

## **Morpheme** [slide 25]

Morphemes are the smallest units of language that carry meaning, and they cannot be broken down into smaller meaningful parts. Therefore, to be considered a morpheme, a sequence of phonemes has to respect two criteria.

- Firstly, a morpheme must convey a meaning. The noun *walk* is a single morpheme and cannot be further analyzed, while in the verb *walked* there are two morphemes, since also the ending *-ed* conveys a meaning by specifying that the verb is used at the past tense.
- Secondly, morphemes cannot be divided into smaller meaningful parts. For example, *read* is a morpheme, as it cannot be broken down into smaller components such as 'r' and 'id': 'r' and 'id' are just sounds devoid of meaning, and not morphemes.

To recap, morphemes must have a meaning, and they cannot be broken down into smaller parts that convey meaning. Also, be aware of the fact that *word* and *morpheme* are two distinct concepts: for example, *cat* is a word, and so is *cats*; and yet *cat* is one morpheme, while *cats* consists of two morphemes. Also, *-s* is a morpheme, but it is not a word.

## Inflection

### a) *Inherent vs contextual inflection* [slides 37-39]

Inflection is the modification of a word's form to indicate grammatical information of various sorts. It is used to convey grammaticalized aspects of meaning, such as tense, mood, and person of a verb, or information about number, gender, and case.

It is possible to distinguish two types of inflection: inherent and contextual. Inherent inflection refers to information directly decided by the speaker based on the intended meaning; on the other hand, contextual inflection is dictated by the syntactic context.

An example of inherent inflection is the specification of number in nouns. For instance, the words *table* and *tables* have different inflections, however, given a sentence, there is no grammatical rule that dictates whether to use one or the other, as the speaker is free to choose which form to use, depending on what they want to communicate. Verb tense is another instance of inherent inflection: the speaker chooses whether to set the action in the past, present, or future and conjugates the verb accordingly. This information is not determined by the structure of the sentence, but rather by the information the speaker wants to convey.

Contextual inflection, on the other hand, is dictated by the agreement between two or more words in a sentence. Agreement occurs when one word is inflected to match certain grammatical properties of another word, such as case, number, or gender. For instance, in most languages the verb must agree with its subject. Although this is not as evident in English, where it only affects the third person of non-past verb forms, it is still observable in phrases like *I write* versus *she writes*. In this example, the speaker decides who the subject of the sentence is beforehand, subsequently the verb undergoes contextual inflection to agree with that subject.

### b) *Internal change and ablaut* [slides 41-42]

Internal change is a widespread inflectional process, used in several languages. In internal change, a non-morphemic segment is substituted for another to indicate a grammatical contrast. The most common type is called ablaut, or apophony, which refers to a vowel alternation within the root to differentiate between grammatical forms.

We can clarify this definition by providing examples of the phenomenon. Consider the verb *sing*, for which the present tense form is *sing*, the past tense *sang*, and the past participle *sung*. These inflected forms do not contain any affix, the tense of the verb is modified by swapping one vowel for another in the root.

Ablaut is not uncommon in English, and it interests especially various so-called irregular verbs such as *sink-sank*, *drive-drove*, and *rise-rose*. As you may notice, in these verbs the past tense is not marked by adding the suffix *-ed*, but by a vowel change within the root. Moreover, for these verbs there is not a clearly identifiable morpheme that we can associate with the grammatical meaning of "past"; instead, there is just a vowel alternation between forms, and from that we deduce the necessary grammatical information.

Internal change can affect not only verbs but also nouns. For example, consider the contrast between *foot* and *feet*. The plural form is not created by adding the usual plural marker *-s*, but by changing the root's vowel, from /fʊt/ to /fi:t/.

### c) *Suppletion* [slides 43-45]

Suppletion is an inflectional process in which a morpheme is replaced with an entirely different one to indicate different grammatical features. Examples include the use of *went* as the past tense form of the verb *go*, and *was* and *were* as the past tense forms of *be*.

## Structure of compounds [slides 73-79]

### a) Head

The internal structure of many compounds consists of a component called “head”, and one or more modifiers. The head determines the main meaning of the entire compound, and, in English, it is typically the rightmost lexical morpheme. For instance, in *milk chocolate* the head is *chocolate*, while in *chocolate milk* it is *milk*. When speaking English, we tend to interpret the rightmost element as the most significant, so we understand *milk chocolate* to be a variety of chocolate, whereas *chocolate milk* refers to a type of milk.

The consistent placement of the head of English compounds as the rightmost element is highlighted in the following examples: *windmill* (mill), *coffee table* (table), *dog food* (food), and *caveman* (man). This set of examples also illustrates that compounds denote a subtype of the broader concept indicated by their head: *windmill* is a type of mill, *coffee table* a type of table, *dog food* is a type of food, and *caveman* refers to a man.

Since the head determines the main meaning of the compound, the easiest way to identify it is by asking “what is it?”. Is a *living room* a living or a room? Clearly, it’s a room; so *room* is the head of the compound. What’s *seafood*? It is not the name of a sea, but rather a type of food sourced from the sea; therefore, *food* is the head of the compound.

Up to this point, our focus has been on meaning; however, it is equally important to consider that the head confers its category to the entire compound. For example, consider *blackboard*: the head, *board*, is a noun, and, as a result, the entire compound is also a noun. Similarly, the head of *ice-cold* is *cold*, an adjective, therefore the compound is also an adjective. In other words, the lexical category of the compound matches that of its head.

In summary, the head of a compound conveys the main meaning, and also determines the part of speech to which the compound belongs.

### b) Endocentric vs exocentric compounds

Endocentric compounds, such as *moonlight* or *windmill*, have a clearly identifiable head that conveys the core meaning of the compound. As a result, the overall meaning is often compositional and can be deduced from the lexical morphemes involved.

On the other hand, exocentric compounds do not have a component that provides the bulk of their meaning, resulting in the absence of a head. Consequently, the overall meaning of an exocentric compound cannot be deduced from its components alone; instead, it requires language-specific cultural and/or historical knowledge. Examples of exocentric compounds are *redneck* and *saber-tooth*. A *redneck* is neither a shade of red nor a part of the neck, but rather a person: there is no head in this compound, and the meaning is not compositional. To understand the word, it is necessary to know the cultural context in which it was created; specifically, the term originally characterized farmers, who had a red neck caused by sunburns from long hours working in the fields. The current meaning stems from the association of farmers with uneducated people.

### **Word formation processes – Conversion [slide 81]**

Conversion is a word-formation process that assigns an existing word to a different lexical category without any change in its form. Suffixation alters the part of speech with the addition of an affix, while conversion results in a change of category, but without any added morphological element.

Conversion is widespread in English, and it is particularly common from nouns to verbs. For instance, the verb *to e-mail* was created by converting the noun *e-mail*, and the noun *eye* was converted to the corresponding verb. The same is also true for verbs like *to bottle* and *to lure*, which were converted from nouns. The reverse process is also well established, and nouns such as *run*, *drink*, *drive*, and *call* are all converted from the corresponding verbs.