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An Animated and Narrated Glossary of
Terms used in Linguistics
presents

Consonant

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Consonants as letters in the alphabet

- One common conception of consonants is to define them as a set of letters in the alphabet:

*b, c, d, f, g, h, j, k, l, m, n,
p, q, r, s, t, v, w, x, y, z*

E.g.
<c> in *cake, cite, scissors* are all different.

For the purposes of phonetics and phonology, this conception is not very useful.

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Consonants as classified by the IPA

The International Phonetic Alphabet provides a list of (pulmonic) consonants.

CONSONANTS (PULMONIC)											© 2005 IPA
	Bilabial	Labiodental	Dental	Alveolar	Postalveolar	Retroflex	Palatal	Velar	Uvular	Pharyngeal	Glottal
Plosive	p b			t d		ʈ ɖ	c ɟ	k ɡ	q ɢ		ʔ
Nasal	m	ɱ		n		ɳ	ɲ	ŋ	N		
Trill	B			r					R		
Tap or Flap		ⱱ		ɾ		ɽ					
Fricative	ɸ β	f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ	ʂ ʐ	ç ʝ	x ɣ	χ ʁ	ħ ʕ	h ɦ
Lateral fricative				ɬ ɮ							
Approximant		ʋ		ɹ		ɻ	j	ɰ			
Lateral approximant				l		ɭ	ʎ	L			

Where symbols appear in pairs, the one to the right represents a voiced consonant. Shaded areas denote articulations judged impossible.

But are these all the consonants there are? Do all consonants share any intrinsic properties that allow them to be grouped together as a natural class?

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Defining Consonants

- Definition 1: Consonants are phones whose articulation involves radical obstruction to airflow in the oral cavity.
  – Thus what counts as a consonant would depend on how one qualifies 'obstruction'.
- Definition 2: Consonants are phones that do not serve as the nucleus of a syllable.
  – Thus what counts as a consonant would depend on one's theory of syllable structure.

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Example: [p]

Is [p] a consonant?

- [p] involves closure of the lips, there is full obstruction of airflow.
  - ➔ [p] is a consonant by Definition 1.
- [p] can serve as an onset in [pit] or as coda in [tip], but never as the nucleus *[spt].
  - ➔ [p] is a consonant by Definition 2.

Therefore, we are pretty certain that [p] is a consonant.

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Example: [m]

Is [m] a consonant?

- [m] involves closure of the lips, there is full obstruction of airflow at the mouth, even though air flows smoothly through the nose.
  - ➔ [m] is a consonant by Definition 1.

- [m] can serve as an onset in [mit] or as coda in [tim], but also as the nucleus [zm] (e.g. *organism*)
  - ➔ [m] is a NOT consonant by Definition 2.

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Example: [w]

Is [w] a consonant?
- [w] involves rounding of the lips, there no serious obstruction of airflow.
  - ➔ We are unsure if it satisfies Definition 1.
- [w] can serve as an onset in [wit] or possibly as coda in [kaw] *cow*
- We are not sure about [w] in the nucleus since it is phonetically not very distinct from [u].
  - ➔ We are unsure if it satisfies Definition 2.

Therefore, we are uncertain if [w] is a consonant. In fact, different linguists analyze it differently depending on their theory and assumptions.

Other uncertainties

- There are many phones which status of consonantality remains uncertain, here are some of them.

[l, ɹ, h, ʍ, w, j]

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Further reading

Davenport, Mike and S. J. Hannahs (2005) *Introducing Phonetics and Phonology*, 2nd edition, Chapter 3. New York: Hodder Arnold Publication.

Gussenhoven, Carlos and Haike Jacobs (2005) *Understanding Phonology*, 2nd edition, Chapter 1. New York: Hodder Arnold.

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Ladefoged, Peter and Ian Maddieson (1996) *The Sounds of the World's Languages*, Chapter 9. Blackwell Publishers

Tserdanelis, Georgios and Wai Yi Peggy Wong (eds.) (2004) *Language Files*: *Materials for an Introduction of Language and Linguistics*, 9th edition, File 3.3. The Ohio State University Press.

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The End

Wee, Lian-Hee and Winnie H.Y. Cheung (2009)
An animated and narrated glossary of terms used in Linguistics.
Hong Kong Baptist University.