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Putting sounds together

Each of us has some degree of awareness of the sounds we use in speaking our own language; and this awareness is heightened in certain societies by the use they make of alphabetical script. When a child or a foreigner makes a mistake of pronunciation, we not only notice it in a reflex way but are able to analyse and correct it. For instance, if a German friend pronounces *petit enfant* without making the liaison by sounding the final *t* of *petit*, or pronounces *batch* instead of *badge*, we are aware of the mistake and can conceptualize it as a lack of liaison or a difficulty with pronouncing the sound ‘ge’ [ʒ] in the context of the word *badge*. We are also capable of identifying regional accents, recognizing them from clues which are at times minute. Every language and every accent has its own sound system governed by strict laws. The slightest departure from these rules reveals a speaker to be an outsider, somebody who was not immersed in the local linguistic environment as a child. What is the nature of these phonetic laws? Are they really laws, and if so, do they have a biological function?

7.1 The articulatory gestures of language

In Molière’s *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (1670), there is a celebrated lesson in phonology:

PHILOSOPHY MASTER: Let me tell you that letters are divided into vowels, called vowels because they express what we call the voices, and consonants, called consonants because they sound with the vowels and serve solely to mark the divers articulations of the voices. There are five vowels or voices: A, E, I, O, and U.
M. JOURDAIN: I grasp all that.