

Phonemes & Allophones

Languages

Sounds that change meaning, and sounds that merely vary.

A phoneme distinguishes meaning. An allophone is a variant of one phoneme that does not.

pat / bat → different words → /p/ and /b/ are phonemes

The p in 'pin' vs in 'spin'

Allophones

One is aspirated, one is not, and no English word depends on it.

I in 'leaf' vs in 'feel'

Allophones in English

Clear vs dark l.

The same pair in Russian

Separate phonemes

There, it does change meaning.

THE COMMON MISTAKE

✗ **Assuming a distinction your language ignores is inaudible**

✓ **It is unlearned, not inaudible**

Infants hear every distinction. The ones their language does not use are gradually stopped being attended to.

This is why /r/ and /l/ are hard for Japanese speakers, and why English speakers struggle with Hindi's four t-sounds.