

# A Contrastive Study of the Consonants in English and Seereer-Siin

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**Abstract:** *The present study deals with the phonological system of English and Seereer. More specific research questions will concern the uses and functioning of the consonants in English and Seereer. This study will analyse the differences and the similarities of the consonants in the two languages. However, English and Seereer work differently in relation to these aspects even if some similarities can be noticed.*

**Keywords:** contrastive, analysis, phonology, sound, pronunciation, consonants, language, English, Seereer

## 1. Introduction

In this study, we will be concerned with the influence an African language can have in the process of the acquisition of a second non-African language; the languages at hand here are Seereer and English. In other terms, the stress will be placed on a systematic comparison of Seereer and English phonological systems, to find out linguistic differences, which will eventually help us predict the difficulties Seereer learners may encounter in the process of learning English. Here we will be focusing on the consonants. According to the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* a consonant is a speech sound in which the air is at least partly blocked, and any letter which represents this.

In the area of pronunciation, English language can be categorized as a difficult language to master. This statement is strengthened by Vernick and Nesgoda (1980) who state that language learners may find difficulties in learning to speak English well because several spelling may be represented by a single sound. Knowing that precision in pronouncing words is especially essential, language learners should pay more attention on the way they articulate the foreign words and, most importantly, master pronunciation of a language they are learning.

Before going any further, a brief presentation of the two languages would be useful. English is an Indo-European language characterised by a very weak corresponding between sound and symbol. Whereas Seereer is an Atlantic language of the Niger- Congo family spoken in Senegal. According to Souleymane Faye (*Manuel d'orthographe du Seereer*) Seereer is characterized by pairs of voiced and voiceless implosive stops in three places of articulation. These pairs are phonemically contrastive in lexical items. The parallelism in the phonology of Seereer and English regarding the consonants will be established after this study. Both languages seem to have similar phonemic system; they have vowels that look alike, long and short ones that can be opposed because of their pertinence. In fact English and Seereer are languages in which phonology and grammar are two fields which are very difficult to separate. And what seems a paradox is that, the similarities, being scattered here and there, are the very point of confusion in the teaching of English and always cause difficulties. Most often phonetic alterations bring about morphological transformations, in this sense English and Seereer are particular similar languages.

Bad pronunciation is one of the factors that hinder oral communication. A sound is never the same, and depends on various circumstances; the smallest change by mispronunciation may change the meaning of a whole sentence. Languages extend from the individual, the resemblance between the two phonemes and their alternations or alternations in the exponents to their treatment, the functions the phonemes fulfil in the grammatical and morphological systems, loan words from either language, and words they have in common in their exponents. A contrastive analysis brings out the similarities and differences of languages. On the one hand that can make easier for the teachers of the both languages to tackle their subjects on a better known ground, and on the other hand, for the students of Seereer or English to realize that in several aspects their languages share many things.

This study we will be more concerned with the comparison of the sounds and sound patterns of English and Seereer. The scrutiny of the exponents, nature, and structure of the phonemes will be dealt with to demonstrate and define the resemblances and differences, and to see how the phonemes work together. The resemblances are in the phonemes and their combinations, in the functions and modifications of the phonemes or by various ways. The phonological similarities are to be found in individual vocalic and consonantal units as in words where these phonemes assume morphological or grammatical functions.

## The English Consonants

Consonants are defined as speech sounds that humans create that involve airflow that is blocked partly or entirely while being produced. They can be blocked by speech organs like the vocal tract, as well as the teeth, tongue, or lips. These speech sounds are represented by letters that we know as consonants. English has twenty-two consonants. They are: six (6) oral Plosives: /p, b, t, d, k, g/; three (3) nasal plosives: /m, n, ŋ/; two affricates: /tʃ, dʒ/; nine (9) fricatives: /f, v, θ, ð, ʃ, ʒ, s, z, h/ and two laterals: /l, r/.

Chart of the English Consonants

## The Seereer Consonants

The phonology of Seereer is characterized by a large inventory of consonants, particularly stops, and a vowel length distinction. Seereer is a stress language. The consonants inventory of Seereer makes use of some combinations of parameters that are unusual cross

linguistically. Seereer also has multiple uvular phonemes, a rarity for sub-Saharan Africa.

The Seereer sound system comprises thirty three (33) consonants, namely ten (10) plosives:/p, b, t, d, c, j, k, g, q,

ʔ/ ; six (6) implosives:/β, ɓ, ɗ, ɗ̥, ɗ̥, ɗ̥/ ; four (4) nasals: /m, n, ŋ, ñ /; four (4) pre-nasals/mb. nd. nj.ng. Ng/ : four (4) fricatives /f. s. h. x/ ; onelateral: /l/ ; one vibrant./r/ and two semi-vowels./w.j/

	Bilabial	Labio- dental	dental	Alveolar	Palatal	velar	Uvular	Glottal
plosives	M							
-nasals				N	Ñ	Ŋ		
-orals	p b			t d	C	k g		ʔ
Implosives	β, ɓ			ɗ, ɗ̥	c, y			
Fricatives		F		S		x		H
Approxim				L		w		
				R	J			
Pre-nasals	mb			Nd	Nj	ng	nG	

## The Contrastive Study

The theoretical foundations for what became known as the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis were formulated in Lado's *Linguistics Across Cultures*. In this book, Lado claimed that "those elements which are similar to the learner's native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult". While this was not a novel suggestion, Lado was the first to provide a comprehensive theoretical treatment and to suggest a systematic set of

technical procedures for the contrastive study of languages. The contrastive study of the phonological system of English and Seereer's aim is to show the similarities and differences between the two languages and establish a close phonological and linguistic relation between them.

The Contrastive Chart of the English and Seereer Consonants

	Bilabial		Labio- dental		Inter- dental		alveolar		alveo- palatal		palatal		Velar		Uvular		Glottal	
	Eng	Seer	Eng	Seer	Eng	Seer	Eng	Seer	Eng	Seer	Eng	Seer	Eng	Seer	Eng	Seer	Eng	Seer
Oral Plosives	p b	P B					t d	t d			– –	c ɟ	k g	k g	– –	q	– –	ʔ
Implosive	– –	ɓ ɗ					– –	f ɗ̥			– –	c' y'						
Nasal plosives	m	M					n	n			– –	ɲ	ŋ	N				
pre-nasals	– –	mb					– –	nd			– –	nj	– –	Ng	– –	nG		
fricatives			f v	f	ð θ	– –	s z	s –	ʃ ʒ	– –			– –	X			h	h
Affricatives									tʃ dʒ	– –								

## 1: Plosives

### -Oral plosives

#### /p/:

Seereer and English have the phoneme /p/. In both languages, /p/ is bilabial and voiceless.

In English the phoneme /p/ has many variants:

-/p/ is aspirated when it is followed by a stressed vowel in initial position. Example: pen [p<sup>h</sup>en], peak [p<sup>h</sup>ik].

-A subsidiary member of the p- phoneme with nasal plosion is heard when /m/ or /n/

follows as in topmost [topmɒst], hypnotize [hipnətaɪz]

- /p/ is silent in the initial groups /pt/ ; /pn/ ; /ps/. Examples: ptarmigan [ta:mɪgən], pneumatic [njumætɪk], psalm [sa:m]

- /p/ is laterally released when /l/ follows as in apple [æpl], couple [kʌpl]

#### /b/:

The phoneme /b/ exists in both languages. Its features are similar in Seereer and in English, it is a bilabial voiced.

/b/ has different phonetic realizations in English.

-A fully or partially devoiced allophone which occurs in syllable initial and final positions.

-A subsidiary member of English /b/ with nasal plosion is used when /m/ Or/n/ follows as in submit [sʌbmɪt], abnormal [abno:məl].

-/b/ is non-audible when final, and preceded by /m/ as in lamb [læm], also before /t/ in words as debt [det], doubt [daʊt],

-/b/ is laterally released when /l/ follows as in bubble [bʌbl], blow [bləʊ]

#### /t/:

In both Seereer and English the phoneme /t/ is a voiceless alveolar. It is similarly distributed in both languages

/t/ has different realizations in English:

-like /p/, /t/ is aspirated before stressed vowels in initial position. Examples: take [t<sup>h</sup>eɪk].

A nasally exploded [t] which is used before /m/ or /n/ as in satan [sætən], cotton [kɒtən], certain [sɜ:tn].

A post alveolar /t/ is heard before /r/ as in tree [tri:].

A dentalized /t/ is heard when /θ/ or /ð/ follows as in eight [eɪtθ], look at this [lʊkəθɪs].

#### /d/:

Seereer has a similar voiced alveolar oral plosive. It is similarly distributed in both languages.

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Seereer phonological system. It is also the same as for /v, θ, ð, ʒ, z/.

### 3: Affricates

English has two affricates /tʃ, dʒ/ whereas Seereer does not have any.

### 4: Approximants

The phonemes /l, r/ are common to both Seereer and English.

#### /l/:

A similar voiced alveolar lateral approximant exists in Seereer. The phoneme is similarly distributed in both languages. It occurs in all word positions.

English /l/ has different phonetic realizations:

-/l/ is dentalized when /θ/ follows as in health [helθ].

-/l/ is devoiced before aspirated consonants as in clear [kliə].

-/l/ is dark before all other consonants except /j/.

-/l/ is clear before vowels and /j/.

#### /r/:

Seereer /r/ is a voiced alveolar vibrant; it differs from the English voiced alveolar approximant.

English /r/ has many variants:

[r] is devoiced after voiceless accented plosives /p, t, k/ as in proof [pʰru:f], Try [tʰrai]. A fricative [r] is heard when /d/ precedes as in drove [drɒv].

### 5: Consonants cluster/ pre-nasals

*"One of the most noticeable differences between languages lies in the different types of syllables structures permitted"*<sup>1</sup>.

The discrepancy comes from the fact that English can combine more than two consonants to make a Cluster where in Seereer the combination permitted is two consonants and is known as pre-nasals. An examination of the patterning of words may help us work out the syllable structures permitted.

There are many initial, medial, word juncture and final consonantal clusters in English.

-In initial, position; English can have up to three consonants within a Cluster, Examples: Stop, spring, Splendid.

It can admit cc; and c cc, consonant groups.

-Clusters at word juncture also exist in English.

They can admit up to five consonants in this position. Examples: first strike, /ststr/.

-As to syllable final position, English can have up to four consonants in a final cluster.

*"A pre-nasal is a speech sound made up of a nasal and a voiced plosive, the two articulated in one movement and acting together as a single unit. They*

*are found neither in English nor in French. But they are very common in African languages."*<sup>2</sup>

The Seereer sound system has five pre-nasals which are: /mb, nd, nj, ng, Ng/. Pre-nasals and clusters are not the same; in a pre-nasal the two elements are combined in one and only one sound. The spelling in two letters has nothing to do with the sounding in one unit. Whereas a cluster consists in two or more than two different consonants pronounced separately in a sequence.

## 2. Conclusion

As it can be noticed in this study, we have tried to give a thorough description of the sound system of both English and Seereer, to find out if the two languages have the same phonemes, whether those phonemes have the same allophones, and if the latter are similarly distributed. The description of the sound systems of Seereer and English is all the more important as it helps us single out the differences at each level of both languages, and from this perspective, predict the difficulties that Seereer learners may encounter when they learn English as a second language.

This research is hopefully useful for both English learners and teachers, whose mother tongue is Seereer. For one thing, by knowing that English department students tend to make the phonological errors in the pronunciation of the English sounds, both English learners and teachers are expected to pay more attention to the articulation of those particular sounds. Moreover, they are also expected to become more aware that those sounds are distinctive English sounds and should not be replaced by Seereer sounds whatsoever. At the same time, it is hoped that by having this paper, the English teachers may be constantly reminded that these English sounds tend to generate problems on the students' pronunciation, and therefore, they can develop the pronunciation lessons by concentrating on those problematic sounds.

*"The students of today must first of all face the fact that many African languages are difficult, that their sound are different from anything he has met before, that part of the grammar and idiom are unlike that of any language, and finally that a considerable amount of work will be needed to overcome these difficulties"*<sup>3</sup>

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