

The shifting border between obstruents and sonorants

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“In [phonetics](#) and [phonology](#), a **sonorant** or **resonant** is a [speech sound](#) that is [produced](#) with continuous, non-turbulent airflow in the [vocal tract](#); these are the manners of articulation that are most often [voiced](#) in the world's languages.

[Vowels](#) are sonorants, as are [semivowels](#) like [j] and [w], [nasal consonants](#) like [m] and [n], and [liquid consonants](#) like [l] and [r].

This set of sounds contrasts with the [obstruents](#) ([stops](#), [affricates](#) and [fricatives](#)).” (*Wikipedia*)

This may hold for phonetics, but what about phonology? Two basic claims in (my own view of) phonology are at stake here: (i) markedness is a central tenet of phonology and is ultimately based on strict implicational universals whereby the marked presupposes the unmarked but not the other way around (Trubetzkoy 1939; Hjelmslev 1943; Jakobson 1963); (ii) “*The only source of phonological knowledge is phonological behavior*” (Kaye 2005: 283).

This talk is divided into three parts. In the first part, it will be seen how nasal consonants behave sometimes as obstruents, mostly in onsets, sometimes as sonorants, mostly in codas. In the second part, I will briefly present a summary of Carvalho’s (2017, 2023) Alignment Theory (AT), which is supposed to account for this variable behaviour in a non-circular way, on the basis of the claims above, thanks to two devices: (i) manner features follow from different *alignments* between the components of the consonant plane and those of the vowel plane; (ii) these planes may differ in length. Nasals can be anchored to two C/V alignments and behave differently according to the alignment they are anchored to.

In the third part, I will show how this model can capture two interesting phenomena: the “checked syllables” typical of Thai, Vietnamese, Cantonese, Burmese etc., and nasal harmony of many Amazonian languages. In the first case, voiceless plosives behave as sonorants in coda, /p t k/ being the *oral* counterparts of /m n ŋ/; in the second case, voiced plosives behave as sonorants in onsets, /b d g/ being the *sonorant* counterparts of /p t k/.

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