



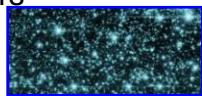
An Animated and Narrated Glossary of
Terms used in Linguistics
presents

Complementary distribution



Definition

- Two forms **A** and **B** are in complementary distribution if they **never occur** in the **same environment**.

E.g.	Sun 	Stars 
When can they be seen?	Only at daytime	Only at night

Picture Credits:
http://thumbs.dreamstime.com/thumb_65/1150159436x7mZQr.jpg
http://www.nasa.gov/centers/goddard/images/content/137159main_FirstStars_top_pannel_lg.jpg

Slide 20



Basic Idea

- The **distribution** of the two forms **do not overlap**.

Example

Spiderman

Peter Parker

Distributions

When there is danger and crime

Elsewhere

Slide 3



Complementarity and Identity

If an entity X has multiple manifestations, then all manifestations of X would be in complementary distribution.

Thus, when two forms are in complementary distribution,

- One suspects that underlyingly they are really the same thing with different manifestations
- But this is not necessarily so.

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Example from English

“pet”	[p ^h et]	*[p ^h et]
“map”	[mæp]	*[mæp ^h]
“spin”	[spin]	*[sp ^h in]
“rapid”	[’ræpid]	*[’ræp ^h id]
“rapidity”	[rə’p ^h iditi]	*[’rəpiditi]

- [p^h] occurs as the onset of a stressed syllable.
- [p] occurs elsewhere.
- In English, [p^h] and [p] are in complementary distribution.



Example from German

der
den “the” [+ masculine]

Der Tisch ist gut.

“The table is good.”

**Den Tisch ist gut.*

Ich mag den Tisch.

“I like the table.”

**Ich mag der Tisch.*

Why *der* and *den* are in complementary distribution?

- *Der* only occurs in the subject position whereas
- *Den* only occurs in the object position.



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.

