

How many types of /s/ are there?

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/s/ typically defies the phonotactic constraints that hold of other obstruents. Most of the literature on the unusual behaviour of /s/ has focused on word-initial sC clusters in Indo-European languages, as sC is often considered to be an Indo-European anomaly. On one hand, this had resulted in a monolithic approach to sC within Indo-European, which fails to recognize the considerable diversity in sC cluster profile that holds across languages in this family. On the other hand, this has led to a failure to explore whether sC clusters are present in non-Indo-European languages and, if so, whether they display similar phonological behaviour as in Indo-European. In this paper, I begin by examining the unusual behaviour of sC across four types of IE languages: French & Picard, Greek & Romansch, Dutch & Italian and English & Russian, as well as in three unrelated languages: Acoma (Keres), Blackfoot (Algonquian) and Ōgami (Ryukyuan). In all of the languages, I show that /s/ functions unusually, but not in an identical manner across languages, which leads to the difficult challenge of finding a unified analysis for /s/. Although I will argue that this is not possible, I will nevertheless show that the diverse phonotactic behaviour that /s/ displays can be analysed in terms of ordinary syllable constituents if an abstract view of the syllable is adopted. I then turn to address the question of why some Indo-European languages, namely Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese, lack sC clusters. I propose that the acoustic properties of /s/ play an important role in determining whether sC clusters are permitted in a language, and when permitted, whether /s/ is realized as [s] (as in English and French) or as [ʃ] (as in German, Acoma and European Portuguese). I conclude that both the phonological and acoustic properties of /s/ conspire to account for the unusual behaviour that this segment displays across languages.