ə/a	[dunnə]	‘bow’
	[dunna]	‘gave’

(ii) in structures of more than two syllables-<sup>5</sup>

CVCVC. .C ə/a	[karə və b]	‘dried fish’
	[karə və la]	‘a snake’

In the structures given in section (a), [ə] and [a] are in complementary distribution. Therefore they are storable as allophones of one phoneme which may be represented as /a/. In these environments, therefore,

/a/	=	[ə]	in	CC-CV
				CVC-CV
	=	[a]	in	CC-CCV
				CVC-CCV

3. Both these structures are Sanskritic borrowings.

4. CVC ə/aa, except where C before ə/aa is not /h/. This special case is taken up later.

5. In a few words which are used in very formal occasions, one may observe an [-aa] sound at the end even in this structure. e.g. [karunaa], a sentiment in literary appreciation. But in normal conversation such words, too, are shortened.

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All the structures given in section (b) have the potentiality of having [ɔ] in the final position. This [ɔ], too, may be treated as an allophone of /a/.

Thus, looking at the sections (a) and (b), /a/ can be stated as having an allophone [ɔ] in CC-CV and CVC-CV structures as well as in word final positions. Elsewhere, /a/ has the allophone [a].

In the structures CC-CCV and CVC-CCV given in section (a) and in the structures with final [-a] or [-aa] given in section (b), the /a/ phoneme occurs doubled as /aa/. The allophones of /aa/ are, then,

in CCaaCCV structure	:	[aa]
in CVCaaCCV structure	:	[aa]
in CVCaa structure	:	[aa]
in CVCaa structure	:	[a]
in CVCCaa structure	:	[a]
in CVCVC...Caa structure	:	[a]

This statement may be extended to the [karə, karə, kaarə] situation given at the outset, so that [karə] and [kaarə] may be phonemicised as /kara/ and /kaara/. /a/ in the word-initial syllables of CV- and CVC- type has the allophone [a]. /aa/ in the first syllable of a word has the allophone [aa].

Special mention has to be made of the environments involving /h/. In CVhV structures the final V may be /a/ or /aa/. /a/ in such instances has the usual word-final allophone [ɔ]. The allophone of /aa/, however, depends on the nature of the vowel preceding /h/. If the vowel preceding /h/ is /a/, final /aa/ will have the allophone [a]. If the vowel preceding /h/ is not /a/, /aa/ will have the allophone [aa] as usual with the CVCaa structures.

The complete allophonic statement of /a/ and /aa/ will now read as follows :

/a/ has the allophone [ɔ] in CCaCV and CVCaCV structures. It has the allophone [ɔ] in the word-final position, too. Elsewhere /a/ has the allophone [a].

/aa/ has the allophone [a] in CCaaCCV structures and CVCaaCCV structures. It has the allophone [a] in the word-final position provided the word is not of disyllabic structure with the first syllable short. /aa/ has the allophone [a] in the environment /ah-/. Elsewhere /a/ has the allophone [aa].

In this analysis the two sounds [ɔ], [a] and [aa] are stated as one phoneme, occurring single or doubled. This statement leaves out the solitary instance of the [kəɾəɳəva] paradigm. The fact that this is a solitary example has to be emphasised. It does not depict the general nature of the language. A generalized phoneme to represent this instance, with no mention of its infrequency of occurrence, is necessarily misleading. It is also important to note that [kəɾəɳəva] grammatically is often an auxiliary verb, in which case the syllable [kə-] comes in the middle of the compound word. In many dialects of Sinhalese this word is pronounced as [kəɾəɳəva]. The word [kəɾəɳəva] occurs in the utterance-initial position only infrequently. Under such circumstances it is not proper to set up a major phone as /ɔ/ on par with other vowel phonemes in order to handle this sound. In phonemicising this particular sound it should not be taken together with the [ɔ] sound observed elsewhere. The sound in [kəɾəɳəva] can be handled in one of three ways:

1. Phonemicise it as /karanavaa/ with a special note on /ka-/.
2. Phonemicise it as /kəɾanavaa/ with a sub-phoneme /ɔ/, specifically setting up /ɔ/ as a sub-system in the language.
3. Write the word concerned as a part of the word that precedes, thus indicating the compound, as /vəɖa-karanavaa/ 'to work'. If there is no word preceding write it as /-karanavaa/.

The English words like 'shirt' borrowed into Sinhalese have a pronunciation [ʃəɳt] in the speech of the English educated people. The others have a tendency to use [ce] instead of [ɔ] as [seɳt]. Even if the pronunciation [ʃəɳt] is taken as the standard one, the relative infrequency of such words must be taken into account. Such words are very few in number. If a sub-phoneme /ɔ/ is stated to account for [kəɾəɳəva], then, that subphoneme may be regarded as occurring doubled in instances like /ʃəɳt/.

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If this concept of a sub-phoneme is accepted, the complete phonemicisation of the data under observation would read as follows:

*Phoneme /a/* has the allophones [a] and [ɔ]. It occurs doubled as /aa/, the allophones of which are [a] and [aa].

There is a *sub-phoneme /ɔ/* occurring in a very few forms. It has the phonetic value [ɔ]. In a few words it occurs doubled as /ɔɔ/ with the phonetic value [ɔɔ].<sup>6</sup>

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6. It may appear that this statement does not touch upon the words like [lamɔyɔgɛ], [noonɔɔ] [noonagen] etc. which have an [-a] sound in the middle of the word. This is a problem in Sinhalese juncture and will be dealt with elsewhere.

This phonemicisation of the three sounds concerned as /a/ and /aa/ everywhere, except in the verb [kɔɔnɔva], is in exact uniformity with the accepted device in writing the Sinhalese language. It will be clear from the following examples that Sinhalese uses the unmarked consonant or the vowel symbol where the phoneme /a/ is postulated, and the consonant marked 'ɔ' or the vowel symbol ɔ where /aa/ is postulated. However, Sinhalese does not use a special symbol for [ɔ] in [kɔɔnɔva], and this solitary example is left to be known from the context where it occurs. Examples for the Sinhalese representation of the phonemes now postulated as /a/ and /aa/ are given below :

බලනවෑ	/balanavaa/
දුවනවෑ	/duvanavaa/
දුවනන	/duvanna/
මහ	/maha/
පහ	/paha/
පාලම	/paalama/
පාසාව	/aasaava/