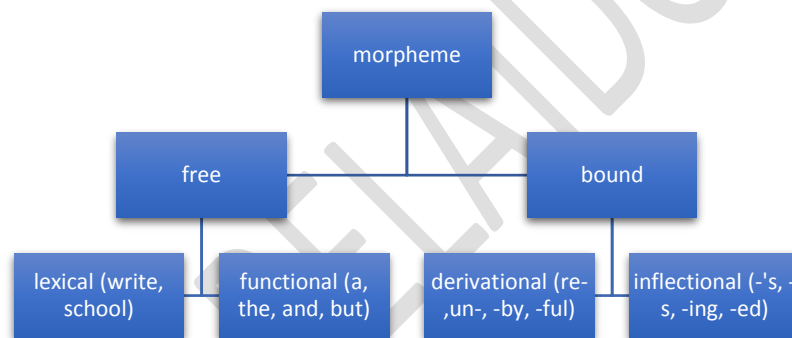# MORPHOLOGY: Building Words

Morphology is the branch of linguistics that studies the internal structure of words. It looks at how words are formed and how they relate to other words in the same language. Morphology deals with word formation out of morphemes—the smallest grammatical units that have meaning.

Definition of the Morpheme

A morpheme is the smallest linguistic unit that has semantic meaning. For example, the word "unhappily" is composed of three morphemes: "un-" (a prefix indicating negation), "happy" (a root word that stands alone as a word), and "-ly" (a suffix indicating the manner of being happy).

Types of Morphemes

Morphemes are broadly categorized into two types:

Free and Bound Morphemes

☐ **Free Morphemes:** These can stand alone as words themselves, such as "dog," "happy," or "run."

☐ **Bound Morphemes:** These cannot stand alone and must be attached to other morphemes to create words. Examples include prefixes like "re-" (meaning again) and "un-" (meaning not), suffixes like "-ing" (present participle) and "-ed" (past tense), and inflections like the plural "-s."

Categories of Free Morphemes

- Nouns (N): dog, table, book
- Verbs (V): run, jump, write
- Adjectives (Adj): happy, red, big
- Adverbs (Adv): quickly, beautifully, carefully

Categories of Bound Morphemes

- **Derivational affixes:** These change the meaning or grammatical category of the base word. Examples include prefixes like "re-" and "un-," and suffixes like "-ful" (meaning full of) and "-less" (meaning without).
- **Inflectional affixes:** These do not change the meaning of the word but indicate grammatical information like plurality, tense, or comparison. Examples include the plural "-s," the past tense "-ed," and the comparative "-er."

Morphs and Allomorphs

A *morph* is the actual realization of a morpheme in speech or writing. Sometimes, a single morpheme can have different forms depending on the context. These variants are called *allomorphs*. For instance, the plural morpheme has different allomorphs: "-s" in "cats," "-es" in "boxes," and "-ren" in "children."

Morphological Processes

English uses various processes to create new words:

Derivation: This involves adding affixes (prefixes or suffixes) to a base word to create a new word with a different meaning or grammatical category. For example, "happy" becomes "unhappy" with the addition of the prefix "un-," and "care" becomes "careless" with the suffix "-less."

Compounding: This involves combining two or more free morphemes to create a new word. Examples include "ice cream" (ice + cream) and "mother-in-law" (mother + in + law).

Other processes include:

- **Reduplication:** Repeating a word or part of it, e.g., "quickquick."
- **Blending:** Combining parts of two words, e.g., "brunch" from "breakfast" and "lunch."
- **Clipping:** Shortening a longer word, e.g., "exam" from "examination."
- **Borrowing:** Taking words from other languages.

Practice Exercises

- **Identify the morphemes in the following words:** unforgettable, kindness, preheat, beautifully.
- **Distinguish between free and bound morphemes in the following words:** hopeful, teaches, fastest, happiness.
- **Provide examples of allomorphs for the following morphemes:** plural, past tense, comparative.
- **Identify the morphological process used to create the following words:** unhappy (derivation), textbook (compounding), brunch (blending).

References

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