There are several terms in phonetics which are often confused. These terms are *phoneme*, *sound*, *allophone*, and *phone*. The purpose of this post is to clearly define each of these terms and exemplify them.

- **Phoneme** (Gr. *phone* "sound, voice") is the smallest contrastive unit of language that may change the meaning of a morpheme and, as a pursuant, a word.

Put it simply, phoneme is a contrasting phonological unit. Let us consider several examples:
1) pig – big /p/* – /b/
2) pen – pan /e/ – /æ/
3) sink – think /s/ – /θ/

As can be seen from the examples above, the distinction between /p/ – /b/, /e/ – /æ/, and /s/ – /θ/ creates new words in English, which means that English has such phonemes as /p/, /b/, /e/, /æ/, /s/, /θ/ (among other English phonemes). When linguists construct phonological system of a language (let's say the language of a tribe), they try to find pairs of words in which the distinction is as small as in the words above. If such a pair is found, then it means that this language has such phonemes. Let us consider one more example, in Russian this time:
4) *люк* [luk] "hatch" – *лук* [łuk] "onion" /l/ – /ł/.

In this pair the only difference between two words is /l/ – /ł/, that is, soft /l/ vs hard /ł/. As example 4 shows, in Russian, there are two distinctive phonemes /l/ – /ł/ since they change the meaning of the word**. However, in English, there is no phoneme /ł/ since it does not serve the purpose of distinguishing words or morphemes. For example, whether we pronounce [lamp] or [łamp], it does not change the meaning; therefore, it is not a phoneme in English. In contrast, in Russian, there is no pair of words which would be distinguished based on the /e/ – /æ/ opposition (example 2 above); therefore, /æ/ is not a phoneme in Russian.

- **Sound** (=**phone**) is a vibration or wave caused by an object.

This definition comes from acoustics and underlines physical characteristics of sounds of speech. Sounds are instances of phonemes in real speech. Put it simply, sounds are everything we hear with our ears. Here are some examples of sounds:
5) [k], [b], [f], [u], [d], [e], [i:]

6) the word “cat” consists of three sounds and can be transcribed as follows: [kæt]

In dictionary transcriptions, we have sounds, not phonemes. Sounds are physical segments. Sounds, unlike phonemes, have such concrete characteristics as duration in time and loudness. Sounds are produced by organs of speech. Sounds are quite concrete and linguists consider them to be units of speech; while phonemes are abstract (they are generalizations made on the basis of comparison of words) and linguists consider them to be units of language (cf Saussurian distinction langue – parole). Sometimes, in non-linguistic circles, the word “sound” is used to name what is, in fact, a phoneme.

- **Allophone** (Gr. *allos* “other” and *phone* “sound, voice”) is a variant of a phoneme.

Allophones are different pronunciations of words which do not change the meaning of these words. Let us consider the following allophones:
7) [p^h] as in “pin” and [p] as in “spin”
8) [l] as in “lean” and [ɬ] as in “fill”

Whether we (or a foreigner) pronounce [pin] or [p^hin], [spin] or [sp^{h}in]; [li:n] or [ɬi:n], [fil] or [fiɬ], it does not really change the meaning in English. Therefore, we are dealing not with phonemes, but with allophones.

Allophones can be of three types (Kocherhan, 2006, p. 158):
a) *individual* (e.g. a foreigner or a person with a speech disorder cannot pronounce [p] correctly);
b) *territorial* (e.g. when in some part of a country [p] is always pronounced as [p^h]); and
c) *positional* (e.g. [l] at the end of words is usually pronounced as [ɬ]).