

THE NATURE OF LINGUAL CONSONANTS

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One of the deficiencies of the standard Distinctive Feature System is the absence of a feature for alveolars, palatals, and velars: in fact, in the Chomsky and Halle system alveolars and velars are maximally opposed to each other. In the paper it is shown that this maximum opposition is unnatural as these consonants often undergo the same phonological processes. Since these consonants are all actively produced with the tongue, it is proposed that they be classified by the feature lingual. It is also shown that /h/ is a lingual and not a "glottal fricative", as often claimed in phonetics.

Of all the phonological processes that go to define linguals as a natural class, palatalisation is perhaps the commonest: most linguals become complete palatals, whereas non-linguals may become only partially palatalised. Examples are drawn from a number of West African languages to support this claim. For instance, in the Akan language, k, g, w, kw, gw, h become c ɟ ɥ cw ɟw ɥ, respectively, and the palatalisation of labials is only restricted to the addition of a secondary palatal /j/ to the primary articulation. But more particularly the complete change of /h/ to ɥ indicates that the former is inherently a lingual.

In most West African languages there is phonological evidence to show that /h/ is in addition a velar as it regularly alternates with /k/, especially in consonant mutation.