



An Animated and Narrated Glossary of
Terms used in Linguistics
presents

Minimal Pair



Basic Idea

- A minimal pair is a pair of forms that are **identical** except for a **minimal difference**, which is relevant for **meaning contrast**.

	Similarities	Differences
Rotini 	Made of egg, flour, water	Shape: twisted spiral
Farfalle 	Made of egg, flour, water	Shape: butterflies



Basic Idea

- The difference is at minimal when **other things are kept constant** except for one element.
 - Orange and apple: *not* a minimal pair
Different in color, but also in texture and shape.
- In establishing a minimal pair, difference must be **contrastive**.
 - A *fat* woman Vs. a *thin* woman, other things being constant such as ages and heights, is contrastive.
 - A *thin* woman Vs. a *rich* woman is *not* a contrastive pair.



Minimal Pair in linguistics

Example from phonology

English

[bæt] “bat” [mæt] “mat”

- This pair of words only differ in one **segment** but their meanings are contrastive.



Minimal Pair in linguistics

More examples from phonology

increase (verb) increase (noun)

- A difference in the location of **stress** can change the grammatical category

[fʌn⁵⁵] 分 “divide” [fʌn²²] 墳 “grave”

- The segmental representations of these two morphemes are identical except for different **tonal values** that are sufficient to make a contrast in meaning.



Minimal Pair in linguistics

Example from morphology

John

Johnny

- The only difference is the presence of a **suffix /-i/**
- There is a **contrast** in meaning.



Language Specificity

- What counts as a minimal pair could be language specific.

Malayalam
[palam] “a weight”
[p^halam] “result”

This is a minimal pair. The two items are contrastive.

This is a NOT minimal pair. The two items are not contrastive.

English
[stɒp] “stop”
[stɒp^h] “stop”



Further reading

- Davenport, Mike and S. J. Hannahs (2005) *Introducing Phonetics and Phonology*, 2nd edition. New York: Hodder Arnold Publication.
- Gussenhoven, Carlos and Haike Jacobs (2005) *Understanding Phonology*, 2nd edition. New York: Hodder Arnold.
- Hawkins, Peter (1992) *Introducing Phonology*. London: Routledge.
- Tserdanelis, Georgios and Wai Yi Peggy Wong (eds.) (2004) *Language Files: Materials for an Introduction of Language and Linguistics*, 9th edition, File 4.2. The Ohio State University Press.



香港浸會大學
HONG KONG BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

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.