13

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Materials for an Introduction to Language and Linguistics

Department of Linguistics

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FILE 4.5

Morphological Analysis

4.5.1 The Nature and Goals of Morphological Analysis

When linguists come in contact with a new language, one of their major tasks is to discover the meaningful units that make up the language. Just as with discovering phonemes and allophones, it is important that the linguist have procedures for discovering these minimal units, since it is impossible to isolate morphemes by intuition.

For example, the Classical Greek word [grapʰɔː] means 'I write,' but if the word is considered in isolation, the linguist has no way of knowing what sound or sequence of sounds corresponds to 'I' and which sequence corresponds to 'write.' In fact, the linguist has no way of knowing even whether the word can be broken down into obvious parts or whether this form is an instance of morphologically or lexically conditioned allomorphy. It is only by comparing [grapʰɔː] with another form, for instance, [grapʰɛː] 's/he writes,' that one is able to investigate what the morphemes of these Greek words might be. Looking at these two forms together allows us to hypothesize that [grapʰ] is the part that means 'write.'

Comparison, then, is the best way to begin morphological analysis. But, of course, you will not want to compare just any forms. Comparing a Greek word like [pʰɛːmi] 'to speak' with [grapʰɔː] will not provide much information, since the forms are so dissimilar and seem to have no morpheme in common. What must be compared are partially similar forms, in which it is possible to recognize recurring units. In this way we can identify the morphemes from which words are composed.

Let us consider our Classical Greek example once more. If we compare [grapʰɔː] with [grapʰɛː] 'he writes,' we note similarities between the forms. The sequence [grapʰ-] appears in both forms, [grapʰ-ɛː] and [grapʰ-ɔː], and if we compare these to the English correspondences, we find that the meaning 'write' appears in both 'he writes' and 'I write.' From this, we are justified in concluding that [grapʰ-] means 'write,' since [grapʰ-] and *write* are constants in the Greek and English, respectively.

Furthermore, since the final vowels in both Greek forms contrast—and since this contrast is accompanied by a difference in meaning in our English correspondence—we can assume that the different vowels in Classical Greek are suffixes that correspond to differences in meaning in our English translation.

However, we must also apply this same process to other verbs in Greek that correspond to the same grammatical features; in this case, first-person singular and present tense. Looking at verbs like [luɔː] 'I loose,' [blepɔː] 'I see,' and [didaskɔː] 'I teach,' we again find [ɔː] at the end of the root in forms where the meanings 'I' and present tense are being expressed. A similar pattern can be found in the third-person singular present tense forms of the same verbs: [luɛː] 's/he looses,' [blepɛː] 's/he sees,' and [didaskɛː] 's/he teaches.' Thus we can safely conclude that 'I (first-person singular)' is marked by [-ɔː] and 's/he (third-person singular)' is marked by [-ɛː]. In sum, then, the initial step in doing morphological analysis is to compare and contrast partially similar forms both within a root and across roots.

To give yourself practice, identify and translate the morphemes in the Hungarian data in (1) and (2). ([ɟ] is a voiced palatal stop.) You should be able to identify four distinct Hungarian morphemes: two roots, one prefix, and one suffix.

(1) [hɔz] 'house'
[ɛɟhɔz] 'a house'
[hɔzɔ] 'his/her house'

(2) [boɾ] 'wine'
[ɛɟboɾ] 'a wine'
[boɾɔ] 'his/her wine'

In order to perform a successful morphological analysis, similarities in both form and meaning are necessary. To demonstrate this point, compare the English words in (3).

(3) work – worker fast – faster

We notice a similarity in form: both *faster* [fæstɻ] and *worker* [wɻkɻ] have a morpheme spelled <er> and pronounced [ɻ]. However, it is apparent that *-er* has two different meanings. The *-er* in *worker* is a derivational suffix known as the agentive morpheme, which attaches to verbs and derives a noun meaning something like 'one who Verbs'

(compare *painter, killer,* and *lover*). The *-er* in *faster,* by contrast, is the inflectional suffix known as the comparative morpheme, which attaches to adjective stems to create the comparative form (compare *wider, longer, colder, prettier,* etc.; see Section 4.1.3).

We will want to claim, then, that despite the identical phonetic forms, these clearly must be distinct morphemes, and thus that [ɹ̩] represents two homophonous but separate suffixes: [ɹ̩] as an agent marker, and [ɹ̩] as a comparative marker (see also Section 4.1.4). This example shows us that it is not sufficient to compare words based on similarity of form alone. There must also be a similarity in meaning or function (in the case of derivational morphology) or grammatical information (in the case of inflectional morphology).

On the flip side, it is also important to recognize that sometimes a similarity in meaning is not matched by an exact similarity in form, as we saw in our discussion of allomorphy in Section 4.1.6. Consider the forms of the English definite article in (4).

(4) a. the end [ði ɛnd]
the apple [ði æp¡]
the ice [ði ɑɪs]

b. the desk [ðə dɛsk]
the swing [ðə swɪŋ]
the weather [ðə wɛðɹ̩]

The issue here is the inverse of that in (3). Whereas in (3) we had the same phonetic form representing two different meanings, in (4) we have two different phonetic forms with the same meaning. The distribution of these phonetic forms is predictable on the basis of the phonetic context, with [ði] appearing before words beginning with a vowel, and [ðə] before words beginning with a consonant. These are thus in complementary distribution and are **allomorphs** of the morpheme *the.* (Note that the usage of stressed [ði] for emphasis is distinct from the regular distribution of unstressed [ði] and [ðə].)

4.5.2 Procedure for Performing Morphological Analysis

Now that we have considered several examples of morphological analysis, it is time to spell out exactly what we are trying to do and how we go about doing it. Our goal is this: given a set of data in phonetic representation, perform a morphological analysis of the forms in the data, identifying each morpheme, its meaning, and its type. You should

also be able to tell where a morpheme appears with respect to other morphemes in the word. Is it a prefix, suffix, etc.? Does it attach directly to the root, or does it attach after or before another morpheme?

Now it is time to consider the procedure. It can be summed up in three steps.

1. Isolate and compare forms that are partially similar, as we did for Classical Greek [grap^{h}-ɛː] and [grap^{h}-ɔː].
2. If a single phonetic form has two distinct meanings, it must be analyzed as representing two different morphemes (as in (3)).
3. If the same function and meaning are associated with different phonetic forms, these different forms all represent the same morpheme (i.e., they are allomorphs of the morpheme), and the choice of form in each case may be predictable on the basis of the phonetic, morphological, or lexical context (as in (4)).

4.5.3 Some Cautionary Notes

People frequently assume that languages are pretty much the same in terms of what each language marks inflectionally. For example, English speakers often assume that all languages mark the plurals of nouns with an ending, or that the subject and the verb agree in person and number in other languages. This is simply not the case.

For example, Tagalog does not usually mark the plural of nouns (in most cases, the number is clear from the context). When it is necessary to be specific, a separate word, *mga,* is used to indicate plural.

(5) [aŋ bataʔ] ‘the child’
[aŋ mga bataʔ] ‘the children’

When a number is specifically mentioned, no plural marker appears in Tagalog, unlike English, where the plural marker is obligatory (**four dog* is ungrammatical). On the other hand, Tagalog has some markers that English does not. [-ŋ] is a “linker” that links numerals and adjectives to the nouns they modify; English does not use this type of device. Examples of both phenomena can be seen in (6).

(6) [dalawa] ‘two’ [dalawaŋ bataʔ] ‘two children’
[lima] ‘five’ [limaŋ bataʔ] ‘five children’

English marks subject-verb agreement (e.g., *I eat* vs. *he eats*; see File 5.2), but Tagalog does not. In Tagalog, the same form of the verb is used with all subjects, as in (7).

(7) [kumakain ako] 'eat I' = 'I eat'
[kumakain siyɑ] 'eat he' = 'he eats'

Other languages also make distinctions that English does not. While English distinguishes only singular and plural verbs, some languages have a dual verb form for when just two people are involved. Consider Sanskrit *juhomi* /ʤuhomi/ 'I sacrifice,' *juhuvas* /ʤuhuvəs/ 'we (two) sacrifice,' and *juhumas* /ʤuhuməs/ 'we (more than two) sacrifice.'

Some languages make a distinction in first-person plural pronouns where English has only *we.* Notice that English *we* in *we are going,* for example, may include everyone in the group the hearer is addressing (i.e., *we* = 'every one of us'), or it may include only some hearers (i.e., *we* = 'I and she/he/they,' but not 'you'). Many languages distinguish these two *we*'s: Tagalog has *tayo* (*inclusive,* i.e., 'you and I') and *kami* (*exclusive,* i.e., 'she/he/they and I').

Comanche, a Native American language of the Uto-Aztecan family, makes a number of other distinctions that English doesn't. In addition to a singular/dual/plural distinction and an inclusive/exclusive distinction, Comanche also makes a distinction between visible/not visible and near/far. Thus, if you are referring to a thing that is within your view, you use a different form than if the thing is not visible to you. Likewise, a nearby object is designated with a pronoun different from the one used for an object that is far away. Consider the following subject forms:

(8) Elements of the Comanche pronoun system

Singular/Dual/Plural Distinction		***Inclusive/Exclusive Distinction***	
[inɨ]	'you (singular)'	[taa]	'we (inclusive)'
[nikwɨ]	'you (two)'	[nɨnɨ]	'we (exclusive)'
[mɨɨ]	'you (plural)'		
Visible/Not Visible		***Near/Far Distinction***	
[maʔ]	'it (visible)'	[ʔiʔ]	'it (proximate)'
[ʔuʔ]	'it (invisible)'	[ʔoʔ]	'it (remote)'

The lesson to be learned here is that you cannot assume that another language will make distinctions in the same way that English does. For example, while every language

has some method of indicating number, not all languages do so in the same way or under the same circumstances. As we've seen, English uses an affix, Tagalog uses a separate word, and Indonesian reduplicates the word to show plurality (see File 4.2). Nor can you assume that the distinctions English makes are the only ones worth making. Languages must be examined carefully on the grounds of their own internal structures.

Finally, although many of the exercises in File 4.6 involve affixation, do not forget that often in the world's languages, morphological marking will happen through some other process or a combination of processes, such as those seen in File 4.2.