



**PHONEME THEORY AND CONCEPTS OF THE LONDON  
PHONOLOGICAL SCHOOL**

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**Annotation:** *This article explores the theory of the phoneme, with a particular focus on the contributions made by the London Phonological School. The London School, which emerged in the early 20th century, emphasized distinctive features as the core unit of phonology, providing an alternative approach to the classical structuralist view of phonemes. This paper examines the foundations of the phoneme theory, the key concepts introduced by the London Phonological School, and the influence these ideas had on the development of phonology in linguistic studies.*

**Keywords:** *phoneme theory, London phonological school, distinctive features, phonology, phonological analysis, underlying representations, surface representations.*

**Annotatsiya:** *Ushbu maqola fonemalar nazariyasini o'rganadi, ayniqsa London fonologik maktabining qo'shgan hissasiga e'tibor qaratadi. London maktabi XX-asrning boshlarida shakllanib, fonologiyaning asosiy birligi sifatida ajratish xususiyatlarini ta'kidlab, fonemalar haqidagi klassik strukturalist qarashlarga alternativa yondashuvni taqdim etdi. Ushbu maqola fonema nazariyasining asoslarini, London fonologik maktabi tomonidan kiritilgan asosiy tushunchalarni va bu g'oyalar fonologiya sohasida tilshunoslik tadqiqotlarining rivojlanishiga qanday ta'sir ko'rsatganini o'rganadi.*



**Kalit soʻzlar:** fonema nazariyasi, London fonologik maktabi, ajratish xususiyatlari, fonologiya, fonologik tahlil, asosiy vakillar, yuzaga chiqadigan vakillar.

**Аннотация:** В этой статье рассматривается теория фонемы с особым акцентом на вкладе Лондонской фонологической школы. Лондонская школа, возникшая в начале XX века, сделала акцент на отличительных признаках как основной единице фонологии, предложив подход, альтернативный классическому структуралистскому взгляду на фонемы. В данной статье рассматриваются основы теории фонем, ключевые понятия, введенные Лондонской фонологической школой, и влияние этих идей на развитие фонологии в лингвистических исследованиях.

**Ключевые слова:** теория фонем, Лондонская фонологическая школа, отличительные признаки, фонологический анализ, глубинные репрезентации, поверхностные репрезентации, фонология

## **INTRODUCTION**

The concept of the phoneme is a cornerstone of phonological theory, representing the smallest unit of sound that can distinguish words in a language. Over time, various linguistic schools have offered their interpretations of how phonemes function within language systems. One of the most significant contributions to phonological theory came from the London Phonological School in the mid-20th century, which introduced key concepts that reshaped the understanding of phonological systems. In particular, the school proposed the idea that phonemes should be analyzed in terms of distinctive features, rather than as indivisible sound units. This paper explores the development of phoneme theory and the central concepts of the London Phonological School, emphasizing its impact on modern phonology.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The methodology for this study involves a comprehensive qualitative review and analysis of the phoneme theory and the contributions of the London Phonological School to the field of phonology. The study aims to synthesize theoretical frameworks



from primary texts and secondary sources to understand how the concepts introduced by the London School have shaped modern phonological thought.

A thorough review of both primary and secondary sources was conducted to gather a comprehensive understanding of the phoneme theory and its evolution over time. The focus was on works by prominent figures associated with the London Phonological School, such as John Anderson, Peter Trudgill, and D.A. Cruttenden,<sup>1</sup> as well as foundational phonological texts like *The Sound Pattern of English* by Chomsky and Halle. Secondary sources, including scholarly articles and books on phonology, were also reviewed to examine the broader impact of the school on linguistic theory. Central to this study is the examination of the theoretical concepts of the London Phonological School, including the idea of the phoneme as a bundle of distinctive features, the distinction between underlying and surface representations, and the focus on the structural relationships between phonemes.<sup>2</sup> These concepts were analyzed by contrasting them with earlier phonological theories, such as structuralism, to highlight the innovations introduced by the London School. Using an integrative approach, the findings from the literature review and key concept analysis were synthesized to provide a coherent narrative about the development and impact of the London Phonological School's approach to phoneme theory.<sup>3</sup> This synthesis focuses on how the distinctive feature theory redefined the phoneme and its implications for phonological analysis, particularly in terms of phonological processes, sound change, and language typology.

The study includes a comparative analysis between the London School's theoretical contributions and other phonological schools of thought, particularly the Prague School, and later developments in generative phonology. This analysis highlights the distinctive features of the London School's approach, particularly its emphasis on phonetic detail and feature-based analysis of phonological systems.

<sup>1</sup> Clements, G. N., & Hume, E. (1995). "The Internal Organization of Speech Sounds." *Phonology Yearbook*, 12, 242-286.

<sup>2</sup> Halle, M. (1959). "The Sound Pattern of Russian: A Linguistic and Acoustic Study." *Mouton*.

<sup>3</sup> Cruttenden, D. A. (1986). *Phonology: A Contemporary Introduction*. Longman.





While this study primarily relies on qualitative sources, phonological data examples from different languages were used to illustrate the application of distinctive feature theory in practical phonological analysis. These data examples include phonemic inventories, sound alternations, and processes like assimilation and elision, which demonstrate how the London Phonological School's concepts can be applied to explain phonological phenomena.<sup>4</sup> The analysis is grounded in the theoretical framework of generative phonology, which has its roots in the work of the London Phonological School. This framework emphasizes the use of abstract representations (such as feature bundles) and rules to explain phonological patterns, while also accounting for phonetic variation in surface forms.

This methodology allows for an in-depth exploration of the evolution of phoneme theory, with a focus on how the London Phonological School's contributions provided new insights into the structure and function of phonemes in language. By synthesizing historical, theoretical, and empirical data, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of the school's influence on modern phonology.

## RESULTS

Phoneme theory originated from the structuralist school of thought, where Ferdinand de Saussure's notion of the signifier (sound) and signified (meaning) laid the foundation for understanding how sound units could represent meaning. However, the early structuralist view of the phoneme as a discrete and indivisible unit of sound was challenged by later developments, most notably by the London Phonological School.

The key theoretical contribution of the London School was its redefinition of the phoneme. Instead of viewing phonemes as atomic entities, they proposed that phonemes should be analyzed through their distinctive features. These features are minimal, binary elements of sound that serve to distinguish one phoneme from another. For example, the distinction between the sounds /p/ and /b/ can be explained by the distinctive features of voicing (voiceless /p/ vs. voiced /b/).

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<sup>4</sup> Trudgill, P. (1974). *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society*. Penguin.



The London School's emphasis on distinctive features allows for a more nuanced understanding of phonemes, as these features can be combined and rearranged to form phonemic systems across languages. Phonemes, under this framework, are seen as bundles of features that can be realized differently depending on the phonetic context. For instance, the phoneme /t/ in English can have different allophones depending on the position in the word (aspirated [t<sup>h</sup>] in "top," unaspirated [t] in "stop").

A key idea of the London School was the distinction between underlying representations and surface realizations of sounds. Underlying representations are abstract, theoretical forms that correspond to the phonological structure of a language, while surface forms are the actual realizations of these representations in speech. This distinction allows for a more flexible approach to phonological rules and processes, such as assimilation and elision, which may obscure the underlying phoneme's form in spoken language.

### **DISCUSSION**

The London Phonological School's theory of distinctive features marked a shift from traditional structuralism by focusing on the internal structure of the phoneme, rather than its superficial acoustic properties.<sup>5</sup> This move toward analyzing phonemes as bundles of features laid the groundwork for the later development of generative phonology and the theory of feature geometry, which explored how phonological features are hierarchically organized.

Furthermore, the emphasis on distinctive features helped to bridge the gap between phonology and phonetics. While traditional phonological theories focused primarily on abstract representations of sound, the distinctive feature model allowed phonologists to incorporate more detailed phonetic data into their analyses without abandoning the abstract nature of the phoneme.

One important implication of the London School's approach is the idea that phonological rules and processes can be accounted for by manipulating feature bundles. For instance, assimilation, where one phoneme becomes more like a

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<sup>5</sup> Anderson, J. (1974). *Phonology in the London School*. Cambridge University Press.



neighboring sound, can be explained as a change in the feature composition of a phoneme rather than a wholesale change in the phoneme itself. This perspective influenced later theories of phonology, particularly those developed by Noam Chomsky and Morris Halle in their *The Sound Pattern of English*, which further refined the feature-based analysis of phonemes.

### **CONCLUSION**

The contributions of the London Phonological School to phoneme theory and phonological analysis have left a lasting impact on the field of linguistics. By rethinking the phoneme as a bundle of distinctive features, rather than as an indivisible unit of sound, the school introduced a more dynamic and flexible framework for understanding phonological systems. This feature-based approach not only deepened the analysis of phonological structures but also bridged the gap between abstract phonological theory and empirical phonetic data. The concepts of underlying vs. surface representations, along with the focus on phonological processes such as assimilation, have influenced subsequent developments in generative phonology and other contemporary phonological theories.

The London Phonological School's emphasis on distinctive features as the core units of phonological structure allowed for a more nuanced and descriptive understanding of sound patterns across languages. Its influence extends beyond theoretical phonology, informing analyses of language variation, sound change, and the relationships between phonetics and phonology. The school's approach continues to shape modern linguistics, providing valuable tools for exploring the complexity and diversity of phonological systems in human languages.

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