Phonetics and phonology essay sample

Linguistics, Language

Introduction

English is a widespread language, spoken all over the world. It is the mother tongue of people of different nationalities, such as: British, American, Australian, Canadian and South African. It is the second language (language of instruction, used in administration and education) of several countries in Asia and Africa and it is learned as a foreign language in almost every country.

Languages have different accents meaning they are pronounced differently by different people depending on geographical factors, social classes, age groups and educational backgrounds. When we speak of an accent, however, it is important to differentiate it from a dialect, which we use to refer to a variety of a language that differs not only in pronunciation but in vocabulary, grammar and word-order, too. The term accent refers to pronunciation differences only.

Pronunciation can be studied from two points of view: the phonetic and the phonological. 1

Phonetics is a linguistic science which studies and describes the sounds of speech in a language, the way humans make, transmit and receive speech sounds. Phonetics can be divided into articulatory phonetics which studies the way the vocal organs are used to produce speech sounds, there is acoustic phonetics which studies the physical properties of speech sounds, and auditory phonetics which studies the way people perceive speech sounds. In this paper I concentrate mostly on the articulation of speech

sounds in the English language, with little mention of their acoustic and auditory characteristics.

Phonology is the study of sound system of a language, the general properties displayed by this system; it studies how sounds function in relation to each other, the way the speech sounds form systems and patters in human languages.

The accent that I concentrate on in this paper; the accent that is one that is most recommended for foreign learners studying British English, is the accent that is familiar as being used by most announcers and newsreaders on national and international broadcasting channels. It is known as Received Pronunciation (or RP). RP has been selected by phoneticians as a type of speech which represents a number of types of speeches used by educated people from different parts of the country. It is the language of Southern English speakers, particularly from London and surrounding counties where the oldest grammar schools and universities are, and is most widely recognised and understood all over the world.

1. Types of Spoken English in Britain

The forms of spoken English in Britain vary considerably more than in most other areas of the world where English is spoken. 2 1. Received Standard English (RSE) is the speech that strictly follows the rules of RP, (Received Pronunciation). 2. Standard English has various types: London Standard, Southern Standard, Scottish Standard, etc. Although these standards have certain features in common, they differ and each standard is to some extent

coloured by the geographical area in which it is spoken. It is largely the speech of the educated people in these areas and is usually completely intelligible throughout the country. 3. Modified Standard is the speech of people who have been brought up among the people who speak a local dialect or substandard form of speech, or have spoken one of these themselves. During instruction, this form has been modified to somewhat halfway between dialect or substandard speech and standard. This type of spoken English can be heard in cities and urban areas among people who have had a secondary level of education. 4. Substandard speech is probably what is commonly referred to as vulgar speech and it is usually heard in the large cities among the working class and especially among those who are uneducated. 5. Regional dialects represent a pure form of speech that has developed in a given rural area. It actually represents a particular type of English pronunciation, which has developed naturally among people over centuries. Since population in rural areas is very static, this form of speech has generally been unaffected by other forms of speech. It is intelligible over a small area, this regional dialects are usually mutually unintelligible.

A few words on American English

Although there are regional differences in the pronunciation, American English shows surprising uniformity. Standard speech in the United States is a rather normal habitual speech used by the educated members of the American society, both in formal and informal situations. American English is divided into three regional types: Eastern (spoken by about 10% of the population of the US), Southern (spoken by about 25% of the total population) and General American (GA, spoken by the rest of the country –

the mid-West and the North). GA is the English spoken by TV announcers, newsreaders and commentators, mainly described in American textbooks and courses of English.

2. Physiology of Speech Organs

The first requisite of speech is breath. During the act of normal, healthy breathing, air is set up from the lungs through the windpipe and out either through the nose or through the mouth. Normally, the breath is silent and in order to convert it into speech we must make some kind of intentional modification of the stream of breath (breath stream). This breath stream can then be modified intentionally at a great number of different points on its way out of the lungs, through the respiratory tract and through the mouth and nose. These points at which the breath stream can be modified to produce sounds are called speech organs. They are: the vocal cords, the tongue, the lips and the roof of the mouth. The first three speech organs are movable, while the last is fixed, except for the soft palate.

2. 1. The Vocal Cords

The first point at which the breath stream can be modified is the larynx. It is placed at the upper end of the wind pipe and it is a bony structure rather like a “ box” which contains two lip-like structures stretched from the front to the back of the larynx called the vocal cords. In the front they are fixed, but in the back each vocal cord is attached to cartilages which are movable. The vocal cords can thus take up four different positions: i. Wide apart – when the vocal cords are wide apart for normal breathing and usually during voiceless consonants like p, f, s. ii. Narrow glottis – if air is passed through

the glottis when it is narrowed the result is a fricative sound, which is not very different from a whispered vowel. It is called a voiceless glottal fricative. iii. Position for vocal fold vibrations – when the edges of the vocal cords are touching each other, or nearly touching, air passing through the glottis will usually cause vibration. iv. Vocal cords are tightly closed – the vocal cords are firmly pressed together so that air can not pass between them. When this happens, we call it a glottal stop or glottal plosive. 3

2. 2 The Tongue

The tongue is the most flexible speech organ. For the purpose of phonetic study it is divided into four imaginary sections: the tip of the tongue, the blade, the front and the back. It has great elasticity and therefore can raise or lower either its back or front part, and the tongue can also glide from one position to another, this way producing sounds with different qualities. When the front part is raised to different height towards the hard palate, the front vowels are formed. The back of the tongue is raised towards the soft palate in the articulation of the back vowels. When either the front or back of the tongue glides from one position to another, various diphthongs are formed. To produce consonants, the tongue is used to block the breath stream at one or more points in the mouth (plosives, nasals), or by narrowing the breath passage so that audible friction is created (fricatives). The tongue takes part in the formation of almost all English sounds.

2. 3. The Lips

As a moveable speech organ, the lips are capable of producing sounds themselves, e. g. /p/. They can also combine with other speech organs

to produce vowels and some consonants, for example /i:/, /f/, /v/, or /w/. Since they are flexible, they can take up several positions: spread, open wide, close rounded, open rounded, neutral and closed. i. Spread – the lips are slightly apart and energetically spread. The vowels produced in this position are: /i:/, /i/, and / e/. ii. Wide open – the lips have no effect on the breath stream. The only vowel produced with lips in this position is /ɑ:/. iii. Close rounded – the lips are rounded with a small gap between them and they can be flat rounded, / ʊ/, or protruded, /u:/ and /w/. iv. Open rounded – the lips have a rather large gap between them: in this position they can be flat rounded to form / ɒ/, or protruded to produce /ɔ:/. v. Neutral – the lips are held in a relaxed position with a medium distance between the jaws. This is the position of the lips to produce /æ/, /ʌ/, /ə/ and /ɜ/. vi. Closed lips – when the lips are completely closed so that the passage of the breath stream is blocked all together. Then either the lips suddenly open /p/ and /b/ or the soft palate lowers /m/. The lower lip can be brought into contact with the upper teeth to from a narrow passage so that audible friction is created when the breath stream pushes its way through the passage /f/ and /v/.

2. 4. The Roof of the Mouth

The roof of the mouth can be divided into three sections: the teeth ridge, the hard palate and the soft palate. i. The teeth ridge is a fixed speech organ whose chief function is to serve as a point of contact, for the tip of the tongue, in the production of some consonants. It also serves both as a place for narrowing the passage of the breath stream together with either the tip or the blade of the tongue, in the production of /s/, /z/ and /r/ and as a place of vibration of the tongue for the thrilled consonant /r/. Furthermore together

with the hard palate it takes part in the production of /ʃ/, /ʒ/, / tʃ/ and /dʒ/. ii. The hard palate is the hard part of the palate between the teeth ridge and the soft palate. It is also a fixed speech organ. Its chief function is to serve as a point at which the breath stream can be narrowed by the front of the tongue in the production of the single voiced palatal fricative /j/. The hard palate together with the alveolar ridge is used in the creation of /tʃ/, /dʒ/, /ʃ/ and /ʒ/. iii. The soft palate is a movable speech organ which has three main functions: to serve as a point of contact for the back of the tongue in the production of the velar consonants /k/, /g/ and / ŋ/. to serve as a place towards which the back of the tongue is raised when the back vowels /ɑ:/, /ɒ/, /ɔ:/, /ʊ/ and /u:/, and the diphthongs /ɑʊ/ and /əʊ/ are formed. it can be raised so that it touches the back wall of the pharynx. In this position the breath stream is prevented from escaping through the nose and it all goes through the mouth regardless of whether there is an obstacle or not. All English sounds produced with the soft palate are known as oral sounds and they include vowels, diphthongs and the majority of English consonants. When the soft palate is lowered, nasal consonants /m/, /n/ and /ŋ/ are produced.

Fig. 1 Speech Organs

3. General Characteristics of English Sounds

English speech sounds have six main characteristics. They are:

1) Quality of sound, which mainly depends on the speech organs that take part in its production, as well as the position they take in the formation of the

sound. This is especially true of vowels, with the raising and lowering different parts of the tongue to determine the shape of the mouth cavity when pronouncing, for example /i/ in comparison to /I:/. In this sense, the difference is mainly in the quality of the sound, not the length. 2) Quantity of sound, which usually refers to the length. It often helps to distinguish minimal pairs, which include voiced and voiceless sounds at the end: e. g. heard [hɜ: d] and hurt [hɜ: t]. Unlike, say, plosives and affricates which are incapable of being lengthened, difference in length is noticeable in vowels, especially long vowels and diphthongs. 3) Vibration of the vocal cords. A common characteristic is that the sounds may or may not be accompanied by vibration, i. e. may or may not be noticed.

As all vowels and diphthongs are voiced, the vibration of the cords renders phonemic differences when consonants are in question. For example /p/, /b/, /s/, /z/, /k/, /g/, /t/, /d/, /f/, /u/, /tʃ/ and /dʒ/. 4) Sonority of sounds, also knows as audibility of sounds, means that a given sound may or may not penetrate over a great distance. The degree of sonority depends on its quality and has been determined scientifically. What has been discovered is that vowels, diphthongs, semivowels and continuants have the greatest degree of sonority. Voiceless fricatives and plosives have the least. 5) Degree of force (stress). Each sound can be pronounced with a varying degree of force, i. e. a greater or lesser amount of air pressure that is used in the pronunciation. The stronger the stress is, the louder the sound is pronounced. 6) Pitch (intonation). This characteristic is generally applied to voiced sounds. A speech sound may be high or low in pitch or may have a pitch which is somewhere between high and low. Furthermore, syllables and

words connected in speech have their own particular pitch and together produce what is known as the intonation of the sentence. We have already said that the stronger the stress – the louder the sound. It also means that the sound has a higher pitch. When the stress is weaker, the pitch is generally low. This shows clearly that the question of intonation is already related to the phenomenon of stress.

4. The Phoneme

The smallest sound unit in a language that is capable of conveying a distinct meaning is called a phoneme. If we compare words such as heat, seat, feet, sheet, cheat, meat and neat, we shall notice that they differ in respect to only one sound: /h/, /s/, /f/, /ʃ/, /tʃ/, /m/ and /n/ in initial position. These are called minimal pairs. Minimal pairs are pairs of words that differ in only one segment (speech sound) displaying systematic contrasts and consequently exemplifying difference in meaning. So, an essential property of a phoneme is that it functions contrastively, i. e., it distinguishes one word from the other. Every vowel, diphthong and consonant in the sound system of a language has no meaning in itself, but when contrasted with other vowels, diphthongs or consonants of the same language, they form words which carry meaning. This sound is then called a phoneme of that particular language.

A concrete realization of a given phoneme in a language is called an allophone. Allophones are actual spoken variants of a given phoneme. Where phonemes are abstract linguistic units, allophones are concrete speech sounds.

Conditioned vs. Free Variants

Conditioned variants are in fact allophones of a phoneme. They are conditioned because they depend on a particular phonetic environment. Thus, for instance, the English phoneme /l/ has at least three allophones (conditioned variants) that are complementarily distributed:

clear [l] (in pre-vocalic position and before /j/) e. g. lip, flow, will you dark [ł](in post-vocalic and pre-consonantal position) e. g. tell, cold, film devoiced [l](following voiceless plosives) e. g. play, clean

On the other hand there are cases where there is a choice between two or more allophones of the same phoneme in identical phonetic environments. A good example of this is the word water: [wɔ: t ə] or [wɔ: r ə] (in Australian English).

These examples display cases of free variation i. e. free interchange of speech sounds on allophonic level. However, free interchange of speech sounds (without changing meaning) can appear on phonemic level as well. Consider these examples:

issue/isju:/ or /iʃju:/
would you/t isju:/ or /t iʃju:/
could you/kudju/ or /kudʒu/
the suffix –ed/reitid/ or /reitəd/

Free variants are present in both standard English and its dialects and whether they occur on phonemic or allophonic level, they are perfectly

acceptable pronunciations. The only difference is in personal preference. Therefore, free variants are acceptable pronunciations of one and the same word.

5. Classification of English Speech Sounds

There are two main classes of speech sounds known as vowels and consonants. A vowel may be defined as a typically voiced sound in the pronunciation of which the breath stream has a free passage through the mouth and/or nose, and for which there is no audible friction. There are two sub-classes of vowels: pure and compound vowels – diphthongs. A pure vowel consists of only one vowel elements, while a diphthong is composed by two vowel elements. A consonant may be defined as a sound, voiced or voiceless, in the pronunciation of which there is either a complete or partial obstruction, or audible friction which prevents the breath stream from escaping through the mouth or nose. This distinction is purely physiological. The acoustic distinction is based on the relative sonority of the speech sounds, vowels being more sonorous than consonants. The third distinction given by linguistic analysis is the pronunciation of the [ði] in front of a vowel and an [ən] in front of a consonant. 5. 1. Classification and Characteristics of Vowels

Vowels can be classified in four different ways according to: The part of the tongue used in their formation, according to which we have front vowels: /i/, /i:/, /e/, /æ/ and /ʌ/, as they are formed when the front part of the tongue is raised towards the hard palate to different heights, back vowels: /a:/, /ɒ/, /ɔ:/, /u/ and /u:/, in the pronunciation of which the back of the tongue is

raised towards the soft palate to different heights, and central vowels: /ɜ:/ and /ə/ which are formed by raising the centre of the tongue towards the junctures between the front and the back of the roof of the mouth. The height of the tongue in the mouth, according to which we distinguish closed vowels: /i:/, /i/ and / u:/, /u/, produced with the tongue in a high position in the mouth., half-closed vowels: /əu/ and /ei/ formed when the tongue is raised to a half-closed position in the mouth (but no pure vowels are articulated this way), half-open vowels: /e/, /ʌ/, /ɔ:/, /ɜ:/ and /ə/, produced with the tongue raised to a half-open position, and open vowels: /æ/, /a:/ and /ɒ/, produced with the tongue in low position.

The position of the lips the vowels occupy in their production, according to which two types of vowels are formed, rounded vowels: /ɔ:/, /ɒ/, / u:/ and /u/, produced with rounding of the lips, and unrounded vowels: /i:/ , /i/, /e/, /ʌ/, /æ/, /a:/, /ɜ:/ and /ə/ which do not require rounding. The inherent length of the vowel, according to which we distinguish long vowels: /i:/, / u:/, /ɜ:/, /ɔ:/ and /a:/ which are normally longer in duration,
and short vowels: /i/, /e/, /ʌ/, /æ/, /ə/, /u/, /ɒ/, which are normally of shorter duration.

5. 2. Classification of Diphthongs

A diphthong is defined by Jones as “ a sound made by gliding from one vowel to another … represented phonetically by sequence of two letters.” Some are classified in accordance with the movement of the tongue defined in the cardinal vowel system: opening diphthongs are those in which the second element is a more ‘ open’ vowel than the first: that is, the tongue ends lower

in the mouth, for example /əʊ/ (‘ oh’); conversely, closing diphthongs are those in which the second element is a closer vowel than the first: that is, the tongue ends higher in the mouth, for example /ai/ (‘ I’); centring diphthongs are those in which the second element is schwa: that is, the tongue ends in the most ‘ neutral’, or central, position in the mouth, for example /eə/ (‘ air’). A second classification is by the comparative importance of the different elements: rising diphthongs are those in which the second element seems to be the more important, such as ‘ view’, in which the /u:/ (‘ oo’) sound is dominant over the introductory short /j/ sound which precedes it, falling diphthongs are those in which the first element seems to be the more important, such as /ɔɪ/, in which the /ɔ/ is heard as ‘ stronger’ than the /ɪ/. Most English diphthongs are falling diphthongs. Diphthongs may also be classified by the extent of the movement of the tongue: wide diphthongs show a larger movement, e. g. from an ‘ open’ vowel to a ‘ close’ one, such as /aɪ/ (‘ I’) and /aʊ/ (‘ ow’); narrow diphthongs show less movement, e. g. from a ‘ half-close’ vowel to a ‘ close’ one, such as /eə/ (as in ‘ day”). 5. 3. Classification and Characteristics of Consonants

Consonants can be classified in three different ways, according to: The manner of production or articulation:
a) plosives: /p/, /b/, /t/, /d/, /k/ and /g/, articulated with complete obstruction at the mouth passage entirely blocking the air flow for a moment b) nasals: /m/, /n/ and /ŋ/, where we have a complete obstruction of the mouth passage allowing the air to pass through the nose c) laterals: /l/, where we have partial closure of the breath passage allowing the breath stream to escape freely out of the mouth d) fricatives: /f/, /v/, /s/, /z/, /h/, /r/, /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/

and /ʒ/, articulated by narrowing the mouth passage so as to make the air-flow turbulent, while allowing it to pass continuously e) affricated: / tʃ/ and /dʒ/, articulated with first a complete obstruction and then a narrowing of the mouth passage f) semivowels: /j/ and /w/, articulatory like vowels, but function like consonants because they are not syllabic An obstruction is formed stopping the breath stream completely at some particular point so that the breath stream is compressed behind this obstruction to build up air pressure which when released produces plosives. There are four points for air obstruction and they are 1) the lips /p/ and /b/ = bilabials, 2) teeth ridge /t/ and /d/ = alveolars, 3) the soft palate /k/ and /g/ = velars and 4) the vocal cords / ʔ / (glottal stop) = glottal. Closing the mouth passage completely and at the same time lowering the soft palate so that the breath stream escapes through the nose is how the nasals are formed.

The place of articulation

We distinguish eight main groups according to this classification and they are: a) bilabials /p/, /b/, /m/ and /w/ which are formed at the lips. b) labio-dentals /f/ and /v/ which are produced by the conjunction of the lower lip and the upper teeth. c) interdentals /θ/ and /ð/, formed by the insertion of the tip of the tongue between the teeth. d) alveolars /t/, /d/, /n/, /l/, /s/, /z/ and /r/ pronounced with the tip of the blade of the tongue near or against the teeth ridge. e) post alveolar / tʃ/, /dʒ/, /ʃ/ /ʒ/, the area between the alveolar ridge and the hard palate f) palatal /j/, which is the hard palate or roof of the mouth g) velar /k/, /g/, /ŋ/, pronounced with the back of the tongue and the

soft palate h) glottal /h/, produced at the space between the vocal cords

Classification of consonants according to the vocal cords:

a) voiced: /b/, /v/, /ð/, /m/, /d/, /z/, /l/, /n/, /j/, /ʒ/, /dʒ/, /g/, /ŋ/, /w/ and /ʔ/ in the pronunciation of which the vocal cords vibrate. b) voiceless: /p/, /f/, /θ/, /t/, /s/, /ʃ/, /tʃ/, /k/ and /h/ in the pronunciation of which the vocal cords do not vibrate.

6. Syllables and Their Parts

Words can be cut up into units called syllables. Humans seem to need syllables as a way of segmenting the stream of speech and giving it a rhythm of strong and weak beats, as we hear in music and they exist only to make speech easier for the brain to process. A word contains at least one syllable. Most speakers of English have no trouble dividing a word up into its component syllables. Sometimes how a particular word is divided might vary from one individual to another, but a division is always easy and always possible. Syllables have internal structure: they can be divided into parts. The parts are onset and rhyme; within the rhyme we find the nucleus and coda. Not all syllables have all parts; the smallest possible syllable contains a nucleus only. A syllable may or may not have an onset and a coda. Onset is the beginning sounds of the syllable; the ones preceding the nucleus. These are always consonants in English. The nucleus is a vowel in most cases. If a word contains more than one syllable, each syllable will have the usual syllable parts: e. g. win-dow, to-ma-to, pre-pos-te-rous, fun-da-men-tal

Rhyme (or rime) is the rest of the syllable, after the onset. The rhyme consists of a nucleus and coda. The nucleus, as the term suggests, is the

core or essential part of a syllable. A nucleus must be present in order for a syllable to be present. Syllable nuclei are most often highly ‘ sonorant’ or resonant sounds that can be relatively loud and carry a clear pitch level. In English and most other languages, most syllable nuclei are vowels. The English “ liquids” [r , l] and the nasals [m , n] can be the nuclei of syllables under certain conditions. [r] can be a nucleus as easily as a vowel, in any position: the words ‘ bird’, ‘ word’, ‘ her’, ‘ fur’; there is no vowel in the pronunciation of these syllables, even though they have one in the spelling. [l] and the nasals [m n] become syllable nuclei when they follow an alveolar consonant in the last syllable of a word. This happens in the relaxed or casual rather than very formal articulation of the word. Compare casual vs. formal pronunciations of ‘ button’, ‘ bottle’, ‘ bottom’. 7. Stress and Intonation

There are two kinds of stress: words stress and sentence stress. In English, one or more of the syllables in each content word are stressed. In some words, where more than one vowel is stressed, one vowel receives great stress or accent (primary/main) marked with ´ where the other stress vowel gets secondary stress marked with ` e. g. rèsignátion lìnguístics stress is contrastive in English and essential in cases where it is used to distinguish between nouns and verbs e. g. súbject (noun) subjéct (verb) When words are combined into phrases and sentences, one of the syllables receives greater stress than all of the others, only one of the vowels in a sentence/phrase receives primary stress (or accent).

All the other stressed vowels receive secondary stress. Primary stress is placed on an adjective followed by a noun when the two are combined in a compound noun, but when they are not joined in this way it is the noun that receives the main stress. e. g. example: tíghtrope tight rópe Intonation Intonation is important because it shows syntactic differences example: Josh is going. (statement) Josh is going? (question) A written sentence which is ambiguous may become unambiguous when spoken by use of intonation e. g. Josh left direction for Ana to follow.

– if Ana is to follow Josh, the rise in pitch would be on the first syllable of the word " follow", followed by a fall in pitch follow – if Ana is to follow the directions Josh left, then the pitch comes on the second syllable of the word " directions" di rections

8. Aspects of Connected Speech

In most of the discussion so far, we have been describing speech sounds separately, in syllables and words as if they are always going to be pronounces carefully and deliberately. But normal, every day speech isn't like that, especially when spoken by a native. Most of native speakers' talk is fast and spontaneous and it requires the articulators to move rapidly from one sound to another without stopping. However, the process of producing " connected speech" affects the pronunciation of certain segments; some segments have a tendency to run together, extra segments may be inserted to ensure smoothness of speech, some segments adopt a less defined phonetic form and some completely disappear. 8. 1. Assimilation

When two sound segments occur in sequence and some aspect of one segment is taken by the other, the process is known as assimilation. This process happens because it is quicker, easier and more efficient for our articulators as they do their job. Consonants and vowels alike are subject to assimilation. The phrase have to, for example, is very often pronounced [hæftə], informally even written “ hafta”, because the adjacent sounds influence each other to become more alike. In the phrase I have to go, the sound /v/ is influenced by the following sound /t/ in a way that in connected speech we produce a voiceless version of /v/ resulting in what sounds more of a /f/, showing the assimilation from a voiced to a voiceless sound. The vowels /i/ and /æ/ in isolation are pronounced without any nasal quality. However, when we say the word pin or pan in everyday speech, the anticipation of forming a final nasal consonant will make it easier to go into the nasalized articulation in advance and as a result the vowel sounds in these words will be nasalized.

8. 2. Elision

Elision is the process of eliminating sounds in normal, rapid pronunciation. Elision mostly occurs where clusters of consonants exist. Take the word government, for example, /gʌvəmənt/, mashed potatoes /mæʃ pəteitəuz/, next day /neks dei. etc. Who syllables may be elided, in words such as library /laibri:/, and some words are simply prone to elision, such as of before consonants in cup o’ tea, lots o’ people, and others such as gonna and wanna, from going to and want to, respectively.

8. 3 Liasion

A sound may be introduced between words or syllables to help them run together more smoothly. A primary example of this is the pronunciation of word-final /r/ in RP. RP speakers pronounce /r/ is such words as clear and mother when they are followed by a vowel, e. g. clear answer /kliər/, but /kliə/ in clear question. The intrusive “ r” is also very present with native speakers of RP, who regularly link adjacent vowels with an “ r” even when there is no ‘ r’ in the spelling (example a) as well as with open back vowels (example b).

e. g. a) media interest /mi: diə(r)intrəst/

b) law and order /lɔ:(r)ənd ɔ: də/

Conclusion

There are two sub-disciplines in linguistics which deal with sound and they are phonetics and phonology and in order to understand the sound system of the English language, its various accents and how these sounds combine and pattern together, we need aspects of both. Phonetics provides objective ways of describing and analyzing the range of sounds humans use in their languages. More specifically, articulatory phonetics identifies precisely which speech organs and muscles are involved in producing the different sounds of the language. Those sounds are then transmitted from the speaker to the hearer, and acoustic and auditory phonetics focus on the physics of speech as it travels through the air in the form of sound waves, and the effect those waves have on a hearer’s ears and brain. While phonetics deals with the production, properties and perception of the speech sounds, phonology,

deals with the sound patterns of the particular language, and in what speakers and hearers need to know to be speakers of that language.

Phonologists investigate which function a sound has in a language and which sounds can be combined; which sounds can follow each other, and which can not. Unlike most European languages, English is not a phonetic language: words can have identical vowel letters and be pronounced in different ways, e. g. great, treat, and threat; vice-versa, words with phonologically identical vowels may have different spellings, as in sea, seize, and precede, hence, the importance of teaching both pronunciation and spelling. Nowadays, everyone is expected to speak a bit of English, but trying to find someone in Italy who can speak it ‘ clearly’ – intelligibly -, without mangling it, is no easy task at all. That is where phonetics and phonology comes in, and it is a fascinating subject and essential for any student wanting to learn (and understand!) a foreign language – especially English!