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11 Morphology1

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1 Introduction

Morphology is about the structure of words. In a language like English many words have an internal structure, consisting of one or more **morphemes**. Thus, the form *cats* comprises the root morpheme 'cat' to which is added the suffix morpheme 's' indicating plural. Why do we say that the expression *the cat* or its French equivalent *le chat* is two separate words, rather than take *the/le* to be prefixes, especially given the French expression *l'ami* 'the friend'? If the 'l' of *l'ami* is a word, why can't we say that the 's' of *cats* is also a word? Here we need the help of syntax: *the cat* is a phrase which can be extended by the addition of other phrases: *the very black cat* and French *l'ami* behaves similarly. The form *cats* can never be split up this way, the reason being that the 's' component is an element which can only exist as part of a word, specifically at the end of a noun. In other words, 's' is a suffix and hence a **bound morpheme**. The property of indivisibility exhibited by *cats* is **lexical integrity**. A single word such as *cats* contrasts rather neatly with the fully fledged (but synonymous) phrase *more than one cat*, in which it is clear that *more*, *than*, and *one* are all independent words and can all be separated by other words or phrases.

This chapter will examine the different structures that words exhibit and the morphological relationships they bear to each other, and the nature of the morpheme. We begin by clarifying the notion "word" itself.

1.1 The lexeme concept

If we ask how many words are listed in (1) we can give at least two answers.

- (1) {cat, cats}

In one sense there are obviously two, but in another sense there is only one word, CAT, and only one entry will be found in a dictionary for it. The plural, *cats*, is formed by a completely general rule from the singular form *cat* and there is no need to record the plural form separately. In addition, we can describe *cat* as "the singular form of the word CAT" and *cats* as "the plural form of the word CAT."¹ On the other hand, the singular form of the word SHEEP has exactly the same form

as the plural, namely *sheep*, even though, in another sense, these are two distinct words, namely "the singular of SHEEP" and "the plural of SHEEP."

It is rather useful to have different terms for these three different senses of the word "word." We will therefore say that there is a **lexeme** CAT which has two **word forms**, *cat* and *cats*. The names of lexemes are conventionally written in small capitals. The grammatical description "the singular/plural of CAT" is a **grammatical word**. Thus, *sheep* is one word form corresponding to one lexeme, SHEEP, but it is two grammatical words (singular/plural of SHEEP).

We can think of a lexeme as a complex representation linking a (single) meaning with a set of word forms (or, to be very strict, linking a meaning with a set of grammatical words, which are then associated with corresponding word forms). From the point of view of the dictionary (or lexicon), this representation is therefore a **lexical entry**. If several sets of forms correspond to one meaning we have **pure synonymy**: e.g., *{boat, boats}*, *{ship, ships}*. If a single form corresponds to more than one completely unrelated meaning, as with *{write, right, rite}*, or *{bank, bank}*, then we have **homophony or homonymy**. Homophones/homonyms are distinct lexemes which happen to share the same shape (written and/or spoken). In some cases these meanings are felt to be related to each other, and dictionaries tend to treat this as an instance of **polysemy**. Thus, the word "head" means a body part, the person in charge of an organization, a technical term in linguistics, and so on, and these meanings are associated by some kind of metaphorical extension. However, it is better to think of this type of relatedness as homophony (but see Section 6.2 for an example of systematic polysemy with verbs such as BREAK).

A pairing of form with meaning is a **sign**, of which the lexeme is a prototypical example. The traditional definition of morpheme is "the smallest meaningful component of a word," and this entails that we consider all morphemes as signs. However, this turns out to be very controversial, for some types of morpheme, at least.

1.2 Types of word formation: inflection, derivation, compounding

It is common to distinguish **inflection**, in which we create word forms of lexemes, such as the plural or past tense, **derivation**, in which we create new lexemes from old lexemes, and **compounding**, in which a single word is formed by combining two other words. We begin with compounds.

The most straightforward type of compound consists of two concatenated words: *morphology + article = morphology article*; *house + boat = houseboat*. The right-hand member is the **head** of the compound, determining the syntactic category and meaning of the whole (a morphology article is a kind of article, a houseboat is a kind of boat, as opposed to a boathouse, which is a kind of house). The left-hand member is the modifier. In transparent cases such as *morphology article* the meaning of the whole is derived from the meanings of the components, though the precise meaning is indeterminate and depends on the context of use.

There is an important distinction in many languages between compounds and phrases. In many cases the difference is obvious. In a hackneyed example such as the compound *blackbird* as opposed to the phrase *black bird*, the compound has stress on *black*, while the phrase is stressed on *bird* (in neutral contexts at least). Moreover, a black bird is necessarily black, while a blackbird is a particular species of bird whatever its color. This means that the semantics of *blackbird* is **noncompositional**, i.e., we can't determine the meaning of the whole just from the meanings of the parts. The semantics of phrases (idioms apart) is compositional. The difference can be illustrated syntactically as in (2, 3) (making very conservative assumptions about syntactic structure):