

MORPHOLOGY

Most grammars divide the study of sentence structure into two areas, **MORPHOLOGY**, which deals with the internal structure of words, and **SYNTAX**, which deals with the way words are combined to form sentences. In morphology, the basic units under investigation are the morphemes of a language. By definition, a **MORPHEME** is a minimal unit of meaning, that is, a meaningful sequence of sounds which is not divisible into smaller meaningful units, e.g., *ball*. It is important not to equate morphemes with either words or syllables; in both theory and practice, there is no necessary coincidence between a morpheme and either of these units. For example, the English noun *hands* is one word consisting of one syllable, but having two morphemes: *hand*, which defines a specific body part, and *s* which indicates plural. Conversely, *finger* has two syllables but is only one morpheme. One cannot divide the word *finger* into smaller meaningful units: the sequences *fin*, *inger*, *ger*, etc. are all without content. Even the sequence *fin*, which does have meaning in English, is not part of the morphological structure of *finger*, because its meaning is unrelated to the meaning of the whole word.

Morphemes are variously classified by linguists as **BOUND** or **FREE** and as **ROOTS** or **AFFIXES**. A **BOUND MORPHEME** is one which cannot occur as an independent word, e.g., the *un-* meaning 'not' in *untrustworthy*, *unappreciative*, *unnecessary*, etc. A **FREE MORPHEME** is one which can stand alone, e.g., the morpheme *trust*. In English, bound morphemes constitute a relatively small class of items, while the number of free morphemes is very large. In other languages, the situation is often quite different. For example, Classical Greek has very few free morphemes, but a great number of bound ones. In Vietnamese, almost all of the morphemes are classified as free.

A **ROOT** is a morpheme which constitutes the core element of a word or group of words of closely related meaning. For example, the morpheme *trust* serves as the root in all of the following words: *trusted*, *untrustworthy*, *mistrustful*, *entrust*, and so on. An **AFFIX** is a bound morpheme added to the beginning of a word (in which case it is called a **PREFIX**) or to the end of a word (in which case it is called a **SUFFIX**). Some common affixes in English are *un-*, *mis-*, *con-*, *ex-*, *-ly*, *-ing*, *-ness*, and *-er*. That part of a word to which affixes are added is called a **STEM**. In English, the stem and the root of a word are usually the same string; in other languages, they differ.

Affixes that are added to roots to indicate grammatical relationships are known as **INFLECTIONAL ENDINGS**, and the process of combining these endings with roots is called **INFLECTION**. The *-s* used to indicate the plural of English nouns is an example of an inflectional ending, as is the *-ed* used to indicate past tense. Comparatively speaking, English is very poor in inflectional endings. Other languages have highly developed inflectional systems. For example, in Latin, Russian, and Finnish, the form of a noun changes depending on whether it is used as the subject of a verb or as the object. In English, nouns are not inflected for this particular contrast, although some pronouns are, e.g., *I/me*, *she/her*, *he/him*, *we/us*, *they/them*, *who/whom*. When applied to **SUBSTANTIVES** (nouns, pronouns, and adjectives) inflection is referred to as **DECLENSION**; when applied to verbs, it is called **CONJUGATION**.

SOME INFLECTIONAL CATEGORIES

PERSON: the inflectional category in pronouns and verbs that refers to the three-way distinction between the speaker (first person), e.g., *I am tall*, the hearer (second person), e.g., *You are tall*, and someone or something else (third person), e.g., *He (she, it) is tall*.

NUMBER: an inflectional category in substantives and verbs that refers to the distinction between singular, e.g., *the house IS big*, and plural, e.g., *the houses ARE big*.

TENSE: an inflectional category in verbs which indicates distinctions in the **TIME (PRESENT, PAST, FUTURE)** and the **ASPECT (PROGRESSIVE, PERFECTIVE)** of an action or state. For example, the verb phrase *is looking* is in the present progressive tense, that is, it indicates an action which is going on in the present; the verb phrase *has looked* is in the present perfective tense, that is, it indicates an action that was completed in the past. Strictly speaking, tense is only partially an inflectional category in English, since it is signaled both by independent words, e.g., forms of the verbs *be* and *have* and by endings, e.g., *-ing* and *-ed*.

VOICE: an inflectional category in verbs that refers to the distinction between **ACTIVE** and **PASSIVE**. An active verb is one whose subject is viewed as performing the action it defines, e.g., *John killed the tigers*; a passive verb is one whose subject is viewed as undergoing the action it defines, e.g., *the tigers were killed by John*.

MOOD: an inflectional category in verbs that refers to the distinction between **INDICATIVE**, **CONDITIONAL**, and **IMPERATIVE**. The indicative mood expresses ordinary statements (*he stopped*); the conditional mood expresses conditions (*he would stop*); the imperative mood expresses commands (*stop!*).

CASE: an inflectional category which indicates the relationship of substantives to other words in a sentence. In English, the opposition *he/him/his* is a case opposition: *he* is used to indicate the subject (**NOMINATIVE CASE**), *him* to indicate the object (**OBJECTIVE** or **ACCUSATIVE CASE**), and *his* to indicate the possessor (**POSSESSIVE** or **GENITIVE**).

GENDER: an inflectional category in substantives that refers to the tripartite distinction between **MASCULINE**, **FEMININE**, and **NEUTER**. In English, only the third person singular pronouns show gender distinctions, e.g., *he*, *she*, and *it*; moreover, the distinction is based on sex. In other languages, e.g., German, gender is a grammatical category of substantives and bears no relationship to sex.