Chapter 2
Morphemes

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces basic concepts in the field of morphology. In the first section, a morpheme is defined as the smallest unit of meaning in a language. In the second section, morphemes are divided into free and bound types, with bound morphemes further classified as either affixes (prefixes, infixes, suffixes, or circumfixes) or bound roots. This section additionally distinguishes between the role of function words and content words in a sentence. The third section outlines the nine word classes in English: nouns, pronouns, adjectives, determiners, verbs, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections. The final section of the chapter explains the implications of this information for teaching vocabulary, grammar, and language skills. The chapter concludes with questions for discussion and some practice exercises.

WHAT IS MORPHOLOGY?

Morphology is the subfield of linguistics which studies morphemes. Morphemes are the smallest units of meaning in a language. They can consist of only one letter, a group of letters, or an entire word. For instance, the indefinite article *a* and the subject pronoun *I* are single letters which have meaning and which are morphemes.

Morphemes can also be groups of letters which represent a meaning but which are not a complete word. For example, although *uni-* is not a complete word, it has a meaning, which is "one." This meaning is manifested in words like *uniform* (there is only "one form;" i.e., everything is the same) and *unicycle* (a cycle with one wheel). Similarly, *-ness* is not a complete word, yet when we add it to other word parts, it refers to a state of being as in *happiness* or *sickness.*

In addition, a morpheme can be an entire word on its own. To illustrate, *dog*, *book*, and *house* are morphemes, but we would also consider them to be complete words. Some words are made up of a combination of morphemes. Consider the word *autobiography*. This word consists of four morphemes: *auto-* (self), *bio-* (life), *graph-* (write), and *–y* (a noun-forming suffix). If we combine the meaning of these four morphemes, we have a noun that refers to a narrative that a person has written about his or her own life. A word, then, can consist of only one morpheme or multiple morphemes.

In all of these cases, whether the morpheme consists of a single letter, a group of letters, or a word, the morpheme represents a minimal unit of meaning. Lexical morphology looks at how morphemes are used to create words and inflectional morphology studies how morphemes add grammatical information to a sentence. You will learn more about these aspects of morphology in the coming chapters.

FREE AND BOUND MORPHEMES

Morphemes can be divided into **free morphemes** and **bound morphemes**. As noted above, there are some morphemes that are complete words (e.g., *desk, him, run,* and *sick*). With these morphemes, it is possible for us to categorize them according to their parts of speech (i.e., **nouns**, **pronouns**, **adjectives**, **determiners**, **verbs**, **adverbs**, **prepositions**, **conjunctions**, and **interjections**). This type of morpheme which is recognized as a complete word is known as a free morpheme. Free morphemes have the potential to serve as the base for the attachment of affixes (see below). For example, *desk* can add *–s* to form *desks*; *sick* can add *–ness* to become *sickness*. Additionally, free morphemes can combine with each other to create compound words. For instance, food that remains after a meal is *left over*. These two words are combined to create the adjective *leftover*, as in *I ate leftover pizza for breakfast*.

Bound morphemes are word parts that cannot stand alone as words, for example, *de-* or *-ly*. They must be connected to another morpheme in order to form a word. *De-*, which means "to remove," attaches to the beginning of words like *motivate* and *frost* to create *demotivate* (to reduce someone's motivation) and *defrost* (to remove ice). *–ly* can be added to the end of words to create adverbs, as in *slow/slowly* and *gradual/gradually*. Bound morphemes can be affixes or bound roots, both of which will be discussed in the coming sections. Notice the use of hyphens (e.g., *de-*, *-ly*) when these forms are written. The hyphens indicate that these forms are not complete words, and the direction of the hyphen shows where the bound morpheme attaches to other morphemes.

Affixes

Affixes are bound morphemes. As such, they must be connected to other morphemes in the language. Affixes can be derivational, in that they allow us to derive, or create, new words with new meanings from morphemes we already have. For instance, *re-* means to repeat an action. When we add *re-* to an existing base word like *write*, we have a new word, *rewrite*, which means to write something again. Likewise, *-al* represents an adjectival function. When we add *–al* to the noun *nation*, the affix changes the noun to an adjective, *national,* as in *national emergency*.

Affixes can also be inflectional, which means they add grammatical information, such as tense, number, or possession, to a word. For instance, *–s* is a morpheme we add to make a noun plural (e.g., *book/books*). Inflectional affixes do not change the part of speech of the word the way that derivational affixes can. Taking our example above, *book* (singular) and *books* (plural) are both nouns. The distinction between derivational and inflectional affixes will be covered in depth in Chapter 3.

Affixes are divided into four categories according to where the affixes can be attached to words: at the beginning (**prefixes**), in the middle (**infixes**), at the end (**suffixes**), or in two parts surrounding the word (**circumfixes**). Prefixes like *bi-*, *co-*, *dis-, re-*, and *semi-* appear at the beginning of a word, before the root, the morpheme which expresses the word's core meaning. Table 1 shows examples of how prefixes attach to words to create new meanings.

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