

An Animated and Narrated Glossary of
Terms used in Linguistics
presents

Phoneme

Meaningful Contrast



“spill”

“skill”



[s_ɪl]

The two words are same in every respect except for [p] and [k].
There is a **meaningful contrast** between [p] and [k] in English.



Meaningful Contrast

With respect to phonology, whether or not a contrast is meaningful is language dependent.

Malayalam:

[kutti] *stump*



[kutti] *child*



No such
contrast in
English

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Definition

In speech languages, a phoneme is a **smallest segmental unit** of sound employed to form **meaningful contrasts**.

Phonemes are represented between slashes:

/phoneme/

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Abstraction

Since meaningful contrasts are language specific, it follows that phonemes are **abstract representations**.

This is because

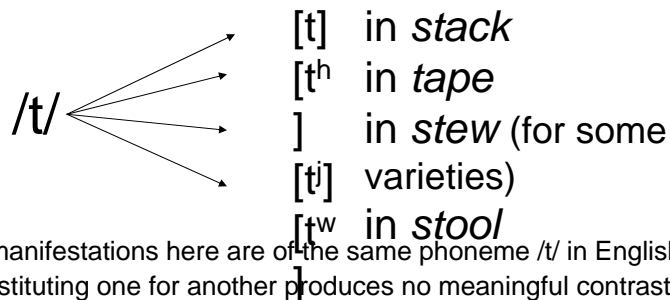
- No two utterances are exactly identical.
- Phonemes can have different manifestations as long as those manifestations are non-contrastive

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Manifestations of Phonemes

/t/ in English



All manifestations here are of the same phoneme /t/ in English. Substituting one for another produces no meaningful contrast.

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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.

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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.