

The problem of classifying and describing pharyngeals.

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The most common scheme for the phonetic classification of consonants is the one embodied in the IPA chart. Consonants are classified along three dimensions: voicing, place of articulation and manner of articulation. In this paper the adequacy of these dimensions for the classification of sounds described as pharyngeals will be critically examined in the light of evidence from instrumental phonetic studies and from the perspective of the descriptive framework offered by Esling's 'laryngeal articulator' model (Esling 1999). The difficulty of specifying passive and active articulators, and Catford's (1977: 140) alternatives of 'upper' and 'lower' articulators, will be discussed.

The IPA chart specifies 'pharyngeal' as a place of articulation between uvular and glottal. However, this 'place', the pharynx, is not so much a specific location the way that dental and alveolar are, but rather a tubular section of the vocal tract whose length and width can be considerably altered during speech. It contains structures whose inter-relationships are not fully understood. These include the faucal pillars, the tongue root, the epiglottis, aryepiglottic folds, the epilaryngeal tube housing the ventricular bands, and of course the pharyngeal walls themselves. No other place of articulation in the IPA scheme is anywhere near as large or as intrinsically complex as the pharynx. In classifying pharyngeals, the possible roles of these structures need to be taken into account, particularly in relation to whether epiglottal articulation, represented separately on the IPA chart since the 1989 Kiel Convention in the 'other symbols' section, should be a distinct category in its own right.

Concerning manner of articulation, the traditional phonetic criterion of degree of constriction is problematic when several pairs or clusters of organs may become approximated to form strictures of similar or different degrees that cannot easily be accommodated to a traditional primary vs. secondary articulation distinction.

Because of the effects of activities in the pharynx on glottal settings, and the possibility of sustained full glottal closures, a simple voiced-voiceless distinction is not straightforward to apply in descriptive phonetic terms.

Pharyngeals provide a telling example of how technological advances in instrumental phonetics provide us with increased phonetic knowledge forcing us to challenge the adequacy of traditional categories of classification. Since the Kiel Convention, the second of the IPA's seven principles has made the intersection of phonetic categories exhaustively definitional of the sounds represented on the chart (IPA 1999: 159), not just 'roughly' definitional as was the case previously (Abercrombie 1967: 124). It is clear in the light of instrumental evidence that we do not fully understand just what the category 'pharyngeal' really is.

The paper will briefly review the history of the classification of pharyngeal sounds and then consider how instrumental data from Arabic might inform revisions to the way they should best be classified and described.

References

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