

THE CLASSIFICATION OF ENGLISH CONSONANTS

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a detailed classification of English consonants based on three primary phonetic criteria: place of articulation, manner of articulation, and voicing. Each category is explored to explain how different English consonant sounds are produced in the vocal tract. By identifying key features such as bilabial, alveolar, and glottal articulations, as well as voiceless and voiced distinctions, the classification provides a foundational understanding of English phonetics. This structured approach aids in language acquisition, phonetic analysis, and speech therapy, highlighting the importance of consonant classification in linguistics and language learning.

Keywords: English consonants, phonetics, place of articulation, manner of articulation, voicing, language learning, linguistics, speech therapy, phonetic classification, articulation

Introduction: The English language consists of a complex sound system that allows speakers to produce a wide range of words and expressions through the manipulation of airflow within the vocal tract. This system comprises **consonants** and **vowels**, with consonants playing a key role in shaping the distinct syllabic and phonetic structure of English. Unlike vowels, which are produced with a relatively open vocal tract, consonants are created by partially or completely obstructing the airflow in different areas of the mouth and throat. The study of these sounds forms a fundamental part of **phonetics**, the branch of linguistics that examines the physical properties of speech sounds and how they are produced.

Consonants are categorized based on three main criteria: **place of articulation**, **manner of articulation**, and **voicing**. Each criterion reveals specific characteristics of how and where a sound is produced. By understanding these features, learners and professionals alike can gain insight into the subtleties of English pronunciation. For instance, mastering the distinction between voiced and voiceless sounds or recognizing the difference between alveolar and velar sounds can greatly enhance pronunciation accuracy for language learners and improve speech therapy approaches.

The classification of English consonants also aids in identifying and correcting common phonetic issues, making it valuable for language instructors, linguists, and speech therapists. In language acquisition, precise pronunciation is key to clear

communication, and for linguists, understanding these distinctions is crucial for analyzing linguistic patterns and variations. This article provides a comprehensive breakdown of the classification of English consonants, offering a structured guide to their articulation and their role within the English language.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Consonant Sounds in English

Like vowels, consonants can also be better perceived by learning their sounds. A consonant sound is a speech sound that is produced by the partial or complete obstruction of air by the lips, teeth, tongue or throat. The Collins Dictionary defines a consonant sound as “a sound such as ‘p’, ‘f’, ‘n’, or ‘t’ which you pronounce by stopping the air flowing freely through your mouth”. There are 44 speech sounds in total in the English language. Among them, 24 are consonant sounds. Let us look at what they are and how they are classified.

Classification of Consonant Sounds

Consonant sounds are divided into categories based on two aspects, namely,

- The place of articulation – with reference to the parts of the mouth that are used to pronounce the particular sounds.
- The manner of articulation – with reference to the movement of air from the lungs and through and out of the nose and mouth.

Read on to learn more about the various places and manners of articulation.

Place of Articulation

- Bilabial – the upper lip and lower lip come in complete contact with each other.
- Dental – the tip of the tongue touches the teeth mildly.
- Labio-dental – the lower lip and the upper teeth come in contact with each other.
- Palatal – the body of the tongue touches the hard palate.
- Alveolar – the tip or blade of the tongue touches the alveolar ridge.
- Palato-alveolar – the blade/tip of the tongue touches the alveolar ridge, and the body of the tongue approaches the hard palate.
- Velar – the body of the tongue comes in contact with the soft palate (also called the velum).
- Glottal – the vocal cords come into contact and produce friction.

Manner of Articulation

- Plosive – a sound produced by the air being blocked inside the vocal tract followed by the release of air from the mouth.
- Fricative – a sound produced by positioning the mouth in a particular manner so as to partially block the air coming out of the mouth.
- Affricate – a combination of a plosive and fricative manner, in which sound is produced by the blocking of air and finally releasing it through a partial passage.

Consonant Sounds	Place of Articulation	Manner of Articulation	Examples
/p/	Bilabial	Plosive	pet, top
/b/	Bilabial	Plosive	bat, tub
/m/	Bilabial	Nasal	mat, palm
/w/	Bilabial	Approximant	wind, always
/f/	Labio-dental	Fricative	front, leaf
/v/	Labio-dental	Fricative	vase, advise
/θ/	Dental	Fricative	think, teeth
/ð/	Dental	Fricative	this, with
/t/	Alveolar	Fricative	trunk, what
/d/	Alveolar	Fricative	dose, ward
/s/	Alveolar	Fricative	save, case
/z/	Alveolar	Fricative	zest, doze
/n/	Alveolar	Nasal	neat, win
/l/	Alveolar	Lateral	like, will
/r/	Alveolar	Approximant	rest, torch
/ʃ/	Palato-alveolar	Fricative	shoes, cushion
/ʒ/	Palato-alveolar	Fricative	beige, measure
/tʃ/	Palato-alveolar	Affricate	catch, patch
/dʒ/	Palato-alveolar	Affricate	badge, judge
/j/	Palatal	Approximant	yoke, yonder
/k/	Velar	Plosive	keep, poke
/g/	Velar	Plosive	game, bag
/ŋ/	Velar	Plosive	sing, wing
/h/	Glottal	Fricative	heap, cohort

• Nasal – a sound produced when the air passes and escapes through the nose.

• Lateral – a sound produced by the air escaping from the mouth and sides of the tongue.

• Approximant – a sound produced when the tip of the tongue slightly touches the alveolar ridge, and the air escapes through the gap between the tongue and the alveolar ridge.

The 24 Consonant Sounds in English

Consonants are either voiced (*sonant*) or voiceless (*surd*). Voiced consonants are pronounced with the same vocal murmur that is heard in vowels; voiceless consonants lack this murmur.

1. The voiced consonants are **b, d, g, l, r, m, n, z**, consonantal **i**, and **v**.
2. The voiceless consonants are **p, t, c (k, q), f, h, s**, and **x**.

4. Consonants are further classified as in the following table:

		LABIALS	DENTALS	PALATALS
	Voiced (<i>mediae</i>)	b	d	g
MUTES	Voiceless (<i>tenuēs</i>)	p	t	c (k, q)
	Aspirates	ph	th	ch
NASALS		m	n	n (before c, g, q)
LIQUIDS			l, r	
FRICATIVES	(Spirants)	f¹	s, z	
SIBILANTS			s, z	
SEMIVOWELS		v		consonant i

Double consonants are **x** (= **cs**) and **z** (= **dz**); **h** is merely a breathing.

1. Mutes are pronounced by blocking entirely, for an instant, the passage of the breath through the mouth, and then allowing it to escape with an explosion (distinctly heard before a following vowel). Between the explosion and the vowel there may be a slight puff of breath (**h**), as in the Aspirates (**ph, th, ch**).²
2. Labials are pronounced with the lips, or lips and teeth.
3. Dentals (sometimes called Linguals) are pronounced with the tip of the tongue touching or approaching the upper front teeth.
4. Palatals are pronounced with a part of the upper surface of the tongue touching or approaching the palate.³
5. Fricatives (or Spirants) are consonants in which the breath passes continuously through the mouth with audible friction.
6. Nasals are like voiced mutes, except that the mouth remains closed and the breath passes through the nose.

CONCLUSION

The classification of English consonants is a foundational aspect of phonetic and linguistic studies, offering valuable insights into how sounds are structured and produced in English. By examining consonants according to their place of articulation, manner of articulation, and voicing, we gain a clearer understanding of the intricacies involved in human speech. This systematic classification not only enhances our comprehension of English phonetics but also serves practical purposes in fields such as language education, speech therapy, and linguistic research.

For language learners, understanding the articulatory properties of consonants can improve pronunciation and listening comprehension, enabling more accurate and confident communication. For professionals in speech therapy, this knowledge is essential in diagnosing and addressing articulation disorders, while linguists rely on

such classifications to explore patterns and variations in languages across the world. Ultimately, the study of consonants underscores the complexity and precision required to produce even the simplest spoken utterances, highlighting the role of phonetics in facilitating effective communication and contributing to a deeper appreciation of language.

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