Module: Phonetics

Level: L1-FILA

Time Allotted: 90 min

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Lecture 8: Key Definitions of Fundamental Concepts

**Introduction**

To understand what a phoneme is, it is necessary to consider some fundamental theoretical questions:

-what is meant by a sound?

-How are the sounds of English established?

-How many are there?

Speech is the production of a continuous stream of sounds, but in order to study it, it is necessary to divide this stream into small pieces called *segments.*

E.g. man [m æ n]: three (3) segments. But, it not always easy to decide on the number

1 2 3

of the segments. E.g. main [m e ɪ n]: three (3) or four (4) segments?

1 2 3 4

The first segment is ‘m’ and the last is ‘n’, but should we regard ‘eɪ’ in the middle as one (1) segment or two (2) segments? Thus, how many sounds are there?

Let consider the set of vowels found in English. Each of these vowels can be pronounced in many slightly different ways, so that the total range of vowel sounds produced is practically infinite. But, we are confident that there are only twenty (20) vowels. Why? If we put one of these 20 vowels in the place of another, there is a change in the meaning of the word.

E.g. if [æ]is substituted for [e] in the word ‘bed’ we get a new word ‘bad’. We say that these two (2) vowels are *phonemes* because they are capable of changing the meaning of the word. Thus, a phoneme can be defined as the smallest unit capable of changing the meaning of a word. However, in the case of two (2) slightly different ways of pronouncing what is considered as the same sound, there is no change in the meaning.

[æ+]

/æ/ [æ+\_]

[æ-]

Speech is divided into segments. These segments (units) are called *phonemes* and the complete set of these units is called *the phonic system of the language.* E.g. /p/ is considered as a phoneme in the English language, but not in the Arabic language. While /Ɂ/ is regarded as a phoneme in the Arabic language ارض- ماء, it is not in English language. /b/ is sometimes pronounced with *no voicing* but sometimes it is *fully voiced*. E.g. the same phoneme has two (2) different realisations but one can be substituted for the other without affecting the meaning of the word. These two different realisations are said to be in *free variation.*

[b̥]

/b/

[b]

Another case concerns the realisation of /t/ which can be either *aspirated* or *unaspirated.*

[th] as in tea

/t/

[t] as in eat

The two different realisations are both recognized as /t/, but aspirated [th] will never be found in the place where the unaspirated [t] is appropriate and vice versa. In this case, we say that the two (2) realisations are said to be in complementary distribution (context) which means that one *allophone* (realisation) cannot be substituted for the other.

**Phonetics vs. Phonology**

Phonetics may be defined as comparatively study of describing the sounds that we use in speaking. Phonology studies how *phonemes function in language* and the *relationship* between different phonemes. It is the study of the abstract side of sounds of a language. “Phonology has been defined as the study of sound systems. That is, the study of how speech sounds structure and function in languages” (L. Hyman, 1975: 2).

“A phonetic study tells how the sounds of a language are made and what their acoustic properties are. A phonological study tells how these sounds are used to convey meaning” (L. Hyman, 1975: 2).

We have to study both phonetics and phonology to acquire a full understanding of the use of sounds in a language.

**Supra-Segmental Phonology**

There are many significant sound contrasts (differences) which are not the result of differences between phonemes. E.g. stress is important in the word ‘import’.

‘import [‘ɪmpɔ:t] noun

import

im’port [ɪm’pɔ :t] verb

Intonation is important too.

Right rising a question

Right

Right falling an agreement

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