

Difficulties in Morphemic Analysis

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Let us now digress long enough to point out that the identification of morphemes is not as tidy a business as may appear in these exercises and that there are serious, perhaps insoluble, difficulties in morphemic analysis.

The first difficulty is that you have your own individual stock of morphemes just as you have a vocabulary that is peculiarly your own. An example will make this clear, Tom may think of *automobile* as one morpheme meaning "car," whereas Dick may know the morphemes *auto-* (self) and *mobile* (moving), and recognize them in other words like *autograph* and *mobilize*. Dick, on the other hand, may consider *chronometer* to be a single morpheme, a fancy term for "watch," but Harry sees in this word two morphemes, *chrono-* (time) and *meter* (measure), which he also finds in *chronology* and *photometer*, and Sadie finds a third morpheme *-er* in it, as in *heater*; thus, *mete* (verb) to measure, + *-er*, one who, or that which.

The second difficulty is that persons may know a given morpheme but differ in the degree to which they are aware of its presence in various words. It is likely, for instance, that most speakers of English know the agentive suffix */-ar/* (spelled *-er*, *-or*, *-ar*) meaning "one who, that which," and recognize it in countless words like *singer* and *actor*. But many may only dimly sense this morpheme in *professor* and completely overlook it in *voucher*, *cracker*, and *tumbler*. Thus, can we say that *sweater* has enough pulse in its *-er* to be considered a two-morpheme word? This will vary with the awareness of different individuals. A less simple case is seen in this group: *nose*, *noseful*, *nosey*, *nasal*, *nuzzle*, *nozzle*, *nostril*, *nasturtium*. Only a linguistically knowledgeable person would see the morpheme *nose* in each of these words. Others will show considerable differences in awareness.

Thus, we conclude that one individual's morphemes are not those of another. This is no cause for deep concern, though it may be a source of controversy in the classroom, for we are dealing with the morphemes of

the English language, not merely with the individual morpheme inventories of Tom, Dick, Harry, and Sadie.

The third difficulty is that language is constantly changing. One problem is that of obsolescence. Morphemes may slowly fade away into disuse as the decades and centuries roll by, affecting our view of their morphemehood. For instance, we can be sure that *troublesome*, *burdensome*, *lonesome*, and *cuddlesome* are two-morpheme words consisting of a base morpheme plus the suffixal morpheme *-some*. *Winsome*, however, has an obsolete base (Old English *wynn*, pleasure, joy), so that the word is now monomorphemic. Between these two extremes are words like *ungainly*. This means of course "not gainly," but what does *gainly* mean? Certainly, it is not in common use. In current dictionaries it is called "rare" or "obsolete" or "dialectal," or is unlabeled.

Another problem results from the fact that metaphors die as language changes. Let us take the morpheme *-prehend-* (seize) as an example. In *apprehend* (= to arrest or seize) and *prehensile* it clearly retains its meaning, but in *comprehend* the metaphor (seize mentally) seems to be dead, and the meaning of the word today is merely "understand." Does it then still contain the morpheme *-prehend-*? Another case is seen in *bankrupt* (bench broken). The morpheme *bank*, in the sense of a bench, may be obsolete, but *-rupt* is alive today in *rupture* and *interrupt*. The original metaphor is dead, however, and the meaning of these two morphemes does not add up at all to the current meaning of *bankrupt*.

This last matter, additive meanings, is a problem in itself, meaning is very elusive, and when morphemes combine in a word, their meanings tend to be unstable and evanescent; they may even disappear altogether. Consider, for example, the morpheme *pose* (place). In "pose a question" the meaning is clear, and it is probably retained in *interpose* (place between). But in *suppose* and *repose* the meaning appears to have evaporated. Between these extremes are words like *compose*, *depose*, *impose*, *propose*, and *transpose*, in which the sense of *pose* seems to acquire special nuances in combination. Such are some of the problems in morphemic analysis that have plagued linguists.