Estudio del sistema fonológico inglés


Title: Estudio del sistema fonológico inglés.

Abstract
Si pretendemos hacer una descripción del sistema fonológico de la lengua inglesa debemos partir de la distinción entre los elementos segmentales y los elementos suprasegmentales. En el primer grupo se incluyen consonantes, vocales, diptongos y triptongos. Sin embargo, en el segundo grupo encontramos estrés, ritmo y entonación. Este es el objetivo de este artículo, para resaltar cómo funciona el sistema fonológico inglés y cómo se puede usar para enseñar inglés.

Keywords: fonética, pronunciación

Título: Study of the English phonological system.

Resumen
Si pretendemos hacer una descripción del sistema fonológico de la lengua inglesa debemos partir de la distinción entre los segmental elements and the suprasegmental elements. In the first group we include consonants, vowels, diphthongs and triphthongs. However, in the second group we find stress, rhythm and intonation. This is the aim of this article, to highlight how the English language phonological system works and how it can be used to teach English.

Palabras clave: Fonética, pronunciación.

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1. INTRODUCTION
If we pretend to make a description of the English language phonological system we must start from the distinction between the segmental elements and the suprasegmental elements. In the first group we include consonants, vowels, diphthongs and triphthongs. However, in the second group we find stress, rhythm and intonation.

2. SEGMENTAL ELEMENTS
We call vowel (and semi-vowel) to the sound produced when the air-stream comes out through the mouth (or mouth and nose) without finding any obstruction or friction. All other sounds are consonants ones, characterised because the air stream meets a friction or closure when trying to come out.

Now we are going to see, in the first place, the consonants phonemes and, in the second place, the vowels phonemes. Later on, we will also deal with diphthongs and triphthongs.

Let’s carry on with consonants.

CONSONANT ELEMENTS
In order to classify the consonants, we can use different parameters:

- Place of articulation.
- Manner of articulation.
- And vibration (or not) of the vowel folds.

With PLACE OF ARTICULATION we refer to the part or parts of the mouth which are used in order to produce the sound. According to it, consonants can be classified as:

Bilabial, labio-dental, dental, alveolar, post-alveolar, palato-alveolar, palatal, velar or glottal.
With MANNER OF ARTICULATION we refer to the proximity of the organs, active and passives, when the sound is produced. This approximation can be total (producing an obstruction), partial or may merely constitute a narrowing sufficient to cause friction.

- If there is a complete closure, consonants can be plosive; affricate; or nasal.
- When the closure is partial, then we find a lateral consonant.
- Finally, if there is only a narrowing sufficient to cause friction, then we find a fricative.

The last parameter to take into account is VIBRATION, which help us to classify consonants as voiced consonant (if there is any kind of vibration), or voiceless consonants, if there is an absence of vibration of vocal cords.

Let’s carry on with some examples of the English consonants, taking advantage of the following grid. Notice here that I’ve included the semi-vowels, since they are usually included in the consonant category in phonology. We only find two semi-vowels in English, “w” and “j”.

On the top we find the classification of consonants according to the organs of articulation, whereas at the left hand side of yours, you can find the classification according to the manner of articulation.

Notice here that I’ve have marked those vowels which can be classified as voiced.

Let’s see the examples: (I’ll always refer to the first sound of the following words).

- An example of bilabial-plosive is the first sound in the word “people”, or the first sound in the word “bird”.
- We find an alveolar-plosive in the word “taxi”, or “day”.
- A velar-plosive: “kangaroo” / “good”.
- Palato-alveolar-affricate: “choise” / “jacket”.
- Bilabial-nasal: “mum”
- Alveolar-nasal: “noise”
- Velar-nasal: in this case, at the end of the word “coming”
- Alveolar-lateral: in the first sound of “lemon”.
- Labio-dental-fricative: in the first sound of “five” / “voice”
- Dental-fricative: in the words “think” / “those”
- Alveolar-fricative: at the end of the words “this” / “these”.
- Post-alveolar-fricative: in the first sound of “ring”.
- Palato-alveolar-fricative: in the first sound of “shower”
- And finally, glottal-fricative: in the first sound of the word “horse”

As you can see, there are many other consonants sounds, but I consider that these examples have been enough to show you how the English consonants sounds are arranged. Now I will go through the vowels phonemes.

**VOWELS PHONEMES**

When studying English, we notice that this language has a richer phonologic system in vowels that our Spanish system, as in contrast to the twelve English vowels our system only has 5.

In fact, Helwag’s triangle used for representing Spanish vowels is insufficient for the English system. This is why a trapezium is used, designed by the eminent phonetist Daniel Jones.
As it happens in Spanish, the vowel sounds of English are normally voiced, and oral sounds. We can classify English vowels depending on three factors.

- **The height of the tongue.** According to it we find front, central or back vowels.
- **The part of the tongue which raised highest point of articulation.** According to it we find a close, half-close, half-open, or an open vowel.
- And the quantity of the vowel, usually understood as its duration: they can be long or short. Notice that long vowels have (:) marking them.

As I have already said, there are 12 vowels in the English language. Let’s see now the description of these vowels:

- **VOWEL NUMBER 1, /a/**. It is a long, close, front vowel. An example: “cheese”.
- **VOWEL NUMBER 2, /ɪ/**. It is a short, nearly close, front vowel: “milk”.
- **VOWEL NUMBER 3, /ə/**. It is a short, half-open/half-close, front vowel: “ten”.
- **VOWEL NUMBER 4, /ʌ/**. It is a short, half-open, front vowel: “man”, “bad”.
- **VOWEL NUMBER 5, /ɑː/**. It is a long, open, back vowel: “car”, “heart”.
- **VOWEL NUMBER 6, /ʌ/**. It is a short, open, back vowel: “dog”, “box”.
- **VOWEL NUMBER 7, /ɒ/**. It is a long, half-open/half-close, back vowel: “horse”.
- **VOWEL NUMBER 8, /ʌ/**. It is a short, nearly close, back vowel: “foot”, should”.
- **VOWEL NUMBER 9, /ɔː/**. It is a long, close, back vowel: “group”, “soup”.
- **VOWEL NUMBER 10, /ə/**. It is a short, nearly open, central vowel: “sun”, “cut”.
- **VOWEL NUMBER 11, /ɛ/**. It is a long, half-open/half-close, central vowel: “bird”.
- **VOWEL NUMBER 12, /ə/**. It is a short, half-open/half-close, central vowel, also called “schwa”. This vowel usually appears at the end of the words, and in unstressed syllables: “letter”, “woman”.

In order to finish with the segmental elements of the English language, we will analyse diphthongs and triphthongs.

**DIPHTHONGS**

We understand diphthongs as sounds that glide from one vowel to another, and consisting only of a single syllable. There are 8 diphthongs in English. We find them in words such as...

**TRIPHTHONGS**

We understand as triphthongs the aforementioned diphthongs but adding a third vocalic element, /ə/, the “schwa”. There are 5 diphthongs. We find them in words such as...

It’s time now to go through **SUPRASEGMENTAL ELEMENTS**, which are also very important in the learning of a foreign language pronunciation.

### 3. SUPRASEGMENTAL ELEMENTS

Generally speaking, stress, rhythm and intonation are less distinct that they can seem.

**STRESS**

We speak of stress when we are considering the prominence or higher strength with which a syllable of a word is uttered.
The stress is usually in a fixed position in a word, but, in English, it is unpredictable if we do not know it in advance (unless it is a monosyllabic word). Moreover, the difference between stressed and unstressed syllables is much stronger in English than in some other languages.

There are five degrees of stress, but for our purpose we shall distinguish 3:

- We shall mark stress with a high vertical stroke /’/ before the syllable carrying the stress, leaving lack of stress unmarked. Example: ‘people

- We mark a stronger stress with a double vertical mark /’’/. Example: *what do *‘you mean?*

- Finally, we also mark a secondary stress with a low, vertical stroke /,’/ before the syllable concerned is used. Example: *decla’ration*

Let’s analyse now RHYTHM

**RHYTHM**

It refers to the pattern of distribution of the peaks of prominence that some syllables have (stress). However, there is no physical mark for rhythm.

We may point out two important characteristics about English rhythm:

- Weak and strong forms.
- And the regularity of rhythm.

**Weak and strong forms:**

Within a sentence, we can find that rhythm establishes a relationship between the stressed and unstressed syllables. As a result, close words such as prepositions, conjunctions, articles, pronouns and auxiliary verbs can be pronounced in two different ways:

- With a weak form
- With a strong form.

The weak form is much more common than the other, because the strong form is only used if the word is specially stressed for some reason, having therefore an example of contrastive stress, which radically changes the rhythm.

**Regularity of rhythm:**

Normally the natural rhythm of English provides roughly equal intervals of time between the stressed items. For this reason, two sentences with the same amount of stress but with different amounts of non-stressed items will generally take the same amount of time to say (given the same person in similar circumstances).

Finally, let’s analyse INTONATION which is the last aspect of the suprasegmental elements.

**INTONATION**

Every language has what is loosely called melody in it. This melody is what we understand as intonation, which is caused by the voice going up and down. In many languages the tune belongs primarily to the word; in English, however, the tune belongs to the sentence.

One problem we can have in our classrooms is a rude pronunciation on our students’ side, usually caused because they transfer the intonation of the sentence from their mother tongue (in this case Spanish) into English with disastrous consequences.

Let’s see two different ways of saying “thank you”.
• *Thank you*: it expresses gratitude.
• *Thank you*: it expresses politeness, but not gratitude.

We can find different intonations, or tones, formed by sequences of stressed and unstressed syllables.

• A **falling tone**: this is the commonest tone in English affirmative sentences. “*I love you*”
• A **raising tone**, usually employed with yes/no questions. “*Do you want a coffee?*”
• Or **falling-raising tunes**, common when something is left unspoken “*That was not a good idea...*”

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**Bibliografía**