

Philosophy of language (PHIL UA-9085)

Brief overview of phonetics and phonology 2

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Plan for today

The sounds of language

Overview

- A **language** is a semiotic system. Signs combine an exponent with a meaning. Grammars are ways to generate complex signs from more basic signs.

Slightly modifying a definition provided by Finegan and Besnier (1989), we might define language as a finite system of elements and principles that make it possible for speakers to construct sentences to do particular communicative jobs. (Fasold & Connor-Linton 2006, p. 9)

- **Signs** combine a form and a meaning, and they are identical with neither their exponent nor with their meaning.
- Basic properties:

- Modularity
- Constituency and recursion
- Discreteness
- Productivity
- Arbitrariness
- Reliance on context
- Variability

Phonetics

- Speech is broken up into a sequence of **discrete units**, sounds, as physical objects, the object of study of phonetics.
- What is a phoneme? We first need to introduce the notion of **minimal pair**:

A pair of words differing in only a single sound in the same position within the word, where the difference is contrastive and their distribution is unpredictable. (cf. p. 38)

- What is a **phoneme**? The answer is indirect:

When two sounds in a language form minimal pairs (that is, if their distribution is unpredictable and contrastive), those two sounds represent different **phonemes**. When two sounds in a language are in complementary distribution (that is, their distribution is predictable and noncontrastive), the two sounds are allophones of the same phoneme. In English, [d] and [ð] represent different phonemes. In Spanish [d] and [ð] are allophones of the same phoneme.

Another way to say this is that a **phoneme** is a label for a group of sounds that are perceived by the speaker to be the “same” sound, and the allophones are the different ways of pronouncing that sound depending upon the context in which it is produced. (Zsiga 2006, p. 39)

Phonetics (cont.)

- Sounds are characterised via the **articulators** involved (distinguish active vs. passive, then airstream mechanism, vocal folds and constriction).
- A basic classification of phonemes:
 - **obstruents**: oral stops, fricatives, affricates.
 - **sonorants**: nasal stops, approximants, vowels.
- A simpler classification: **consonants vs. vowels**.
- **Consonants** are distinguished by place of articulation.

Bilabial, labiodental, dental, alveolar, alveopalatal, retroflex, palatal, velar, uvular, pharyngeal, laryngeal.

- **Vowels** are described in terms of the ways in which the tongue body and lips move.
- Do not confuse **written characters and sounds**:

The English language involves 36 different sounds, but it is written with just 26 letters. Only 5 letters are used to represent vowels, but it uses more than a dozen different vowel sounds.

Between phonetics and phonology

The study of **suprasegmental aspects of speech** straddles the domains of phonetics (the study of speech sounds as physical objects) and phonology (the study of how languages organize sounds into different patterns) (cf. p. 28).

- length,
- pitch: tone, intonation,
- syllable structure, and
- stress.

When we turn from analysing the physical aspects of speech sounds to studying their cognitive organisation, we get to...

Phonology

- **Phonology** is about contrast and predictability.
- When do two sounds represent different **phonemes** vs. **allophones**? We work with minimal pairs.

The first thing a phonologist working to describe a previously unknown language wants to figure out is its inventory of sounds: what sounds does the language use? But the second thing he/she wants to figure out is which sound differences the language uses to encode differences between words: what are the phonemes? (p. 40)

Allophones of each phoneme appear in predictable patterns of complementary distribution.

- **Phonotactics** establishes predictable sequences of sounds in languages.
- Allomorphs for a phoneme appear systematically. An **alternation** is seen when the same morpheme is pronounced different ways depending on the context. Types of alt.:

- assimilation, dissimilation, insertion, deletion, lenition and fortition, metathesis and reduplication.

What's next?

Session 4: Thursday 1 February 2024

Topic: Topic: Brief overview of morphology 1

Reading: Donna Lardiere (2006)

Contact

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