Chapter 5: Phonological structure: The Phoneme and its allophones. Segmental specification: Distinctive Features in various phono-logical theories

5.1. Individual sounds and classes of sounds. The phoneme and its contrastive function
5.2. Allophones. Complementary distribution and free variation
5.3. The phonological idiosyncrasy of linguistic systems
5.4. Broad and narrow transcription
5.5. Segmental and suprasegmental phonemes
5.6. From the minimal unit of linguistic analysis to the bundle of distinctive features
5.7. Jakobson and Halle’s feature system
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5.10. The use of features for segmental specification and for the description of phonological processes

5.3. The phonological idiosyncrasy of linguistic systems

Another important reality becomes evident for us: if human beings are biologically apt to produce a wide (but still finite) variety of speech sounds, each natural language will operate a particular selection and choose a set of sounds that are functional within the respective linguistic system. It follows from that that differences which are considered “important” (functional, contrastive, phonemic) by a certain language, may not be considered in the same way by other languages. An example at hand is vowel length. It is evident that vowels have different lengths in both Romanian and English. But while in Romanian vowel length doesn’t play any role, in English it clearly does so, since it is vowel length that distinguishes, say, seat from sit. Another example of the different interpretation of the same phonetic reality by the two languages is the treatment of the velar nasal [ŋ]. Any speaker of Romanian if asked to carefully analyze the sound spelt ți in bandă and bancă respectively will acknowledge the difference but will not consider it an important one, because in Romanian the distinction between the alveolar nasal and the velar one is never contrastive or functional. In English, however, it is, as minimal pairs like sin [sin] and sing [sŋ] prove. Consequently, while Romanian treats the two sounds as allophones of the same nasal phoneme, /n/, English will grant both [n] and [ŋ] the status of allophones of two different nasal phonemes, /n/ and /ŋ/ respectively. Aspiration, mentioned above, is another good example. While in English it doesn’t have a phonemic value as it is associated to positional variants of one and the same phoneme, in Hindi, for example, it is the basis of a phonemic contrast since pal with an unaspirated plosive means to take care of, while phal (pronounced with aspiration) means the edge of a knife (Spencer, 1996: 5).

Remembering the distinction between phonetics and phonology discussed in the second chapter of the book, we can now say that while phonetics deals with the more or
less universal characteristics of sounds (in articulatory, acoustic or auditory terms) phonology will rather focus on the particular way in which the sound systems of different languages are organized. The phonological rules, constraints, the sound patterns of a given linguistic system will then be the domain of phonology. Simplifying, we can say that phonetics deals with actual sounds and their characteristics, while phonology will be concerned with matters of a more abstract nature, as it analyses phonemes, phonemic features phonological patterning. We will actually see that the boundary between the two disciplines is far from being so clear-cut as we would like it to be since it is impossible to speak of the phonetic characteristics of sounds outside of a phonological context and on the other hand we cannot talk about phonological processes without making use of the phonetic characteristics of sounds.