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The Principle of Complementary Distribution

When two sounds used in a language do not occur in the same phonetic environment and the replacement of one by the other does not change the meaning of a word, then these two sounds are considered to be in complementary distribution. Consider the words 'Peak' and 'Speak'. The sounds represented by the letter /P/ in both the words are different. In 'peak', it is aspirated and realized as /pʰ/, and in 'speak' it is unaspirated and realized as /p/. The phonetic environment of these sounds is different and replacement of one by the other does not change the meaning of the words. That is to say, if /pʰ/ of 'peak' is changed into /p/, its meaning will not change. Likewise, if /p/ unaspirated sound of 'speak' is changed into aspirated /pʰ/, the meaning of the word 'speak' will remain the same. It means that these two sounds are in complementary distribution, and, so they are not the separate phonemes. They are all allophones of English language. Thus the principle of complementary distribution establishes that two sounds will be allophones only when -

- they occur in different phonetic environments and
- their replacement by each other does not change the meaning of the words.