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## MORPHOLOGY

**MORPHOLOGY** means the scientific study of word formation, i.e. the study of word structure.

**MORPHEMES** constitute the elements of a word. A morpheme can be defined as “a minimal unit of meaning or grammatical function.” Units of grammatical function include forms used to indicate past tense or plural, for example. We can recognize that English word forms such as talks, talker, talked and talking must consist of one element talk, and a number of other elements such as -s, -er, -ed and -ing. All these elements are described as morphemes.

The word tourists contains three morphemes. There is one minimal unit of meaning tour, another minimal unit of meaning -ist (marking “person who does something”), and a minimal unit of grammatical function -s (indicating plural).

**FREE & BOUND MORPHEMES** free morphemes are morphemes that can stand by themselves as single words, for example, *open* and *tour*. Bound morphemes are those forms that cannot normally stand alone and are typically attached to another form, exemplified as re-, -ist, -ed, -s. So, we can say that all affixes (prefixes and suffixes) in English are bound morphemes. The free morphemes can generally be identified as the set of separate English word forms such as basic nouns, adjectives, verbs, etc. When they are used with bound morphemes attached, the basic word forms are technically known as stems. For example:

un-	dress	-ed
prefix	stem	suffix
bound	free	bound

**LEXICAL & FUNCTIONAL MORPHEMES** Free morphemes fall into two categories. The first category is that set of ordinary nouns, adjectives and verbs that we think of as the words that carry the “content” of the messages we convey. These free morphemes are called lexical morphemes and some examples are: girl, man, house, tiger, sad, long, yellow, sincere, open, look, follow, break. We can add new lexical morphemes to the language rather easily, so they are treated as an “open” class of words.

Other types of free morphemes are called functional morphemes. Examples are and, but, when, because, on, near, above, in, the, that, it, them. This set consists largely of the functional words in the language such as conjunctions, prepositions,

articles and pronouns. Because we almost never add new functional morphemes to the language, they are described as a “closed” class of words.

**DERIVATIONAL & INFLECTIONAL MORPHEMES** The set of affixes that make up the category of bound morphemes can also be divided into two types: The derivational morphemes and the inflectional morphemes.

We use these bound morphemes to make new words or to make words of a different grammatical category from the stem. For example, the addition of the derivational morpheme -ness changes the adjective good to the noun goodness. The noun care can become the adjectives careful or careless by the addition of the derivational morphemes -ful or -less. A list of derivational morphemes will include suffixes such as the -ish in foolish, -ly in quickly, and the -ment in payment. The list will also include prefixes such as re-, pre-, ex-, mis-, co-, un and many more.

The second set of bound morphemes contains what are called inflectional morphemes. These are not used to produce new words in the language, but rather to indicate aspects of the grammatical function of a word. Inflectional morphemes are used to show if a word is plural or singular, if it is past tense or not, and if it is a comparative or possessive form. English has only eight inflectional morphemes (or “inflections”), illustrated in the following sentences.

Jim’s two sisters are really different.

One likes to have fun and is always laughing.

The other liked to read as a child and has always taken things seriously.

One is the loudest person in the house and the other is quieter than a mouse.

In the first sentence, both inflections (-'s, -s) are attached to nouns, one marking possessive and the other marking plural. Note that -'s here is a possessive inflection and different from the -'s used as an abbreviation for is or has (e.g. she's singing, it's happened again). There are four inflections attached to verbs: -s (3rd person singular), -ing (present participle), -ed (past tense) and -en (past participle). There are two inflections attached to adjectives: -er (comparative) and -est (superlative). In English, all the inflectional morphemes are suffixes.

Noun + -'s, -s

Verb + -s, -ing, -ed, -en

Adjective + -er, -est

A useful way to remember all these different types of morphemes is in the following chart.

**MORPHS & ALLOMORPHS** Morphs are the actual forms used to realize morphemes. For example, the form cats consists of two morphs, cat + -s, realizing a lexical morpheme and an inflectional morpheme ("plural"). The form buses also consists of two morphs (bus + -es), realizing a lexical morpheme and an inflectional morpheme ("plural"). So there are at least two different morphs (-s and -es, actually /s/ and /əz/) used to realize the inflectional morpheme "plural."

Just as we noted that there were “allophones” of a particular phoneme, so we can recognize the existence of allomorphs of a particular morpheme.

Take the morpheme “plural.” Note that it can be attached to a number of lexical morphemes to produce structures like “cat+plural,” “bus+plural,” “sheep+plural,” and “man + plural.” In each of these examples, the actual forms of the morphs that result from the morpheme “plural” are different. Yet they are all allomorphs of the one morpheme. So, in addition to /s/ and /əz /, another allomorph of “plural” in English seems to be a zero-morph because the plural form of sheep is actually “sheep +  $\emptyset$ .” When we look at “man + plural,” we have a vowel change in the word ( $\text{æ} \rightarrow \text{ɛ}$ ) as the morph that produces the “irregular” plural form men.

There are a number of other morphological processes at work in a language like English, such as those involved in the range of allomorphs for the morpheme “past tense.” These include the common pattern in “walk + past tense” that produces walked and also the special pattern that takes “go + past tense” and produces the “irregular” past form went.