

Suffixal Homophones

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Some suffixes, both inflectional and derivational, have homophonous forms. The inflectional morpheme (-ER cp) has two homophones. The first is the derivational suffix (-ER n), which is attached to verbs to form nouns. This is a highly productive suffix, that is, it is used to produce hundreds of English nouns like *hunter*, *fisher*, *camper*, *golfer*, *lover*. It is often called the agent -er and conveys a meaning of "that which performs the action of the verb stem," as in *thriller* and *teacher*. It may also be attached to nonverbal stems, e.g., *probationer*, *New Yorker*, *teen-ager*, *freighter*. The -er on such words could be said to convey a more general meaning of "that which is related to"; and since this meaning is inclusive of the previous one, both these -er suffixes can be considered to belong to {-ER n}.

The second derivational -er morpheme appears at the end of words like *chatter*, *mutter*, *flicker*, *glitter*, *patter*. This {-ER rp} conveys the meaning of repetition. The acceptance of this (-ER rp), however, is problematic and raises questions about the analysis of the remainders in words of this class. For example, if the -er in *glitter* is a morpheme meaning repetition, we are left with the remainder *glitt-*, whose morphemic status is dubious.

The verbal inflectional suffix (-ING vb) has two homophones in -ing. The first one is the nominal derivational suffix {-ING nm}, which is found in words like *meetings*, *weddings*, *readings*. This nominal (-ING nm) is obviously derivational since it permits the addition of an inflectional suffix to close it off, the noun plural {-s pl}. When such a word occurs alone without the inflectional suffix, e.g., *meeting*, the -ing is ambiguous, for it could be either {-ING vb}, as in "He was meeting the train" or {-ING nm}, as in "He attended the meeting."

The second homophone of (-ING vb) is the adjectival morpheme {-ING aj}, as in a *charming woman*. There are two tests by which the verbal {-ING vb} can be distinguished from the adjectival (-ING aj}.

The verbal {-ING vb} can usually occur after as well as before the noun it modifies, e.g

I saw a burning house.

I saw a house burning.

The adjectival {ING aj} can be preceded by a qualifier like *very*, *rather*, *quite*, or by the comparative and superlative words *more* and *most*, as in

It is a very *comforting* thought.

This is a more *exciting* movie.

but not

*I saw a rather burning house.

Also, compare

that interesting snake

that crawling snake.

The adjectival (-ING aj) can occur after seems:

That snake seems *interesting*.

whereas the verbal {-ING vb} cannot:

*That snake seems crawling.

The verbal inflectional (-D pp) has a homophone in the adjectival derivational (-D aj), as in

Helen was excited about her new job.

She was a devoted mother."

The adjectival (-D aj) is characterized by its capacity for modification by qualifiers like *very*, *rather*, *quite*, and by *more* and *most*. (-D aj} is considered derivational because it often can be followed by another suffix, e.g., *excitedly*, *devotedness*.

Example: A rather faded tapestry hung over the fireplace.

The verbal {-D pp}, on the other hand, does not accept such modifiers. We would not, for example, say

*The very departed guests had forgotten their dog.

The *seems* test for adjectival (-ING aj) is applicable to adjectival {-D aj}; for example, "The tapestry seems faded" but not "The guests seem departed."

The adverbial derivational suffix (-ty av) is added to most adjectives to form adverbs of manner, as in rich, richly; kind, kindly; formal, formally; happy, happily. A small group of adjectives does not take this {-LY av}, among them big, small, little, tall, long, fast.

This adverbial (-LY av) has as a homophone the derivational suffix (-LY aj), an adjectival morpheme that is distributed as follows:

1. It is added to monosyllabic nouns to form adjectives that are inflected with -er, -est.

Examples: love, lovely; friend, friendly; man, manly

2. It is added to nouns to form adjectives that are not inflected with -er, -est.

Examples: king, kingly; beast, beastly; scholar, scholarly; mother, motherly; leisure, leisurely

3. It is added to a few adjectives, giving alternate adjectival forms that are also inflected with -er, -est.

Examples: dead, deadly; live, lively; kind, kindly; sick, sickly

Here the adjectives kindly and lively are homophonous with the adverbs kindly and lively, which end in (-LY av). For example, we see the adverb in "She spoke kindly to the children," and the adjective in "She was the kindest woman in the village."

4. It is added to a short list of "time" nouns to form adjectives.

Examples: day, daily; hour, hourly; month, monthly

These are not inflected with -er, -est, and some of them undergo functional shift to become nouns, e.g., "He subscribes to two dailies and three quarterlies."