

A quick introduction to ...PHONOLOGY!

Phonology – the study of the rule systems governing speech sounds in language

Phonetics – the study of the sounds used in language (divisions: articulatory/ acoustic/ perceptual/ linguistic)

Phonology/phonetics are closely allied disciplines

Phoneme: smallest unit of sound that contributes to a meaning change in language

-- can be seen in minimal pairs, e.g., “pit / kit”

Phonemes are abstract and mental – for example, /pal/ “moment” vs. /p^hal/ “fruit” in Hindi. The word for “moment” will sound like it starts with a “b” to a non-Hindi speaker.. The aspiration difference in the “p” sounds occur in both Hindi and English—for example, “pit” /p^hIt/ vs. “spit” /spIt/.. However, the difference is distinctive (and therefore “phonemic”) in Hindi, not English . Such mental distinctions are acquired quite early in infancy..

Speech sounds are classified by feature systems, with diacritics used in addition to symbols of the I.P.A (International Phonetic Alphabet).

Phonological rules are designed to capture the sound change and sound combination facts of language. For example, let’s consider the fact that aspirated “p” [p^h] only occurs at the beginning of syllables in English. This can be expressed:

[p] à [+ aspiration] / _s

which reads as... “p is realized as aspirated in the environment at the beginning of a syllable”

We could also express the [p] as a feature matrix, e.g.:

+ consonantal
+ labial
- continuant
- voiced

So far, we have dealt with the segmental properties of speech sounds, that is, individual units of sound including consonants and vowels. However, language also makes use of sound patterns greater than the individual unit, i.e. suprasegmental properties. Suprasegmental properties include features such as rhythm, stress, and intonation. Another name for these suprasegmental properties is prosody (“the melody of language”). Here are some examples of prosodic distinctions:

- Lexical stress: “Let’s rebel against the rebels”
- Emphatic stress: “It’s the FOOD you want” vs. “It’s the food YOU want” (expresses different meaning!)
- Sentence-level intonation: “Are we going?” “We are going, aren’t we?” (try saying these with a flat melody and you will see it doesn’t work!)
- Most of the languages of the world also have phonemic tone, e.g /ma maa ma ma/ , “Mother sold me a horse” (Mandarin)