



An Animated and Narrated Glossary of
Terms used in Linguistics
presents

Phoneme



Meaningful Contrast



“spill”



“skill”

[s_pil]

The two words are same in every respect except for [p] and [k].
There is a **meaningful contrast** between [p] and [k] in English.

Meaningful Contrast

With respect to phonology, whether or not a contrast is meaningful is language dependent.

Malayalam:

[kutti] *stump*



[kutti] *child*



No such
contrast in
English

Slide 3 

Definition

In speech languages, a phoneme is a **smallest segmental unit** of sound employed to form **meaningful contrasts**.

Phonemes are represented between slashes:

/phoneme/

Slide 4 



Abstraction

Since meaningful contrasts are language specific, it follows that phonemes are **abstract representations**.

This is because

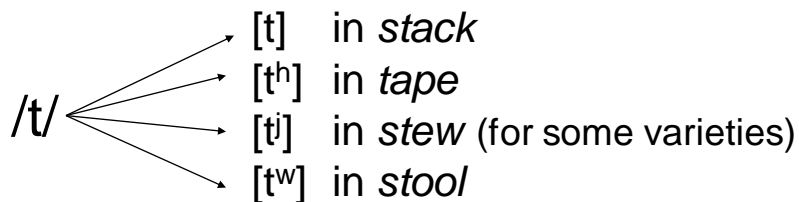
- No two utterances are exactly identical.
- Phonemes can have different manifestations as long as those manifestations are non-contrastive

Slide 5 



Manifestations of Phonemes

/t/ in English



All manifestations here are of the same phoneme /t/ in English. Substituting one for another produces no meaningful contrast.

Slide 6 



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.

