

Immediate Constituents

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Up to this point we have scrutinized the four sorts of morphemes bases, prefixes, infixes, and suffixes of which words are composed. Now we shall see how these are put together to build the structure that we call a word.

A word of one morpheme, like *blaze*, has, of course, just one unitary part. A word of two morphemes, like *cheerful*, is obviously composed of two parts, with the division between them:

cheer | ful

But a word of three or more morphemes is not made up of a string of individual parts; it is built with a hierarchy of twosomes. As an illustration let us examine the formation of *gentlemanly*, a word of three morphemes. We might say that *man* and *-ly* were combined to form *manly* and that *gentle* and *manly* were then put together to produce the form *gentlemanly*. But the total meaning of *gentlemanly* does not seem to be composed of the meanings of its two parts *gentle* and *manly*, so we reject this possibility. Let's try again. This time we'll say that *gentle* and *man* were put together to give *gentleman*. And if we remember that *gentle* has the meanings of "distinguished," "belonging to a high social station," we see that the meaning of *gentleman* is a composite of those of its two constituents. Now we add *-ly*, meaning "like," and get *gentlemanly*, like a gentleman. This manner of forming *gentlemanly* seems to make sense.

Now when we analyze a word, we show this process but in reverse. We usually divide a word into two parts of which it seems to have been composed. Thus

gentleman | ly

We continue in this way, cutting every part into two more until we have reduced the word to its ultimate constituents, that is, to the unit morphemes of which it is composed. Our analysis of *gentlemanly* would look like this:

gentle | man | ly

Next, let us suppose that the word to be analyzed is *ungentlemanly*. If we make the same first cut as before, cutting off the *-ly*, we get *ungentleman* plus *-ly*. But as English contains no such word as *ungentleman*, our word could not be composed of the two parts *ungentleman* and *-ly*. Instead, let's cut after the *un-*. This gives *un-* plus *gentlemanly*, a common English negative prefix plus a recognizable English word. This seems to be the right way to begin, and as we continue we get this analysis.

un | gentle | man | ly

We have now shown the layers of structure by which the word has been composed, down to the ultimate constituents-*un-*, *gentle*, *man*, and *-ly*.

In doing word diagrams like those above to show layers of structure, we make successive divisions into two parts, each of which is called an immediate constituent, abbreviated IC. The process is continued until all component morphemes of a word, the ultimate constituents, have been isolated. Here are three recommendations on IC division that will assist you in the exercise to follow:

1. If a word ends in an inflectional suffix, the first cut is between this suffix and the rest of the word. So:

pre conceiv | ed

mal formation | s

2. One of the IC's should be, if possible, a free form. A free form is one that can be uttered alone with meaning, e.g., *enlarge*, *dependent*, *supportable*. Here are examples of wrong and right first cuts:

Wrong: en | large ment
in depend | ent
in support | able

Right: en large | ment
in | depend ent
in | support able

3. The meanings of the IC's should be related to the meaning of the word. It would be wrong to cut *restrain* like this:

rest | rain

because neither rest nor rain has a semantic connection with restrain. Nor would a division of starchy as

star | chy

be right because this would give an unrelated morpheme and a meaningless fragment. The two examples are properly cut in this way:

re | strain

starch | y

The ultimate constituents are the morphemes of which the word is composed.