Lecture 2. Turgunbaeva U.J.

THE FUNCTIONAL ASPECT

OF SPEECH SOUNDS

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**1. The Phoneme**

**2. Transcription**

**3. Main Trends in the Phoneme Theory**

**4. Methods of Phonological Analysis**

1. **The Phoneme**

The definition of the phoneme

To know how sounds are produced by speech organs it is not enough to

describe and classify them as language units. When we talk about the sounds

of a language, the term "sound" can be interpreted in two rather different

ways. In the fIrst place, we can say that [t] and [d] are two different sounds

in English, [t] being fortis and [d] being lenis1 and we can illustrate this by

showing how they contrast with each other to make a difference ofmeaning

in a large number of pairs, such as *tie die, seat seed,* etc. But on the

other hand ifwe listen carefully to the [t] in *let us* and compare it with the

in *let them* we can hear that the two sounds are also not the same, the [t] of

*let us* is alveolar, while the [t] of *let them* is dental. In both examples the

sounds differ in one articulatory feature only; in the second case the difference

between the sounds has functionally no significance. It is perfectly

clear that the sense of "sound" in these two cases is different. To avoid this

ambiguity, the linguist uses two separate terms: "phoneme" is used to mean

"sound" in its contrastive sense, and "allophone" is used for sounds which

are variants of a phoneme: they usually occur in different positions in

word (i. e. in different environments) and hence cannot contrast with each

other, nor be used to make meaningful distinctions.

The most comprehensive defmition ofthe phoneme was first introduced

by the Russian linguist L. V. Shcherba.

The concise form ofthis definition could be:

The phoneme is a minimal abstract linguistic uuit realized in speech in the

form of speech souuds opposable to other phonemes of the same language to

distinguish the meauing of morphemes and words.

According to this definition the phoneme is a unity of three aspects:

material, abstract and functional.

*Figure* 3

Three Aspects of the Phoneme

Material aspect Abstract ( Functional aspect

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1.1.2. The phoneme as a uuity of three aspects

Let us consider the phoneme from the point ofview of its three aspects.

Firstly, the phoneme is a functional unit. A" you know, in phonetics function is

usually understood as discriminatory function, i. e. the role ofvarious components

ofthe phonetic system ofthe language in distinguishing one morpheme

from another, one word from another or also one utterance from another.

The opposition of phonemes in the same phonetic environment differentiates

the meaning ofmorphemes and words: *said* - *says, sleeper* - *sleepy,*

*bath* - *path, light -like.*

Sometimes the opposition of the phonemes serves to distinguish the

meaning ofthe whole phrases: *he was heard badly* - *he was hurt badly.* Thus

we may say that the phoneme can fulfil the distinctive function.

Secondly, the phoneme is material, real and objective. That means that

it is realized in speech ofall English-speaking people in the form of speech

sounds, its allophones. The sets of speech sounds, i. e. the allophones belonging

to the same phoneme: I) are not identical in their articulatory content

though there remains some phonetic similarity between them; 2) are

never used in the same phonetic context.

As a first example, let us consider the English phoneme [d], at least

those of its allophones which are known to everybody who studies English

pronunciation. As you know from the practical course ofEnglish phonetics,

1.1. The Phoneme

[d] when not affected by the articulation of the preceding or following

sounds is a plosive, forelingual apical, alveolar, lenis stop. This is how it

sounds in isolation or in such words as *door, darn, down,* etc., when it retains

its typical articulatory characteristics. In this case the consonant [d] is

called the principal allophone. The allophones which do not undergo any

distinguishable changes in the chain of speech are called principal. At the

same time there are quite predictable changes in the articulation of allophones

that occur under the influence ofthe neighbouring sounds in different

phonetic situations. Such allophones are called subsidiary.

The examples below illustrate the articulatory modifications ofthe phoneme

[d] in various phonetic contexts:

[d] is slightly palatalized before front vowels and the sonorant [j], e. g.

*deal, day, did, did you.*

is pronounced without any plosion before another stop, e. g. *bedtime,*

*bad pain, good dog;* it is pronounced with the nasal piosion before the nasal

sonorants [n] and [m], e. g. *sudden, admit, could not, could meet;* the plosion

is lateral before the lateral sonorant [1], e. g. *middle, badly, bad light.*

The alveolar position is particularly sensitive to the influence of the

place ofarticulation ofa following consonant. Thus followed by [r] the consonant

[d] becomes post-alveolar, e. g. *dry, dream;* followed by the interdental

[9], [a] it becomes dental, e. g. *breadth, lead the way, good thing.*

When [d] is followed by the labial [w] it becomes labialized, e. g. *dweller.*

In the initial position [d] is partially devoiced, e. g. *dog, dean;* in the intervocalic

position or when followed by a sonorant it is fully voiced, e. g.

*order, leader, driver;* in the word-final position it is vQiceless, e. g. *road,*

*raised, old.*

These modifications ofthe phoneme [d] are quite sufficient to demonstrate

the articulatory difference between its allophones, though the list of

them could be easily extended. If you consider the production of the allophones

of this phoneme, you will fmd that they possess three articulatory

features in common: all ofthem are forelingual1enis stops.

Consequently, though allophones ofthe same phoneme possess similar

articulatory features they may frequently show considerable phonetic differences.

It is perfectly obvious that in teaching English pronunciation the difference

between the allophones of the same phoneme should be necessarily

considered. The starting point is of course the articulation of the principal

allophone, e. g. jd-d-dj: *door, double, daughter, dark,* etc. Special training

of the subsidiary allophones should be provided too. Not all the subsidiary