Module: Phonetics

Level: L1-FILA

Time Allotted: 90 min

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Lecture 11: Approximants

**Description**

They are called approximants because during their production, the articulators approach each other without making a real contact.

**Place of articulation**

The manner of articulation is the same for the three phonemes, but they have different places of articulation. All of them are voiced:

/r/: palato-alveolar (post-alveolar)

/j/: palatal

/w/: bilabial

**The phoneme /r/**

\*/r/ is a voiced palato-alveolar (post-alveolar) approximant in the English language.

\* Although in R.P.E ‘r’ is only pronounced when followed by a vowel as in ring [rɪŋ] arrive [ǝ’raɪv̥], it is realised in all positions in many English and American dialects: these are called *rhotic accents* as opposed to RP.E which is a *non-rhotic accent.*

Examples of rhotic accents are: American English: never /‘nevǝ**r**/

 Scottish English: hard /ha:**r**d/

**N.B**Just like the phoneme /l/, /r/ loses its voicing when it is preceded by voiceless consonants especially /p, t, k/. E.g. pray [pr̥eɪ] cry [kr̥aɪ] trade [tr̥eɪd̥]

**The phonemes /w/, /j/**

-/w/ is bilabial

-/j/ is palatal: the front of the tongue is raised against the palate.

- Traditionally, they were called semi vowels because there is no real obstruction to the flow of air and /w/ is more or less like /u:/ and /j/ is more or less like /i:/ from the phonetic point of view i.e. their production is more or less the same. But, from the phonological point of view, they must be considered as consonants because of their consonantal distribution i.e.

 **/w/**

 **+ vowel**

 **/j/**

Examples: which / wɪtʃ/ away [ǝ’weɪ] years [jɪǝz]

* /w/, /j/ lose their voicing when preceded by /p, t, k/:

E.g. quickly [‘kw̥ɪkli] twelve [‘tw̥elv̥] pure [pj̥ʊǝ] tune [tj̥u:n]

The following table summarizes the classification of the English consonant sounds on the basis of the three aforementioned aspects.

**The English consonant phonemes**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| consonants | bilabial | Labio-dental | dental | alveolar | Palato-alveolar | palatal | velar | glottal |
| plosives | **P, b** |  |  | **t, d** |  |  | **K, g** | **[Ɂ]\*** |
| fricatives |  | **F, v** | **Ɵ, ð** | **s, z** | **ʃ, Ʒ** |  |  | **h** |
| affricates |  |  |  |  | **tʃ, dƷ** |  |  |  |
| nasals | **m** |  |  | **n** |  |  | **ŋ** |  |
| lateral |  |  |  | **l** |  |  |  |  |
| approximants | **w** |  |  |  | **r** | **j** |  |  |

*\* The glottal stop [Ɂ] only occurs as an onset to vowels, as in [(Ɂ) ǝʊld], or as an allophonic realisation of /p, t, k/ in certain phonetic contexts or certain dialects, e.g.,[ˋpʰɪ****Ɂ****tʃə] instead of [ˋpʰɪ****k****tʃə].*

**Conclusion**

Basically, the symbols are used for one or two purposes: either they are symbols for phonemes (phonemic or phoneme symbols) or phonetic symbols. The number of phonetic symbols is usually much greater than the number of phonemic symbols because many phonemes may have different realisations or allophones such as:

 **[l]clear ‘l’**

 **/l/[ɫ] dark ‘l’**

 **[l̥] devoiced ‘l’**

Indeed, we can make many more sounds than the 44 segments in English, especially when we want to represent the pronunciation of the word more accurately (precisely) i.e. by showing all details (narrow phonetic transcription). The best known system of transcription is the I.P.A (International Phonetic Alphabets) which consists of round a hundred symbols + diacritics to modify these symbols in some way for phonetic detailed transcription.

e.g. /æ/ may be centralized in some dialects [æ]

On the other hand, phonemic symbols do not have to indicate precise phonetic quality. From this comes the difference between phonetics and phonology. While phonology is concerned with the function and distribution of phonemes in different contexts, phonetics deals simply with how speech sounds are produced by the speaker and perceived by the hearer.

The number of phoneme symbols must be exactly the same as the number of phonemes in the language. For example, there are 44 phonemic symbols in the English language for 44 phonemes.

Different languages have different phonemic inventions.

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