

UNIVERSAL AND LANGUAGE SPECIFIC TRAITS IN THE SYSTEM OF SOUND FEATURES

Albertas Steponavičius, University of Vilnius, USSR

This paper deals with hierarchies of distinctive features (DFs) and phonological oppositions. The set-up of hierarchies must be such that oppositions of a higher rank comprise oppositions of a lower rank. It follows from this that subclasses of different classes of phonemes are not structurally and functionally identical and must be set up independently, irrespective of the possible identity of the anthropophonic nature of their DFs. Classes of phonemes may also be separated into subclasses by more than one pair of DFs at a time. The main distinction to be made is that between consonants and vowels, with both liquids and glides classified as consonants. This primary distinction is expressed by means of two pairs of features, consonantal vs. nonconsonantal, and vocalic vs. nonvocalic, in view of the possible presence in some languages of items to be specified as /-con, -voc/. Of consonantal modal features primary importance should be attached to the features obstruent vs. nonobstruent, and sonant vs. nonsonant. The next pairs of modal features which must be classified among the primary and universal ones are stop vs. nonstop, and fricative vs. nonfricative. The consonantal distinction nasal vs. nonnasal, though language universal, is secondary from the point of view of particular languages in that it is usually relevant only in the subsystem of sonants. In determining the degree of the universality of the consonantal features according to place of articulation, a sharp distinction should be made between the so-called active and passive organs of speech. According to the participation of the active organs of speech labial, apical, and dorsal series of phonemes may be distinguished, specified by means of the following universal (or near-universal) DFs: apical vs. nonapical, labial vs. nonlabial, and dorsal vs. nondorsal. Further local specifications of consonants according to points in the stationary part of the vocal tract are highly language specific. Vocalic features of aperture are universal in that all the known languages have at least two vowel heights, the most regular type being three heights. The utilization of the primary vocalic features front vs. back, and rounded vs. unrounded is rather language specific, though separate typologies may be established.