

PHONEME THEORY: THE DEVELOPMENT OF PHONOLOGICAL THOUGHT AND ITS LINGUISTIC SIGNIFICANCE

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Abstract. Phoneme theory is one of the fundamental concepts in linguistics and phonology. It explains how speech sounds function in a language and how they help distinguish meaning. This study discusses the main ideas of phoneme theory, its historical development, and the contribution of major linguistic schools, including I.A. Baudouin de Courtenay, the St. Petersburg Phonological School, and the Moscow Phonological School. The research applies a descriptive and comparative approach to analyze different views on the phoneme and its role in language structure. The findings show that phoneme theory remains essential for understanding pronunciation, language teaching, and modern phonological studies.

Key words: phoneme, phonology, speech sounds, linguistic schools, pronunciation, meaning distinction

Annotatsiya. Fonema nazariyasi tilshunoslik va fonologiyaning fundamental tushunchalaridan biridir. U nutq tovushlarining tilda qanday amal qilishini va ularning ma'no farqlashga qanday yordam berishini tushuntiradi. Ushbu tadqiqotda fonema nazariyasining asosiy g'oyalari, uning tarixiy taraqqiyoti hamda I.A. Boduen de Kurtene, Sankt-Peterburg fonologiya maktabi va Moskva fonologiya maktabi kabi yirik tilshunoslik maktablarining ushbu sohaga qo'shgan hissasi muhokama qilinadi. Tadqiqotda fonema va uning til tuzilishidagi o'rni haqidagi turli qarashlarni tahlil qilish uchun tavsifiy va qiyosiy yondashuvlar qo'llanilgan. Natijalar shuni ko'rsatadiki, fonema nazariyasi talaffuzni tushunish, til o'qitish va zamonaviy fonologik tadqiqotlar uchun hamon muhim ahamiyatga ega.

Kalit so'zlar: fonema, fonologiya, nutq tovushlari, tilshunoslik maktablari, talaffuz, ma'no farqlash.

Аннотация. Теория фонемы является одной из фундаментальных концепций в лингвистике и фонологии. Она объясняет, как речевые звуки функционируют в языке и как они помогают различать смыслы. В данном исследовании рассматриваются основные идеи теории фонемы, её историческое развитие и вклад крупнейших лингвистических школ, включая И.А. Бодуэна де Куртенэ, Петербургскую фонологическую школу и Московскую фонологическую школу. В работе применяется описательный и сравнительный подход для анализа различных взглядов на фонему и её роль в структуре языка. Результаты показывают, что теория фонемы остается необходимой для понимания произношения, преподавания языков и современных фонологических исследований.

Ключевые слова: фонема, фонология, звуки речи, лингвистические школы, произношение, смысловое различие.

Introduction

Language is built on sounds, and these sounds play an important role in communication. However, not every sound difference changes meaning. The concept

that helps explain this system is the phoneme. A phoneme is the smallest sound unit in a language that can distinguish one word from another. For example, in English the words bat and pat differ in meaning because of the phonemes /b/ and /p/.

Phoneme theory became one of the most significant achievements in modern linguistics because it established the difference between physical sounds and their functional role in language. It helped linguists understand how sounds are organized into a system and why some sound differences matter while others do not.

The purpose of this study is to examine the origin and development of phoneme theory, describe the views of major scholars and linguistic schools, and explain the importance of the phoneme in language analysis and teaching.

The term phoneme was introduced and developed in linguistic science in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One of the first scholars to make a major contribution to phoneme theory was I.A. Baudouin de Courtenay. He argued that the phoneme should not be understood simply as a physical sound, but as a mental and functional unit of language. According to his theory, the phoneme exists in the mind of speakers and is realized in actual speech through different sound variants.

This idea became highly influential in the development of phonology as a separate branch of linguistics. It showed that speech sounds must be studied not only from the physiological or acoustic point of view, but also from the functional point of view. Thus, phonology focuses on the role of sounds in distinguishing meaning, while phonetics studies how sounds are produced and perceived.

The St. Petersburg Phonological School, associated especially with L.V. Scherba, further developed phonemic theory. Scherba defined the phoneme as a real, independent unit that exists in the sound system of a language. He emphasized that the phoneme performs a distinctive function: it helps differentiate words and grammatical forms. This approach gave special importance to the practical side of phonology, especially in teaching pronunciation and literacy.

According to Scherba's phonemic concept, each phoneme can have several variants, called allophones, but these variants do not change the meaning of a word. For example, the pronunciation of a sound may vary depending on its position in a word, yet speakers still recognize it as the same phoneme. This distinction between phoneme and allophone became one of the core principles of phonological theory.

The Moscow Phonological School offered a somewhat different interpretation. Its representatives paid greater attention to the morphological function of phonemes and their role within morphemes. They argued that phonemes should be studied in relation to the grammatical and morphological structure of language. In this view, the phoneme is not only a sound unit but also an element connected with word formation and grammatical meaning.

The difference between the St. Petersburg and Moscow schools shows that phoneme theory developed through scholarly debate. While one approach emphasized the sound and distinctive function of phonemes, the other stressed their relation to morphology and the structure of words. Both approaches, however, contributed greatly to the understanding of language as a systematic and organized phenomenon.

Phoneme theory is important not only in theoretical linguistics but also in practical fields. In language teaching, it helps learners understand pronunciation rules and the difference between similar sounds. In lexicography, it supports accurate transcription and pronunciation guides. In speech therapy and speech technology,

phonemic analysis is necessary for identifying sound patterns and building systems of speech recognition.

Moreover, phoneme theory explains why certain sound differences are meaningful in one language but not in another. A contrast that distinguishes meaning in English may not have the same function in Uzbek or Russian. This proves that phonemes belong to the system of a particular language and cannot be studied in isolation from that language.

Conclusion

In conclusion, phoneme theory occupies a central place in the study of language. It explains how speech sounds function as meaningful units within a linguistic system. The contributions of Baudouin de Courtenay, Scherba, the St. Petersburg School, and the Moscow School played a crucial role in shaping phonological thought.

The study shows that the phoneme is not merely a sound, but a functional and abstract unit that helps distinguish meaning. Different linguistic schools approached this concept from different perspectives, yet all of them enriched phonological science. Today, phoneme theory remains highly relevant in linguistics, language teaching, pronunciation studies, and speech-related technologies.

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