Morpheme

Definition of Morpheme

A morpheme is the smallest syntactical and meaningful linguistic unit that contains a word, or an element of the word such as the use of −s whereas this unit is not divisible further into smaller syntactical parts.

For instance, in the [sentence](#), "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times" (*A Tale of Two Cities*, by Charles Dickens), all the underlined words are morphemes, as they cannot be divided further into smaller units.

Types of Morpheme

There are two types of morphemes which are:

Free Morpheme
The free morpheme is just a simple word that has a single morpheme; thus, it is free and can occur independently. For instance, in "David wishes to go there," "go" is a free morpheme.

Bound Morpheme
By contrast to a free morpheme, a bound morpheme is used with a free morpheme to construct a complete word, as it cannot stand independently. For example, in "The farmer wants to kill duckling," the bound morphemes "–er," "s," and "ling" cannot stand on their own. They need free morphemes of "farm," "want" and "duck" to give meanings.

Bound morphemes are of two types which include:

Inflectional Morpheme
This type of morpheme is only a [suffix](#). It transforms the function of words by adding –ly as a suffix to the base of the noun, such as in "friend," which becomes "friendly." Now it contains two morphemes "friend" and "–ly." Here, "–ly" is an inflectional morpheme, as it has changed the noun "friend" into an [adjective](#) "friendly."

Derivational Morpheme
This type of morpheme uses both [prefix](#) as well as suffix, and has the

ability to change function as well as meaning of words. For instance, adding the suffix "-less" to the noun "meaning" makes the meaning of this word entirely different.

Examples of Morpheme in Literature

Example #1: *Hamlet* (by William Shakespeare)

"Sit down <u>awhile</u>;
And let us once <u>again</u> assail your ears,
That are so fortified against our story
What we have two <u>nights</u> seen.
<u>Before</u> my God, I might not this believe
Without the sensible and true avouch
Of mine own eyes."

All the underlined words in this example are bound morphemes, as they cannot exist independently. For instance, "awhile" is a combination of two morphemes "a" and "while." Similarly, "again," "nights," and "before" are combinations of two morphemes each.

Example #2: *Tyger Tyger* (by William Blake)

"Tyger Tyger, <u>burning</u> bright,
In the forests of the night;
What <u>immortal</u> hand or eye,
Could frame thy <u>fearful</u> symmetry?
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?"

In this example, all of the underlined words are bound morphemes. The second one, "immortal," and the third one, "fearful," have changed functions and meanings after the addition of suffixes. "Fearful" is an inflectional morpheme, and it has changed this noun into an adjective.

"The young man, who was <u>studying</u> the country, took his glasses from the pocket of his faded, khaki flannel shirt, wiped the lenses with a <u>handkerchief</u>, screwed the eyepieces around until the boards of the mill showed <u>suddenly</u> <u>clearly</u> and he saw the <u>wooden</u> bench <u>beside</u> the door; the huge pile of sawdust that rose behind the open shed where the circular saw was, and a stretch of the flume that brought the logs down from the <u>mountainside</u> on the other bank of the stream."

In this passage, all the underlined words "studying," "handkerchief," "suddenly," "clearly," "wooden," "beside," and "mountainside" are bound morphemes.

Example #4: *Master of the Game* (by Sidney Sheldon)

"Jamie McGregor was one of the <u>dreamers</u>. He was <u>barely</u> eighteen, a <u>handsome</u> lad, tall and <u>fair-haired</u>, with startlingly light gray eyes. There was an attractive ingenuousness about him, an <u>eagerness</u> to please that was endearing. He had a <u>light-hearted</u> disposition and a soul <u>filled</u> with optimism."

This passage is another good example of bound morphemes. The underlined words "dreamers," "barely," "handsome," "fair-headed," "eagerness," "light-hearted," and "filled" are bound morphemes.

Function of Morpheme

A morpheme is a meaningful unit in English morphology. The basic function of a morpheme is to give meaning to a word. It may or may not stand alone. When it stands alone, it is thought to be a root. However, when it depends upon other morphemes to complete an idea, then it becomes an [affix] and plays a grammatical function. Besides, inflectional and derivational morphemes can transform meanings and functions of the words respectively adding richness and beauty to a text.