Morphology: Basic concepts, Rules and Processes

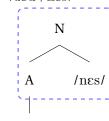Nir Segal　–　October 24, 2025

Basics

- **Morphology**:= (The study of) the rules for forming words (?!) from *morphemes*
- **Morpheme** := any sequence of phones to which meaning is assigned
  (the basic unit)
- We can classify two types of morphemes:
  a. **Free** morphemes := stand-alone-able sequences
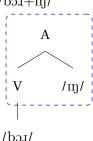   (e.g., *job, most, how*)
  b. **Bound** morphemes := non-stand-alone-able sequences (they need a 'host')
     (e.g., *-er, -s, un-*)

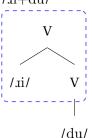We represent the composition of morphemes via ... tree structures.

(1)　a.　/ɹɛd+nɛs/　　b.　/bɔɹ+ɪŋ/　　c.　/ɹi+du/
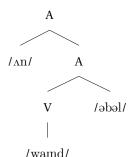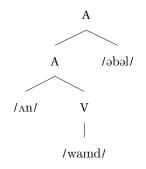

Combining more than two morphemes can lead to **morphological ambiguity** (keep in mind, however, that the distribution of affixes is *regular*).

(2)　/ʌnwaɪmdəbəl/

　　a.　*not windable*　　　　　b.　*able to be unwound*

> ### Morphemes Composition in Tree Notation
>
> (3)　Show how the following words are composed from smaller morphemes by using our 'tree notation'.
>
> a.　'repayable'
> b.　'uninstaller'
> c.　'unsettling'
> d.　'unfelicitousness'

Morphological Rules and Processes

The rules of word formation: (i) describe general regularities (that means they can apply to nonce words), (ii) are sensitive to the **category** of the input, and (iii) determine the category of the output.

(4)　<u>Some word-formnation processes:</u>

a.　**Affixation** := Attachment of a bound morpheme (generally):
   (i)　To the *end* of a morpheme　　　　　　　　　　a **prefix**
       N → V + /iːɹ/ as in 'player'
   (ii)　To the *beginning* of a morpheme　　　　　　a **suffix**
       V → /ɹi/ + V as in 'reinvest'
   (iii)　*Inside* a morpheme　　　　　　　　　　　an **infix**
       'abso-(god)damn-lutely',
       the relevant rule: the infix has to come just before the *syllable* receiving **main stress**

b.　**Reduplication** := Copying (and pasting) a morpheme, or a part of a morpheme.

c.　**Internal Change (Ablaut)** := Altering some phoneme(s) within a morpheme.
   [spik]~[spowk]; [ɹajt]~[ɹowt]

d.　**Compounding** := Forming a *word* (free morpheme) by combining together two other words.
   In English, the category of a compound is 'copied up' from the category of the rightmost word (the **head**) in the compund.

Identifying processes & rules

(5) Consider the following word pairs of Italian. What kind of word formation process(es) can you find here? State informally the word-formation rule(s).

/tapːeto/	'mat'	/tapːetone/	'big mat'
/tavolo/	'table'	/tavolone/	'big table'
/gatːo/	'cat'	/gatːone/	'big cat'
/kukːjajo/	'spoon'	/kukːjajone/	'big spoon'

(6) Consider the following word pairs of Armenian. Do the same as before.

/mak^{h}rel/	'to clean'	/mak^{h}rvel/	'to be cleaned'
/grel/	'to write'	/grvel/	'to be written'
/pahel/	'to hold'	/pahvel/	'to be held'
/pac'el/	'to kiss'	/pac'el/	'to be kissed'

(7) Consider the following word pairs of Hebrew. Do the same as before.

/zakan/	'beard'	/zkankan/	'little beard'
/kelev/	'dog'	/klavlav/	'little dog'
/katom/	'orange'	/ktamtam/	'orangish'
/kaχol/	'blue'	/kχalχal/	'bluish'
/ʃamen/	'fat'	/ʃmanman/	'chubby'
/katan/	'small'	/ktantan/	'tiny'