

Phonology

Phonology is the study of sounds in a language. Humans can make a large number of sounds, but no language uses all of those sounds. We make sounds by changing the shape of our mouth. We can raise and lower our jaws. We can move our tongue forward and backwards and up and down. We can place our tongue behind and between our teeth, and we can close or round our lips.

	<p style="text-align: center;">How We Make Sounds</p> <p><i>This is a picture of some of the parts of what is called the "vocal tract." We use these parts to make the sounds that make up language. Some of the are made when air passes through the vocal chords. The vocal chords vibrate to make different sounds. We can stretch the vocal chords to make high pitched or low pitched sounds.</i></p>
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The sounds that a language uses is called a "phonemic inventory." *Phonemes* are the individual meaningful sounds in a language. An inventory is an itemized list of things. A phonemic inventory, then, is an itemized list of meaningful sounds that a language uses to create words. Meaningful sounds are the ones that can change the meaning of a word. For example, *cat* refers to a cute little animal. If we change only one sound in that word, we could end up with *cot*, which is something we sleep on, or we could have *cap*, which is something we put on our heads.

The words that are alike except for one sound are called "minimal pairs." Linguists use minimal pairs to help them figure out the phonemic inventory of a language. Here are some more minimal pairs in English:

cat	rat	hot	cot	yet	bet	note	coat
kit	wit	fry	fly	hope	heap	reap	deep
bull	bill	sick	tick	sing	sin	dear	mirror

How many sounds are in the English Phonemic Inventory?