



# Inflection

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# Word formation processes

By word-formation processes we mean the different devices which are used in English to build new words from existing ones.

- Each word-formation process results in the production of a specific type of word.
- Consequently, an understanding of these processes is one way of studying the different types of words that exist in English.

# Inflection and derivation

Inflection is a general grammatical process which combines words and affixes (always suffixes in English) to produce alternative grammatical forms of words.

E.g. The plural morpheme is an **inflectional morpheme**. This implies that the plural form *flowers*, does not represent a lexical item fundamentally different from the singular form *flower*, it is simply an inflectional variant of the same word.

Inflection contributes a morpheme that is required in order to ensure that the word has a form that is appropriate for the grammatical context in which it is used.

Inflectional affixes:	-S	(plural)
	-ER	(comparative)
	-EST	(superlative)
	-IA, -IM, ...	(irregular plural)

# Inflection

- Inflection is motivated by syntax. Inflectional processes assign a stem certain grammatical properties so as to produce a grammatical word that can fit in a given syntactic slot.
- Some linguists say that inflectional morphology is concerned with syntactically driven word-formation. Inflectional morphology deals with syntactically determined affixation processes while derivational morphology is used to create new lexical items. (Katamba and Stonham, p. 223)
- Languages of the world have different morphosyntactic properties expressed by their inflectional system:

e.g.

NOUNS: Number, Case, Definiteness, Gender

VERBS: Tense, Aspect, Mood, Voice, Number, Person, Gender;

ADJECTIVES: Degree, Number, Gender, Case, Definiteness

# Forms of nouns

- Most countable nouns in English have two word forms: a singular and a plural.
- Inflectionally, for any noun lexeme X, there are just two grammatical words, 'singular of X' and 'plural of X', contrasting in **number**.
- Irregular suffixes expressing plurality include *-i*, *-ae*, *-a* (as in *cacti*, *formulae*, *phenomena*) found with some relatively learned words borrowed from Latin and Greek; the suffix *-(r)en* that shows up only in *oxen*, *children*, *brethren*; and a very few others such as the Hebrew *-im* in *cherubim*, *kibbutzim*.
- There are also some nouns that express their plural with no suffix at all, e.g. *teeth*, *men*.
- However, there are also some whose plurals display not even a vowel change: e.g. *sheep*, *fish*, *deer*, *trout*. We can tell whether they are singular or plural by the syntactic context:
  - *A deer was visible through the trees.*
  - *Two deer were visible through the trees.*

# Forms of nouns

- There are a few nouns such as *SCISSORS*, *PANTS* which exist only in an –s plural form, and which appear only in plural syntactic contexts, even though they denote single countable entities.
- In contexts where the syntax seems to require a morphological singular form, there is a conventional circumlocution or **periphrastic form**: *a pair of scissors*, *a pair of pants*.

# Grammatical Categories of Nouns: Number

The first category, number, is relatively simple. There are two terms of this category in English: singular (the concept of 'one') and plural (the concept of 'more than one').

Number

is expressed by inflection, generally by -s:

- in count nouns (*dog/dogs*)
- in demonstratives (*this/these, that/those*)
- in the 1st and 3rd p of personal pronouns (*I/we*), possessive determiners (*my/our*), possessive pronouns (*mine/ours*), and reflexive pronouns (*myself/ourselves*), but not in the 2nd p.

Note that for historical reasons the idiosyncratic forms of the personal pronouns are considered “inflected forms”, though they do not always contain separable inflectional endings. Number is also expressed by distinct forms of certain pronouns and adjectives:

- singular: *every, each, someone, anybody, a/an*
- plural: *all, many, few, several, most*

# Number

Number is also expressed in a limited way in verbs, by the singular -s of the 3rd p which occurs in the present but not in the past tense (he writes versus they write, he wrote).

Number is expressed more fully in the inflected forms of the verb 'to be' (singular am, is, was, plural are, were), which because of its high frequency, tends to preserve inflections more fully than do other verbs. (Note: the history of the English language has involved a gradual loss of inflections in all parts of speech.)

The concept of **generic number**, which incorporates both singular and plural and is used when one doesn't want to specify number, is expressed in English in three ways:

- a. the definite article + singular noun (The tiger may be dangerous),
- b. the indefinite article + singular noun (A tiger may be dangerous), and
- c. Ø article + plural of count nouns or singular of mass nouns (Tigers may be dangerous or
  - Gold is valuable).

Finally, an "odd" use of number is use of the plural when singular is denoted, in the so-called "royal we" or "editorial we".



# Gender

English has a rather straightforward system of gender called natural gender, as opposed to the seemingly less motivated system called grammatical gender. Grammatical gender, the system found in German, French, or Italian, for example, as well as in an earlier stage of English, appears to be arbitrary; here, gender is not related to the sex of the object denoted but is really just a means of subclassifying nouns as masculine/feminine or masculine/feminine/ neuter, as in German *das Mädchen* (n) 'the girl' or French *le jour* (m) 'the day' or Italian *la vita* (f) 'the life'.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, natural gender depends on the sex of the object in the real world. In this system, we distinguish masculine, feminine, common or dual (m or f), and neuter (sexless) genders.

In English, gender is expressed by inflection only in personal pronouns, and only in the 3rd person, singular *he, she, it*; the 1st and 2nd person forms *I, we, and you* are common gender, while the 3rd person plural form *they* is either common gender or neuter (the people ... *they*, the boats ... *they*). Relative and interrogative pronouns and some other pronouns inflectionally express a related category of animacy (animate/inanimate): *who, whom* vs. *what, which*, *somebody/one* vs. *something*, *anybody/one* vs. *anything*. Distinctions of animacy are variable, but commonly speakers distinguish between human beings and higher animals (the {woman, dog} *who...*) and lower animals and inanimate things (the {ant, stone} *which...*).

# Gender

However, gender may also be expressed overtly on the English noun in a number of limited ways:

- 1. by derivational suffixes, such as the feminine suffixes -ine (hero/heroine), -ess (god/goddess), -rix (aviator/aviatrix), and -ette (suffragist/suffragette) or the common gender
- suffixes -er (baker), -ist (artist), -ian (librarian), -ster (prankster), and -ard (drunkard);
- 2. by compounds, such as lady-, woman-, girl-, female-, -woman or boy-, male-, gentleman-,
- -man;
- 3. by separate forms for masculine, feminine, and common genders, such as boy/girl/child
- or rooster/hen/chicken; and
- 4. by separate forms for masculine and feminine genders, such as uncle/aunt, horse/mare,
- bachelor/spinster and proper names such as Joseph/Josephine, Henry/Henrietta.

# Forms of pronouns and determiners

- Some determiners display a *singular-plural* contrast, and pronouns combine a *singular-plural* contrast with contrast unique to them, between subject and non-subject forms.
- E.g. *this* – *these*
- *that* – *those*
- *he* (nominative case) – *him* (accusative case) (the same is with all other pronouns, except *you-you*).

# Forms of verbs

- In English, a verb lexeme has at most five distinct forms: GIVE  
E.g. a. third person singular present tense: *gives*  
b. past tense: *gave*  
c. progressive participle: *giving*  
d. perfect or passive participle: *given*  
e. basic form (used everywhere else): *give*.

The contrast between present in a and past in b is a contrast of **tense**.

**Person** is contrasted in a (third person versus the rest).

**Number** is also contrasted in a (singular versus plural).

# Grammatical Categories: Verbs

- The category of aspect is one more often applied to languages such as Russian or Hopi, but it is, in fact, equally applicable to English since the so-called “compound tenses”, the perfect and the progressive, are better treated as expressions of the aspect.
- Aspect (which translates the Russian term for ‘view’) can be defined as the view taken of an event, or the “aspect” under which it is considered, basically whether it is seen as complete and whole (perfective aspect) or as incomplete and ongoing (imperfective aspect).
- The simple past tense in English is perfective in aspect since it views events as complete and whole, e.g., *Yesterday, I drove to town, ran some errands, and visited with my friends.*
- *The progressive periphrasis, consisting of be + the present participle, presents actions as in progress, ongoing, and incomplete (not yet ended).* It thus expresses imperfective aspect.

# Verbs: Mood

Mood is rather difficult to define, but it can be said simply to be an indication of the speaker's attitude towards what he or she is talking about, whether the event is considered fact (*indicative*) or *nonfact* (*subjunctive, imperative*). *Nonfact encompasses a number of different degrees of reality, including wishes, desires, requests, warnings, prohibitions, commands, predictions, possibilities, and contrary-to-fact occurrences.*

# Verbs: Voice

The category of voice, though usually considered a category of the verb, is actually relevant to the entire sentence. Voice is an indication of whether the subject is performing action of the verb or being something (active voice) or whether the subject is being affected by the action or being acted upon (passive voice).

While the active is expressed by the simple forms of the verb, the passive is expressed periphrastically:

- –by be + the *past participle*, as in *The report was written (by the committee)*; or
- –by get + the *past participle*, as in *The criminal got caught (by the police)*.

# Forms of verbs

- Modal verbs usually distinguish only two

e.g. *can, could*

*will, would*

*may, might*

*shall, should*

or even just one:

*must*

*ought*

- *BE* distinguishes eight (*am, is, are, was, were, being, been, be*).



# Forms of adjectives

- Many English adjectives exhibit three forms: e.g.

*Grass is green. The grass is greener now than in winter. The grass is greenest in early summer.*

The grammatical words that *green*, *greener*, *greenest* express are the positive, comparative and superlative of GREEN, contrasting on the dimension of **comparison**.

Of course, there are also some irregular or **suppletive** forms, such as *good, better, best...*

Some adjectives lack comparative and superlative forms, e.g. *curious*.

The suffixes *-er* and *-est* appear on adjectives whose basic form has one syllable, or two provided that the second syllable ends in a vowel (e.g. *tidy, yellow*) while longer adjectives usually require the use of periphrastic forms with *more* and *most* (*more curious, most curious*).

# Inflection: conclusion

- Some lexemes have more than one word form, depending on the grammatical context or on the choices that grammar forces us to make (e.g. plural or singular).
- In so far as grammar affects all words alike, the existence of inflected word forms does not have to be noted in dictionaries; however, the word forms themselves must be listed if they are irregular.
- Inflection affects nouns, verbs, adjectives and a few adverbs, as well as the closed classes of pronouns, determiners, auxiliaries and modals. However, the maximum number of distinct inflected forms for any open-class lexeme is small:

nouns – 2, (e.g. *cat*, *cats*); verbs – 5, (*gives*, *gave*, *giving*, *given*, *give*);  
adjective – 3, (*green*, *greener*, *greenest*); adverbs – 3 (*soon*, *sooner*, *soonest*).

# Inflection and derivation

- On the other hand, **derivation** is a lexical process which actually forms a new word out of an existing one by the addition of a derivational affix to a stem.
- E.g. *Resign, departure* + suffixes *ation, ure* give *resignation and departure*.
- E.g. the stem **ACTIV** +ate → activate
- +ation → activation
- +ely → actively
- +eness → activeness
- +ity → activity
- +ism → activism
- +ist → activist