

VOWEL ALTERNATION IN SPOKEN SINHALA NOMINALS

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0. Vowels in spoken Sinhala (=SS) nouns, show up with certain alternations both in inflection and derivation. The purpose of this article is to spotlight some of the regular vocalic alternations that are noticeable in the nominal paradigms of SS.

0.1 The following phonemic symbols are used here for the representation of the SS nouns:

Vowels: a, a:,æ,æ:, e, e:, i, i:, u, u:, o, o:,ə,(ə)

Consonants: p, b, b̃, t, d, d̃, t̃, d̃, c, j, k, g, g̃, m, n, ñ, ŋ, y, r, l, v, s, (ś), (f), h.

The symbols given within parenthesis are of marginal status.

1. Vowels can be classified as follows based on their distribution and alternations in nouns forms:

- a. i, u; these can occur almost in any position in a noun form; e.g. iti 'twigs'; kiri 'milk'; ki:ri 'splinters'; ikiri 'a plant'; kikili 'hen'; pi:rili 'combings'; kækiri 'cucumber'; du:vili 'dust'; iḍo:re 'drought'; bo:dili 'a kind of coconut'; pali ḡu 'crystal'; pæḡgira 'adolescent boy -nick name'; hil 'holes'; bitti 'walls'; ulu 'tiles'; kuḍu 'powder'; ku:ḍu 'cages'; uguru 'throats'; kulunu 'pillars'; su:duru 'cumin'; kæ:kulu 'buds'; pi:kudu 'liver'; ude: 'morning'; de:dunu 'rainbows'; kiḍuri 'mermaid'; eluva 'goat'; gul 'holes'; muḡḡi 'pots'.
- b. e, æ, a, o; these can occur initially. But their occurrence in the medial and final positions of a noun form is metrically conditioned; beli 'wood apple'; meru 'moths'; mette 'mattress'; bo:le 'ball'; æli 'waterfalls' dæ:llo 'cuttlefish'; æ:hæ 'eye'; alu 'ash'; vaḡḡi 'trays'; ma:ma 'maternal uncle'; olu 'heads'; poli: 'interest as of money'; kollo 'lads'; u:ro 'pigs'.

- c. Long vowels (other than ə:); These can occur freely initially and medially but their occurrence in the final position of a noun is metrically conditioned; i:ri 'sow'; næ:ti:mə 'dancing'; kuli: 'wages'; ma:təri: 'a woman from Matara (impolite)'; ci:tte 'a cloth'; u:ra 'pig'; mu:nu 'faces'; me:s 'socks'; le:nnu 'squirrels'; jane:le 'window'; hire: 'prison'; re:kke 'rake'; o:lu 'water lilies'; ro:de 'wheel'; solo:ke 'Sanskrit stanza'; ko:ppe 'cup'; a:le 'love'; ma:le 'necklace'; gara:di 'spokes'; ta:nayəmə 'rest house'; ra:kke 'shelf'; pala:t 'provinces' ja:pə:lə 'a herb'
- d. The Vowel 'ə:' occurs only in loan-words from English, and has not yet been fully assimilated into the SS. phonological system, and as a result it does not enter into any morphophonemic alternations. nə:s 'nurse' pə:s 'wallets'; hə:s 'hearse' are some examples for its occurrence.
- e. ə; As far as the SS. nouns are concerned, 'ə' can be conditioned and grouped as an allophone of /a¹. However, due to English loan-wards it has been brought to a near-phonemic status, within nouns.

¹ In a medial open syllable only 'ə' occurs; word finally in open syllable, both 'a' and 'ə' occur. However, we do not get a three-way contrast a: ʌ aʌ in this position. Hence the 'a' can be interpreted as a: whereas 'ə' can be interpreted as ʌ. Word initially 'ə' occurs only following the clusters Cr/y/v- in open syllable. (Such instances are due to loan-words from Sanskrit). 'a' occurs in an initial open syllable (other than specified above); in closed syllables in any position of the word; and following the sequence -ah- (where 'ə' doesn't occur):

	paɓlə	'width'	
	gona:	'bull'	
go:na	'elk'	vyəvəsa:yə	'engagement'
balla	'dog'	svəki:yə	'one's own'
mallə	'bag'	gaha	'tree'
prəma:ne	'measure'	ihə	'head'
krəme:	'method'		

However this pattern has been distributed by the influx of English loan-words into the language that has extended the occurrence of 'ə' into closed syllables as well. Forms like 'tikət', 'tickets', krikət, 'cricket', kusən 'cushions' are examples.

2. Vowel alternations in SS. nouns cover both quantitative and qualitative changes, and occur in derivational as well as inflectional paradigms.

2.1 Vowel length conditioning

The general distribution of vowels in noun final position is as follows.

2.1.1. In monosyllabic nouns the final vowel is always long: vi: 'paddy' du: 'daughter', le: 'blood'

ræ: 'night', to: 'You-derogatory', ra: 'toddy'.

2.1.2. In dissyllabic nouns ending in vowels, length is conditioned as follows:

2.1.2.1. If the first syllable is light, the final vowel can be either short or long. The short vowel in this position can be only /a/, /i/ or /u/. In this position /a/ occurs in its reduced grade /ə/.

The vowels /a/, and /ə/ can occur in this position, only if preceded by /h/. There are no instances of nouns of this structure ending in /e/ or /o/.

e.g. kiri 'milk', bali 'a kind of exorcism', pori 'popped corn', bulu 'a tree', velu 'a twisting of yarn etc.' valu 'bunches', malə 'flower', gaha 'tree', æhə 'eye'.

Any long vowel can occur in this position: kuli: 'wages', aru: 'he (derogatory)' kade: 'shop', kəɛə: 'woods', pala: 'edible green leaves', polo: 'earth'.

2.1.2.2. If the first syllable is heavy, the final vowel is always short:

ko:pi 'coffee', kappi 'the left over from flour', go:t̪ti 'shouting aloud' ma:lu 'fish', sattu 'animals', ga:stu 'fees', bo:la 'balls', balla 'dog'; pa:rə 'road'; attə 'branch'; ba:lkə 'beams', ro:de 'wheel', kotte 'pillow', ko:ppe 'cup';

² That, this word final /a/ and /ə/ conditioned by /h/ is actually the reduced grade is made evident by its being replaced by - e: , in the genitive singular, as in gahe: 'of the tree' and æhe: 'of the eye' etc. When the preceding syllable is structurally heavy we get - e, as the genitive marker, as in pa:re 'of the road', vatte 'of the estate', ko:t̪te 'of the stick' etc.

2.1.3. In trisyllabic nouns, final vowel- length- conditioning is as follows:

2.1.3.1. If the first two syllables are light, the final vowel is short:

varədə 'fault' varədə 'of the fault'
 baləla 'cat' gorəli 'a kind of bird'
 borəlu 'gravel'

2.1.3.2. Otherwise (i.e. if one or both of the preceding syllables differ from this rhythmic patterning) the penultimate syllable conditions the length of the final vowel as follows: if the penultimate syllable is light then the final vowel is long, with the exception that /ə/ can also occur in this position; if the penultimate syllable is heavy, the final vowel is short.

e.g

pa:ləmə	'bridge';	ma:ləti:	'a girls name';
a:dəre:	'affection';	pandəme:	'of the torch';
pala:te	'of the province	a:ve:se	'possession by spirit';
santo:se	'joy'	ka:va:di	'a devotional dance'
karo:lə	'dry fish'	isko:le	'school'
ki:dʒ:va	'pest'	sambo:la	'coconut chutney'

2.1.4. In quadrisyllabic nouns final vowel length is conditioned as follows:

2.1.4.1. If the first syllable is heavy, it is discounted, and the remainder behaves exactly like other trisyllabics (see above 2.1.3.) in the length conditioning of the final vowel.

e.g. pandələmə = pan/ dələme 'a wodden structure (genitive)'
 næjgurəme = næj/ gurəme 'of the anchor'
 bo:dilima = bo:/dilima 'a kind of lizard'
 manda:rəme = man /da:rəme: 'of cloudiness'
 ta:na:yəme = ta:/ na:yəme: 'of the rest house'

2.1.4.2. If the first two syllables are light, both count as constituting a single heavy syllable, thus yielding a rhythmic trisyllabic structure (parallel to structures given in 2.1.3) as far as final vowel length conditioning is concerned.

If the second syllable is heavy then that along with the following syllables constitute a trisyllabic structure (cf 2.1.3) in conditioning final vowel length, (the first syllable being discounted). In either case it is the penultimate syllable that determines the length of the final vowel: (cf 2.1.3.2)

(S = syllable ; - = heavy; ∪ = light)

e.g.

karə̀d̪re: = $\frac{\text{karə̀}}{\text{S}} \frac{\text{d̪re:}}{\text{S S}}$ 'trouble'

kã̀duk̪re: = $\frac{\text{kã̀}}{\text{S}} \frac{\text{duk̪re:}}{\text{S S}}$ 'hilly area'

pã̀d̪na: = $\frac{\text{pã̀d̪na:}}{\text{S S S}}$ 'ornaments'

vala:kule: = 'of the cloud'

kaʃand̪re: = 'story'

sajja:ỹna: = 'group chanting'

2.1.5. Pentasyllabic and hexasyllabic nouns are usually complex, constituted of more than one morpheme. In these cases too generally the trisyllabic law of rhythmic grouping applies regarding final vowel length conditioning:

sa:ɳvats̪rike 'anniversary'
 a:nantarike 'a karmic action that yeilds results immediately after one's death'

2.1.5.1. There is a general tendency however for these nouns to be morphemically grouped as to rhythmic patterning in which case the syllabic constitution of the last morpheme determines final vowel length (i.e.if it is quadrisyllabic or trisyllabic, the trisyllabic law applies; if it is dissyllabic the penultimate syllable conditions the length of the final vowel).

2.1.6. Glide Conditioning

A penultimate glide /y/ or /v/ occurring in polysyllabic nouns other dissyllabic effects the shortening of a final vowel. Compare the following pairs:

va:ʃiye 'of the border' but bo:d̪ime: 'of the hostel'
 si:nuve 'of the bell' but bi:rume: 'cloudiness'

mahattaya 'gentleman' but sakuntala: 'a name'
 sapattuve 'of the shoe' but paressame: 'of carefulness'

2.2. Vowel reduction.

This refers to the change of /e/, /æ/, /a/, /o/ to /ə/ in medial open syllable, in morphophonemic alternations. This is found in the following instances:

2.2.1. Plural formation of certain inanimate nouns:

	<u>singular</u>	<u>plural</u>	<u>base-form</u>		
'bangle'	vaɐllə	vaɐlu	*valalu-	}	
	'a forked stick fastened to a pole for picking fruits etc.	balattə	balattə		*balattu-
'case of coconut flower'	hanassə	hanəsu	*hanasu	} a ~ ə	
'an open arid land /cemetery'	kanattə	kanətu	*kanatu	}	
'hoe'	udællə	udəlu	*udælu-	}	
'shutter'	pællællə	pælləli	*pællæli-		} æ ~ ə
'bunch cluster'	kærrællə	kærrəli	*kærræli-		
'wrong'	værræddə	værrədi	*værrədi-	}	
'a wild olive'	verellə	verəlu	*verəlu	}	
'fire brand'	penellə	penəli	*penəli-		} e ~ ə
'lacle'	kenessə	kenəsi	*kenəsi-		
'a very young coconut'	gobollə	gobəlu	*gobəlu	}	
'hole'	kapollə	kapəlu	*kapəlu		} o ~ ə

2.2.2 Pre-nominal stem formation of certain nouns:

	<u>singular</u>	<u>pre-nominal form</u>	<u>base-form</u>	
'leech'	ku:ɖælla	ku:ɖəlu-	*ku:ɖælu	} æ ~ ə
'wish'	kæməttə	kæməti	*kæməti-	
'merchant'	velenda	velə̃də	*velẽda-	e ~ ə
'a demon connected with cattle'	gopolla	gopəlu	gopolu-	o ~ ə

2.2.3. Singular formation of certain nouns:

	<u>singular</u>	<u>plural</u>	<u>pre-nominal form</u>	<u>base-form</u>	
'cat'	baləla	balallu	balal	balal-	} ə ~ ə
'wood pecker'	kæ:rəla:	kæ:rallu	kæ:ral	kæ:ral	
'a lap-wing'	kirəla	kirallu	kiral-	kiral	
'learned person'	ugəta	ugattu	ugat	ugat	
'parrot'	girəva	girav	gira:-	girav-	
'a monkey'	riləva	rilav	rila:-	rilav-	
'cow'	harəka	harak	harak-	harak-	
'fin'	varələ	varəl	varal-	varal-	
'child'	laməya	lamay	lama:-	lamay-	
'pot'	valə̃də	valaŋ	valaŋ-	valãd-	
'asterism'	nækətə	nækə̃t	nækə̃t	nækə̃t-	} æ ~ ə
'viper'	polə̃ga	poloŋgu	poloŋ	*polõg-	

2.2.4. Derivation of abstract nouns from certain forms:

	<u>abstract noun</u>	<u>base-form</u>	
'width'	palələ	palal-	wide
'memory'	matakə	matak-	
			} a ~ ə

2.2.5. Indefinite oblique of inanimate nouns:

	<u>direct</u>		<u>oblique</u>	
	definite	indefinite		
'flower'	malə	malak	maləkə	'of the flower'
'book'	potə	potak	potəkə	'of a book' etc.
				} a ~ ə

2.2.6. Before the pluralizer -la animate 'kinship' nouns:

	<u>singular</u>	<u>plural</u>	<u>base-form</u>
'mother'	amma	amməla	amma-
'father'	ta:tta	ta:tələ	ta:tta-
'older brother'	ayya	ayyəla	ayya-
'maternal uncle'	ma:ma	ma:məla	ma:ma

2.2.7. Derivational processes that involve:

2.2.7.1. Prefixation:

	<u>simple form</u>	<u>derived form</u>	
'strong'	balə	abələ	'weak'
	balə	dubələ	'weak'
'help'	sarənə	asərənə	'helpless'
'liking'	kəməttə	akəməttə	'dislike'
'fruit'	palə	apələ	'fruitless'
	palə	sapələ	'fruitful'
'memory'			
remembering'	matakə	amətəkə	'forgetting'
'time'	kalə	akələ	'untimely'
	kalə	vikələ	'bad/wrong time'
			} a ~ ə

2.2.7.2. certain compound formations:

	<u>simple form</u>		<u>compound form</u>	
'place'	polə	depələ	'two place'	} 0~ə
	polə	gepələ	'designed piece of land for house construction'	
'leaf'	kolə	duŋkələ	'tobacco-leaf'	
'dross'	borə	yabərə	'dross of iron'	
'heavy'	barə	gəbbərə	'pregnant' (lit. 'heavy with foetus')	} ə~ə
'village'	gamə	biyəgamə	'a name of village'	

2.3 Vowel Fronting

This refers to the fronting of non-front vowels of nouns when they undergo certain morphological processes.

The specific details are:

u	→	i
u:	→	i:
o } ə }	→	e
o:	→	e:
a	→	æ
a:	→	æ:

Vowel fronting in nouns is found in the following instances:

- 2.3.1. Feminine derivation of certain sets of nouns, by the addition of the suffixes - i /inni.

2.3.1.1. Suffix - i

<u>masculine</u>	<u>feminine</u>		<u>base-form</u>
kukula 'rooster'	kikili	'hen'	kukul- ³
balla: 'dog'	bælli	'bitch'	balu-
baɓla: 'cat'	bæləli	'cat(f)'	balal-
vaɓdura: 'monkey'	væɓdiri	'monkey(f)'	vaɓduru-
bamunu 'brahman'	bæmini	'brahman woman'	bamunu-
kolla 'lad'	kellə (<keli+ə)	'lass'	kolu ³
kora: 'lame man'	kerə (<keri+ə)	'lame-woman'	korə
hora: 'thief'	herə (<heri+ə)	'thievish woman'	horə

2.3.1.2. Suffix - inni

<u>masculine</u>	<u>feminine</u>	<u>base-form</u>
valaha 'wolf'	væləhinni 'wolf(f)'	valas-
koka: crane'	kekinni crane(f)'	kok-

2.3.1.2.1 However there are some nouns that take these suffixes without accompanying vowel fronting.

<u>masculine</u>		<u>feminine</u>		<u>base-form</u>
ædura	'teacher'	æduri	teacher(f)	æduru-
	'-impolite'		'-impolite'	
kuməra	'prince'	kuməri	'princess'	*kumara-
manəma:ləya	'bridegroom'	manəma:li	'bride'	*manama:la-
yaka:	'devil'	yakinni	'devil(f)'	yak-

are some examples.

³ In the case of these two forms, kikil- and keli- respectively have also been extended as base forms. The former is optional whereas the latter seems obligatory.

2.4 Vowel shortening due to particle adjunction.

When the particles -t 'also' and -yi 'and' are added to a form (other than monosyllabic) ending in a long vowel, that vowel is shortened:

gona:	'the ox'	gonat	'the ox also'	gonayi	'the ox and...'
pa:l̥me:	'the bridge'	pa:l̥meyi	'of the bridge and..'		
karəd̥re:	'trouble'	karəd̥reyi	'of the trouble and..'		
patt̥re:	'paper'	patt̥reyi	'of the paper and..'		
pa:l̥m̥e:	'of the bridge'	pa:l̥m̥et	'also of the bridge'		
karəd̥r̥e:	'of the trouble'	karəd̥r̥et	'also of the trouble'		
pa:tt̥r̥e:	'of the bowl'	pa:tt̥r̥et	'also of the bowl'		

But monosyllabic:

ma:	'me'	ma:t	'me too'	ma:yi	'me and...'
ge:	'house'	ge:t	'house too'	ge:yi	'house and..'

2.5 Vowel shortening conditioned by nasal

In non-monosyllabic noun forms, a final nasal shortens the preceding long vowel:

	<u>singular</u>	<u>plural</u>	<u>base-form</u>
'a drum'	ra ā :nə	ra ṅ	*ra ā :n-
'plate'	pi ṅ ā:nə	pi ṅ āṅ	*pi ṅ ā:n-
'fan'	ava ā :nə	ava ṅ	*ava ā :n-
'woods'	mu:kə lā :nə	mu:kə lā ṅ	*mu:kə lā :n-

2.6 Summary

A summary of the noun final vowel length conditioning rules within the frame of dissyllabic through quadrisyllabic is given below:

- | | | | |
|-----|---|-----|---|
| 1. | # S # | --> | # \bar{S} # |
| 2. | # $\overset{\cup}{S}$ $\overset{\cdot}{S}$ # | --> | # $\overset{\cup}{S}$ $\overset{\cdot}{S}$ # (the vowel in $\overset{\cdot}{S}$ # being ə, i or u unless h- conditioned). |
| | | --> | # $\overset{\cup}{S}$ \bar{S} # |
| 3.1 | # $\overset{\cup}{S}$ $\overset{\cdot}{S}$ S # | --> | # $\overset{\cup}{S}$ $\overset{\cdot}{S}$ $\overset{\cdot}{S}$ # |
| 3.2 | # \bar{S} $\overset{\cdot}{S}$ S # | --> | # \bar{S} $\overset{\cdot}{S}$ $\overset{\cdot}{S}$ # (if glide-conditioned) |
| | | --> | # \bar{S} \bar{S} S # |
| 3.3 | # $\overset{\cup}{S}$ \bar{S} S # | --> | # $\overset{\cup}{S}$ \bar{S} $\overset{\cdot}{S}$ # |
| 4.1 | # $\overset{\cup}{S}$ $\overset{\cdot}{S}$ $\overset{\cdot}{S}$ S # | --> | # $\overset{\cup}{S}$ $\overset{\cdot}{S}$ $\overset{\cdot}{S}$ $\overset{\cdot}{S}$ # (if glide-conditioned) |
| | | --> | # $\overset{\cup}{S}$ $\overset{\cdot}{S}$ \bar{S} \bar{S} # |
| 4.2 | # \bar{S} $\overset{\cdot}{S}$ $\overset{\cdot}{S}$ S # | --> | # \bar{S} $\overset{\cdot}{S}$ $\overset{\cdot}{S}$ $\overset{\cdot}{S}$ # |
| 4.3 | # $\overset{\cup}{S}$ \bar{S} $\overset{\cdot}{S}$ S # | --> | # $\overset{\cup}{S}$ \bar{S} $\overset{\cdot}{S}$ $\overset{\cdot}{S}$ # (if glide-conditioned) |
| | | --> | # $\overset{\cup}{S}$ \bar{S} \bar{S} \bar{S} # |
| 4.4 | # $\overset{\cdot}{S}$ $\overset{\cdot}{S}$ \bar{S} S # | --> | # $\overset{\cdot}{S}$ $\overset{\cdot}{S}$ \bar{S} $\overset{\cdot}{S}$ # |

The pentasyllabic and hexasyllabic are generally covered by the trisyllabic law.