IV. Consonants: *Sounds you can feel*

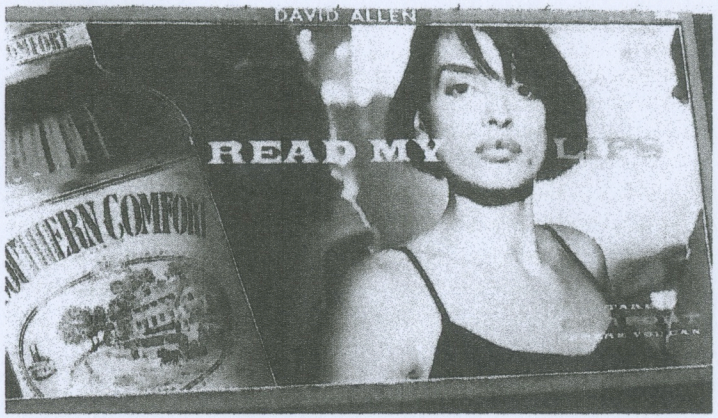

Fig. 1. Read her lips: What part of this utterance has she reached? It could be the [m] in *my* or the [p] in *lips* but certainly not the word [ri:d].

After the example chapters on the consonant /l/ and the vowels /æ/ and /e/ in Sections III.1. and 2., in this chapter we are going to concentrate just on consonants. The reason for doing this is that consonants are easier to think about because you can *feel* where in your mouth you are producing them – and *see* the articulation if the lips are involved, as the woman in the whiskey advertisement nicely demonstrates. As her mouth is almost closed with a tiny opening in the middle our guess is that she has just reached the final consonant cluster [ps]. And since our aim with this book is not only to get you to *sound* better, but also to understand *why* you sound better, we are keen to treat things in a way that will let you absorb the background phonetic knowledge.

Obstruents and sonorants

Basically, what makes a consonant in contrast to a vowel is some sort of barrier to obstruct the air flowing through the mouth. This is the reason why the technical term for an important group of consonants is **obstruent** – you can see the link to the word "obstruction" in the name.

Infobox

There are different classes of ***obstruents***, distinguished by the way in which the airflow is obstructed – this is called "**the manner of articulation**".

Plosives, or ***stops*** are consonants that are produced by stopping the airflow completely somewhere in the vocal tract – [p] at the lips, [t] behind the teeth, and [k] further back in the mouth. Then it is released with a small explosion. Clearly "stop" and "plosive" are two words for the same thing, but the two words pick out different aspects of the articulation – the holding part and the releasing part.

Fricatives are sounds that are produced without complete closure, just with a narrowing, a constriction somewhere in the vocal tract. The air flowing through the constriction becomes turbulent, which is heard as a friction sound – [f], formed between upper teeth and lower lip, and [s] produced with a narrow groove in the tongue tip against the teeth ridge, are two examples of fricatives.

A third category of obstruent is the ***affricate***, which is like a stop followed by a fricative. Instead of "exploding" the stop, the stoppage is opened just a bit, so that the escaping air causes friction – [ʧ] as in *chair* is an affricate. Because they behave like other single consonants, and because they are produced in the same period of time as a single consonant they are considered a sound *unit* in a particular language and are given a special name (with a special unitary symbol), rather than "stop + fricative" – [tʃ].

If you look on p. 287, at the back of the book, you will see the IPA consonant chart. The stops and fricatives are three of eight manners of articulation in the table (there is a lateral fricative that is given a row all to itself!), and the affricates are not even mentioned because they are considered to be a single sound consisting of a sequence of two manners of articulation (stop followed by fricative) at the same place of articulation. Notice that there are always two symbols in the box representing each place of articulation, a so-called "voiced" sound and a voiceless sound.

Those consonants that are *not* obstruents are often referred to as ***sonorants***. This is because they are naturally voiced, i.e. they are produced with the vocal folds vibrating. This means that as far as sonorants are concerned there can be no distinctions that depend on voicing differences. You can see that they occur singly in the boxes of the IPA consonant chart, in contrast to the obstruents, which – as we stated above – are arranged in pairs, voiceless on the left, and voiced on the right.

The "voiced/voiceless" distinction in the obstruents is an important one, and although both German and English use the distinction phonemically – i.e., to distinguish words (read III.4. again if you have forgotten what phonemes are)