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THE GRADUAL CLASSIFICATION OF THE FRENCH CONSONANT SYSTEM BASED ON THE PARTICIPATION OF THE ARTICULATORY ORGANS IN PRONUNCIATION

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Abstract

This article explores the gradual classification of the French consonant system with respect to the involvement of the vocal folds in articulation. The study focuses on the phonetic principles underlying consonant production and examines how the participation of the vocal folds contributes to the systematic organization of consonant sounds. Special attention is given to the articulatory features that distinguish voiced and voiceless consonants within the French phonological system. The analysis aims to clarify the theoretical foundations of consonant classification and to contribute to a deeper understanding of French phonetics.

Keywords: gradual relations, consonant phonemes, consonant paradigm, voiced and voiceless consonants, anterior (front) consonants, posterior (back) consonants, articulatory features, acoustic features.

Introduction

The structure of any language is formed on the basis of gradual relationships, and this principle is particularly evident at the phonological level. Consonant

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phonemes are grouped according to their distinctive features and enter into paradigmatic relations, meaning that they are differentiated through their articulatory and acoustic properties. Within the consonant paradigm, each phoneme occupies a lower-level position while remaining systematically connected to higher levels of phonological organization. For example, consonants are classified on the basis of oppositional features such as voiced versus voiceless, sonorant versus non-sonorant, and anterior versus posterior articulation. In this way, the consonant paradigm functions as a practical manifestation of gradual relationships within the phonological system of a language.

Here is a scientifically accurate, plagiarism-free English translation written in a natural academic style:

The linguist A. N. Rapanovich classifies consonants into five categories according to their place of articulation.

1. The first group comprises bilabial consonants, in which the obstruction is formed between the upper and lower lips. In this classification, L. P. Andreychikova, M. Ubaydullaev, and N. A. Yusupova represent this group by the series [p–b | m–w–ɸ], whereas A. N. Rapanovich presents it in the order [p–b | w–ɸ–m].

A. N. Rapanovich refers to these sounds as “губно-губные, билабиальные” (bilabial) or “двух губные” (two-lip / bilabial). When labial consonants are combined with a sufficiently strong airstream, the lips vibrate easily. Due to the relatively large mass of the active articulatory organ, these consonants are characterized by a higher degree of acoustic noise compared to articulations involving the tip of the tongue and the uvula, and they are acoustically more prominent than anterior and lingual trills.

[p] – a bilabial, plosive, voiceless consonant.

[b] – like [p], a bilabial plosive consonant, but voiced. During the articulation of voiceless consonants, the articulatory tension is generally stronger than in the production of voiced consonants.

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[m] - a bilabial, voiced nasal consonant. The airstream passes simultaneously through both the oral and nasal cavities.

[w] – a labialized sonorant (voiced) semi-vowel/semi-consonant sound. It occurs relatively rarely in French and is mainly found in loanwords from English or German, or as a result of the combination of the vowels [o] and [u], producing a gliding articulation. Example: **wagon** [vagon].

[ɥ] – a bilabial, back-series gliding semi-consonant/semi-vowel sound. For its articulation, the tip of the tongue touches the lower teeth while the lips are strongly protruded forward. This sound has no direct equivalent in Uzbek. Examples: **huit** [ɥit], **lui** [lɥi], **cuisine** [kɥizin].

[j] – a semi-vowel/semi-consonant sonorant. In terms of labialization and constriction, it is similar to [w] and [ɥ]. Its articulation is not a diphthong, yet muscular tension is concentrated at the constriction point, forming a syllable-like structure similar to consonants. According to L. V. Sherba, when articulating [w] and [ɥ], the labial articulation of the vowels “u” and “y” is preserved, while the overall tension of the speech organs is reduced, resulting in a short and precise pronunciation.

Based on the labialization features and articulatory properties of the consonants described above, their gradual (stepwise) relationships can be determined. Vowel sounds do not encounter a constriction, which is why in semi-vowels such as [w] and [ɥ], gradations can be observed both in terms of the degree of labialization and the presence of constriction. Drawing on the studies and observations discussed above, we can establish a series of gradations among the consonants according to the degree of constriction involving the lips:

P → b → m → w → ɥ

Here is a scientifically accurate, academically styled English version of your gradation scheme:

Bilabial → Bilabial → Bilabial → Labial → Labial (single-lip)

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Full constriction → Full constriction → Full constriction → Partial constriction → Weak constriction

The gradation series based on the prominence of lip involvement combined with a reduced degree of constriction is as follows:

u → w → m → b → p

Lips rounded → Lips semi-rounded → Lips slightly unrounded → Lips unrounded → Lips fully unrounded

In this case, the semi-vowel nature of [w] and [u] contributes to an increase in the degree of lip opening, a characteristic typical of semi-vowel sounds.

2. **Labiodental consonants.** A constriction occurs between the upper teeth and the lower lip. The [f – v] sounds are labiodental fricatives, produced with the interaction of the lip and teeth. They stand in an equipollent opposition, meaning they do not enter into a gradual (stepwise) relationship.

3. **Alveolar (or dental-alveolar) consonants** [t-d | s-z | ʃ-ʒ | l-n]. The constriction for producing these sounds is formed between the anterior part of the tongue and the upper teeth. In this series, considering the involvement of the tongue tip and the upper teeth: in [t-d], both articulators fully participate; in [s-z], the anterior part of the tongue lightly contacts the upper teeth; in [ʃ-ʒ], the tongue dorsum approaches the hard palate; and in [l-n], the tongue tip contacts the upper alveolar ridge to form the constriction.

[t-d] → [l-n] → [s-z] → [ʃ-ʒ]

A hierarchy of constriction can be identified as follows: [t-d] fully contacts the upper teeth; [l-n] lightly contacts the upper teeth; [s-z] makes minimal contact with the upper teeth (approaching the palate); and [ʃ-ʒ] approaches the palate more closely.

4. **Palatal consonants** [k-g | j-ŋ- r]

The constriction for these sounds is formed between the dorsum of the tongue and the palate.

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5. Uvular consonants. For uvular sounds, the active articulator is the back of the tongue, which forms a constriction with the uvula. For example, the [r] sound can serve as an illustration. French phonetics textbooks report that the [r] phoneme has three variants in French, as noted in scholarly sources. However, A.N. Rapanovich identifies two variants of this consonant, [ʀ] and [R], whereas French linguists recognize four, and sometimes even six, different variants of the [r] phoneme in pronunciation.

Conclusion

The analysis of consonant articulations demonstrates that the phonological system of a language is organized according to gradual (stepwise) relationships. By examining consonants from bilabial to uvular positions, we observe a systematic progression in the degree and location of constriction, as well as the involvement of different articulatory organs. Bilabial consonants show variations in lip closure and labialization, labiodental consonants maintain equipollent opposition without stepwise gradation, alveolar and dental-alveolar sounds display a clear hierarchy of tongue-to-teeth contact, palatal consonants involve the tongue dorsum and palate, and uvular consonants involve the back of the tongue and uvula with multiple variants.

This stepwise organization highlights that gradual articulatory and acoustic differences underpin consonant classification. The sequential arrangement of sounds in terms of constriction, articulator engagement, and acoustic prominence provides a coherent framework for understanding how consonants are structured within a language. Overall, the phonological system reflects a continuous and gradable hierarchy, demonstrating that gradual relationships are a fundamental organizing principle of speech sounds.

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