Vowels and Consonants:

Two words have figured many a time in the foregoing discussion without it being made clear what each denotes. Before I get further in my discussion, I recommend that you go back to the previous chapter and try to comprehend more fully what phonetics and phonology study sound-wise: failure to understand these two definitions will doubtless engender failure to understand most of what will ensue herein.

To the heart of the matter now: phoneticians and phonologists for the sake of making manageable the study of sounds, split the sounds of speech into two broad often clear-cut categories: vowels and consonants. As vowels and consonants are vital for both phonetics and phonology, and as each field is interested in properties of speech sounds that fall outside the realm of the other field, we note that vowels and consonants have two different definitions one is phonetic; the other phonological

3.1. What are Vowels and Consonants from a Phonetic Perspective

From a phonetic perspective, vowels are speech sounds in the production of which no or a negligibly small obstruction is made to lung-air. In other words, in the production of vowels, the journey lung air makes ever since it is pushed upwards by lung pressure is not blocked by any organ of speech: its upward movement is free.

We can potentially safely compare the movement of the air while vowels are produced to a bus driver going along a road where no other vehicle is allowed to be and where there is no checkpoint to bring it to a mandatory halt, will not the bus make its journey without unceacingly?

On the other hand, a consonant is a speech sound in the production of which the air coming up from the lungs is not allowed to make its journey unobstructed. In the generation of any consonant, then, there are two or more speech organs which move towards each other to obstruct the free movement of the airflow. The obstruction to the air could be made at different points in the speech chain. It could happen at the level of the vocal folds, at the level of the lips, the teeth, and the list goes on. It must have been manifestly obvious by now that the sole criterion phoneticians deploy to differentiate vowels from consonants is **the presence or absence of obstruction to the pulmonic air**, **lung-air**. (Gimson: 1970)

3.2. What are Vowels and Consonants from a Phonological Perspective

Now that the two terms have been defined from a phonetic vantage point, we will proceed into how phonologists go about putting sounds into the two broad categories. Recall that phonology is not interested in how speech sounds are produced. Rather, as it has been pointed out above, phonological studies concern

themselves with the properties of sounds in system, the sound pattern of a language or languages.

Consonants, then, are those segments that have a syllable-marginal role; they are those sounds that are typically seen occupying the edges, the fringes of syllables. The term consonant, accordingly, designates a speech sound that does not occur in the centre of any syllable. /t/, /d/, /f/ etcetera are labelled consonants because they do not occur in the middle, the centre of words like, **table**, **bat**, **attire**; **dolphin**, **dodo bird**, **beard**; **fragile**, **half**, **fabulous**. Notice that they occur solely at the edges of this bunch of words. The centre of the syllable is left to another category of sounds, vowels. Vowels, then, refer to the variety of speech sounds that has a syllable-central position. They are the peak, the nucleus of syllables as some phonologists would opt for calling them. All the vowels in the following words occupy the centre of the syllables, **alone**, **father**, **breath**, **shambles**, etc.

3.3. Semi vowels or semi consonants

Rules and exceptions go hand in hand. Hardly ever at all are we likely to come across rules which are exceptionless even in the realm of phonetics and phonology. We have been looking at vowels and consonants above as if the distinction between them is invariably clear-cut and unproblematic. Though the overwhelming majority of sounds fall legitimately neatly into one of the major

categories; there are some sounds which defy this classificatory framework. It is noteworthy that, globally speaking, whenever a speech sound is said to be belonging to one of the categories by phonologists then phoneticians accounts will not be at odds with the phonologists. By way of example, the sound bolded in **b**elly is said to be a consonant by phoneticians and phonologists alike. Intriguingly enough, there two consonants in English which do not abide by this maxim. /w/ and /j/ are from a phonetic point of view vowel-like and from a phonological point of view consonants-like. What explains this? They are deemed vowels or vowel-like sounds because in their production there is no stricture or narrowing needed to obstruct air-flow, which is an inherent feature of vowels. For a sound to be licitly called a consonant some degree of obstruction has to be made to air flow. Hence, because this feature is absent in /w/ and /j/, it would not be fair to call them true consonants. From a phonological perspective, however, they function as consonants in the sense that they appear marginally in syllables. Another reason which asserts their being consonant is the behaviour of the indefinite article when followed by words whose initial sounds are either /w/ or /j/. For instance, we say a **w**edding-ring, a **w**ise wife and a **y**oung groom, a **u**nique husband.

These sounds are, in a nutshell, vowels from a phonetic point of view and consonants from a phonological point of view. To sort things out and come up with

a label that will fit their peculiar traits, phoneticians term them **semivowels** or **semiconsonants**