



CHAPTER 4

Introducing English Morphology

AFTER ISOLATING AND CLASSIFYING THE SIGNIFICANT sounds in a language, the linguist gives his attention to the isolation of the minimal MEANINGFUL sound units or combinations. The minimal meaningful sound unit or combination is called a **morph**, and the study of morphs is called **morphology**.

A word may be one morph, like the word *boy*, for instance. Or a word may contain two or more morphs, as in the word *boys* or the word *inability*. The "word" is not a clearly drawn or easily definable entity in a language; often there is no juncture or pause between "words" in spoken English. When we speak quickly we may say, "Whatcha gonna do?" for what in writing would appear, "What are you going to do?" Is "whatcha" one word or three?

The morph, on the other hand, may be isolated, and groups of morphs may be classified. Words are formed of single morphs or of groups of morphs combined according to patterns. Let us look then at some of the patterns of word formation in English.

The plural morpheme

Here are two lists of words in English:

cat /kæt/	cats /kæts/
top /tɒp/	tops /tɒps/
book /bʊk/	books /bʊks/
muff /mʌf/	muffs /mʌfs/
month /mɒnθ/	months /mɒnθs/

Since a morph is one occurrence of a minimal meaningful sound combination, we know that each word in the first list is a morph. All the possible occurrences of a morph that carry the same meaning and are formed by the same sounds can be grouped together into a category called an **allomorph**. In other words, all the morphs that are phonologically and semantically identical are members of one allomorph. Thus *cat* in the first list above and the *cat*-part (of *cats*) in the second list are members of one allomorph. In the second list we could make a cut before the *s* in every word to show that what comes before the /s/ is a single morph. We would then have a list of *s*'s, all of which are pronounced the same way and all of which carry the meaning of "plural." The /s/ then, wherever it occurs at the end of a word and carries the plural meaning, is a member of a plural allomorph.

Let us examine two more lists of words:

ball /bɔːl/	balls /bɔːlz/
car /kɑːr/	cars /kɑːrz/
day /deɪ/	days /deɪz/
lad /læd/	lads /lædz/
job /dʒɒb/	jobs /dʒɒbz/
bag /bæg/	bags /bægz/
sleeve /sliːv/	sleeves /sliːvz/

Here we find the allomorph *ball*, the allomorph *car*, the allomorph *day*, the allomorph *lad*, the allomorph *job*, the

allomorph *bag*, and the allomorph *sleeve*, each represented by two morphs, one in each list. We are left with /z/, which appears seven times, always with the meaning "plural." We have found another plural allomorph: the /z/.

The following lists reveal another plural allomorph:

kiss /kis/	kisses /kisiz/
breeze /briyz/	breezes /briyziz/
dish /diš/	dishes /dišiz/
garage /goraž/	garages /goražiz/
church /čarč/	churches /čarčiz/
judge /jəj/	judges /jəjiz/

As we compare these lists we find members of the allomorphs *kiss*, *breeze*, *dish*, *garage*, *church*, and *judge*. The six occurrences of /iz/ are members of a third plural allomorph. Notice that where this third plural allomorph occurs it ADDS AN EXTRA SYLLABLE to the word to which it is attached.

There is one further classification, which is used by the linguist to combine all allomorphs into a group in which not all the sound formations are alike but the meaning is similar for every member. This category is the **morpheme**, all members of which are semantically similar but which may vary in sound formation with some regularity.

The difference in sound formation in the three allomorphs of the plural morphemes that we have examined can be accounted for and predicted. The /s/ pronunciation of the plural suffix occurs after the voiceless consonant sounds /p/, /t/, /k/, /f/, and /θ/; that is, after all voiceless sounds except /s/, /š/, and /č/. The /z/ pronunciation occurs after all vowel sounds (all of which are voiced) and after /b/, /d/, /g/, /v/, /ð/, /l/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/, and /r/; in other words, after all VOICED sounds except /z/, /ž/, and /j/. The /iz/ pronunciation (which is an extra syllable) occurs after the sibilants /s/, /z/, /š/, and /ž/, and after the affricates /č/ and /j/; that is, after those sounds that are EXCEPTED from the two lists above.

The pronunciation of the plural morph is **CONDITIONED** by the sound that immediately precedes it. We can predict, then, that the regular plural morpheme will occur as /s/ after all UNVOICED consonants except the sibilants and affricates, as /z/ after all vowels and all VOICED consonants except the sibilants and affricates, and as /iz/ (an EXTRA SYLLABLE) after the sibilants and affricates.

There are other allomorphs of the plural morpheme. As the language has changed through the centuries, some older forms representing regular patterns of the past have remained. Here are some of these archaic allomorphs of the plural morphemes:

The allomorph /f/-/vz/:

life /layf/	lives /layvz/
loaf /lowf/	loaves /lowvz/
wife /wayf/	wives /wayvz/

The allomorph /ən/:

ox /aks/	oxen /aksən/
child /čayld/ ¹	children /čildrən/

The allomorphs of vowel changes:

man /mæn/	men /men/
woman /wumən/	women /wimin/
goose /guws/	geese /giys/
mouse /maws/	mice /mays/

The "zero" allomorph (no change):

deer /dir/	deer /dir/
fish /fiš/	fish /fiš/

The possessive morpheme

The 's that forms the possessive of nouns in English follows the same pattern of phonological conditioning that we have seen in the regular forms of the plural morpheme.

/s/	/z/
Jack's /jæks/	Henry's /henriz/
Pat's /pæts/	Paul's /pəlz/
Jeff's /jɛfs/	John's /janz/
Philip's /fɪləps/	Abe's /eybz/
Judith's /juwdiθs/	Fred's /fredz/
/iz/	
Alice's /ælisiz/	
Rose's /rowziz/	
George's /jəɹjiz/	
Blanche's /blænčiz/	
Josh's /jašiz/	

The third-person-singular present-tense morpheme

In the present tense of the verb, the *s*-ending that occurs in the third-person-singular form of the verb also follows the same pattern of phonological conditioning.

/s/	/z/
he eats /iyts/	he sees /siyz/
he laughs /læfs/	he pulls /pulz/
he packs /pæks/	he runs /rənz/
he hops /həps/	he hides /haydz/
	he tugs /təgz/
/iz/	
he dresses /dresiz/	
he dozes /dowziz/	
he washes /wašiz/	
he pledges /plejiz/	
he watches /wačiz/	

¹ *Child* has two allomorphs: /čayld/ and /čildr-/.

The past-tense morpheme

A similar pattern of phonological conditioning is evident in the pronunciation of the regular past-tense ending of the verb. (The irregular formations of the past tense and of the past participle compose many allomorphs of the past-tense and past-participle morphemes.)

Here let us look at the regular formation of the past tense. (In regular verbs the same sounds are used for marking the past tense and the past participle, and the same phonological patterns prevail. However, the past-tense marker and the past-participle marker are members of two different morphemes because their meanings are different.) Notice the following verbs:

lick /lik/	licked /likt/
stop /stap/	stopped /stapt/
laugh /læf/	laughed /læft/
watch /wætʃ/	watched /wætʃt/
miss /mis/	missed /mist/
wish /wiʃ/	wished /wiʃt/

The past-tense morpheme in these verbs is pronounced /t/. The /t/, then, is one allomorph of the past-tense morpheme. Another allomorph of the past-tense morpheme is /d/:

rub /rəb/	rubbed /rəbd/
brag /bræg/	bragged /brægd/
love /ləv/	loved /ləvd/
breathe /briyð/	breathed /briyðd/
buzz /bʌz/	buzzed /bʌzd/
judge /ʃʌʒ/	judged /ʃʌʒd/
chew /tʃu/	chewed /tʃud/

The third allomorph that we shall examine is /ɪd/ (which is an EXTRA SYLLABLE). This occurs after the sounds /t/ and /d/:

want /want/	wanted /wantɪd/
need /niyd/	needed /niydɪd/
expect /ɪkspekt/	expected /ɪkspektɪd/
demand /dimænd/	demanded /dimændɪd/

The /t/ allomorph of the past-tense morpheme occurs after all UNVOICED consonants except /t/; the /d/ allomorph occurs after all vowels and all VOICED consonants except /d/; the /ɪd/ allomorph occurs only after the sounds /t/ and /d/. This pattern prevails throughout the language for the regular past-tense (and past-participle) forms, regardless of the spelling. For example, words like *missed*, *breathed*, *bragged*, and *stopped* are never pronounced with two syllables (unless marked especially, in rare instances in poetry), whereas *wanted* and *needed* are always pronounced with two syllables. If students understand these phonological patterns, their pronunciation is more accurate, and their ability to read English improved.

Inflectional suffixes

We have examined several types of suffixes; all are **inflectional** suffixes. Inflectional suffixes are those, such as the plural, the possessive, the verb person-and-number suffix (including the three forms of *be*: *am*, *is*, *are*), and the verb past-tense suffix, which carry grammatical meaning but do not change the part of speech of the word to which they are joined. Inflectional suffixes always come at the end of the word; no other suffixes can normally be added after them. (Another kind of suffix, the **derivational** suffix, changes the part of speech of a word and can have other suffixes added after it. We shall consider derivational suffixes in the next chapter.)

In addition to the four inflectional suffixes that we have examined, there are two other verb suffixes and two adjective suffixes. One verb suffix is the *-ing* ending that is used with the helping verb *be* to form the continuous tenses. This is considered to be distinct from the *-ing* ending which makes the verb a participle with an adjectival function and from the *-ing* ending that causes the verb to function as a noun. The latter two are derivational suffixes. The other inflectional suffix that is used with verbs is the *-ed* ending that forms the participle, with its perfective and passive functions (the perfective being formed with the helping verb *have*, and the passive with the helping verb *be*). The inflectional suffixes that occur with adjectives are the comparative and superlative markers *-er* and *-est*, respectively.

In our consideration of inflectional suffixes we should include the pronoun system of English. The variations in the pronoun forms, reflecting usage of great age, provide with some regularity a form for the subject position in a sentence, a form for the object position, a form for the possessive I (when a noun follows it), and a form for the possessive II (without a noun). Below is the complete set of pronoun forms:

SUBJECT	OBJECT	POSSESSIVE I	POSSESSIVE II
I	me	my	mine
you*	you*	your*	yours*
he	him	his	his
she	her	her	hers
it	it	its	its
we	us	our	ours
they	them	their	theirs

Pattern drills

Linguists and language teachers have been working together for many years to improve second-language teaching. One of the most effective devices that has been developed is the **pattern drill**. The rationale of the pattern drill is that, since language is patterned and the effective speaker of a language uses the patterns of that language automatically, the learner of the language must practice the basic patterns orally thousands of times so that the patterns become automatic for him. Of the various types of pattern drills, we shall consider the **substitution drill** in this chapter.

* The forms on this line occur for both singular and plural.