Phoneme vs. Minimal Pair in English Phonetics

Glossary of Grammatical and Rhetorical Terms
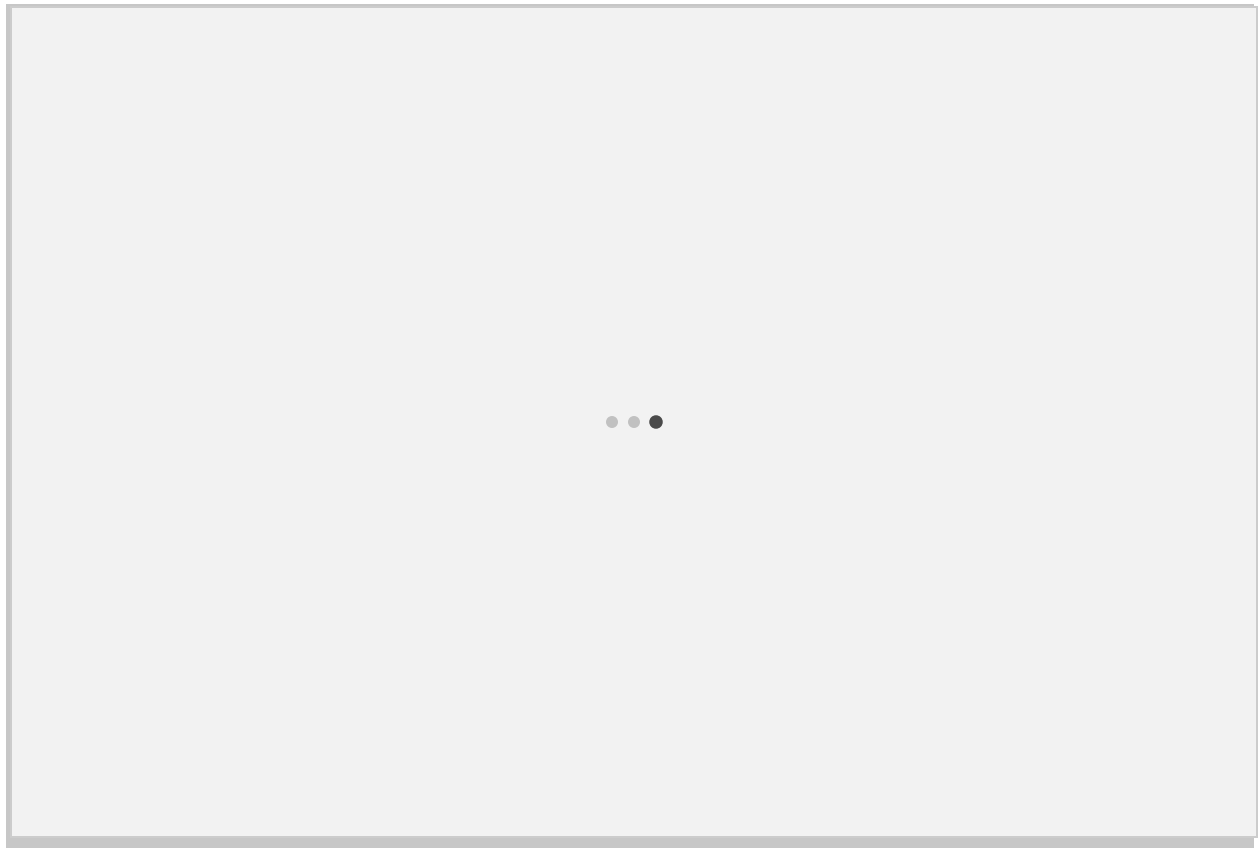
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In phonology and phonetics, the term *minimal pair* refers to two words that differ in only one sound, such as *hit* and *hid*. The words in a minimal pair have completely different, often

unrelated definitions. Minimal pairs are useful to linguists because they provide insight into how sound and meaning coexist in language.

Definition of a Minimal Pair

James McGilvray provides a clear definition of a minimal pair in *The Cambridge Companion to Chomsky*: "A **minimal pair** is a pair of words that differ in a single phoneme. Minimal pairs are often used to show that two sounds contrast in a language. For example, we can demonstrate that [s] and [z] contrast in English by adducing minimal pairs such as *sip* and *zip*, or *bus* and *buzz*. Since the only difference in these words is the [s] vs. [z], we conclude that they belong to distinct phonemes. However, a similar test would show that [a:j] and [Aj] are distinct phonemes in English, since *writer* and *rider* appear to be minimal pairs distinguished in their second elements, not their fourth," (McGilvray 2005).

> Kammie Green: sound/letter

> Kammie Green: show variation

In short, minimal pairs serve as tools to establish that two or more sounds are *contrastive*. A difference in sound means a difference in meaning, notes Harriet Joseph Ottenheimer, and thus a minimal pair is "the clearest and easiest way to identify phonemes in a language," (Ottenheimer 2012).

> Kammie Green: similar but comparable

Examples of Minimal Pairs

"We looked!
Then we saw him step in on
the *mat*!
We looked!
And we saw him!
The *Cat* in the *Hat*!" (Seuss 1957).
"*Cheers* and *Jeers* provides an opportunity to use music and humor to relax and release tension," (Holcomb 2017).
"Unless someone like you cares a whole awful *lot*, nothing is going to get better. It's *not*," (Seuss 1971).
"The US *Coast Guard* had 125-foot cutters and eight 765-foot long patrol boats. By the late 1920s, forty-five vessels operated out of this local base with some parking at the pier, as can be seen in a *postcard*," (Deese 2006).
"The role of the sympathetic nervous system is to prepare the body for emergencies, commonly known as *fright, flight* and *fight* reactions," (Moonie 2000).

> Kammie Green: mat/hat beginning of word

> Kammie Green: different beginning

Word Position and Context

With regard to both creating and understanding minimal pairs, context is everything, as Mehmet Yavas explains. "[T]he only way we can create a **minimal pair** with reference to the two sounds involved is to put them in exactly the same environment in terms of word position and the surrounding context, To clarify further, the pair: *jail–Yale* shows the contrast between /dʒ/ and /j/ in initial position, *budge–buzz* focuses on the contrast between /dʒ/ and /z/ in final position,

> Kammie Green: contrast in final consonant cluster

while *witch–wish* contrasts /tʃ/ and /ʃ/ in final position. It should be noted that minimal pairs include forms that have different spellings, as evidenced in *jail–Yale*," (Yavas 2011).

> Kammie Green: not just a letter, but sound

Near Minimal Pairs

True minimal pairs aren't too common, but near minimal pairs are easy to find. "[S]ometimes it is not possible to find perfect minimal pairs differentiated by only a single sound for every phoneme. Sometimes it is necessary to settle for **near minimal pairs** ... [P]*leasure* and *leather* qualify as a near minimal pair, since the sounds immediately adjacent to the target sounds, [ð] and [ʒ], are the same in both words: [ɛ] before the target sound and [ɹ] after it. Like minimal pairs, near minimal pairs are usually sufficient to demonstrate that two sounds are separate phonemes in a language," (Gordon 2019).

> Kammie Green: doesn't need to be a single letter, can be hidden