



An Animated and Narrated Glossary of
Terms used in Linguistics
presents

Distinctive Feature



Guessing Game

I'm thinking of something. Ask me 10 yes-no questions to guess at what I'm thinking.

- Is it a living thing? YES
- Is it an animal? YES
- Is it a herbivore? NO
- Is it a carnivore? YES
- Is it wild? YES
- Is it mammalian? YES
- Is it feline? YES
- Does it have patterns on its hide? NO
- Does it have a mane? YES
- Is it a LION?
YES



Features as Description

- By asking those questions earlier, we arrive at a description of an object that has the following features:

+living
+animate
-herbivore
+carnivore
-domesticated
+mammal
+feline
-spots/stripes
+mane

=



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Features in Phonetics & Phonology

- I'm thinking of a phone. Ask me a maximum of 10 yes-no questions to guess at what I'm thinking.

Is it a consonant? YES = [+consonantal]
 Do you use your lips? NO = [-labial]
 Do you use the tip of your tongue? YES = [+coronal]
 Does air flow out of the nose? NO = [-nasal]
 Does air flow out of the mouth? YES = [-stop]
 Does air flow out from the centre of the mouth? NO = [+lateral]
 Does air flow smoothly? YES = [+sonorant]
 Do vocal folds vibrate? YES = [+voice]
 Is the tongue curled upwards? YES = [+retroflex]
 Is it [l]? YES!!

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Features in Phonetics & Phonology

- By asking those questions earlier, we arrive at a description of a phone that has the following features:

$$\left. \begin{array}{l} +\text{consonantal} \\ -\text{labial} \\ +\text{coronal} \\ -\text{nasal} \\ -\text{stop} \\ +\text{lateral} \\ +\text{sonorant} \\ +\text{voice} \\ +\text{retroflex} \end{array} \right\} = [\text{ɭ}]$$

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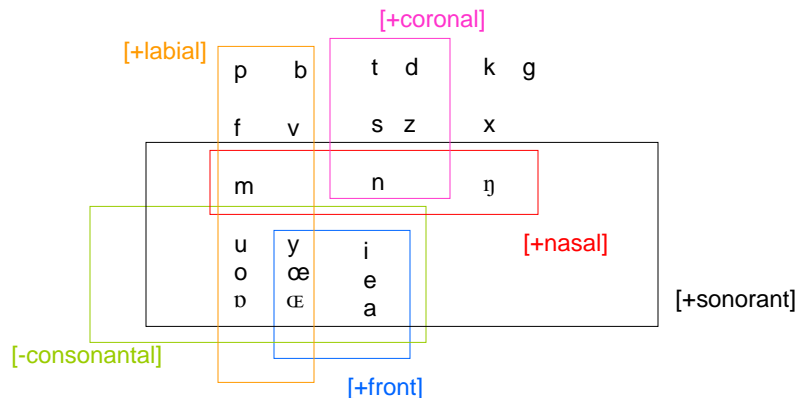
Features in Phonetics & Phonology

- In phonology, Distinctive Features are categories used for characterizing a **natural class** of phones/segments.
- Depending on one's analytical framework,
- Set of features and their definitions differ
 - Features may be binary or privative

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Features and Classes



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Beyond Phonology

Use of features is not restricted to phonology (or even linguistics).

- Case assignment is sensitive to [animate] of NP in Malayalam
- Whether or not an NP subject is [singular] affects the form of a verb and vice versa
- In Malay, passivization is possible only if the internal argument of the verb is [affected].
- Adverbs of volition are possible only if the external argument of the verb is [volitional]

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Further reading

- Chomsky, Noam and Morris Halle (1968) *The Sound Pattern of English*. MIT Press.
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- Gussenhoven, Carlos and Haïke Jacobs (2005) *Understanding Phonology*, 2nd edition, Chapters 5. New York: Hodder Arnold.
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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.