





An Animated and Narrated Glossary of  
Terms used in Linguistics  
*presents*

# Minimal Pair



## *Basic Idea*

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

	Similarities	Differences
Rotini 	Made of egg, flour, water	Shape: twisted spiral
Farfalle 	Made of egg, flour, water	Shape: butterflies





## Basic Idea

- Difference is 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

[bæt] “bat” [mæt] “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<sup>55</sup>] 分 “divide”    [fʌn<sup>11</sup>] 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.



## *Minimal Pair in linguistics*

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”  
[p<sup>h</sup>alam] “result”

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

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

English  
[stɒp] “stop”  
[stɒp<sup>h</sup>] “stop”



## 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.

