Chapter 4

Morphology

PHONOLOGY HAS BEEN DESCRIBED as the study of speech sounds and their patterns. It is a study based on the 'phoneme' or smallest significant unit of speech. Morphology is the study of morphemes, which are the smallest significant units of grammar. This definition becomes more comprehensible if you look at some examples. If you examine such patterns as:

(a) cat	cats
mat	mats
bat	bats

or:

(b) cook	cooked
look	looked
book	booked

you will see that in (a) plurality is indicated by adding +s to the singular noun thus:

Singular	*Plural*
cat	cat+s
mat	mat+s
bat	bat+s

In each example, there are two morphemes, the morpheme 'cat' (or the morpheme 'mat' or 'bat') and the morpheme 's' which in many English words marks the difference between singular and plural. In (b) there is the following pattern:

Present	*Past*
cook	cook+ed
look	look+ed
book	book+ed

where the 'ed' morpheme indicates the past tense for many English verbs.

Free and bound morphemes

If you look at a number of other examples you can establish different categories of morpheme. The words:

unmanly

meaningless

can be split up into:

un+man+ly

and:

mean+ing+less

In both these examples, the words are composed of three morphemes, only one of which can occur in isolation:

That *man* is very tired.

What do you *mean*?

Morphemes which can occur freely on their own are called 'free' morphemes. Morphemes which can only occur as affixes are described as 'bound' morphemes. Bound morphemes (or affixes) are divided into two types: those like 'dis-' and 'un-' which precede words (that is, free morphemes) and which are called prefixes and those like '-ly' and '-ness' which follow free morphemes and which are called suffixes.

Allomorphs

Often, morphemes which fulfil the same function have slightly different forms. If you look at the following three words:

slammed

slipped

stilted

you will notice that, in the written form, they all have the '-ed' morpheme indicating the past tense. When you pronounce these words, however, you become aware that the '-ed' morpheme has three different forms:

/slæmd/

/slɪpt/

/stɪltɪd/

/d/ in 'slammed', /t/ in 'slipped' and /ɪd/ in 'stilted'. When a

morpheme has alternative forms the various forms are known as 'allomorphs'.

Take another example. Some English adjectives form their opposites by prefixing the bound morpheme 'in-':

capable	incapable
tolerant	intolerant

Often, however, the negative morpheme changes 'n' to the consonant of the word it prefixes:

legal	illegal
mobile	immobile
regular	irregular

'il-', 'im-' 'in-' and 'ir-' can thus be called allomorphs.

Derivational morphology

Morphology fulfils two main functions in English. Morphemes can be used to form new words:

beauty + ful > beautiful

danger + ous > dangerous

or to inflect verbs and nouns:

look, look+s, look+ing, look+ed

tree, tree+s

The first category is known as derivational morphology and it involves prefixation:

re + turn > return

un + true > untrue

suffixation:

man + ly > manly

wicked + ness > wickedness

or affixation involving both prefixation and suffixation:

un + speak + able > unspeakable

sub + conscious + ly > subconsciously

Commonly occurring prefixes are 'be-', 'de-', 'en-', 'ex-', 'hyper-', 'pre-', 'pro-', 're-', 'sub-', 'super-' and 'trans-'. Prefixes alter meaning but do

not always change the function of the word to which they are prefixed:

Prefix	Free morpheme (Class)	Result (Class)
be	witch (*n.*)	bewitch (*v.*)
de	limit (*v.*)	delimit (*v.*)
en	rich (*adj.*)	enrich (*v.*)
ex	terminate (*v.*)	exterminate (*v.*)
hyper	market (*n.*)	hypermarket (*n.*)

Commonly occurring suffixes always change the class of the word to which they are attached:

beauty (*n.*) + ful   beautiful (*adj.*)

determine (*v.*) + ation   determination (*n.*)

Words ending in the morphemes '-acy', '-ation', '-er/-or', '-ess', '-ity', '-ment', '-ness' and '-ship' tend to be nouns:

democracy	actor	bewilderment
adoration	mistress	weakness
painter	solemnity	horsemanship

Words ending in '-ise/ize' tend to be verbs:

epitomise

hospitalise

Words ending in '-able', '-ed', '-ful', '-ical', '-ive', '-less', '-like', '-ous' and '-y' tend to be adjectives:

an enjoyable film

a polished performance

a comical episode

a diminutive person

a helpless individual

a workmanlike effort

an industrious group

a pretty girl

And words which end in '-ly' tend to be adverbs:

He ran home *quickly*.

She locked the doors *securely*.

Although the above suffixes tend to be associated with particular word classes, it is always worth remembering that, in English, it is only safe to judge the class of an item when it has been seen in context. Thus, although 'lovely' and 'friendly' end in '-ly' they function as adjectives and not as adverbs:

a lovely girl   a friendly welcome

Inflectional morphology

Whereas derivational affixes often involve a change of class – such as the verb 'attract' becoming the adjective 'attractive' – inflectional suffixes never involve a change of class. Inflectional morphology occurs with nouns, pronouns* and verbs. In nouns, inflection marks plurality in regular nouns:

book	books
chair	chairs

and the possessive of all nouns:

John	John's book/books
the man	the man's book/books
the men	the men's book/books
the builders	the builders' material/materials

Irregular nouns often form their plurals by a vowel change:

foot	feet
man	men
mouse /maʊs/	mice /maɪs/

but they form the possessive in exactly the same way as regular nouns:

the dog	the dog's tail
the mouse	the mouse's nose

There is no difference in sound between a regular noun's plural form and its possessive:

the doctor

the doctor's patients

the doctors

the doctors' patients

*Pronouns change according to such categories as plurality and case. They will be dealt with in Chapter 5.

In the written medium, however, the apostrophe indicates whether or not we are dealing with a possessive and whether or not the possessive is singular or plural.

With regard to verbs in English, inflectional suffixes are used to indicate present tense agreement:

I
you
we   look/sing
they

but:

he/she/it   look+s/sing+s

and the present participle:

look+ing/sing+ing

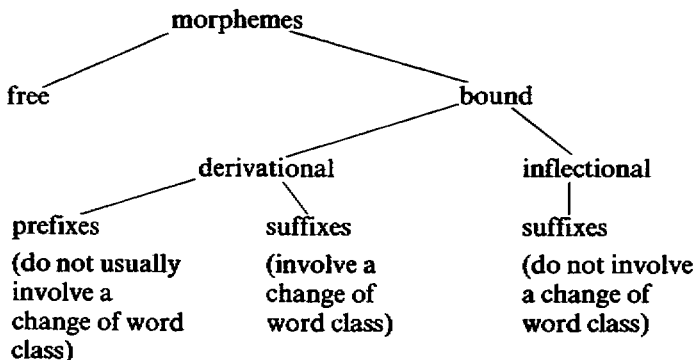For regular verbs the past tense and the past participle are formed by the suffix '-ed':

I look+ed/I have look+ed

whereas, with irregular verbs, the past tense and the past participle are often signalled by a vowel change or a vowel change plus a suffix:

sing	sang	sung
take	took	taken
write	wrote	written

Summary

The information on morphology can be summarised as follows:

morphemes

free   bound

derivational   inflectional

prefixes   suffixes   suffixes
(do not usually   (involve a   (do not involve
involve a   change of   a change of
change of word   word class)   word class)
class)

Exercises

1. Identify the morphemes in the following words, indicating where a spelling change may be necessary when one breaks the word down into its constituents.

   (1) equalisers
   (2) inclination
   (3) befriending
   (4) transportation
   (5) endearment
   (6) predetermination
   (7) dangerously
   (8) unbelievable
   (9) protection
   (10) dehumanise

2. Pick out the bound morphemes in the following words and say whether they are derivational morphemes (D) or inflectional morphemes (I).

   (1) inflectional
   (2) terrifying
   (3) hospitalised
   (4) regularises
   (5) reviewers
   (6) respectably
   (7) represents
   (8) stifles
   (9) previewed
   (10) submariners

3. What are the main allomorphs of each of the following morphemes? Provide examples to illustrate each of the allomorphs.

   (1) -s (as in the verb 'looks')
   (2) -ed (as in the verb 'looked')
   (3) in- (as in words where the morpheme means 'not', for example 'in + eligible')

4. Segment the following words into free and bound morphemes. Say in each case whether the bound morpheme changes the word class of the free morpheme.

   (1) unbearable
   (2) moralised
   (3) tranquilisers
   (4) imprudently
   (5) width

5. Identify the inflectional (I) and derivational (D) affixes in the following words and assess their productivity (that is, say whether they can be used in the modification of many, some or few morphemes in English).

 (1) non-event
 (2) Assamese
 (3) examination
 (4) happenings
 (5) multivitamin
 (6) interdenominational
 (7) delighted
 (8) John's
 (9) midsummer
(10) featureless