



An Animated and Narrated Glossary of
Terms used in Linguistics
presents

[consonantal]



Basic idea

- [consonantal] is a **phonological feature**.
- It is used as a **distinctive feature** for distinguishing different phones/phonemes/segments.
- It is also used as a distinctive feature for capturing a **natural class** of segments.



Definition

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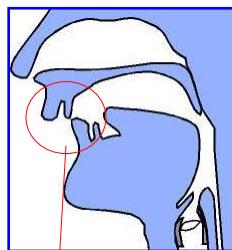
A phone/phoneme X is [consonantal] if in the articulation of X, there is **radical obstruction** to the air flow in the **oral cavity**.

A radical obstruction is a point in the oral cavity where air pressure is significantly higher than its surroundings.

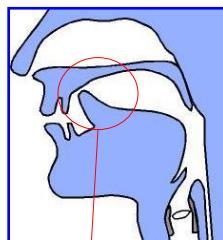
Slide 30



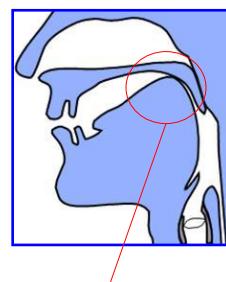
Radical Obstruction



[f] where obstruction (though not total) is at the upper teeth and lower lip.



[s] where obstruction (though not total) is at the coronal and alveolar ridge.



[k] where obstruction (total) is at the velum.

Slide 40



Examples of [consonantal]

- By the definition given,
 - Plosives such as [p, t, k, b, d, g] are [consonantal]
 - Nasals such as [m, n, ŋ] are [consonantal]
 - Fricatives such as [f, v, s, z, ʃ] are [consonantal]
- However,
 - Vowels are NOT [consonantal]
 - Glottals [ʔ, h] are NOT [consonantal]
- The status of glides [w, j] remains a matter of some debate.

Slide 5



Evidence

- In many languages, glottals have been observed to not pattern with other consonants, but with vowels instead.
- Sundanese nasal spreading:
 - Inside a word, all vowels after a nasal become nasalized.
 - The nasal spreading applies across syllable boundaries.
 - Nasal spreading is blocked only by oral consonants.
 - Nasal spreading is not blocked by vowels or glottals.

Slide 6



Sundanese

Notice that nasalized vowels only appear where there are preceding nasals.

[h] does not behave like other consonants, hence should not be classified as such.

abot	'heavy'	ag ^ŋ j	'big'
am [̄] s	'sweet'	an [̄] om	'young'
handap	'light'	luhur	'high'
awon	'bad'	basir	'wet'
kon [̄] ŋ	'yellow'	birim	'red'
engal	'new'	g [̄] dde	'big'
m [̄] h [̄] ir	'skillful'	m [̄] ri	'uncertain'
m [̄] h [̄] h [̄] ed	'poor'	bum [̄]	'house'
m [̄] rr [̄] i	'duck'	m [̄] h [̄] siswa	'student'

Data from Odden (2005:57)

Vowels not nasalized if preceding nasal is blocked by consonants.

Blocking does not apply to [h]

Slide 7/10



Endnote

- There is other evidence, which we will leave for you to discover.
- The counter-intuitive patterns of [h] should lead us to be more careful about our normally accepted notions of classification.
- One should also be careful not to confuse the feature [consonantal] with the daily use of the word “consonant”.

Slide 8/10



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.

