

Gradient Phonemicity Hypothesis

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Traditional phonological analysis assumes that a difference between two speech sounds either reflects a phonemic contrast or allophonic variation exclusively. However, in line with what some authors have suggested, we feel that this strictly binary view is questionable.

Evidence from many languages in the world blatantly shows that among the many entities analysed as phonemes, some constitute better candidates to phonemicity than others. For instance, the /ð/ vs. /θ/ opposition in English yields very few minimal pairs (*thy/thigh, either/ether* – the latter, not in all accents). Given its extremely small functional load, this contrast is far from prototypical, which may well imply that its cognitive status is quite different from that of more typical oppositions. Conversely, under certain circumstances, some allophonic patterns bear a close resemblance to phonemes. For example, in standard German, [ç] and [x] are in complementary distribution in mono-morphemic words; a preceding front vowel conditions [ç] and a back vowel yields [x]. However, if a morpheme boundary intervenes, marginal contrasts can show up, e.g. [kuxen] ‘cake’ vs. [ku:çen], ‘little cow’. According to these data, [ç] and [x] cannot be said to exhibit a typical allophonic behaviour, which very likely has a number of cognitive consequences.

Based on these well-known – though often neglected – phenomena, we propose the **gradient phonemicity hypothesis** (GPH), according to which a whole range of cognitive statuses exists between allophony and phonemicity, and a difference between two sounds can be adequately described by some measure of how typically allophonic or phonemic their relation is. Our current work relies on speech perception experiments. This research is supported by a **Subvention de Recherche** (research grant) from the **Fondation Fyssen** for the year 2010.