

1.1. The Inconsistency of English Spelling

This lack of concurrence between letters and sounds is one of the bafflingly confusing trappings of the English language. Native speakers themselves have been reported to fall short of getting the pronunciation of some arguably unfamiliar words right. A hugely vital piece of advice, so to speak, I would confide to beginning learners, is that they should make sure when they meet a given word for the first time in their reading, they should not blindly fall back on the linguistic knowledge already internalised; learning by means of analogy is truly perilous and potentially catastrophic. The only remedy for this routine difficulty I can prescribe is very affordable; whenever you encounter a word for the first time irrespective of how certain you are of the potential accuracy of your pronunciation, consult the dictionary for help. It might sound a lot of work at first blush, but as you compel yourself to practise this as often as the need arises, you will as time wears on start to discern how immensely helpful this easy gesture could be in your learning experience. Accordingly, you will realise the indispensably necessary contributions regular dictionary usage could bring to learners' ultimate success and how much it alleviates their learning tension all along the phases that they go through.

1.4.1. The Smallest Distinctive Unit of Phonology

Any phonological study has as its starting point to find out all the sounds that a given linguistic system possesses. Put in strictly phonological terms, it strives to identify all **the phonemes** of the code under scrutiny.

Before getting any further into our explanation, it behoves me to define what a phoneme is. We will assuredly have many meetings with this term throughout our subsequent discussion. Hence, not understanding what it stands for might well make it well-nigh impossible for you to get to full grips with other ensuing terms and concepts tightly linked to it. A phoneme is simply the smallest unit of phonology which serves to distinguish meaning. (Pike: 1947; Gimson: 1970; Roach: 2002) Put differently, a phoneme is a speech sound which functions to change the meanings of words. For example, /k/ and /l/ enjoy the status of phonemes in the English consonantal inventory. Why? The reason is very conspicuous: if we use /l/ instead of /k/ in **kick**, we would generate a completely different word with an utterly divergent meaning: **lick**. The same holds true for /k/ and /m/ in the words **mat** and **cat**. Does not the usage of /k/ instead of /m/ bring about a word that has a totally different identity? To readily grasp the notion of phoneme it is plausible and wise to compare it with the numbers. For a given figure (such as, **1**, **7**) to have the status of a number it has to contribute to altering the numerical value of the word following it. Adhering to this line of thought, **2** and **8** are treated as different numbers because

2 laptops and **8 laptops** are radically different in value, in size, in price, etc. Another equally legitimate insightful analogy could be drawn between the phoneme and the letter. Take the Roman alphabet as an example. It is said to incorporate twenty six letters. Now that you are cognizant of the reason why this example has been adduced, you can come up with the reasoning underpinning this number of letters. It is because of the glaringly obvious fact that if we use one letter instead of another, we generate different words. The following pairs of words are differentiated by virtue of the existence of different letters therein: **pin**, **bin**; **beep**, **weep**; **toy**, **boy**; **bet**, **bit**; **slap**, **slip**. (The letters setting members of each pair apart are bolded). I very much hope this analogy has helped you to understand more fully what the notion that will prevail in the remainder of this book, the phoneme, is.

1.4.2. Allophonic Variants

Speech sounds, or phonemes, are not pronounced similarly in all phonological environments by different speakers, or even by the selfsame speakers in different conditions for different purposes or under different physical and/or psychological statuses. It is indeed an indisputable trait of sounds that they acquire different, not radically different, identities for a variety of factors, whether they be linguistic or otherwise. That is why it is believed by many phoneticians that a single

phoneme should not be viewed as one single sound. Rather, the argument runs, it should be viewed as an umbrella heading, a cover label, of a whole sound family.

To take the argumentation a bit farther from abstract arenas, let us consider some examples. A very salient one that readily springs to mind is the phoneme /l/. You might have noticed thanks to your exposure to native speakers' parole that they do not pronounce this sound in the same way. In word-initial positions and when preceded or/and followed by vowels they produce what is called a clear /l/; in word or sentence final positions or when followed by other consonants, they produce a dark /l/. The two pronunciations of this phoneme are labelled its **allophonic variants** or simply **allophones** of the phoneme /l/. The dark and clear /l/ are merely variants of this phoneme because they inherently do not have any power to bring about differences between words, whether you pronounce the /l/ in **lap** or **lick** as **clear** or **dark**, the words' lexical significance will not be altered. None the less, using the dark in lieu of the clear (which is the accurate, native pronunciation) will impart a foreign taste, as it were, to the accent of the speaker.

To render the idea of allophonic variant far easier to grasp, it seems prudent that I take recourse to the learners' first academic language, Standard Modern Arabic. The /l/ phoneme in this educated variety of Arabic seems to behave similarly to its English counterpart; it has the same allophones both the clear and the dark.

Take the Arabic word for God, Allah; in this very word, it is clear in some environments and dark in others. However, the phonological rules governing which is licit and which is otherwise are at odds with the English ones.

1.4.3. Minimal Pairs

Now that the two concepts have been defined, the time is ripe to introduce you to another notion that is inextricably related to the phoneme: **minimal pairs**. What does minimal pair denote and why is it considered vital to imbed in this introductory book to phonetics and phonology?

A minimal pair refers to a pair of words the constituents of which are made different from one another by one, and only one, phoneme. The pairs, **pit, bit; set, wet; hit, fit; book, look; see, bee; think, wink** are just illustrative examples. Can you perceive that the members of each pair are different from one another because of only one phoneme. Is not *book* different from *look* because of the fact that the first phoneme is the /b/ in book, whereas in look it is /k/. Irrespective of this one difference the two words would be identical. This procedure, that is minimal pairs analysis, is deployed by phonologists to establish the phonemes used in the sound inventory of a hitherto unstudied language (languages that have never been studied, predominantly those without any writing system).

1.5. Segmental phonology

What we have discussed so far as topics within the general scope of phonology constitute, in fact, only one broad branch of phonology, **segmental phonology**. It is called segmental because it is exclusively concerned with the systematic study of individual sounds. (Chalker and Weiner: 1994) The adjective segmental is derived from the noun segment which simply means speech sound, either phoneme or allophone. The other broad branch of phonology is termed **suprasegmental phonology**. It bears this name because it studies aspects of spoken language extending beyond the level of individual sounds. It studies, more clearly, the properties of sounds in combination. It is this branch which studies, stress and intonation, amongst other things.