

1.1. What is Phonetics

Phonetics is the scientific study of the speech sounds that the human speech organs are capable of producing and are equally meaningful in a language or languages. That is, phoneticians, experts on phonetics, carry out very intricate and detailed experiments in order that they can provide a full description of speech sounds that we utter and perceive and play significant roles in our day-to-day usage of language. Random sounds which escape the vocal tract are, hence, not investigated by phonetics. Phoneticians, to put it in plainer English, concern themselves with the sounds that combine together to form words and other longer stretches of language, not the sounds that do not get into the lexical make-up of language.

A word of caution is in place here: phoneticians are exclusively interested in three main aspects of speech sounds:

How they are produced at the level of the speech producing apparatus;

Their physical and acoustic properties after they have left the speakers' speech organs; and

How the produced sounds are perceived by the listeners' ears and other parts of their auditory and perceptual mechanism, including the ear and the chain of nerves connecting up the ear to the brain.

Phonetics, thereby, could be viewed as a tiny camera that secretly follows the speech sound ever since it embarks on its journey from the speakers' articulatory organs up till its termination juncture, the listeners' auditory organs. The tiny camera tries to provide us with full account, accurate along with fine-grained and clear descriptions of the various traits of the speech sounds during their journey.

The spoken mode of language is all too multi-faceted and wide-scoped that there are two complementary fields of inquiry that make of spoken language their area of expertise. We have heretofore looked in brief at one of the two: phonetics; in what follows a pithy account as to the scope of the second field, phonology, is dwelt upon.

1.2. What is Phonology

Surprisingly enough, phonology is also concerned with the study of speech sounds; however, quite unlike phonetics, phonology is interested not in the articulatory, acoustic and auditory features of sounds. Rather, it is concerned with

the investigation of the functionality of every single speech sound in a language or languages. Phonology studies, then, the sound pattern of language. It studies, by way of example, which combinations of sounds are possible in a given linguistic system, which sounds can occur at the beginnings of words, which can in the middle, and which at the end. Another aspect of sounds phonology strives to account for pertains to which sounds play distinctive roles and which are non-distinctive. I am acutely aware that this last sentence does not make much sense to most readers; however, nothing daunted. I will revisit the notion embodied herein in a while.

It is, indeed, by virtue of studies conducted in English phonology that we now know that the following speech sounds never occur in word-final positions in English words: /h/, /y/ and /r/. No known English word terminates in one of these sounds. This, however, does not imply that you are bound to stumble across words not adhering to this rule; far from it. Languages, live languages, borrow unceasingly from one another for filling up lexical slots inherent in them, thereby rendering themselves more useable and equally importantly warding off any communicative failures their users might find themselves.

After this digression we go back to the point made a bit earlier: some of you are now wondering why the /r/ is in the cluster of consonants in question. Some are now saying this is grossly untrue: I am perfectly certain that I heard many native

speakers, highly educated ones of course, pronounce it in words, such as **bird**, **father**, **lure** and an array of others. Do not forget that in this volume from beginning to end we are describing the sounds produced by educated British speakers. The people whom you have heard repeatedly use pronunciations at odds with the one described herein are by no means using this educated British accent. They probably use American, Canadian, Scottish Irish or some other uneducated British accents, to enumerate just a few. Others might, likewise, be reluctant to take in this view but for a different reason; they argue that the /r/ sound is there to be seen figuring finally in a huge number of words, like **here**, **where**, **wore**, etc. Some indeed have voiced their incredulity to me. The answer is forthcoming. You should bear in mind that whenever we are talking about studies in English phonetics and phonology, we are by no means still within the territories of the orthographic system: we are actually in the realm of pronunciation, in the province of how words are *pronounced*, not how they are *spelt*. If a given letter exists in the orthographic make-up of a given word, then, this does not entail that that particular letter is perforce pronounced. The English dictionary is undoubtedly brimful of words wherein many letters are unpronounced. I reiterate: you should invariably remember that the unit of both phonetics and phonology is *the sound* in lieu of *the letter*.