

Phoneme

Definition of Phoneme

A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound in a word that makes a difference in its pronunciation, as well as its meaning, from another word. For instance, the /s/ in 'soar' distinguishes it from /r/ in 'roar', as it becomes different from 'soar' in pronunciation as well as meaning.

There are a total of 44 phonemes in the English language, which include consonants, short vowels, long vowels, diphthongs, and triphthongs. Phonemes have distinct functions in the English language, such as the /b/, /t/, and /d/ consonant sounds that are missing in some languages. The written representation of a sound is placed in slashes, as in this example where /b/ is placed in slashes on both sides.

Examples of Phoneme in Literature

Example #1: *To Kill a Mockingbird* (by Harper Lee)

“When he was nearly thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow. When it healed, and Jem’s fears of never being able to play football were assuaged, he was seldom self-conscious about his injury. His left arm was somewhat shorter than his right; when he stood or walked, the back of his hand was at right angles to his body, his thumb parallel to his thigh. He couldn’t have cared less, so long as he could pass and punt.”

A few of the letters in this passage have been underlined for understanding. The first three underlined examples of phonemes are the sounds /wh/ /th/ and /j/ respectively.

Example #2: *1984* (by George Orwell)

“It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen. Winston Smith, his chin nuzzled into his breast in an effort to escape the vile wind, slipped quickly through the glass doors of Victory Mansions, though not quickly enough to prevent a swirl of gritty dust from entering along with him.”

The underlined letters are sounds of /i/ /b/ /d/ /s/ /ie/ /w/ /s/ and /v/ respectively. However, two phonemes have used aspirated diphthong sounds /th/ in “Smith” and /th/ in “though.”

Example #3: *Great Expectations* (by Charles Dickens)

“All this time, I was getting on towards the river; but however fast I went, I couldn’t warm my feet, to which the damp cold seemed riveted, as the iron was riveted to the leg of the man I was running to meet. I knew my way to the Battery, pretty straight, for I had been down there on a Sunday with Joe, and Joe, sitting on an old gun, had told me that when I was ‘prentice to him, regularly bound, we would have such Larks there!”

In this example, different phonemes are highlighted as /g/ i/ /b/ /w/ /m/ /ie/ /d/ /s/ /f/ /h/ /j/ and /l/.

Example #4: *Ode to Nightingale* (by John Keats)

“My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
‘Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
But being too happy in thine happiness,—
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees
In some melodious plot

Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
Singest of summer in full-throated ease.”

In this stanza, Keats has used mostly diphthongs, including sounds like /ow/ /ou/ /ia/ /oo/ and /sh/. All of them are giving distinct sounds of their respective phonemes.

Example #5: *Tyger Tyger* (by Charles Dickens)

“Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?”

This example also has used short vowels, long vowels, consonants and diphthongs. The first word contains six phonemes or sounds as /b/ /u/ /r/ /n/ /i/ /n/. The last word “fearful” contains six sounds /f/ /ea/ /r/ /f/ /u/ and /l/, where the second sound is a diphthong.

Function of Phoneme

Phonemes carry distinct sounds that differentiate one word from another. Counting them could be challenging, for sounds are made of different ways and variations. Through phonemes, readers learn pronouncing words correctly and comprehending their meanings. Phonemes are an integral part of reading and listening, specifically in poetry, where they are very important to understand, meter which is solely based on stress patterns and phonemes. That is the reason that poets stress upon each phoneme to understand poetry, for it is a sure way to understand a word by pronouncing it loudly.