



An Animated and Narrated Glossary of
Terms used in Linguistics
presents

[consonantal]



Basic idea

- [consonantal] is a **phonological feature**.
- It is used as a **distinctive feature** for distinguishing different phones/phonemes/segments.
- It is also used as a distinctive feature for capturing a **natural class** of segments.

Definition

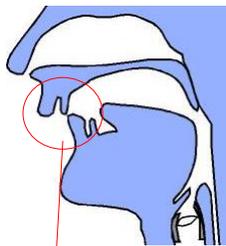
Definition

A phone/phoneme X is [consonantal] if in the articulation of X, there is **radical obstruction** to the air flow in the **oral cavity**.

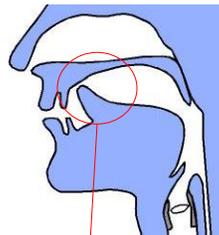
A radical obstruction is a point in the oral cavity where air pressure is significantly higher than its surroundings.

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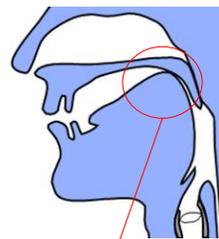
Radical Obstruction



[f] where obstruction (though not total) is at the upper teeth and lower lip.



[s] where obstruction (though not total) is at the coronal and alveolar ridge.



[k] where obstruction (total) is at the velum.

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Examples of [consonantal]

- By the definition given,
 - Plosives such as [p, t, k, b, d, g] are [consonantal]
 - Nasals such as [m, n, ŋ] are [consonantal]
 - Fricatives such as [f, v, s, z, x] are [consonantal]
- However,
 - Vowels are NOT [consonantal]
 - Glottals [ʔ, h] are NOT [consonantal]
- The status of glides [w, j] remains a matter of some debate.

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Evidence

- In many languages, glottals have been observed to not pattern with other consonants, but with vowels instead.
- Sundanese nasal spreading:
 - Inside a word, all vowels after a nasal become nasalized.
 - The nasal spreading applies across syllable boundaries.
 - Nasal spreading is blocked only by oral consonants.
 - Nasal spreading is not blocked by vowels or glottals.

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Sundanese

Notice that nasalized vowels only appear where there are preceding nasals.

[h] does not behave like other consonants, hence should not be classified as such.

abot	'heavy'	agiŋ	'big'
amīs	'sweet'	anōm	'young'
handap	'light'	luhur	'high'
awon	'bad'	basir	'wet'
konēŋ	'yellow'	birim	'red'
eŋgal	'new'	gədde	'big'
māhīr	'skillful'	mīri	'uncertain'
mōhēhēd	'poor'	bumī	'house'
mōrri	'duck'	māhāsiswa	'student'

Data from Odden (2005:57)

Vowels not nasalized if preceding nasal is blocked by consonants.

Blocking does not apply to [h]

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Endnote

- There is other evidence, which we will leave for you to discover.
- The counter-intuitive patterns of [h] should lead us to be more careful about our normally accepted notions of classification.
- One should also be careful not to confuse the feature [consonantal] with the daily use of the word "consonant".

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Further reading

- Aronoff, Mark and Janie Rees-Miller (eds.) (2001) *The Handbook of Linguistics*. Blackwell Publishers.
- Chomsky, Noam and Morris Halle (1968) *The Sound Pattern of English*. MIT Press.
- Davenport, Mike and S. J. Hannahs (2005) *Introducing Phonetics and Phonology*, 2nd edition, Chapter 7. New York: Hodder Arnold Publication.
- Fromkin, Victoria and Robert Rodman (1998) *An Introduction to Language*, 6th edition. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.
- Gussenhoven, Carlos and Haïke Jacobs (2005). *Understanding Phonology*, Chapter 5. London: Hodder Arnold.
- Hall, T. A. (2007). Segmental features. In Paul de Lacy (ed.) *The Cambridge Handbook of Phonology*, (pp. 311-334). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hawkins, Peter (1992) *Introducing Phonology*, Chapter 3. London: Routledge.
- Kenstowicz, Michael J. (1994) *Phonology in Generative Grammar*. Blackwell Publishers.
- Odden, David (2005) *Introducing Phonology*, Chapter 6. Cambridge 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.