(Second Year) Lecture No. 12

Chapter 13: Problems in Phonemic Analysis & Distinctive Features (P. 101)

Second: Schwa /ə/

The /ə/ is one of the problematic phonemes in English, as it is considered a distinct ==phoneme== by some and an ==allophone== by others. If the vowel /ə/ is a distinct vowel, we should add it to the list of pure vowels and the overall number of phonemes would be ==eleven==. Yet, if the /ə/ is not regarded as a distinct phoneme, the overall number of phonemes would be ==ten==.

Q: Why schwa is not considered a distinct vowel by some scholars?

1. The problem with the schwa is that it is always the vowel pronounced when a ==function word== is realized in their weak forms (/woz/ -- /wəz**/**. Besides, it is always used instead of the full vowel in unstressed syllables. So, those people consider an allophone of all other pure vowels whenever they are pronounced in weak forms.
2. We cannot find the schwa in one-syllable words, and it is only found in words with more than one syllable.
3. We cannot have minimal pairs with schwa and any other vowel.

Distinctive Features

It is a theoretical approach that is important to the language learner and can be useful in language learning. It does not consider the phonemes as independent units, it rather considers them as combinations of different features. These features are supposed to be distinctive i.e. the learner can use them to distinguish each and

every phoneme from another. The approach adopts a (+-) system to indicate the presence of the feature (+) or the absence of the feature (-).

For example, the sound /s/ is – voiced (which refers to the absence of voicing, voiceless), + fricative (which refers to the presence of friction), + alveolar (which refers to the place of articulation).

Since we have different phonemes, we should have at least one different feature between them (look at the table, P.103). let's have a look at the vowels /ɪ/ and /ʊ/ and see if distinctive features can be used in learning the difference between them:

/ɪ/== +close, -rounded, -long, +front
/ʊ/== +close, +rounded, -long, -front (+back)

You can see in the example above, that we are not required to use all the features we have. Instead, we use only the features that are relevant to the phoneme. If we want to put the set of distinctive features for a vowel, do we need the feature (+-voiced)? The answer is NO, because we already know that ALL vowels are voiced. Moreover, we do not need to use all the features relevant to the phoneme. The features that make the phoneme distinct are enough.

Q: Give the distinctive features for the following phonemes:

/t/, /m/, /u:/