

Ling 100 International Journey of Phonemes and Allophones

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Student: It's time for linguistics!

Instructor: Welcome to LING100. Today, we're going to talk about phonemes and allophones. A phoneme is the smallest linguistic unit that distinguishes meaning. Minimal pairs are pairs of words that differ in only one sound in the same location. For example, *pat* and *bat* are minimal pairs. An allophone is any of the various surface realizations of a phoneme that do not distinguish between meanings. For example, an aspirated [p] in *pat* versus an unaspirated [p] in *spat* are allophones.

Student: Hmm... I'm really confused. I know I will get some help from friends on my vacation.

[travels to Mexico]

Student: Oh, my friend got a dog! I think the word for dog in Spanish is *perro*.

- Student: Nice perro
- Friend: Que?
- Student: I said nice dog! Perro.
- Friend: Oh, you mean *pero* with a trill [r], you said *perro* with a flap [r]. You said *nice butt!*
- Student: Oh! That's what my prof meant by phonemes.
- Friend: Yes, si. *Pero* and *perro* are minimal pairs!
- Student: Adios!

[At an Indian wedding]

Student: The bride is so beautiful! I wonder what that thing is on her forehead?

- Student: Hey Jess! Good to see you! What's that thing on the bride's *bal*?
- Jess: Her *bal*? What is on her hair?
- Student: No no! Her forehead. What's in her *bal*?
- Jess: Ohh, her forehead! That's pronounced /b^hal/ with an aspirated [b]. Unlike English, [b] and [b^h] distinguish meaning in Hindi.
- Student: So [b] and [b^h] are phonemes based on the minimal pairs *bal* and *bhal*. I treated them like allophones. Thank you! Time to catch a flight to China. Bye!

[In China]

- Student: Ni hao! I'm just visiting China with my *mǎ*.
- Friend: You just called your mother a horse.
- Student: Oh no! Sorry, Mom. This must be another linguistic mistake!
- Friend: *Mā* means mother *mǎ* means horse. Mandarin is a tonal language, so *mǎ* and *mā* are minimal pairs. The tones add phonic distinction even though the underlying sounds are the same. In English, tone is not used to distinguish lexical meaning. In Mandarin, tone is used to distinguish lexical meaning.
- Student: Wow! Who knew languages were so different? Now, I understand that a phoneme is the smallest unit of speech that can be used to make one word different from another word. And an allophone is one of two or more variants of the same phoneme! These distinctions must make it difficult to learn a new language!
- Both: Zai jian!

[back in class]

Student: My trip definitely prepared me for my phonology midterm. Time to rock this!