

THE SOUND SHAPE OF LANGUAGE IN ALL ITS FACETS

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It has long been recognized that language has 'double articulation': units with meaning are composed of units (distinctive features, phonemes, syllables) without meaning, whose only significance lies in their 'mere otherness'. However, the speech sound as a whole is an artifact endowed with many different functions, only one of which is distinctiveness. In particular, there are in addition redundant, configurative, expressive, and physiognomic features, each of which have a function of their own and none of which evidence 'double articulation'. In addition, the distinctive features evidence the tendency for immediate signification and autonomous significance, as shown by sound symbolism, by the role sounds play in magic (e.g. glossolalia), in language play (verbal games), in poetry (where the sounds become a focus of attention in their own right and where they are one of the constitutive devices of the sequence), and in 'word affinities' (identity of form between words, which affect the meaning and the history of the words - evidenced for example by 'phonesthemes'). It is concluded that phonology and phonetics are both currently being defined too narrowly - being confined to distinctiveness - and that the ever-occurring balance between mediacy ('double articulation') and immediacy (e.g. sound symbolism) for the distinctive features must be taken into account if we are to understand language structure and language change and if we are to be able to interpret our results in speech perception, child language acquisition, etc. correctly.

Reference

Jakobson, Roman & Linda R. Waugh (1979): The Sound Shape of Language, Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press.