

# The Morphology of English

Dr. Rafal Hassoon Obaid

## Definition of Morphology and Morpheme

The study of the internal structure of words is known as morphology.

A morpheme is a short segment of language that meets three criteria:

1. It is a word or a part of a word that has meaning.
2. It cannot be divided into smaller meaningful parts without violation of its meaning or without meaningless remainders.
3. It recurs in differing verbal environments with a relatively stable meaning.

Let us examine the word *straight* /stret/ in the light of these criteria. First of all, we recognize it as a word and can find it listed as such in any dictionary. Second, it cannot be divided without violation of meaning. For example, we can, by dividing *straight* /stret/, get the smaller meaningful forms of *trait* /tret/, *rate* /ret/, and *ate* /et/, but the meanings of these violate the meaning of *straight*. Furthermore, when we divide it in these ways, we get the meaningless remainders of /s-/ , /st-/ , and /str-/. Third, *straight* recurs with a relatively stable meaning in such environments as *straightedge*, *straighten*, and a *straight line*. Thus, *straight* meets all the criteria of a morpheme.

As a second example let us compare the morpheme *bright* (= light) with the word *brighten* (= make light). In sound the only difference between the two words is the added /-n/ of *brighten*, and in meaning the difference is the added sense of "make" in *brighten*. This leads us to conclude that /-ən/ means "make." Thus, we see that /-ən/ is a part of a word that has meaning. We also know that it cannot be divided into smaller meaningful units and that it recurs with a stable meaning in words like *cheapen*, *darken*, *deepen*, *soften*, and *stiffen*. It is therefore obvious that /-ən/ must be considered a morpheme.

## Free and Bound Morphemes

Morphemes are of two kinds: free and bound.

A free morpheme is one that can be uttered alone with meaning. For instance, in reply to "What are you going to do now?" you might answer "Eat." This is a free morpheme.

A bound morpheme, unlike the free, cannot be uttered alone with meaning. It is always annexed to one or more morphemes to form a word. Bound morphemes would not utter in isolation like *ante-*, *re-*, *-ly*, *-er*, and *un-*, *preview*, *played*, *inter-*, *-vene*.

## Bases

Another classification of morphemes puts them into two classes: bases and affixes.

A base morpheme is the part of a word that has the principal meaning. The italicized morphemes in these words are bases: *denial*, *lovable*, *annoyance*, *re-enter*. Bases are very numerous, and most of them in English are free morphemes; but some are bound, like *-sent* in *consent*, *dissent*, and *assent*. A word may contain one base and several affixes.

A base is a linguistic form that meets one or more of these requirements:

1. It can occur as an immediate constituent of a word whose only other immediate constituent is a prefix or suffix.

Examples: react, active, fertilize

2. It is an allomorph of a morpheme which has another allomorph that is a free form.

Examples: depth (deep), wolves (wolf)

3. It is a borrowing from another language in which it is a free form or a base.

Examples: biometrics, microcosm, phraseology

The third point is open to the theoretical objection that it imports diachronic lore to clarify a synchronic description.

*Readability*, for example, contains the free base *read* and the two affixes *-abil-* and *-ity*; and *unmistakable* has the free base *take* and the affixes *un-*, *mis-*, and *-able*.

Now we shall look at bound bases, to which it is sometimes hard to attach a precise meaning. A good number of bound bases in English come from the Latin and Greek, like the *sent* in *sentiment*, *sentient*, *consent*, *assent*, *dissent*, *resent*. The standard way to pin down the meaning is to search for the meaning common to all the words that contain the base (in these words, *-sent-* means "feel"). Also, you will find some of the more common base morphemes listed as separate entries. The following, for example, are all separately entered in Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary: *phot-*, *photo-* (light); *xer-*, *xero-* (dry); *bi-*, *bio-* (life); *mis-*, *miso-* (hate); *ge-*, *geo-* (earth); *biblio-* (book); *-meter* (measure); *tele-*, *tel.* (distant); *-phil*, *-phile* (lover); *-logy* (science or study of).