Dhivehi is the national and only native language of the Republic of Maldives, an island nation southwest of India. The country’s roughly 1,200 islands, grouped into atolls, cover a large and strategically important area near major shipping routes in the Indian Ocean. The Maldives’ 100 percent Muslim population made a successful transition to democracy in 2008, but the nation still faces threats from sea-level rise and Islamic radicalization.

Dhivehi (ދިވެހިރެދިވެހިރެއ), also spelled Divehi, is also spoken on the nearby island of Minicoy (Maliku)—now part of India but formerly belonging to the Maldives. On Minicoy, Dhivehi is known as Mahl or Mahal, or Maliku Bas. There are roughly 396,000 Dhivehi speakers in the Maldives, 10,000 in Minicoy, and small expatriate populations in mainland India and Sri Lanka.

**Dhivehi dialects**

The standard dialect is that of the Maldivian capital, Malé. The Malé dialect is close to the speech of much of the country, except for the dialects of the three southernmost atolls. These atolls, Huvadhoo, Fuvammulah, and Addu, are far from the capital and separated from the rest of the Maldives by the One and a Half Degree Channel. As a result, the speech of these three atolls differs significantly from the Malé standard. The inhabitants of these atolls learn to understand the standard dialect via education and media, but speakers of the standard dialect cannot understand the southern dialects. As for Minicoy, its dialect is mutually intelligible with the Malé dialect, but there are some differences due to the longstanding geopolitical separation between Indian and Maldivian Dhivehi speakers.

**Dhivehi writing**

The standard spoken Malé dialect forms the basis of the written language. Dhivehi is written in its own alphabet, known as Thaana (ދިވެހިރެދިވެހިރެއ), also spelled Taana or Tāna. Thaana is written from right to left and consists of 24 consonants, 10 vowels, and a sukun (absence-of-vowel marker). The script is not genetically related to any other, although Arabic influence is clear in its design. Consonants form the central line of writing, with vowels written above and below. The first nine consonants are derived from the Arabic numerals 1 through 9, and some of the symbols for short vowels are derived from Arabic. Unlike in Arabic, however, writing all vowels is obligatory. Thaana...
GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH THE DHIVEHI LANGUAGE

alphabetical order is unlike that of any other alphabet, and starts with ਖ਼ h. There is also an official Romanization of Thaana, which is sometimes used to write Dhivehi (and used here to write words such as Dhivehi and Thaana).

Linguistic description

Dhivehi is an Indo-Aryan language whose closest relative is Sinhalese (Sinhala), spoken in neighboring Sri Lanka. Dhivehi shares with Sinhalese some features not shared by other Indo-Aryan languages, such as a series of prenasalized stops and an absence of phonemic aspiration. The latter is an example of influence from the South Indian Dravidian language family. Despite their similarities, Dhivehi and Sinhalese are not mutually intelligible, as they have been evolving separately for at least 900 years and perhaps as many as 2,300 years. Dhivehi shares with other Indo-Aryan (and Dravidian) languages a distinction between retroflex and dental stops; Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) word order; and many properties of the verbal system, including a maximum of one finite verb per sentence and the use of “do” and “be” verbalizers.

The vocabulary is largely native Indo-Aryan with some Dravidian influence. However, there are also a significant number of words borrowed from Perso-Arabic-Urdu sources, especially in areas of religion, law, and government. By contrast, Dhivehi has not drawn much from Sanskrit, unlike the South Asian languages that have significant Hindu populations. Since the 1960s, English has begun to make its presence felt. Names of government departments and associated job titles, for example, now tend to be in English (e.g., Minister of State for Finance and Treasury).

Except for the southern dialects, Dhivehi does not have the strong diglossia that many other South Asian languages do, in which the written form of the language is very different from the spoken forms. As with any language with a literary tradition, there are some differences between the spoken and written languages, the most obvious being a pervasive -eve that occurs at the end of almost all written sentences. In general, however, the grammar of the written language follows that of the Malay spoken language. One source of a certain diglossia, however, is a tendency to represent the spelling of Perso-Arabic-Urdu loanwords with special diacritic-bearing letters that transliterate the Arabic alphabet. As a result, many words have both a nativized and an Arabicized spellings (the latter having the diacritics). Generally only the nativized spellings represent the pronunciation of these words in everyday speech.

Learning Dhivehi

Speakers of Sinhalese are best positioned to learn Dhivehi, but speakers of other Indo-Aryan or Dravidian languages would also be well suited because of common language features. Urdu/Hindi speakers in particular would share both the inherited Indo-Aryan features as well as the Perso-Arabic-Urdu loanwords with Dhivehi speakers. Knowledge of Persian or Arabic would also be helpful in this respect.

For English speakers, the lack of diglossia makes Dhivehi easier to learn than Sinhalese and many other South Asian languages. Dhivehi lacks grammatical gender, another accessible feature for English speakers. English speakers are likely to be challenged by the syntax, but experience with another SOV language can help reduce that difficulty. The writing system is easy to learn, as it does not have the positional variants of Arabic or the conjunct characters of many South Asian scripts. However, it is different enough from all other writing systems that developing true fluency requires long practice.

Additional resources

This synopsis is the first in a series of Dhivehi-related publications being planned by CASL, such as an alphabet primer, dictionary, grammar, and self-teach products. Only a few published linguistic studies on Dhivehi exist, only one Dhivehi–English dictionary of any length, and no textbooks or readers. Of the available works, the publications listed below will be most useful to the learner. Online sources of authentic texts include a Dhivehi Wikipedia (www.dv.wikipedia.org) and numerous online newspapers, such as Haama Daily (www.haamadaily.com), Miadhu News (www.miadhu.com), and Minivan News (www.minivannews.com). For listening practice, various Dhivehi audio selections can be found on www.youtube.com by searching “Dhivehi.”

For English speakers, Dhivehi may be easier to learn than Sinhalese and many other South Asian languages.
Annotated bibliography

Dictionaries, glossaries, and phrase books


This dictionary is readily accessible and up-to-date, but short. It has the rare quality of being bidirectional: English–Dhivehi and Dhivehi–English.


Both a phrase book and a glossary, this resource is a good place to start learning the language.


This is of high linguistic quality and the only dictionary on this list of any significant length (5,130 headwords). It is, however, somewhat out of date, as the Maldives has modernized significantly since the author did his fieldwork in the 1970s. It is also hard to read, being poorly formatted.

Grammatical and orthographic descriptions


This compact and readily available grammatical description is a good place to start learning the structure of the language. Unfortunately, there is no index, though there is an extensive table of contents. It is focused on the spoken form of the language, so none of the examples are written in Thaana.


This is a good place to start in learning Dhivehi script.
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