

Chapter 2: *Articulatory, Auditory and Acoustic Phonetics. Phonology*

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CHAPTER 2

ARTICULATORY, ACOUSTIC AND AUDITORY PHONETICS. PHONOLOGY

2.1. Phonetics and phonology

Two terms are (often loosely) used to refer to linguistic disciplines studying that part of the linguistic sign which de Saussure called the acoustic image: *phonetics* and *phonology*. The importance of sounds as vehicles of meaning is something people have been aware of for thousands of years. However, systematic studies on the speech sounds only appeared with the development of modern sciences. The term *phonetics* used in connection with such studies comes from Greek and its origins can be traced back to the verb *phōnein*, to speak, in its turn related to *phōnē*, sound. The end of the 18th century witnessed a revival of the interest in the studying of the sounds of various languages and the introduction of the term *phonology*. The latter comes to be, however, distinguished from the former only more than a century later with the development of structuralism which emphasizes the essential contrastive role of classes of sounds which are labeled *phonemes*. The terms continue to be used, however, indiscriminately until the prestige of phonology as a distinct discipline is finally established in the first half of the 20th century. Though there is no universally accepted point of view about a clear-cut border line between the respective domains of *phonetics* and *phonology* as, indeed, we cannot talk about a phonological system ignoring the phonetic aspects it involves and, on the other hand, any phonetic approach should take into account the phonological system that is represented by any language, most linguists will agree about some fundamental distinctions between the two.

Phonetics will be almost unanimously acknowledged to be the linguistic science which studies *speech sounds*: the way in which they are *produced* (uttered, articulated), the way in which they are *perceived*, their *physical* characteristics, etc. Therefore, it is these more “palpable”, measurable aspects of the phonic aspects of language that constitute the domain of phonetics. On the other hand, it is obvious, however, even for those whose perception of linguistic phenomena is rather of an empirical and not of a very scholarly kind, that when communicating verbally, though they are producing a wide variety of sounds, people are actually “aware” of using a comparatively drastically limited set of sounds, in other words that they tend to disregard the obvious (more or less important) differences between the way in which sounds are uttered and have in mind only *classes of sounds* that perform a certain function in language. From this new perspective, it is not the sounds as such that are important, but rather the role they have in linguistic communication. As we shall see later, different languages operate different distinctions and structure in different ways the more or less common stock of sounds that can be found in various idioms. It is precisely this aspect of sounds that is of interest for *phonology*, which is thus understood to study not so much the sounds as such, but rather classes of sounds that have a certain function in the structure of a given language.¹ This distinction will be further analyzed in the chapter dealing with the *phoneme*.

We have already said that phonetics is concerned with various aspects relevant for the physical characteristics of sounds. Several branches of phonetics can further be distinguished, depending on the narrower domain of interest of the respective field. Thus, one of the most important branches of phonetics is *articulatory phonetics* which studies the way in which human beings articulate or utter the sounds they make use of in verbal communication.

¹ Note that what we referred to as phonetic, alphabetic writing actually tends to represent these classes of sounds. That is why people using this type of writing have at least some intuitive awareness of the phonological structure of their language.