3
The Sound System: Description and Classification

3.1 Major class distinctions

Following on from the practice of orthoepists of the previous century, early-eighteenth-century grammarians usually make a primary classificatory distinction between vocalic and consonantal phonological segments. For most observers at this time this distinction represents a discrete, binary opposition, and not one seen as the endpoints on a scale or cline, a concept embraced by some commentators later in the century. Most early commentators take a minimalist view of the degree of componentiality of phonological structure, individual sounds being seen as atomic, indivisible units. For instance, Jones (1701: 1–2) divides the phonological inventory into two main components, comprising simple and compound sounds, where ‘a Simple Sound (in general) is one uniform undivided Sound, having but one beginning, and one Ending, without any difference of Parts, being (as Men use to say) all of a Piece; as a single knock of a Hammer upon an Anvil; a single touch of a musical String; or the Sound of a, e, o, &c.’, a definition prescient of that for the phoneme. Jones also recognises a Compound Sound which ‘is such as consists of two, or more of those Simple Sounds’; as examples of this type he includes: g in age; f in Joy; l in die; u in due and x in ax. Simple Sounds are exemplified by a in all; b in bib; k in kick and he lists 28 in all, including those where digraphs are involved: au in Saul; aw in awl; oo in too; sh in ash among others. Along very similar lines too we have Brightland and Gildon (1711: ii note): ‘A Letter may be said to be a simple un compounded Sound of or in the Voice, which cannot be subdivided into any more simple, and is generally mark’d with a particular Character’. Definitions of vowel-ness are fairly standard in this period, such segments characterized as having ‘a perfect Sound’, ‘standing by itself’, typically: ‘a Vowel is a Letter that marks a full and perfect Sound of itself, without the help of, or joining with any other Letter to it’ (Greenwood 1711: 233); ‘A Vowel is a Letter that makes a full and perfect Sound of itself; without which there can be no syllable’ (Tuite 1726: 2). Consonantal segments, on the other hand, demonstrate contrasting characteristics and are viewed as essentially combinatorial in nature: ‘A consonant is a letter that makes no sound or syllable, without the help of a vowel, either before or after it’ (Tuite 1726: 3); ‘a Consonant is a Letter that
cannot easily be sounded without the Sound of a Vowel, and therefore are always
sounded with some Vowel, and for that Reason call’d Consonants’ (Jones 1701: 3),
likewise Watts (1721: 3), Mattaire (1712: 6) and Owen (1732: 6) and almost all
other commentators. It is Brightland and Gildon who perhaps best express the
notion of the primacy of the vocalic against the derived/dependent status of
consonantal segments (1711: 3):

A Vowel therefore is a Letter denoting a full Sound made in the Throat, and can
be pronounc’d without the help, or joining any Letter to it; but a Consonant,
which derives its name from sounding with another, cannot be sounded with-
out adding a Vowel before or after it. Vowels, or perfect Sounds, being by Nature
of greater excellency than Consonants, since they perform that by themselves,
which the other cannot do without their Assistance.

Indeed, their definition of the vowel/consonant dichotomy is perhaps the most
inclusive in the period, seeing it in multifaceted terms, involving articulatory char-
acteristics such as the absence/presence of constriction in the vocal tract, relative
structural complexity as well as centrality versus peripherality (1711: 3 note 6):

It is of use to observe, that the several Sorts of Sounds us’d in Speaking, which
we call Letters, are form’d in a very natural Manner. For first, the Mouth is the
Organ, that forms them, and we see, that some are so simple, and unmix’t, that
there is nothing requir’d, but the opening of the Mouth, to make them under-
stood, and to form different Sounds. Whence they have the Name of Vowels, or
Voices, or Vocal Sounds. On the other side we find, that there are others, whose
Pronunciation depends on the particular Application and Use of every Part of
the Mouth, as the Teeth, the Lips, the Tongue, the Palate; which yet cannot
make any one perfect Sound but by the same opening of the Mouth; that is to
say, they can only Sound by the Union with those first and only perfect Sounds,
and these are call’d Consonants, or Letters sounding with other Letters.

There is much discussion concerning the status of segments represented by
the graphs y and w, almost all of which arises from a failure by commentators to
distinguish sound from symbolic function. Some observers characterize the graphs
as having vowel, others consonantal status, typically Mattaire (1712: 11):

The Letters w and y are Consonants in the beginning of a syllable; as ware,
beware, year, beyond: else Vowels; and then w is pronounced like u, y; like i or ie
final; as vow, by, they, mercy, byass. Y in Greek words is always a Vowel; as hymn,
cypress. W beginning a syllable, in some words, supplieth the room of gu; as
ward for guard, war from the French guerre.

Watts (1721: 2 note) takes a more sophisticated stance on the issue: ‘I have here
followed the old and usual custom of making Twenty-four Letters, and distin-
guishing the u and i, into Vowels and Consonants afterwards; tho it had been