

WHAT IS A CONSONANT?

/wɒt ɪz ə 'kɒnsənənt/

A consonant is a speech sound where the airstream from the lungs is either *completely* blocked (a **plosive** or a stop), *partially* blocked (a **lateral**), or where the opening is so *narrow* that the air escapes with audible friction (a **fricative**) [audible – *slyšitelné*; friction – *tření*.] With some consonants the airstream is blocked in the mouth but it can escape through the nose. These are called **nasals**. With the other main group of speech sounds, the **vowels**, the air from the lungs is not blocked and it can escape freely. There are a number of sounds where the distinction is not clear-cut, such as the sound /j/ in *yes*. Linguists have called these sounds **approximants** or semi-vowels.

There are 24 consonant phonemes in English.

Describing consonant sounds

Three things can be said about every consonant:

1. if it is voiceless or voiced,
2. the place of articulation,
3. the manner of articulation.

1. Voiceless or voiced? /'vɔɪsləs ɔ: vɔɪst/

If the vocal cords do not vibrate, the consonant is voiceless.

If they do, the consonant is voiced.

These are voiceless: /p/ /t/ /k/ /f/ /θ/ /s/ /ʃ/ /tʃ/ /h/

These are voiced: /b/ /d/ /g/ /v/ /ð/ /z/ /ʒ/ /dʒ/
/m/ /n/ /ŋ/ /r/ /w/ /l/ /j/

(LINK See “What is Voicing?”)

2. Place of articulation /pleɪs əv ɑ:tɪkjʊ'leɪʃən/

This means where the sound is produced, which articulators are used.

The main ones are:

-two lips = bilabial /bɑɪ'leɪbɪəl/

-the lower lip touching top teeth = labiodental /,leɪbɪəʊ'dentəl/

-the tongue touching the upper teeth = dental /'dentəl/

-the tongue touching the alveolar ridge = alveolar /ælvi'əʊlə/

-the back of the tongue touching the soft palate (velum) = velar /'vi:lə/

(LINK See “The Articulators“, “Phonetic Description of Consonants“)

3. Manner of Articulation //mə'nə(r) əv ɑ:tɪkjʊ'leɪʃən/

This describes the *way* in which the speech sounds are produced by the speech organs (the articulators).

There are different ways of producing consonant sounds:

-stopped and suddenly released = **plosives**

- friction = **fricatives**

- stopped and then slowly released = **affricates**
- partially blocked = a **lateral**
- blocked in the mouth but air escapes through the nose = **nasals**

Plosives /'pləʊsɪvz/

These are consonant speech sounds which are produced by blocking the airstream from the lungs completely and then suddenly releasing it.

There are a total of six plosives in English. They are /p//b/ /t//d/ /k//g/
The first in each pair is voiceless.

/p//b/ are bilabial plosives

/t//d/ are alveolar plosives

/k//g/ are velar plosives

Aspiration /æspə'reɪʃən/ is a little puff of air which follows a speech sound.

The voiceless plosives are aspirated at the beginning of a stressed syllable /p/ /t/ /k/
peer appear tack attack count account

Fricatives /'frɪkətɪvz/

These are speech sounds which are produced by allowing the airstream from the lungs to escape with friction. This is caused by bringing two articulators (eg the upper teeth and lower lip), close together but not so close enough to stop the airstream completely.

There are nine fricatives in English /f/ /v/ /θ//ð/ /s//z/ /ʃ//ʒ/ /h/
The first in each pair, and /h/, are voiceless.

/f/ /v/ are labiodental fricatives

/θ//ð/ are dental fricatives

/s//z/ are alveolar fricatives

/ʃ//ʒ/ are palato-alveolar fricatives

/h/ is a glottal fricative

Affricates /'æfrɪkəts/

These are consonant sounds which are produced by stopping the airstream from the lungs, and then slowly releasing it with friction. The first part is similar to a plosive, the second part is similar to a fricative. There are two affricates in English: /tʃ/ /dʒ/

Lateral /'lætərəl/

This is a speech sound which is produced by *partially* blocking the airstream from the lungs. The tongue touches the alveolar ridge. The air can escape on both sides of the blockage. There is one lateral in English /l/ which is a voiced alveolar lateral.

Nasals /'neɪzəlz/

Nasals are speech sounds which are produced by stopping the airstream from the lungs at some place in the mouth, for example by closing the lips. The air escapes through the nose. The three English nasals are /m//n/ /ŋ/. They are all voiced.

Approximants /ə'prɒksɪmənts/

The airstream is allowed to pass from the lungs through the mouth with only very slight friction. There are three such sounds in English. /w/ /r/ /j/ These are all voiced.