

Introduction to the Limbu Script



This short introduction to the Limbu script is intended for people with no prior experience but can be used by anyone looking for more information on this unique script. It is based on the current Unicode proposal to encode Limbu and the successful implementation of the Limbu script by XenoType Technologies on a Macintosh running OS X 10.2.x.

The main purpose of this document is to provide information for software developers in an effort to promote the support of Limbu-enabled operating systems and support applications. We will not however delve into the specifics of programming support for Limbu — the information herein should provide an adequate starting point regardless of the operating system or technology involved.

To this end, we will frequently diverge from traditional linguistic terminology in an effort to point out or emphasize certain features of this script. Linguists and purists will have to forgive us.

Consonants

As currently encoded, the Limbu script consists of 66 basic letter shapes, or nominal glyphs, which can be further divided into consonants, vowel signs, diacritics and digits. The 29 consonants, or base glyphs, are shown here:

𑌀 𑌁 𑌂 𑌃 𑌄 𑌅 𑌆 𑌇 𑌈 𑌉 𑌊 𑌋 𑌌
𑌍 𑌎 𑌏 𑌐 𑌑 𑌒 𑌓 𑌔 𑌕 𑌖 𑌗
𑌘 𑌙 𑌚 𑌛 𑌜 𑌝 𑌞 𑌟

All but one of these (𑌀) represents a consonant or consonant cluster. Just as in other related scripts, this character acts as a carrier for the various vowel marks when word initial or at the beginning of a syllable. Because it can take certain conjoined diacritics representing medial sounds, we refer to it as a consonant for the purposes of this document.

It should also be noted that the glyph 𑌄 has another popular variant 𑌛. This variant is commonly found in most of the currently available Limbu fonts but modern materials seem to prefer the former glyph.

There are two additional glyphs which occur in older versions of the script and which are referred to even in modern publications. Although they rarely occur in popular literature and never in native words, we recommend that they be added to the Unicode block or, at the very least, that a cohesive method for producing them be addressed — the use of SA-I as a virama would be extremely counterintuitive, particularly since its own function in the writing system is already in transition. XTT currently supports these glyphs through the Private Use Area.

𑌠 𑌡

Vowels

There are 9 basic vowel signs used in Limbu which can appear above, below and after a base glyph. We illustrate these signs below:

ྱ ྲ ླ ྴ ྵ ྶ ྷ ྸ ྐྵ

No graphic transposition is required to display these vowel signs properly so reordering of the text stream is not necessary.

Digits

Like most digits around the world, Limbu digits pose no special problems.

୦ ୧ ୨ ୩ ୪ ୫ ୬ ୭ ୮ ୯

Diacritics

Limbu uses a variety of diacritics — for our purposes we refer to 12 of them here. As in the Lepcha writing system, Limbu uses a variety of characters to indicate a syllable final consonant. There are 9 such glyphs in Limbu illustrated below with the base glyph ు.

ృ ౄ ౅ ె ే ై ౉ ొ ో

The character ౌ represents Devanagari anusvara which does not occur in native Limbu words.

్ ౎ ౏

There are three additional diacritics, depicted above, that perform various functions in the language: U+1939 LIMBU SIGN MUKPHRENG, U+193A LIMBU SIGN KEMPHRENG and U+193B LIMBU SIGN SA-I. MUKPHRENG typically occurs at the end of a syllable, but it is frequently dropped in the literature of modern writers. KEMPHRENG is used to emphasize a prolonged vowel but its use is not mandatory — aside from a few common words, it occurs only sporadically. KEMPHRENG can also create ligatures with vowel signs that occur above a base glyph (predominantly ౱ but also ౲ and ౳).

The use of SA-I is enigmatic at best. Technically speaking, it should really only occur with base glyphs but it is frequently written with the final consonant signs as well. Since one of its functions is to cancel out the inherent vowel, its use with final consonants is idiosyncratic and should be discouraged. More recent publications seem to adhere to this policy fairly consistently.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that one of the first well known Limbu writers uses SA-I with the final consonant signs throughout his Limbu-Nepali-English Dictionary. Interestingly, he considers this publication obsolete. We have been in communication with him and hope to get clarification on this usage of SA-I. We are also awaiting delivery of the new Limbu-Nepali-English Dictionary published by the Royal Nepal Academy of Science and Technology which may provide further clarification. In any case, its encoding in the Limbu block is not likely to be affected by its usage in the language.

