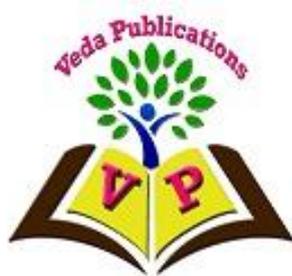


**‘WHERE DOES THIS BUS GO?’****TOWARDS THE PHONOLOGY OF ABBREVIATIONS**

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*(SSN College of Engineering, Chennai)*[srinivass@ssn.edu.in](mailto:srinivass@ssn.edu.in)**ABSTRACT**

Abbreviations are often found on buses in certain parts of South India, spelling out their destinations in short form. Unlike acronyms, however, these abbreviations do not carry successive letters from the full form (e.g. *Chikballapur* → CBP, *Kadiri* → KDR), and a deeper look reveals interesting patterns about them.

Firstly, the initial letter of a destination-name is never omitted in the corresponding abbreviation (e.g. *Anantapur* → ATP, *Puttaparthi* → PTP), reflecting the phonological privilege enjoyed by the left-edge of words (Beckman 1997). Secondly, the non-initial letters in an abbreviation tend to be consonants corresponding to syllable-onsets in the full form (e.g. *Bagepalli* → BGP, *Jee.di.met.la* → JDM, *Ti.ru.pa.ti* → TPT), echoing the universal preference for word-medial syllables to have onsets (Kaye & Lowenstamm 1981). Thirdly, place-sharing nasal-stop sequences may be copied from the full form to the abbreviation (e.g. *Bangalore* → BNG, *Gorantla* → GNT), respecting geminate integrity (Hayes 1986), but coda consonants in general are not, owing to the cross-linguistic preference against syllable codas (Prince & Smolensky 1993:139).

In essence, the aforementioned abbreviations pattern according to general phonological principles. This makes them worthy objects of phonological study, especially under the rubric of World Englishes.

**Keywords:** *Abbreviations, Phonology, Indian English, World Englishes, Truncation.*



## INTRODUCTION

Travelling on South Indian buses which do not have functioning air-conditioners may not be anyone's idea of a good time. Surprisingly, however, it does open one's eyes to the odd intellectual puzzle; like the abbreviations found on buses in Andhra Pradesh, Telengana and Karnataka. Each of those abbreviations spells out the name of the depot to which a bus belongs; which also happens, typically, to be its source or destination.

The abbreviations are curious in that they are formed by taking discontinuous elements from the full base words (e.g. *Puttaparthi* → PPT, *Kakinada* → KKD, *Vakadu* → VKD, and *Medak* → MDK). The choice of elements itself is not random, however. For example, the abbreviations always retain edge-elements, especially those at the left-edge, from the base (section 1); invariably preserve syllable-onsets but preserve -codas only occasionally (section 2); and, sometimes, reproduce connected phonological entities, like geminates or nasal-stop sequences which share place of articulation (section 3).

All of this becomes predictable when the abbreviations are viewed through phonological lenses (section 4). Moreover, at a time when 'Indian English' is gaining traction among linguists and teachers alike (Agnihotri & Singh 2013) in the map of World Englishes, such abbreviations, coined as they are by users of Indian English, become legitimate objects of linguistic study.

### 1. EDGE MATTERS

The idea of a 'word' is shared by the speakers of most, if not all, human languages. The edges of words are particularly important to the idea because without them speech or writing would sound or seem like one continuous stream of static or nebula. Phonologically speaking, edges of words can license more sounds than the other positions (Clements 1990). Stress or accent is also frequently oriented towards the edges of words in languages (Hayes 1995). The abbreviations studied in this paper also reflect the phonologically privileged status of word-edges.

Of the 193 base-abbreviation pairs in my list, the first letter of the base form is not omitted even in

one abbreviation.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, many abbreviations also retain the final letter of the corresponding base form, as seen below.

- |     |                         |   |             |
|-----|-------------------------|---|-------------|
| (1) | Base-abbreviation pairs |   |             |
| a.  | <b>Achampet</b>         | > | <b>ACPT</b> |
| b.  | <b>Dharmavaram</b>      | > | <b>DVRM</b> |
| c.  | <b>Guntakal</b>         | > | <b>GKL</b>  |
| d.  | <b>Hakeempet</b>        | > | <b>HPT</b>  |
| e.  | <b>Machilipatnam</b>    | > | <b>MTM</b>  |
| f.  | <b>Narayanakhed</b>     | > | <b>NKD</b>  |
| h.  | <b>Tandur</b>           | > | <b>TDR</b>  |
| i.  | <b>Vizianagaram</b>     | > | <b>VZM</b>  |
| j.  | <b>Warangal</b>         | > | <b>WL</b>   |

If the two edges of a base word are deemed to 'anchor' it, retaining the elements at those edges while abbreviating in represents a straightforward way to establish correspondence between the base and the abbreviation. As to why left-edge elements are always retained in the abbreviation, while right-edge elements are not, a preliminary response could be that, when a word is truncated in Indian English, there is greater pressure to keep the left-edge intact. This response is supported by the fact that hypocoristic names in India typically retain the leftward syllables from the full names from which they are derived.<sup>2</sup>

- |     |                           |   |                         |
|-----|---------------------------|---|-------------------------|
| (2) | Indian hypocoristic names |   |                         |
| a.  | Aditya                    | > | Adi (*Ditya)            |
| b.  | Krithika                  | > | Krithi/Kirithi (*Thika) |
| c.  | Padmaja                   | > | Padma (*Maja)           |
| d.  | Saroja                    | > | Saro (*Roja)            |
| e.  | Ranganathan               | > | Rangan (*Nathan)        |
| f.  | Venkatesan                | > | Venkat (*Tesan)         |

More generally, in typical English abbreviations, the first letter of the content words abbreviated is retained, and the abbreviations discussed in this paper conform to that pattern as well.

<sup>1</sup> The data for this paper have been taken from the APSRTC and TSRTC websites, their URL mentioned along with the other references.

<sup>2</sup> This may be contrasted with certain Christian names whose hypocoristic forms may retain the left-edge (e.g. David > Dave), the right-edge (Albert > Bert(ie)) or both (e.g. Elizabeth > Beth/Liz(a)).



## 2. ON-SET

In many of the world's documented languages, it is necessary for word-medial syllables at least to begin with a consonantal onset (Hooper 1972, Kaye & Lowenstamm 1981, Clements 1990). Revealingly, the abbreviations discussed here abound with consonant letters, and in many cases these letters correspond to the onsets of syllables in the base forms. (Dots indicate syllable boundaries, as per the phonological convention in vogue.)

(3)	Onset retention		
a.	A.do.ni	>	ADN
b.	A.nan.ta.pur	>	ATP
c.	Gu.di.va.da	>	GDV
d.	Jee.di.met.la	>	JDM
e.	Ni.za.ma.bad	>	NZB
f.	Put.ta.par.thi	>	PTP
g.	Ra.ni.gunj	>	RNG
h.	Thi.ru.pa.ti	>	TPT
i.	U.ra.va.kon.da	>	URKD
j.	Vishakapatnam	>	VSP

The point of the data in (3) is not that all onset consonants are copied from the base to the abbreviation; but that all consonants which are copied are onsets. Naturally, the question arises whether the onset consonants copied are picked in a systematic fashion. Any response to that question requires deeper reflection on and analysis of the data, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

What is certain, however, is that the copied consonants are predominantly syllable-onsets and, very rarely, syllable-codas in the base form. In fact, there are only a handful of cases where a standalone (non-final) coda consonant finds its way into the abbreviation (e.g. *Machilipatnam* > MTM, *Nar.si.pat.nam* > NSPT, *Ka.rim.nagar* > KRMR, *Shadnagar* > SDNR *Nal.gon.da* > NLG).<sup>3</sup> In all other cases, the consonant copied shares place of articulation with a following consonant (see next

<sup>3</sup> 'Nagar' means city in many Indian languages and may therefore be considered a separate word in *Karimnagar* and *Shadnagar*. The preservation of 'm' and 'd' in the abbreviations KRMR and SDNR may be reanalysed, therefore, as the retention of the right-edge element in the words *Karim* and *Shad*, without referring to the coda position.

section); or its very status as a coda is in doubt;<sup>4</sup> or it is copied along with all the consonants from the base (in which case the reference to the coda position becomes redundant). The general non-copying of coda consonants from the base to the abbreviation may be seen as a particular instance of the Emergence of the Unmarked (McCarthy 1994), because syllables with codas are marked, i.e. they are not preferred, in the phonology of human languages (Prince & Smolensky 1993/2004: 139).

## 3. LINKED THINGS

Doubled consonants, a.k.a. geminates, and place-sharing nasal-stop sequences occupy two segments of space, but they often behave like single units. In autosegmental phonology, the apparent 'schizophrenia' of such consonants is explained by linking a single consonantal melody to two timing slots (Levin 1985), or a single place node to two timing slots, in the case of place-sharing nasal-stop sequences.<sup>5</sup> The broad implication is that segments thus linked cannot be separated (Hayes 1986), a point borne out by some of the abbreviations discussed in this paper.

So, while letters corresponding to coda consonants in the base generally do not find a place in the abbreviation, they do get copied sometimes, if the coda consonant is part of a geminate (4), or if it is a nasal consonant (5) sharing place of articulation with a following stop.

(4)	Geminates in the abbreviation	
a.	Gid.da.lu.ru	GDLR
b.	Jam.ma.la.ma.du.gu	JMD
c.	Ya.da.gi.ri.gut.ta	YGT

<sup>4</sup> *Bhadrachalam*, *Husnabad* and *Ibrahimpatnam*, for example are abbreviated as BDCM, HSB D and IBP. In each case, the second letter in the abbreviation ('D', 'S' and 'B') represents the first consonant of a rising sonority cluster ([dr], [sn], [br]) in the base, and may, therefore, be treated as being part of a complex syllable onset, rather than as a coda.

<sup>5</sup> This is a simplification and needs to be worked out in feature-geometric terms (see Padgett 1994 and the references therein).



## (5) Nasal-stop clusters in the abbreviation

	<i>Base</i>	<i>Nasal-stop cluster</i>	<i>Abbreviation</i>
a.	Man.ga.la.gi.ri	[ŋg] – velar place	MNGL
b.	Man.che.ri.al	[ɲc] – palatal place	MNCL
c.	Gun.tur	[nt] – alveolar/dental place	GNT

While neither geminates nor nasal-stop clusters always get represented in the abbreviations, geminates get represented far more often than nasal-stop clusters do. Since doubled consonants are phonologically single melodies linked to two timing slots, copying one of the letters corresponding to a doubled consonant from a base to its abbreviation is tantamount to copying both. As regards place-sharing nasal-stop sequences, however, it is possible to copy either the nasal or the stop, by copying just the timing slot linked to the nasal or the one linked to the stop. It is the stops which usually get copied to the abbreviation, because they are syllable-onsets in the base, whereas the nasals which are syllable codas are ignored—another compelling instance of The Emergence of the Unmarked.

**4. DISCUSSION**

The first three sections of this paper have shown that the discussed abbreviations are derived from their base forms in phonologically predictable ways. The retention of edge elements, the inclusion of onsets (and the general exclusion of codas) and the modicum of respect shown to linked elements from the base all conform to well-known phonological principles. This section dwells on a few other interesting aspects of the abbreviations examined above.

It may be seen at first blush that these abbreviations collectively have many more consonants than vowels. This stems from the simple fact that vowels are copied only if they are base-initial (or, sometimes, -final). Consonants thus form the meat of these abbreviations, a fact reminiscent of the root of Arabic words which are exclusively made up of consonants (McCarthy 1979/1985). The similarity is unsurprising because both roots and abbreviations perform the same function: they act as indices for expanded phonological objects, words or phrases.

Secondly, the letter 'h' is copied to an abbreviation only if it stands alone as a syllable-onset in the base form. In those cases where 'h' follows a consonant, it does not represent any sound – or, to put it in familiar terms, it is 'silent' – and is therefore not copied. This point illustrates that the abbreviations take account of phonology, and not just orthography.

Thirdly, the derivation of the abbreviations seems, in a number of cases, sensitive to the internal structure of the base; specifically, to whether the base is a simple word or a compound. It is arguable that in those bases which end in 'pet(a)', 'pet(a)' itself is treated as a word and is represented by 'PT' in the abbreviation (e.g. Achampet > ACPT, Chikaluripet > CPT, Governorpet > GVPT, Rajampet > RPT, Suryapet > SRPT; Jagayyapeta > JPT and Sullurpeta > SPT). The string 'nagar' is similarly treated in some of the bases which end in 'nagar' (see also note 2).

Lastly, no two abbreviations are exactly the same. The avoidance of homonymous abbreviations stems from the decent human need not to mistake one thing for another, just like the avoidance of homophonous words (Ichimura 2006) or even homophonous word-edges (Srinivas & Kudva 2017).

**5. CONCLUSION**

Two points emerge from the abbreviations discussed in this paper. The first is that they are robust linguistic objects, as seen from the phonologically predictable way in which they are derived from the base and the similarities they share with other phonological objects, like the Indian hypocoristic names or Arabic roots. The second is that they add to the rich volume of data being accumulated under the banner of 'World Englishes', given that Indian English, whose administrative expressions they are, is finally walking out of its



colonial shadows and becoming a variety in its own right (Agnihotri & Singh 2013, Kumar & Wee 2014).

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