Nick Riches

# Relevance of words and morphemes

Words and morphemes are the building blocks of sentences

In order to analyse sentence structure we need to know about words and morphemes

Language-impaired individuals, in particular children, tend to have morphological difficulties

# Definitions

Both words and morphemes are ‘symbolic’, meaning that there is an *arbitrary* relationship between form and function.

### MORPHEME = smallest unit of meaning

How many ‘units of meaning’ in the following words:

1. Dogs
2. Laughed
3. Working
4. Believe
5. Unbelievable
6. Sang

### WORD = smallest *standalone* unit of meaning (or minimal standalone symbolic unit)

Words can stand alone, e.g.

1. A: What was he doing? B: Working
2. B: How would you describe the experience? B: Unbelievable
3. Shark!!!!!!!!
4. Run!!!!!!!!!

# Categorising morphemes

Morphemes can be **free** or **bound**. If a morpheme is *free* it can also be classified as a word (because it can ‘stand alone’). In the following sentence, we have examples of both *free* and *bound* closed-class morphemes

1. Jack **is** (really) try-**ing** to run fast-**er**

Bound morphemes can be **prefixes** or **suffixes** (which are both kinds of **affixes**). Another type of bound morpheme is the **infix**, which comes in the middle of the word. English rarely uses infixes, and when they are used they sound “marked” (odd), e.g. fan-*bloody*-tastic). Other languages use infixes productively, e.g. Arabic

Morphemes are divided into two categories, ***inflectional*** and ***derivational***. While *inflectional* morphemes make minor modifications to a word’s meaning, *derivational* morphemes are used to *derive* a new word, either by substantially changing meaning or altering word class.

Words containing multiple morphemes are described as **morphologically complex**.

# The difference between inflectional and derivational morphemes

1. Identify the prefixes / suffixes in these words. Which of these morphemes is inflectional / deriviational?
2. Dogs
3. Laughed
4. Unbelievable
5. Reconsider
6. Working
7. Smaller
8. Outmaneouvre
9. Careless
10. Intensify
11. Manageress
12. Slept
13. Can you correct the following sentences? What is wrong with them?
14. He see the cat eats the food.
15. My house is big than yours.
16. How does the pronunciation of the past tense vary across the following sentences?
17. He dropped the book
18. He turned the corner
19. She skidded on the mat
20. What’s the problem with the following sentences?
21. He is uneducated and untolerant
22. While Jack is a sporty person, Anna is more booky
23. While Mary embraced motherhood, she wasn’t so keen on wifehood
24. Jane quickly realised the falseness of the information.

Now complete the following statements about the two types of morpheme, citing the examples above (answers provided).

1. While INFLECTIONAL morphemes are involved in syntactic processes, DERIVATIONAL morphemes are not.
2. INFLECTIONAL morphemes participate in phonological processes to a greater extent than DERIVATIONAL morphemes
3. While INFLECTIONAL morphemes are very productive (we can add them to many words), DERIVATIONAL morphemes are less productive.
4. While DERIVATIONAL morphemes can come at the beginning and ends of words (prefixes and suffixes), INFLECTIONAL morphemes can only come at the end (suffix)

Other differences: (1) Derivational morphemes are longer (2) Derivational morphemes have more specific meanings, e.g. *out* in *outmaneouvre* means “to do something better than a competitor” (3) Derivational morphemes are more language-specific, e.g. *out-* prefix is not found in Spanish, and *-ito/-illo* diminutive suffixes are not used productively in English.

# Word-building processes

There are three ways to form morphologically complex words using morphological processes

1. Inflection (adding inflectional morphemes), e.g. *laugh-ed*
2. Derivation (adding derivational morphemes), e.g. *un-do*
3. Compounding (taking two words and “squishing” them together), e.g. *fire man*, *book seller*

Generally the last two are described as **word-building processes** as they can be used to coin new words, e.g. *skypeable*, or *red jacket man/woman* (a mysterious handsome stranger you see on the Metro every morning)

When we build morphologically-complex words, we tend follow a particular order

1. We start out with the root
2. We add deriviational affixes
3. We add an inflectional affix

This gives the impression that we build up the words in a series of steps.

# Morphemes and language impairment

Individuals with language impairment struggle with inflectional morphemes. In particular, children with Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) often miss out tense morphemes, e.g. regular past tense.

Many studies quantify children’s language abilities using the Mean Length of Utterance in Morphemes.

Language-impaired individuals tend to have difficulties using derivational morphemes. It is worthwhile teaching these morphemes in clinic as they can be used to build words.

# 5 minute exercise

Look at these examples. What does the suffix ‘mouth’ mean? How do you pronounce it in each word?

1. Portsmouth
2. Plymouth
3. Tynemouth
4. Grangemouth
5. Cockermouth