

Morphemes as Substance or Rule: Different Approaches to the Concept of Morpheme

Philipp Kneis · Seminar Handout · Nov 7, 2002

1. Morphemes

Definition: smallest meaningful unit of a language

- (1) walk – walk-er – walk-ed – walk-s – sidewalk
- (2) pro-active
- (3) interest-ing — but: inter-[e]s-t
- (4) catastroph-e — but: κατα-στροφ-ή (στρέφω: to turn)

root (or base) morphemes: able to constitute a stem or a word themselves: -walk-

bound morphemes: can only appear in connection with a bound morpheme: pro-, -er, -ed, -s

Bound morphemes can appear as **affixes** (resp. **derivational** morphemes):

- (5) prefix: im-possible [in-]
- (6) infix: abso-bloomin-lutely [-bloomin-]
- (7) interfix: whatcha-ma-callit [-ma-], col-u-nt [-u-, Lat. 3rd ps Pl. colere, to cherish], Geschmack-s-verirrung [-s-]
- (8) suffix: dark-ness [-ness]; participate — participation; natus – natio (Lat. born – tribe/nation)
- (9) circumfix: Arab. inta tiktib (you write) — inta ma-tiktib-sh (you don't write); mash/mesh/mush (فش): not

or **endings** (resp. **inflectional** morphemes):

- (10) cat – cat-s; ὁ ἀδελφ-ός – τῶ ἀδελφ-ώ – οἱ ἀδελφ-οί (Gk. the brother; number: singular/(dual)/plural)
- (11) pulch-e-r-Ø – pulchr-a – pulchr-um (Lat. “beautiful”; gender: m/f/n)
- (12) popul-us – popul-i – ... (Lat. people) / кошка – кошки – ... (Russ. cat) / Haus – Hauses (case declension: Nom. / Gen.)
- (13) am-o – am-a-s – am-a-t – ... (Lat. to love); have – have – has – ... (verb conjugation)

Representations of the same morpheme are called **morphs**, there can be different **allomorphs** for the same morpheme:

- (14) English plural -s: cats /kats/, dogs /dogz/, horses /ho:səz/ (allomorphy conditioned by phonology)
- (15) index – indices, but also: indexes; knife – knives; but: fife – fifes (allomorphy as idiosyncratic property of a word)

Morphemes can exhibit **assimilation**:

(16) on + knowledge = acknowledge; in + possible = impossible

(17) root + able: readable; possible

or show otherwise variation, or may be substituted by another morpheme (**suppletion**):

(18) think – thought – ~ ; bring – brought – ~

(19) France – French – Frank – Franco- (partial suppletion, etymological reasons)

(20) go – went – gone; esse – sum – fui (Lat. be – I am – I have been; whereas -s- is the root for “be”)

2. Morphological Operations

inflection: declination of nouns, conjugation of verbs: (12) (13)

derivation: can induce a change in syntactic category: (8)

morphological classes: more or less arbitrary groupings associated with different sets of inflections or gender markers

gender may or may not be linked to morphological classes (Spanish or Russian), it may follow arbitrary

lexical classes (French).

Inflection can follow **declensional or conjugational classes**, independent of gender or other classifications (forming paradigms).

As a consequence, certain rules of morphosyntax may apply, leading to **agreement, government** or **concord** between related forms:

(21) il canale grande (gender concord)

(22) Ceterum censeo Carthaginem delendam esse. (Lat. “besides, I deem it necessary that Carthage be destroyed”):

case and gender concord (Carthaginem delendam [though the morphological class of declension is different]),

government: “censeo” here demands for an infinitive construction with an Accusative, illustrated by the English translation.

changes can also be achieved by operations like the following:

reduplication:

(23) pello – pepuli (Lat. push); παιδέύ-ω – πε-παίδευ-κα (Gk. to teach).

(These examples show the formation of a perfective form, which in Greek is by default formed by the means of reduplication, whereas Latin only retains that method in certain verbs. Herein we may understand reduplication as a form of stress applied to the stem, underlining what is meant by the perfect form, stressing the result of the action. This may be a grammatical manifestation of a phonetic phenomenon.)

clitics: elements that cannot exist independently and are attached before (proclitic) or after (enclitic) a **host**.

(24) Il me les a donné. (he has given them to me) – Donnez-les moi. (give them to me)

(25) Senatus Populus-que Romanus (-que = et, “and”) = Senatus et Populus Romanus
scis-nē (Lat. you know, don’t you: -nē = not)

One may argue whether affixes or other elements could have originated from pro- or enclitic elements which are now added to the word. For instance, most prepositions and articles in Ancient Greek are clitics, they don’t carry accents of their own. Also, lots of non-inflectional prefixes can also stand on their own (ad, pro, prae, **διά, κατά**). Some affixes may also be altered forms of such clitics.

(26) on-going – a-going (Appalachian dialect); cf. also (16): on + knowledge = acknowledge

Prefixes used for negation in Indo-European languages may also originate from a common sound /n/, a vocalized n, manifesting itself into forms like un-, in-, ne-, not, a- and an-. Like with the perfective example above (21), the origin of such forms may have been onomatopoeic as well.

alterations in **stress, vowel length, tone, change in vowels, mutations** (for further examples, see Spencer 1991, 16-20):

(27) cóntrast – to contrást (noun – verb)

(28) lie – lay; fall – fell (intransitive – transitive)

Changes in word class may also appear to not be connected with morphological change. They may be interpreted as either a simple **(morphological) conversion** from one word class to another, or as being the result of a **null** or **zero affixation**.

(29) a cut – to cut

(30) the chicken was killed – the killed chicken (participle – adjective)

(31) the book is cool – a cool book (predicative – attributive). If we were to translate this into German, we may say
”Das Buch ist cool”, whereas the second case would be “Ein cooles Buch.” It seems that even though in English both words look the same, despite their different functions, German has to differentiate between the two by adding the adjective ending
-es in order to underline the attributive function. If we may make such a connection between two closely related languages, we could assume that in the English case a zero affixation takes place.

There can also be a change of **voice** or valency between Active, Passive or Medium voice. That can be achieved by means of inflections or combinations of morphological and syntactical rules.

(32) Antonius Cleopatram amat – Cleopatra ab Antonio amatur.

(33) Anthony loves Cleopatra – Cleopatra is loved by Anthony.

Other categories for grammaticalized aspects of meaning are those of **tense** (time), **aspect**, **correlation**, **mood** (indicative, imperative, subjunctive, optative, conditional &c) and **modality** (desideratives, degrees of certainty).

3. Substance v. Rule (Spencer 1991, 12ff)

Morphemes as **substance** or **things**: Morphemes somehow are like small words, the morphologic part of grammar is like a kind of syntax whose task is to combine the morphemes in a certain way. This could be illustrated by most examples of affixation and inflection, where the attached morpheme doesn't otherwise affect the base morpheme.

Morphemes as **rules**: It is not about the mere existence of morphemes, but about the system of relations or contrasts created by them. Words undergo a certain morphological process in order to derive at a different form. This could be illustrated by alterations like changes in stress, vowel length, tone etc., (examples (27-28)), where the attached morpheme either affects the base morpheme, or the modifying morpheme itself is not directly visible, and it can only be seen by its effects, as in the case of zero affixation (29-31), or the morpheme itself is the rule as such (the change of stress itself would be the morpheme).

4. Resources

"Indo-European Roots". *The American Heritage College Dictionary, 4th Edition*. Boston / NY: Houghton Mifflin, 2002.

Doug Arnold. „Morphology 1: Introduction“.

<http://courses.essex.ac.uk/lg/LG619/Morph/intro/index.pdf> (Nov 7, 2002).

Barbara Hansen, Klaus Hansen & Albrecht Neubert & Manfred Schentke. *Englische Lexikologie -- Einführung in Wortbildung und lexikalische Semantik*. Leipzig: VEB Verlag Enzyklopädie, 1985.

Christian Mair. *Einführung in die anglistische Sprachwissenschaft*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997.

Andrew Spencer. *Morphological Theory. An Introduction to Word Structure in Generative Grammar*. Oxford/Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991. 3-36.

Andrew Spencer, Arnold M. Zwicky (eds.). "Introduction". *The Handbook of Morphology (Blackwell Handbooks in Linguistics)*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998. 1-10.

http://www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk/images/Content_store/Sample_chapter/063122694X/Spencer.pdf (Nov 7, 2002)

Jonathan West. „SML112 Morphology “.http://www.ncl.ac.uk/sml/staff/west/sml112_week6a.htm (Nov 7, 2002).