An Animated and Narrated Glossary of Terms used in Linguistics

**[consonantal]**

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**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**

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.

**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.
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.

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.
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.

Vowels not nasalized if preceding nasal is blocked by consonants.

Blocking does not apply to [h]

Data from Odden (2005:57)

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


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.