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ENGLISH PHONETICS AND PHONOLOGY – MEANING IS THE LIMIT

Sound and Meaning

A general statement that can be made about language is that it uses sound to convey meaning. Back in 1964 R.A Hall gave a definition of language as “the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols.” Speech is the prime means of communication for virtually every social group, the most complex tool of communication that man has ever developed. A comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon as complex and multi-stranded as speech necessarily has to draw on the resources of a large number of different disciplines.

The teaching of English pronunciation is both a simple and a complicated procedure. It is simple in that such teaching involves merely the drilling of students on pronouncing the various sounds of English. The teacher should also keep in mind that ear drilling is extremely important, too. If a teacher is to do more than simply guide the students through the process of listening and producing sounds, things get more complicated because they require proper understanding of the basic principles of English speech production.

Phonetics and phonology are concerned with speech – with the ways in which humans produce and hear speech. Even the simplest of conversations – an exchange of short greetings, for example – presupposes that the speaker and hearer make sense to each other and understand each other. The first distinction that has to be made is between language as an internalized system of knowledge and speech as the

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concrete use of language, the actual production of specific utterances, hence the distinction between linguistic competence as the internalized knowledge about sounds, meanings and the way they are interrelated, possessed by the speakers of a language, and linguistic performance, as actual language behavior, the use of language in everyday situations. In this case, the effectiveness of teaching does not depend so much upon the teaching methods or techniques but rather upon the teacher's knowledge and understanding of Phonetics and Phonology as a highly important stage in acquiring a language.

Phonetics and phonology is a branch of linguistics concerned with speech and the ways in which humans try to communicate by producing and hearing speech. Human communication presupposes that a speaker and a listener make sense and understand each other performing various operations during what has been called an *act of communication*. Verbal communication implies interaction of a speaker and a listener during an act of communication by means of language, i.e. a *code of communication*.

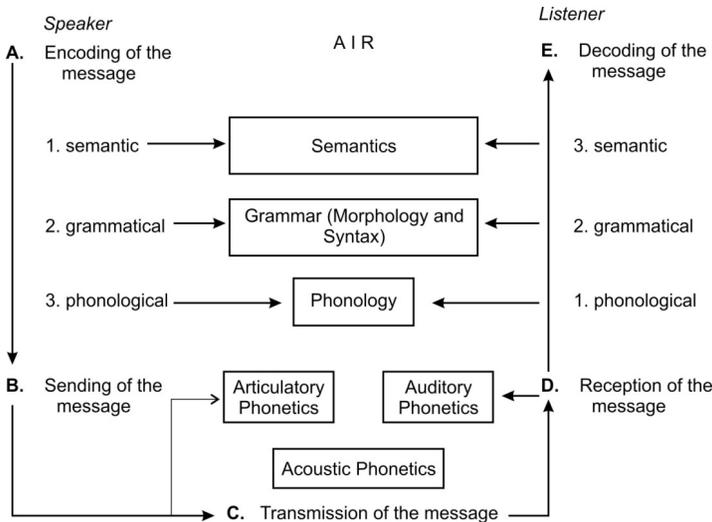
Spoken communication can only be successful if both the speaker and the listener have adequate knowledge of the code, i.e. of the language in which they are communicating, the production and interpretation of relevant linguistic signs. Any act of communication implies five sequential operations and presupposes interaction between a speaker and a listener: encoding and sending of the message (performed by the speaker), transmission of the message, reception and decoding of the message (performed by the listener).

During the last stage, the chain of morphemes is conveyed into a chain of different units that in the long run will appeal to the senses of the listener. These are mentally symbolized sounds, combinations of phonological units called *phonemes*. Every language has a set of phonemes (vowels and consonants) which can be combined into higher rank units (morphemes) carrying meaning.

This is the result of the process of 'double articulation' of language. First language articulates reality into semantic and grammatical units. Then, by means of a double articulation, the morphemes, as the units of grammar are articulated into their component phonemes. Unlike the morphemes, the phonemes are devoid of meaning, their sole function being a distinctive

one, namely to keep morphemes apart from one another. The chain of morphemes has thus taken the shape of a chain of phonemes.

So far no sound has been produced, therefore, as far as the listener is concerned, there is no message. The message only takes the material shape of sounds when the second operation is performed by the speaker in an act of communication. Once the phonological encoding is completed and the speaker has decided on the kind of phonemes and their arrangement, he proceeds to the actual production of speech sounds by sending instructions from the brain to parts of his body, muscles and bones, which perform certain movements and as a result produce sounds. These are the *speech organs* or *articulators*, and by moving them the speaker changes the chain of phonemes into a chain of *sounds*. A phoneme is realized phonetically by a variety of similar but not identical sounds known as *allophones*. The sounds differ within the same language and from one language to another not because the organs of speech are different, but because the phonological codes are different, hence instructions sent from the brain are different. When studying a language it is important to pay careful attention to the phonetic variations which occur, to ensure that we make the right decisions about which sounds count as phonemes, and which count as allophones.



The graphic representation of an act of communication
(D.Chitoran,1978)

Language functions as a means of communication by using symbols. The symbolization process is a complex process shared by man alone, relying on a system of signs used to communicate and studied by Semiotics. The semiotic analysis of speech can involve a consideration not only of the communicative signs themselves, but also of the mechanisms by which the signs are produced by the speaker and perceived by the listener, using the auditory and visual channels of communication. According to Ferdinand de Saussure the *sign* consists of two independent sides: the *signifiant* (the signifying side i.e. the material support of the sign: vocal noises or visible marks on a surface) and *the signifié* (the signified side i.e. ‘the thing which is signified’)

The vocal noises, which form the substance of *expression*, represent only the medium used by language. In order to discharge their linguistic function, they need to be arranged according to some very complex patterns (i.e. they need *form*). Hence a complete description of language will have to include a phonetic and phonological analysis of its *expression* level and a syntactic and semantic analysis of its *content* level.

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- *articulatory phonetics* analysing the anatomy and physiology of speech and dealing with the production, identification and classification of individual sounds.
- *acoustic phonetics* sometimes restricted to instrumental analysis and measurement of sounds and their transmission under the form of sounds waves.
- *auditory phonetics* dealing with the acoustic properties of speech sounds.

Moreover, speech is a purposeful human activity, not just a movement or energy or noise, but a systematically organized activity, intended to convey meaning. The term *phonology* is associated with the study of this level of speech organization. Thus *phonology* is often said to be concerned with the organization of speech within specific languages, or with the systems and patterns of sounds that occur in a language. The boundary need not be sharply drawn, nor should it be constructed on assumptions about the primacy of one kind of reality above others, yet it can be said that *phonology* deals with the systems and structures of speech, while *phonetics* focuses more narrowly on articulation and acoustics – to make a long story short, ‘**meaning is the limit**’ and not all sounds produced by the human speech organs are *phonemes*.

The Phoneme, Symbols and Transcription

As mentioned above speech can be divided into segments, and there is great variety in the way these segments are made. Just as there is an abstract alphabet as the basis of our writing, so there is an abstract set of units as the basis of our speech. These units are the *phonemes*, and the complete set of these units is called the phonemic system of the language. The phonemes themselves are abstract, but there are many slightly different ways in which we make the sounds that represent these phonemes, just as there are many ways in which we may make a mark on a piece of paper to represent a particular letter of the alphabet. A very important divisions among languages spoken all over the world should be made in this case, the essence of which is ‘*we speak as we write*’, and it is highly relevant for Serbian students who will be teaching English.

Sometimes a speaker may produce the same phoneme in different ways, but these sounds should be regarded as different realisations of the phoneme as they can be substituted for one another without changing the meaning of the word. In the word ‘lake’, the realisation of the phoneme **l** is very different from the realisation of the same phoneme in the word ‘feel’. In more technical terms the ‘clear **l**’ in ‘lake’ and the ‘dark **l**’ in ‘feel’ are *allophones* of the phoneme **l**, and they are not usually indicated when we write symbols to represent sounds. Basically the

symbols are for one of two purposes: either they are symbols for phonemes (*phonemic* symbols) or they are *phonetic* symbols. Depending on the language, they can be both *letters* and *phonetic symbols* in the case of ‘we speak as we write’, or *phonemes* and *phonemic symbols*.

Received Pronunciation (RP)

Meaning has always been the key. Language teaching has always contributed to and profited from *phonetics* and *phonology*. The fact that English spelling is not a direct reflection of pronunciation has undoubtedly been an important factor and led to the publication of pronouncing dictionaries and other guides to pronunciations, both for native speakers of English and foreign learners who might at times be confused with the ‘right’ kind of English. It is now customary for general-purpose English dictionaries to include some kind of transcription or guide to the pronunciation of each word.

Debate about a standardized or ‘correct’ pronunciation of English has also played an important role. The wide variety of ‘Englishes’ spoken nowadays throughout the world makes it absolutely necessary for the teachers to choose what kind of ‘English pronunciation they have in view. Received Pronunciation (RP), is a style of pronunciation more commonly and less precisely referred to as ‘BBC English’ or ‘Oxford English’. The term refers to that particular variety of British English used by educated speakers in the Southern part of England, including the London area, which has also acquired the standard pronunciation for British speakers, but there are no implications that other accents are inferior or less pleasant-sounding; the reason is simply the RP is the accent that has always been chosen by most of the Serbian teachers to teach their students, and is the accent that has been most fully described.

It has been used as the basis for textbooks and pronouncing dictionaries and we would use it as a reference system. It does not mean in any way that there is such a thing as ‘the only correct pronunciation’ as far as English is concerned. Just that teaching English in Serbia today should be a question of ‘meaning is the key’ and the way English is spoken is irrelevant as long as the right meaning is conveyed.

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