An Animated and Narrated Glossary of Terms used in Linguistics

presents

**Minimal Pair**

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**Basic Idea**

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Similarities</th>
<th>Differences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rotini</td>
<td>Made of egg, flour, water</td>
<td>Shape: twisted spiral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farfalle</td>
<td>Made of egg, flour, water</td>
<td>Shape: butterflies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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

[baet] “bat” [maet] “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
  
  [fʌn] 分 “divide”    [fʌn] 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.

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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”
[pʰalam] “result”

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

English
[stɔp] “stop”
[stɔpʰ] “stop”

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

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.