ENGLISH MORPHOLOGICAL SYSTEM

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Abstract

Morphology, over time, has evolved into a branch of linguistics that encompasses the formation of words, their internal structures, and all their derivational forms. It is the branch of linguistics that studies the structure and formation of words. It is concerned with how words are built from smaller units called morphemes, which are the smallest meaningful units in a language. This paper provides an introduction to morphology, exploring key concepts, types of morphemes, word formation processes, and the relevance of morphology in understanding languages. It is designed for beginners and aims to offer a clear, approachable explanation of this important area of linguistic study. Morphology, the study of the internal structure of words, has been a foundational field in linguistics, essential for understanding language formation, structure, and meaning. However, like many areas of linguistic study, morphology is not immune to critique. Scholars have raised questions about the theoretical assumptions underpinning morphological analysis, the limitations of traditional morphological frameworks, and the extent to which morphological analysis can fully explain the complexities of language use.

Keywords: English, Morphemes, Morphology, System

Introduction

The traditional concern of morphology is the identification of morphemes. Linguists interested in morphology look at the parts that words are divided into and study the meaning of these individual parts. The main aim of morphology is to assign parts of words, so for example: borrow-ing

This is divided into two morphemes: one free morpheme (borrow) and one bound morpheme (-ing). Once a linguist can tell that '-ing' is a bound morpheme, they know this will be the case in all situations where that particular morpheme arises.

Key terms

Morphemes: The smallest units of language that carry meaning or function.

Free morphemes: words that can stand alone and still make sense.

Bound morphemes: Morphemes that cannot stand alone; they need to be attached to a free morpheme to be a proper, meaningful word.

Affixes: A morpheme attached to something else.

Root: The core of the word. What's left when affixes are taken away?

Syntax: The study of sentence structure.

Vowel Harmony: The first vowel of the suffix depends on the last vowel of the word to which the affix is applied

Types of Bound Morphemes

There are two types of bound morphemes: inflectional and derivational.

Inflectional morphemes are a combination of the root and affix, usually resulting in a word of the same class as the original root. Inflectional morphemes do not tend to change the meaning of the root word either; they just turn the original word into a plural, past tense, etc.

The addition of these types of affixes is there to mark grammatical functions. The highlighted parts are examples of inflectional morphemes found in the following words: Running, jumped, eaten, funner, dogs.

Derivational morphemes are also a combination of the root and an affix, but in this case, the meaning or word class of the original word often changes. An example of this is: Happiness

Here, adding to '-ness' to the root 'happy' changes the word from an adjective to a noun. Inflectional and derivational morphology are how many new words enter the language.

Morphology vs. Syntax

'Grammar' is often used as a blanket term to cover both morphology and syntax.

An overview of the English morphological system

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Basic terminology with definitions and examples:

MORPHEME = the smallest meaningful unit of language (any part of a word that cannot be broken down further into smaller meaningful parts, including the whole word itself). The word 'items' can be broken down into two meaningful parts: 'item' and the plural suffix '-s'; neither of these can be broken down into smaller parts that have a meaning. Therefore, 'item' and '-s' are both morphemes.

FREE MORPHEME = a morpheme that can stand alone as an independent word (e.g. 'item').

BOUND MORPHEME = a morpheme that cannot stand alone as an independent word, but must be attached to a free morpheme/word (affixes, such as plural '-s', are always bound; roots are sometimes bound, e.g. the 'keep-'of 'kept' or the '-chive' of' 'receive'.

BASE = an element to called (free or bound, root morpheme consists of a single root morpheme, as with the kind" of 'kindness'. But a base can also be a word that itself contains more than one morpheme. For example, we can use the word 'kindness as a base to form the word "kindnesses"; to make 'kindnesses' we add the plural morpheme, spelled '-es in this case, to the base 'kindness.'

ROOT =a (usually free) morpheme around which words can be built up through the addition of affixes. The root usually has a more specific meaning than the affixes attached to it. The root 'kind' can have affixes added to it to form 'kindly', 'kindness', 'kinder', 'kindest'. The root is the item you have left when you strip all other morphemes off of a complex word. In the word dehumanizing, for example, if you strip off all the affixes -- -ing, -ize, and de-, human is what you have left. It cannot be divided further into meaningful parts. It is the root of the word.

AFFIX = a bound morpheme which attaches to a base (root or stem). PREFIXES attach to the front of a base; SUFFIXES to the end of a base; INFIXES are inserted inside of a root. An example of a prefix is the 're-' of "rewrite'; of suffix, ' al of 'critical'.

INFLECTION = the process by which, talk-ed', affixes combine with roots to indicate basic grammatical categories such as tense or plurality (e.g. in 'cat-s', 'talk-ed', -s an 'd-ed' are inflectional suffixes). Inflection is viewed as the process of adding very general meanings to existing words, not as the creation of new words.

DERIVATION = the process by which affixes combine with roots to create new words (e.g. in 'modern-ize', 'read-er', '-ize and '-er' are derivational suffixes). Derivation is viewed as using existing words to make new words. The inflection/derivation difference is increasingly viewed as shades of gray rather than an absolute boundary. Derivation is much less regular, and therefore much less predictable, than inflectional morphology. For example, we can predict that most English words will form their plural by adding the affix <-s> or <- es>. But how we derive nouns from verbs, for example, is less predictable. Why do we add <-al> to 'refuse', making 'refusal, but '-ment to 'pay' to make 'payment? 'Payal' and 'refusement are not possible English words. We have to do more memorizing in learning derivational morphology than in learning inflectional morphology.

CONTENT MORPHEME: A morpheme that has a relatively more-specific meaning than a function morpheme; a morpheme that names a concept/idea in our record of experience of the world. Content morphemes fall into the classes of noun, verb, adjective, and adverb.

FUNCTION MORPHEME: A morpheme that has a relatively less-specific meaning than a content morpheme; a morpheme whose primary meaning/function is to signal relationships between other morphemes. Function morphemes generally fall into classes such as articles ("'a' 'the"), prepositions ('of', 'at'), auxiliary verbs ('was eating', 'have slept'), etc.

SIMPLE WORD: a word consisting of a single morpheme; a word that cannot be analyzed into smaller meaningful parts, e.g. 'item', 'five', 'chunk', 'the'.

COMPLEX WORD = a word consisting of a root plus one or more affixes (e.g. 'items', 'walked' dirty').

COMPOUND WORD = a word formed from two or more simple or complex words (e.g. landlord, red-hot, window cleaner).

MORPHOPHONEMICS/ALLOMORPHY = the study of the processes by which morphemes change their pronunciation in certain situations.

ALLOMORPHS = the different forms (pronunciations) of a single morpheme. Example: the plural morpheme in English is (-z). Its allomorphs are / s /, / z /. Also, the morpheme 'leaf has two allomorphs: leaf in words built from it (e.g. 'leafy') and 'leave-', found only in the plural: 'leaves'.

English Inflectional Morphology

English has only three categories of inflectional meaning, which are expressed inflectionally, known as inflectional categories. They are numbers in nouns, tense/aspect in verbs, and comparison in adjectives. Within these categories, English has a remarkably small inventory of affixes by comparison with languages such as Spanish or Russian. English does not always use affixes to express these categories (see the discussion of irregular morphology below): Inflectional categories and affixes of English

Word class to which inflection applies	Inflectional category	Regular affix used to express category
Nouns	Number	-s, -es: book/books, bush/bushes
	Possessive	–': the cat's tail, Ibrahim's toe

Verbs	3rd person singular	–'s, -es: it rains, Idris writes,
	Past tense	–ed:paint/painted
	Past perfect	-ed: paint/painted ('has painted)
	Progressive or continuous	–ing: fall/falling, write/writing
	comparative	
Adjectives	(comparing two items)	-er: tall/taller
	superlative	
	(comparing +2 items)	-est: tall/tallest

iii. Regular and irregular inflectional morphology

Here are some ways English inflectional morphology is irregular:

Type of irregularity	Noun plural	Verbs: past tense	Verbs: past participle
Unusual suffix	oxen, syllabi, antennae		taken, seen, fallen, eaten
		Run/ran, come/ came flee/fled	
Change of stem vowel	foot/feet,	meet/met,	fly/flew, swim/swum
	Mouse/mice	stck/stuck, get/got	sing/sung
Change of	brother/brethren	feel/felt,	write/written,
Stem vowel/with unusual suffix		kneel/knelt	do/done, break/broken, fly/flown
Change in base/stem form		send/sent, bend/ bent	send/sent, bend/bent,
(sometimes with unusual suffix)			think/thought think/thought

Zero marking   deer, sheep, moose, fish   hit, beat   hit,   beat
come

(no suffix, no stem change)

More ways inflection can be irregular:

Suppletion (instead of a suffix, the whole word changes):

be-am-are-is-was-were-been

do-went-gone

good-better-best

some-more-most

Syntactic marking (added meaning is indicated by a separate word rather than marking with a suffix or change to the base).

Future of verbs: will go, will eat, will fight, etc

Comparative/superlative of adjectives: more intelligent, more expensive, etc.; most intelligent, most expensive, etc.

English derivational morphology

Below is a sample of some English derivational affixes,

This is only a sample; there are far more affixes than presented here.

Some derivational affixes of English

Affix	Class (es) of word to which affix in meaning applies	Nature of change in meaning	Examples
Prefix 'non-'	Noun, adjective	Negation/opposite	Noun: non-starter Adj.: non-partisan
Suffix '-ity'	Adjective	Changes to noun	electric/electricity obese/obesity tie/untie

Prefix Verb			Reverses action
fasten/unfasten			
''un-'	Adjective	opposite	quality
clear/unclear			
			Safe/unsafe
Suffix	Noun	Changes to	adjective
fame/famous,			
'-ous'			glamor/glamorous
Prefix	verb	Repeat action	tie/retie,
write/rewrite			
re-'			
		Changes to adjective;	
Suffix			
'-able' Verb		means 'can undergo action of verb'	
print/printable			
			Drink/drinkable

Word in formation processes: Ways of creating new words in English

1. Affixation: adding a derivational affix to a word. Examples: abuser, refusal, untie, inspection, pre-cook

2. Compounding: joining two or more words into one new word. Examples: skateboard, handbag, whitewash, cat lover, self-help, red-hot, etc

3. Zero derivation: (also called conversion or functional shift): Adding no affixes; simply using category as a word of another category. Examples: Noun-verb: comb, sand, knife, butter, referee, proposition

4. Stress shift: no affix is added to the base, but the stress is shifted from one syllable to the other. With the stress shift comes a change in category

Noun

cómbine

implant

réwrite

transport

Noun	Adjective
cóncrete	concréte
ábstract	abstráct

5. Clipping: Shortening of a Polysyllabic Word

Examples: bro (< brother), pro (< professional), prof (< professor), math (< mathematics), veg (< 'vegetate', as in veg out in front of the TV), sub (< substitute or submarine).

6. Acronym formation: forming words from the initials of a group of words that designate one concept. Usually, but not always, capitalized. An acronym is pronounced as a word if the consonants and vowels line up in such a way as to make this possible; otherwise, it is pronounced as a string of letter names. Examples: NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration), AU (African Union), AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome), SCUBA (Self-contained underwater breathing apparatus), radar (radio detecting and ranging), NFL (National Football League).

7. Blending: Parts (which are not morphemes!) of two Organizations already-existing words are put together to form a new word. Examples: motel (motor hotel), brunch (breakfast & lunch), smog (smoke & fog), telethon (television & marathon), modem (modulator & demodulator), Spanglish (Spanish & English).

8. Backformation: A suffix identifiable from other words is cut off of a base which has previously not been a word; that base then is used as a root, and becomes a word through widespread use. Examples: pronunciate (< pronunciation < pronounce), resurrect (< resurrection). enthuse (< enthusiasm), self-destruct (< self-destruction < destroy), burgle (< burglar), attrit (< attrition), burger (< hamburger). This differs from clipping in that, in clipping, some <u>phonological</u> part of the word which is not interpretable as an affix or word is cut off (e.g. the '- ther' essor' of 'professor' is not a suffix or the word; nor is the '-ther of 'brother'. In ackformation, the bit chopped off is a recognizable affix or word (ham 'in 'hamburger'), '-ion' in 'self-destruction'. Backformation is the result of a false but plausible morphological analysis of the word; clipping is a strict phonological process that is used to make the word shorter. Clipping is based on syllable structure, not morphological analysis. It is impossible to recognize backformed words or come up with examples from the knowledge of English, unless one already knows the history of the word. Most people do not know the history of the words they know; this is normal.

9. Adoption of brand names as common words: A brand name becomes the name for the item or process associated with the brand name. The word ceases to be capitalized and acts as a normal verb/noun (i.e. takes inflections such as plural or past tense). The companies using the names usually have copyrighted them and object to their use in public documents, so they should be avoided in formal writing (or a lawsuit could follow!) Examples: Xerox, kleenex, band-aid, kitty litter.

10. Onomatopoeia (pronounced: 'onno-motto-pay-uh'); words are invented which, to native speakers at least, sound like the sound they name or the entity which produces the sound. Examples: hiss, sizzle, cuckoo, cock-a-doodle-doo, buzz, beep, ding-dong

11. Borrowing: a word is taken from another language. It may be adapted to the borrowing language's phonological system to varying degrees. Examples: skunk, tomato (from indigenous languages of the Americas), sushi, taboo, wok (from Pacific Rim languages), chic, shmuck, macho, spaghetti, dirndl, psychology, telephone, physician, education (from European languages), hummus, chutzpah, cipher, artichoke (from Semitic la languages), yam, tote, banana (from African languages).

12. Coinage: The word formation process of inventing entirely new words: slumdog, robotics, genocide, netbook.

13. Eponym: New words based on names of persons or places. Volt (Alessandro Volta), Italian, boycott (Charles Boycott), rish

14. Calque: direct translation of the element of a word into the borrowing language, i.e., word translation of a phrase borrowed from another language. Example, Spanish from English: Perros calientes -dog hot=hot dog.

Allomorphy, or morphophonemic variation in English

Many English morphemes have more than one way of being pronounced, and this is often not reflected in the spelling of the morpheme. Such variations affect both affixes and roots. Sometimes, the pronunciation varies because of nearby sounds, and sometimes, there is no logic to it—its motivation lies in forgotten history.

The pronunciation variants of a morpheme are called allomorphs. The phenomenon of variation in the pronunciation of a morpheme is called allomorphic variation or morphophonemic variation (since it is the phonemic makeup of a morpheme that is varying). The variations themselves are sometimes called morphophonological processes.

The English past-tense morpheme has three allomorphs: /@d/, /t, and /d/. (Remember, /@/ is being used to stand for schwa.)

Morpheme: Past tense '-d'/-ed'

Allomorphs: /@d/, /t/, /d/

Distribution: /@d/ after /t/ and /d/, /t after other voiceless consonants, /d/ after other voiced Cs and vowels.

Motivation: Phonological. /d/ occurs after vowels and voiced consonants other than /d/; /t/ occurs after voiceless consonants other than /t/; and /@d/ occurs after the alveolar stops /t/ and /d/.

/@d/ after /t / and vowels and /d/	/t / after other voiceless	/d/ after other voiced Cs
faded, stated, petted, sounded	kissed, leaped, fluffed, stocked	buzzed, played, mooned, sued

Unmotivated allomorphy: A change in the pronunciation of a morpheme that is not based on the phonological surroundings. Most of these simply must be memorized.

Examples:

'Electric' usually has final /k/; but has final /s/ in 'electricity'. The morpheme 'electric' has two allomorphs: 'electri/k/' and 'electri/s/-'; the second occurs only when the suffix -ity' is attached to the word.

Words such as 'life', 'shelf ', 'leaf 'have a final /f/ in most forms, but when pluralized, the base has a final /v/: 'lives', 'shelves', 'leaves'. Thus, these words have two allomorphs: one final in /f/ in the singular ('life", "shelf, "leaf) word forms, and syntax (the study of sentence structure).

Morphology and syntax are, however, closely related, and there is often an argument as to whether learning morphology leads to the acquisition of syntax or if syntax provides the features and structures upon which morphology operates.

It is possible to have the syntax right, but the morphology wrong- for example, in children's language, the child will often put together their sentence perfectly well, but use the wrong affix, or apply an affix where there needn't be one- for example, 'I felled over' instead of 'I fell over'. From this example we can see how morphology is in fact very irregular- the past tense inflection ed' that is found in words such as 'walked', 'danced" or 'jumped' is not applied to all past tense constructions, this is one of the major differences between morphology and syntax, syntax follows strict rules, while morphology is often inconsistent with many exceptions to the rules.

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