Chapter 3: The Sounds of English. Consonants and Vowels. An Articulatory Classification and Description. Acoustic Correlates

3.1. Consonants and Vowels. Traditional distinctions. Chomsky and Halle’s SPE definition
3.2. Criteria for consonant classification. Vocal cord vibration. Sonority
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True consonants or obstruents can then be classified taking into account manner of articulation features. Consonants have already been defined as sounds produced by obstructing the vocal tract while expelling the airstream from the lungs. The way in which this obstruction is achieved can be of different kinds. If a sound is produced with a complete closure of the vocal tract followed by a sudden release of the air, the articulation is accompanied by a burst, a sort of explosion. Such sounds are consequently called plosives. As the articulation involves a total obstruction (occlusion) of the tract, an alternative name for such a consonant is that of stop (Rom. ocluzivă). It should be mentioned, however, that the two terms are not exactly synonymous, since nasal sounds are stops (the air stream is blocked) but are not plosive sounds as their articulation is not accompanied by an explosive burst. We must remember, then, that the articulation of any plosive sound includes three distinct phases: during the first one, often called the approach, the articulators are moving together, preparing to block the airstream; during the second stage, called the hold or closure, the articulators completely block the speech tract preventing the air to go out and contributing thus to building up the pressure of the airstream; during the third and last stage, called the release, or plosion, the speech organs move swiftly, releasing the air with an explosion.

If the stricture or narrowing of the tract does not result, however, in a complete blockage and a narrow passage is left for the air to go out, the pressure building up in the case of plosives is absent and the sound is uttered not with a sudden burst, but continuously, the articulation being accompanied by friction between the airstream and the speech organs. Such sounds are therefore called fricatives. A major distinction between the latter and the stops is that they are continuant, nonabrupt sounds and their articulation can be, at least theoretically, continued indefinitely.
The last major group of consonants that can be identified on the basis of the manner of articulation is that of the affricates. Affricates combine the features of the two previous classes of sounds, since their articulation starts like that of a plosive, by a complete blockage of the airstream, but continues like that of a fricative, as the next stage does not involve an abrupt release of the air, but a gradual one. The symbols used in the phonetic transcription of these sounds in English are, as we shall see, somehow suggestive of their ambiguous, hybrid nature.