


Our speech consists in a continuous stream of sounds which can be divided into small pieces called segments. The word 'man' is made up of 3 segments: /m/, /æ/ and /n/. Each of these segments is called a phoneme. So, what exactly is a phoneme?

Contrastive Distribution

- ▶ When we choose minimal pairs (i.e. pairs of words that differ in only one phonological element), if replacing one sound with another changes the meaning, we can say that two phones (sounds) are separate phonemes. For example, in the minimal pair *bed/bad*, replacement of one unit of sound causes change in the meaning of the two words; thus, we can say that /e/ in /bed/ is a phoneme which is different from /æ/ in /bæd/.

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- Using other minimal pairs, we can establish that the phonemic system of English (BBC accent, in particular) is based on 44 phonemes: 20 vowel phonemes and 24 consonant phonemes. Again, if we put one of the 20 vowels of English in the place of another, we change the meaning of the word and say that we have a different vowel.

Free Variation

Each phoneme in English is pronounced slightly differently between one speaker and another, but the slight differences are regarded as realizing the same phoneme as long as they don't result in changing the meaning of a word. (E.g. the vowel in 'please').

When the different realisations of a phoneme are possible in the same environment without changing the meaning of a word, we say they are in free variation.

- ▶ Slight differences in the pronunciation of the same phoneme which do not change the meaning of the word.

Complementary Distribution



Different realisations of a phoneme occur at separate places i.e. one can occur where the other cannot, we say that they are in complementary distribution. These similar phones are called allophones. For example, aspirated /t/ occurs in the beginning of a stressed syllable, and unaspirated /t/ occurs at the end of a word or where there is no vowel after.