

kuka [kuka] ‘dustbin’ and *kutya* [kuca] ‘dog’. It follows that [k] and [c] are not in complementary but in contrastive distribution; that interchanging them does make a meaning difference between words; and hence that [k] and [c] belong to different phonemes, /k/ and /c/ respectively, in Hungarian. Unsurprisingly, speakers of Hungarian find the difference between [k] and [c] glaringly obvious, and would be extremely surprised to find that English speakers typically lump them together as the same sound.

As for differences between periods of the same language, it is straightforward to demonstrate that Modern English [f] and [v] contrast, or are in complementary distribution, since minimal pairs like *fat* [f] versus *vat* [v], *leaf* versus *leave*, or *safer* versus *saver* are easy to come by. The phoneme system of Modern English therefore contains both /f/ and /v/. However, the situation was very different in Old English, as the examples in (3) show.

(3) *Old English*

hla[v]ord <hlaford> ‘lord’

æ[f]ter <æfter> ‘after’

o[v]er <ofer> ‘over’

heal[f] <healf> ‘half’

heo[v]on <heofon> ‘heaven’

[f]isc <fisc> ‘fish’

Instead of minimal pairs, we find predictable, complementary distribution, with [v] appearing medially, between vowels, and [f] in other positions. Consequently, [f] and [v] can be analysed as allophones of one phoneme, which we might call /f/: Old English speakers would have regarded [f] and [v] as the same, just as Modern English speakers think of [k] and [c] as the same sound. Later in the history of English, many words like *very*, *virtue* and *veal* were borrowed from French, bringing with them initial [v], which had not previously been found in English. The distribution of [f] and [v] therefore ceased to be complementary, since both could appear in word-initial position, creating minimal pairs like *very* and *ferry*, or *veal* and *feel*. In consequence, [v] stopped being an allophone of /f/, and became a phoneme in its own right, producing the opposition of /f/ (realised as [f]) and /v/ (realised as [v]) we find today.

2.4 Some further examples

The notion of the phoneme is a notoriously difficult one to come to terms with at first. This is not altogether surprising: it isn’t every day that you are told you know a whole range of things you didn’t know you knew, and moreover that this knowledge seems likely to be structured in