

The Study of Speech

Phonetics and Phonology

What do we do when we speak? First, we use certain parts of our body to produce an air stream inwards and outwards. This air stream is created intentionally to produce certain sounds. These sounds are transmitted as sound waves, which are perceived by a hearer. This hearer receives the sound wave, decodifies it and, then, interprets it.

“Phonetics and Phonology are concerned with speech – with the ways in which humans produce and hear speech.” (Clark & Yallop, 1990: 1) These two disciplines study the production and reception of speech sounds in all its complexity. That is, they study the whole process and all the mechanisms involved in the production and reception of speech.

On the one hand, Phonetics is concerned with the anatomy and physiology of speech, with the production organs (Articulatory Phonetics), with the sound wave (Acoustic Phonetics) and with the perception of that sound wave (Auditory or Perceptual Phonetics).

On the other hand, Phonology is concerned with the “systems and patterns of sounds that occur in particular languages.” (Ibid.: 2). So, a research on the way articulatory organs work to produce a given sound or a sound feature is normally considered a phonetic investigation, whereas a research on the total number of vowel and consonant sounds in English is considered as phonological in nature. Then, “phoneticians are likely to draw on methods and techniques used in the natural sciences (while) phonologists may profess to be more concerned with the mental organization of language.” (ibid.: 3)

However, both disciplines must be studied together. Phonetics and phonology only study two different aspects of the same reality. According to Peter Roach (1991), phonology is “the study of the abstract side of the sounds of language” whereas phonetics studies “the actual realizations”. Speech is a complex human phenomenon which involves mental and physical components and both phonetics and phonology aim at accounting for this complexity.

Bibliography

- Clark, John, and Colin Yallop. 1990. *An Introduction to Phonetics and Phonology*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Roach, Peter. 1991. *English Phonetics and Phonology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.