How to Solve Phonology Problems

Because phonemes are psychological units of language structure, it is not always easy to distinguish phonemes from phones. We cannot rely on speakers’ intuitions, because the distinction we are attempting to identify is one which speakers usually do not notice. Linguists have developed a method of objective analysis in order to identify phonemes.

Follow these steps:

1) Identify the phonetic features of the segments under examination and describe how the two sounds are different.

2) Organize the words into lists according to the segments which each contains. Do not do this mechanically; focus on the phonetic values of each word so that you will be able to . . .

3) Identify the phonetic environments in which each segment occurs. If possible, identify minimal pairs.

4) Look at these environments to find natural classes.

5) Look for complementary gaps in the environments, i.e, environments in which one of the segments occurs but the other doesn’t.

6) State generalizations about the distribution of each of these sounds.

7) Determine the identity of the phoneme and its allophones. Assume that the sound with the least restricted distribution is the basic allophone. This will be the name of the phoneme.

If you need more information, consult pp. 128-33 of your text. [Note that their step (1) is our step (4).]