THE CONSONANT SYSTEM OF ENGLISH

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Abstarct: *Every sound belongs to one or other of two main classes known as vowels and consonants. Vowels are classified by lack of obstruction to the air stream, defused muscular tension, and weak air stream. Consonant articulatory obstruction to the air steam, muscular tension concentrated in the place of obstruction, strong air stream. The particular quality of a consonants depend on the work of the vocal cords, the position of the soft palate and the kind of noise that results when the tongue or the lips obstruct the air passage. An articulatory obstruction may be complete (is formed when the organs of speech come in contact with each other and the air passage through the mouth is blocked) or incomplete (an articulatory organ is held close to a point of articulation without blocking the air passage).*

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The distinction between vowels and consonants is a very old one. The principle of this division, however, is not sufficiently clear up to the present time, the boundary between them being rather uncertain. The old term, "consonants" precludes the idea that consonants cannot be pronounced without vowels. Yet we know that they can and often are; for instance, in the sound that calls for silence.

The fact vowels are usually syllabic, does not mean that consonants are incapable of forming syllables. On the contrary, they may be syllabic too, and we find many instances in the English language of syllabic sonorants forming syllables by themselves.

Acoustically, vowels are musical sounds. Nevertheless, in the formation of vowels considerable noise-producing narrowings are sometimes created; on the other hand, some consonants possess musical tone.

According to Prof. D. Jones: "The distinction between vowels and consonants is not an arbitrary physiological distinction. It is in reality a distinction based on

acoustic considerations, namely on the relative sonority or carrying power of the various sounds." In the opinion of D. Jones, vowels are more sonorous than consonants. This is correct in most cases, but some consonants, especially sonorants, are very sonorous (for example, [l], [m], [n], [q]).

D. Jones gives the following definition: "A vowel (in normal speech) is defined as a voiced sound in forming which the air issues in a continuous stream through the pharynx and mouth, there being no obstruction and no narrowing such as would cause audible friction.

"All other sounds (in normal speech) are called consonants".

I.A. Baudouin de Courtenay has discovered a physiological distinction between vowels and consonants; according to his theory the main principle of their articulation is different: in consonant articulation the muscular tension is concentrated at one point which is the place of articulation in vowel articulation the muscular tension is spread over all the speech organs. Knowing this, we have no difficulty in ascertaining whether one or another particular sound is a vowel or a consonant.

Acoustically, a vowel is a musical sound; it is formed by means of periodic vibrations of the vocal cords in the larynx.

The resulting sound waves are transmitted to the supra-laryngeal cavities (the pharynx and the mouth cavity), where vowels receive their characteristic tamber.

We know from acoustics that the quality of a sound depends on the shape and the size of the resonance chamber, the material which it is made of and, also, on the size and shape of the aperture of its outlet. In the case of vowels, the resonance chamber is always the same - the supra-laryngeal cavities. However, the shape and size of the chamber can be made to vary, depending upon the different positions that the tongue occupies in the mouth cavity; and also depending on any slight alterations in the position of the back wall of the pharynx, the position of the soft palate and of the lips which form the outlet of the resonance chamber. The lips may be neutral or rounded, protruded or not protruded, forming a small or a large aperture, or they may be spread, forming a narrow slit-like opening. When the lips are protruded, the resonance chamber is lengthened; when the lips are spread or neutral, the resonance chamber is shortened, its front boundary being formed practically by the teeth.

It has already been mentioned that in producing vowels, the muscular tension is spread equally over all the speech organs, yet the tension may be stronger or weaker. If the muscular tension in the walls of the resonance chambers is weaker, the vowel has a less distinct quality; it may sometimes be quite obscure. If the muscular tension

is stronger, the vowel has a well-defined quality. In the first case, the vowels are called lax, in the second-tense.

It is difficult, however, if not next to impossible, to classify vowels correctly from the point of view of tenseness. The degree of tenseness may be ascertained chiefly by comparison, while the result of comparison depends largely upon the articulation basis of the mother-tongue of the person who makes the comparison.

The first attempt to classify speech sounds on the basis of their acoustic distinctions was made by a group of phoneticians and linguists Jacobson, Fant and Halle, in their work "Preliminaries to Speech Analysis". The authors establish the acoustic distinctions used in human language. These distinctions form 12 binary (or dichotomous) distinctive oppositions. The authors claim that their classification can be applied to all the languages of the world, but not all the 12 oppositions are to be used to classify the phonemes of a particular language. For the English language, according to the authors, 9 binary oppositions are sufficient: 1) vocalic -non-vocalic; 2) consonantal - non-consonantal; 3) compact - diffuse; 4) grave -acute; 5) flat - plain;6) nasal - oral; 7) tense - tax; 8) discontinuous - continuant; 9) strident - mellow.

Acoustic definitions and classifications of speech sounds are of great theoretical importance to linguists. Their practical importance and application is also undeniable. Acoustic characteristics of speech sounds are indispensable in technical acoustics for the solution of the problem of speech synthetics and sound transmission, for the construction of speech recognizers as well as machines capable of putting out information in spoken words. As for language teaching the acoustic classification of speech sounds is practically inapplicable. But the acoustic data of spectrographic analysis are of great use when related to the articulatory characteristics of speech sounds.

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