

What Sort of Statement Is “/p/ is a phoneme of English”?

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Abstract: The article considers the nature of descriptive statements and the ontological status of descriptive constructs in linguistics, taking the example of a phoneme of English. It is argued that descriptive statements should be seen as expressions of the content of descriptive models or as hypotheses. Furthermore, it is argued that descriptive models and constructs in linguistics have a purely explanatory function in relation to speech events and without ontological commitment to corresponding entities in the real world.

Keywords: ontological commitment, linguistic description, judgments, constructs, particulars, identification, characterization, hypotheses.

Many linguists explicitly or implicitly make very strong and debatable ontological claims.¹ Saussure (1972) claimed that languages and their component signs were realities “with their seat in the brain” and existing in the collectivity. Pike (1967, 120) claimed “phonemes exist”. The “cognitive reality” of “words” in the “mental lexicon” has been claimed by large numbers of writers, and followers of Chomsky, such as Radford (1988), Fromkin and Rodman (2003) or Børjars and Burridge (2001) have identified linguistic statements with unobservable knowledge on the part of the speaker. Others (such as Lamb 1999) have identified linguistic models with cognitive processes. One reason may be the apparent form of descriptive statements in linguistics.

¹ For a recent discussion of ontological issues in linguistics, see Mulder – Rastall (2005).

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One of the things linguists try to do is to make descriptions of languages, or parts of languages. The expression "linguistic description" is itself in need of clarification. Whereas there are clearly speech events whose communicative regularities and anomalies can be described, it is not the case that there are (higher-order) entities in the real world which correspond to the descriptions. However, it is clear that linguistic descriptions can focus on various ranges or sets of phenomena (French, the dialect of coal workers in Selby, England, etc.) and aspects of speech phenomena (phonological, grammatical, pragmatic, etc.). The purpose of a description is normally to provide a means for the understanding of the relevant phenomena through models and the statements derived from models. Those models and statements are placed in a theoretically and methodologically well-defined context and are capable of being tested with respect to the phenomena under description. /p/ is a model in a more complex model, the organized set of phonological units and relations of English. "/p/ is a phoneme of English" or "/p/ is opposed to /b/ in English" are statements "about English"² which we can make using our model.

"/p/ is a phoneme of English", "*chien* is a word in French", "the parameters *older-younger* and *paternal-maternal* are factors in the semantic field of Chinese kinship terms", "the **noun-noun** construction forms predications in Russian", and many more are simple examples of descriptive statements.

These statements appear to be categorical synthetic judgements. They appear to contain references to (or identification of) particulars (/p/, *chien*, the parameters *older-younger* and *paternal-maternal*, the **noun-noun** relation) and characterizations of those particulars ("is a phoneme of English", "is a word in French", "are factors in the semantic field of Chinese kinship terms", "forms predicative structures in

² Of course, the question of what English (or any other language) "is" is a complex and debatable one itself. We could say, *inter alia*, that English is the model, our organised understanding of a set of phenomena, or we can say that "English" is a large class of speech acts with various properties locating the class in space and time which we try to account for with models. We cannot assume that the two are identical.

Russian”). The nature of the characterization seems to be such that it adds new information about the particular, which is not knowable from the name of the particular.³ The statements appear to be statements of fact.

If we are indeed dealing with synthetic judgements, then we would expect to be able to identify instances of the named particular, or “identification” in Strawson’s terms, and determine whether the particulars do in fact have the properties in question.

It is here that we run into trouble. The way we format the written names of particulars already indicates that we are dealing with labels rather than references to real-world particulars. /p/ is the label for a phonological construct. *Chien* is the label for a simple form-meaning unit. *Older-younger* and *paternal-maternal* are labels for aspects of organization in a semantic field. **Noun-noun** is the label for a constructional relation in grammar. From another point of view, /p/ is the property which groups together a range of variants (“allophones”) and the word *chien* is the set of form-meaning-grammatical characteristics of a class of utterances. The particulars being labeled are not real-world entities as we might find in an utterance of *Fred is a postman*, but component models of a larger model. Furthermore, we cannot test our linguistic statements in the direct way that we can determine whether the real-world Fred is employed in delivering mail.

Similarly, the characterizations are not predicates referring to real-world characteristics but to the organization of the (wider) models from which the particular models are taken. Indeed, the component models *contribute to* the wider models. The other phonemes of English or words of French, etc. are defined in relation to /p/ and *chien*. The parameters, *older-younger* and *paternal-maternal* as well as a grammatical relation **noun-noun** make sense in the context of the model of the language under consideration, and when we know the meaning of theoretical predicates such as “is a phoneme”, “is a word”, “is a semantic field”, or “is a grammatical construction”. The meaning of theoretical terms cannot be found by inspecting the phenomena. That would lead to circularity.

³ I am following Strawson’s (1968) discussion of singular terms and predication here.

If we look at /p/, we must read that label as “the phoneme /p/”. Thus, our statement becomes, “the phoneme /p/ is a phoneme of English”. This looks almost tautologous. What is added, apparently, is the claim that English has a /p/ phoneme. When we consider, however, that /p/ is part of the definition of English phonological structure, the statement looks entirely tautologous. It is not the case that English has somehow selected /p/ from a set. The English /p/ has the characteristics which refer to English speech events and the organization of them. There is no reason to suppose that Chinese /p/ has the same characteristics. A conclusion of the vacuity of linguistic statements is, however, going too far and contradicts our sense that the statement in some way “says something”. But what does it say?

I would like to suggest:

- a) that “/p/ is a phoneme of English” and other descriptive statements in linguistic description are not really judgements. They are, in the first place, verbal expressions of the organization of constructs in models.⁴ This explains their apparent vacuity when their meanings are considered.
- b) that we must make the interpretation of /p/ in terms of real-world events (instances of [p] sounds) and the theoretically and methodologically motivated comparisons of such events with others. It is a complex of such observations which leads us to believe we should set up a construct, /p/, in order to model those real-world events and comparisons. (That is, the construct /p/ will correspond to (or be projected onto⁵) organized classes of real-world events.)
- c) that it is an ontological error to assign real-world existence to an assumed, but unobservable, correlate of constructs such as /p/.
- d) that it is a category error to assert that /p/ or other constructs “occur in” speech events.

⁴ Linguistic models have a high theoretical content and have no direct interpretation in real-world events. The theoretical framework is needed to link the model to the real speech acts. The term “linguistic model” differs in this way from models in model theory.

⁵ To use Hjelmslev’s (1953) famous image of a net projected onto the phenomena.

- e) that the function of expressions such as /p/, *chien*, etc. is to refer to real-world events and our comparisons of them as part of a process of accounting for, or explaining, through systematic application of concepts and methods. This requires, *inter alia*, an ontological distinction between construct and speech event.

The point c) above is, I think, of some importance. With notable exceptions, as we have seen, linguists have strong ontological commitment to constructs. But their constructs are the names or labels of classes. From another point of view, they are the intensions of classes. A phoneme, for example, is a class of functionally equivalent allophones and a word is a class of allomorphs. As Quine⁶ has pointed out, ontological commitment to the intensions of classes or class names is an extreme of platonic realism, which should be avoided. We tend not to notice this ontological commitment to unobservable class entities in linguistics partly because of our reification of linguistic units and partly because we forget the considerable theory-laden content of constructs.⁷ /p/ may look like a simple object but what we mean by /p/ depends on the phonological theory we adopt.⁸

We cannot point to real-world phonemes or words corresponding to our constructs. That is why we need modeling of speech events. Correspondingly, linguists should avoid hypostatizing their constructs.⁹

Yet, we feel that descriptive statements in linguistics do in fact “say something”. But what they say is not what they appear to say. They do not say (or, perhaps, should not be taken to say) that there is something in reality which is /p/ and that it falls into the class of phonemes. What they do say is that, if our models have been set up correctly, and if our theory and methods work, then our overall model

⁶ Quine (1953, 128) and (1960, 119 ff).

⁷ See Rastall (2000, 225 ff).

⁸ To determine that a phoneme is, for example, a minimum unit in phonotactics and a maximum unit in phonematics or that it is a class of allophones, etc.) and it also depends on a mass of comparisons of [p] events with [b], [m], [v] ..., etc. events in a large number of contexts ([-et], [-rik], [la-], etc.

⁹ Some linguists have been very clear on this point, notably Hjelmslev (1953), and Mulder (1989).

and the components in it will account for a selected set of phenomena (or, better, chosen aspects of those phenomena¹⁰). By looking at the phenomena from a theoretically motivated point of view and using appropriate methods, we can test whether we need a /p/ construct for English and whether it has the characteristics expressed in the model, and so on *mutatis mutandis* for other descriptive statements. From that point of view, “/p/ is a phoneme of English” and the other statements we have considered are *hypotheses*. It is that which gives a synthetic content to the statements.

We should say, then, that the statement, “/p/ is a phoneme of English”, is both a way of expressing a part of a model and, from another point of view, a hypothetical statement.

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¹⁰ As Saussure pointed out (1972, 23), linguistic constructs do not correspond to simply identifiable real-world entities. Our points of view lead to the creation of a variety of constructs related to the same speech events.

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