

Syllables vs. segments in phonological theory: Debates

- (1) Ladefoged & Disner (2011). *Vowels and Consonants*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.

(p 187) “There are 38 sounds—vowels and consonants—in 3,700 ms, over 10 consonants and vowels per second. But are these syllables composed of consonants and vowels? Of course we can describe them that way, but does this mean that they are stored in the brain as a sequence of consonants and vowels? When we talk are we really joining consonants and vowels together?

“The answer, I think, is no. When you talk, you don’t join vowels and consonants together for the simple reason that they are not stored separately. Talking involves pulling stored forms of words out of some part of the brain, but words are not stored as sequences of sounds. They are stored as wholes, or at least as whole syllables, in which the consonants and vowels are not separate items. We should even consider whether consonants and vowels exist except as devices for writing down words. [...] I must warn you that many people who are working on speech do not agree with the views expressed [here]. But I hope to show you that consonants and vowels are largely figments of our good scientific imaginations.”

- (2) Summary of L&D’s arguments that the mental grammar *refers to syllables only*, and *not* to segments:

- (a) Evidence from **adult speech errors**:

(p 188) “[Adult speech errors] are typically confusions involving consonants at the beginning of one syllable with consonants at the beginning of another. [...] I’ve never heard anyone mispronounce *cat* as *tack*, a mistake that they could quite conceivably make if the sounds existed as separate items in the brain. [...] All descriptions of observed speech errors must make reference to syllables. It seems probable that we organize our speech production much as we organize our speech perception, in terms of units more like syllables than individual speech sounds.”

- (b) Evidence from **writing systems**:

(pp 191-192) “Alphabetic writing [which represents language at approximately the level of the phoneme] has almost certainly been invented only once [i.e., all alphabet systems are apparently descended from or inspired by the Phoenician alphabet], whereas there are many independent inventions of systems for writing down syllables. [...] This shows that] the division of the syllable into vowels and consonants is not a natural one. Alphabets are scientific inventions, and not statements of real properties of words in our minds.”

Discussion

- Decide whether you (or your group) agree or disagree with L&D’s position.
- If you **agree**, find at least one phenomenon we have discussed in this course that would seem to support the existence of the segment as a phonological level of representation, and develop an alternative proposal that does not require reference to the segment.
- If you **disagree**, choose at least one of the arguments in (2a)–(2b) and refute it, or make a different argument in support of the existence of the segment.