Tamil

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Below are some words in the Tamil language, transcribed using a system of phonetic symbols developed by American linguists in the 20th century. The symbol ":" following a vowel indicates that it is long, ṭ , ḍ and ṇ are retroflex versions of t, d, n (pronounced with the tongue curled backwards), č sounds like English "ch", š like English "sh", ǰ like English "j", ñ like Spanish ñ in "Español", ð like English "th" in "that", β is like Spanish "v" in "lavar", ṛ is a retroflex sound like English or Mandarin "r", γ is like Spanish g in "pagar", ŋ is like English ng in "sing", ḷ is a retroflex version of l, and ɨ represents a high central unrounded vowel, like Russian ы or Guarani "y".

1. vi:ḍɨ — "house"
2. paṛam — "fruit"
3. kaβam — "phlegm"
4. iḍaðɨ — "left"
5. vaŋgi — "bank"
6. ka:ḍɨ — "forest"
7. ka:ṭṭɨ — "show!"
8. añǰɨ — "fear!"
9. pe:ččɨ — "speech"
10. čonne:n — "I said"
11. romba — "very (colloquial)"
12. maγan — "son"
13. makkaḷ — "people"
14. ka:ppa:tta — "to protect"
15. muðɨγɨ — "back"
16. kuppai — "trash"
17. eṛɨttɨ — "letter"
18. eṛɨðɨ — "write!"
19. mu:ñǰi — "face (colloquial)"
20. arivɨ — "knowledge"
21. pe:šɨ — "speak!"
22. pe:ši — "having spoken"
23. činna — "small"
24. pašikkiraðɨ — "is feeling hungry"
25. toṇḍai — "throat"

26. paṇam — "money"
27. naṇḍɨ — "crab"
28. aŋge: — "there"
29. čirippɨ — "laughter"
30. aččam — "fear"
31. viral — "finger"
32. namakkɨ — "to us"
33. ru:βa:y — "rupee"
34. vanda:y — "you came"
35. mo:šam — "bad"
36. tamiṛ — "Tamil"
37. ya:ṛ — "harp"
38. ella:m — "everything"
39. malar — "flower"

Assignment 1: If you study the data carefully, you will notice that not all of the sounds appear in all positions in a word. This is called "defective distribution" by linguists. Describe the environments in which each sound in Tamil occurs. You may ignore the consonant "y" for this exercise. If you feel that you don't have enough data to draw a solid conclusion, please mention this.

Assignment 2: In order to describe the sound systems of languages, linguists make use of the notion of the "phoneme." A phoneme is "a contrastive unit in the sound system of a particular language." In structural linguistics, each phoneme has a series of realizations (actual sounds that are produced by the speaker). Realizations of the same phoneme are called "allophones." Knowing this, how many phonemes are there in Tamil? For each, give their allophones and the environments in which they occur.

NB: The Tamil language is a Dravidian language spoken in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. It is spoken by approximately 77 million speakers.