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An Animated and Narrated Glossary of
Terms used in Linguistics
presents

Distinctive Feature

香 港 浸 會 大 學
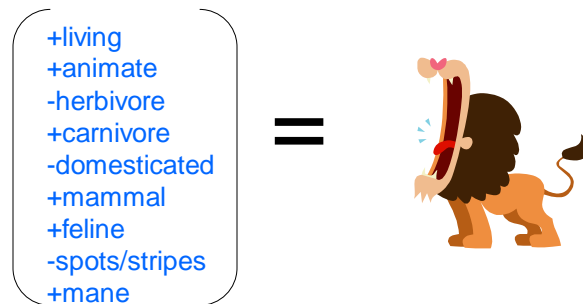HONG KONG BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

Guessing Game

I'm thinking of something. Ask me 10 yes-no questions to guess at
   what I'm thinking.

Is it a living thing? YES
Is it an animal? YES
Is it a herbivore? NO
Is it a carnivore? YES
Is it wild? YES
Is it mammalian? YES
Is it feline? YES
Does it have patterns on its hide? NO
Does it have a mane? YES
Is it a LION?
            YES

Features as Description

- By asking those questions earlier, we arrive at a description of an object that has the following features:

> +living
> +animate
> -herbivore
> +carnivore
> -domesticated
> +mammal
> +feline
> -spots/stripes
> +mane

=

Slide 3

Features in Phonetics & Phonology

- I'm thinking of a phone. Ask me a maximum of 10 yes-no questions to guess at what I'm thinking.

Is it a consonant?   YES   = [+consonantal]
Do you use your lips?   NO   = [-labial]
Do you use the tip of your tongue?   YES   = [+coronal]
Does air flow out of the nose?   NO   = [-nasal]
Does air flow out of the mouth?   YES   = [-stop]
Does air flow out from the centre of the mouth?   NO   = [+lateral]
Does air flow smoothly?   YES   = [+sonorant]
Do vocal folds vibrate?   YES   = [+voice]
Is the tongue curled upwards?   YES   = [+retroflex]
Is it [ɭ]?   YES!!

Slide 4

Features in Phonetics & Phonology

- By asking those questions earlier, we arrive at a description of a phone that has the following features:

$$
\left.
\begin{array}{l}
\text{+consonantal} \\
\text{-labial} \\
\text{+coronal} \\
\text{-nasal} \\
\text{-stop} \\
\text{+lateral} \\
\text{+sonorant} \\
\text{+voice} \\
\text{+retroflex}
\end{array}
\right\} = [\ ɭ\ ]
$$

Features in Phonetics & Phonology

In phonology, Distinctive Features are categories used for characterizing a natural class of phones/segments.

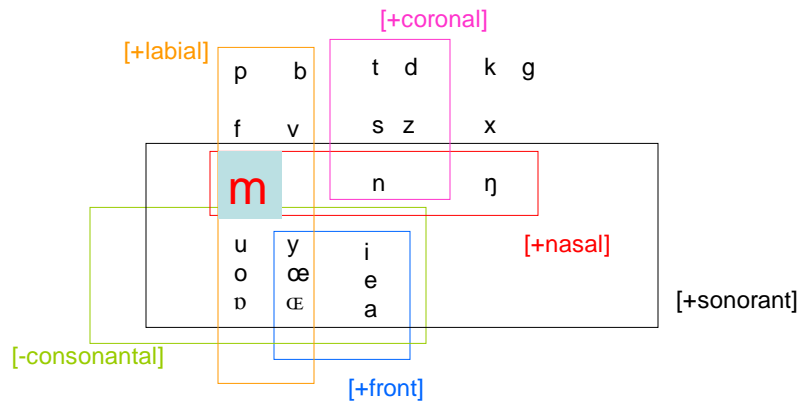Depending on one's analytical framework,

- Set of features and their definitions differ
- Features may be binary or privative

Features and Classes

[+coronal]

[+labial]

			[+coronal]			
p	b	t	d	k	g
f	v	s	z	x	
	m	n	ŋ		
u	y	i			
o	œ	e			
ɒ	Œ	a			

[+nasal]

[+sonorant]

[-consonantal]

[+front]

Beyond Phonology

Use of features is not restricted to phonology (or even linguistics).

– Case assignment is sensitive to [animate] of NP in Malayalam

– Whether or not an NP subject is [singular] affects the form of a verb and vice versa

– In Malay, passivization is possible only if the internal argument of the verb is [affected].

– Adverbs of volition are possible only if the external argument of the verb is [volitional]

The End