

1.4. THE THEORY OF PHONEME

The theory of phoneme was first expounded by Baudouin de Courtenay, professor of the Kazan University in the 1880s. In his treatise “On the Comparative Study of the Grammar of Slavonic Languages” he clearly defined the difference between a phoneme and a speech sound. He treated a phoneme as a semantically differentiating unit, and a speech sound as an anthropophonic unit of speech, not connected with any meaning. This differentiation proved to be highly fruitful and made it possible to establish mutual relations between the sound and the phoneme. Baudouin de Courtenay went on developing the theory of phoneme in his “Versuch einer Theorie der Phonetischen Alternationen” (1917) and other works.

One should not underestimate the importance of Baudouin de Courtenay’s theory. He was the first in the history of the development of linguistics to elaborate the theory of the phoneme, to consider human speech sounds from the viewpoint of their functions and thus, created the teaching of the grammatical part of phonetics.

The theory of the phoneme was further developed by L.V. Shcherba. He studied the theory in his «Русские гласные в качественном и количественном отношении» published in 1912. In this book he defined the phoneme as the smallest general phonetic unit of a given language which can be associated with sense notions and can differentiate words.

In 1955 in his book devoted to phonetics of the French language, L.V. Shcherba wrote that in the spoken language a much greater number of various sounds are pronounced than we usually think and these sounds in every given language unite to form a system of a comparatively small number of sound types capable of differentiating words and their forms, that is, capable of serving the purposes of human intercourse. Such sounds he called phonemes.

Developing the theory of the phoneme L.V. Shcherba comes to the conclusion of the social nature of the phoneme as a speech sound used by people in their intercourse.

The teaching about the sense differentiating function of the phoneme is one of the most important parts of the theory of the phoneme.

The main importance of this definition lies in the fact that L.V. Shcherba speaks of the sense-differentiating function of the phoneme, which proved to be a turning point in the understanding of the phoneme.

For a number of years there were two main trends in linguistics concerning the concept of the phoneme. One of them was headed by Leningrad linguists, the followers of L.V. Shcherba (Матусевич М.С., 1951; Зиндер Л.Р., 1960). The second trend comprised the representatives of the so-called Moscow phonological school (Яковлев Р.Ф., Кузнецов П.С., Реформацкий А.А., Сидоров В.Н., Аванесов Р.И. and others).

The main difference between the schools was in their conception of the phoneme. The followers of L.V. Shcherba proceeded from the word, while Moscow linguists proceeded from the morpheme. These different points of view determined their treatment of the phoneme, their understanding of the phonetic system as a whole.

R.I. Avanesov (1956) pointed out that the two theories were correct and compatible, as they reflect different language facts. Accordingly, he suggested distinguishing two notions – “phoneme” and “phonematic family”.

L.R. Zinder in his *General Phonetics* (1960) further developed the teaching of the variants of the phoneme, the problem of phonematic structure and other problems, and supported R.I. Avanesov’s notion of the “phonematic family”.

In the 1950s a new theory of the phoneme was suggested by S.K. Shaumyan «Двухступенчатая теория фонем», 1952.

All these theories developed many complicated questions of the phoneme but the problem has not been solved yet. Many points need strict proof and completion.

The theory of the phoneme was also being treated by many linguists abroad. It was investigated by the scientists of “The Prague Linguistic Circle” (Trubetskoy N.S., 1929; Якобсон Р., Халле М., 1962). Some foreign linguists (Sapier E., Twaddell W.F.) treated the phoneme apart from its real sound value. As a result the real human speech sounds were replaced by abstract properties of sounds. The phoneme figured as a symbol of a certain quality of the sound.

The English linguist D. Jones fell in another extreme, treating the phoneme as a sound fully disconnected from its sense-differentiating function. D. Jones treated the phoneme as a group of sounds united by similar articulation features. “A phoneme is a group of sounds consisting of an important sound together with other related sounds” wrote D. Jones in his “Phoneme, its Nature and Use” (Jones D. Outline of English Phonetics, 8th ed.).