TEACHING MORPHOLOGY

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Introductory morphology teaching is often little more than a naming of parts. The vocabulary is daunting for the introductory student (particularly once we move from 'prefix' and 'suffix' to 'morph', 'allomorph' and 'morpheme'), but the fundamental idea that words might contain meaningful parts is unlikely to come as a surprise to anyone being taught even in English — a language notoriously poor in morphology. If they are led carefully through well-selected data, most students can pick up the basic ideas fairly rapidly, though there are a few areas which are likely to cause recurrent problems: in my experience morph and allomorph, lexeme, word-form and grammatical word, and drawing tree structures for words are continual sources of difficulty for some (but not all) beginning students. I should add that many of the other notions which are introduced as being simple turn out not to be so simple on closer acquaintance, but I assume that we will in general choose examples which do not give rise to insuperable problems in the first instance.

It is once we move on from this introductory level that we have to ask where we want the student to end up. If we are going to be teaching paradigm structure morphology, we might not care very much about the niceties of morph and morpheme; if we are going to be teaching a syntax of words approach, we might not care much about the difference between word-forms and lexemes. While we may feel some obligation to teach even those aspects of the general background to which we do not ourselves subscribe, it is pleasant to be able to play down some awkward terminological or theoretical point if we are not going to exploit it. But there is one area which nobody who wants to have more than a passing acquaintance with morphology can ignore: everybody needs to be able to present an analysis of a word into elements which are morphological in nature rather than purely phonological or purely semantic. Independent of their theoretical stance, all morphologists are going to agree that *poodle* does not contain a morphological element whose meaning is 'dog', and are going to agree that the syllabic structure and the morphological structure of, say, Russian *s*-*put*-*nik* (with·way·one = 'fellow-traveller, sputnik'), do not coincide. Any linguist who wants to write a description of some linguistic data, and especially any linguist who wants to consider the morphology, semantics, or etymology of some aspect of a given language, has to be able to determine, at least in the clear cases, what the units within the word are.

It is surprising how bad students are at this. Even advanced students will find an affix *-ness* in *governess*. While one hopes it is a slip, it appears to be a recurrent slip! And a trick question like asking for the elements in *distressing* can lead to all kinds of wonderful answers.

Part of the difficulty for the teacher here is that morphological analysis requires a certain degree of familiarity with the language to be analysed. That is why, in very elementary morphological exercises, we prefer to present data from languages in which the relevant morphology is word-based rather than stem-based (Bloomfield 1935: 225) and why we almost invariably provide information about base forms in the data for the problem. If we want to open things up completely, we need to use a language where we can presuppose some knowledge of the available forms. In courses taught in English this will largely mean English. It happens that English not only has an impoverished inflectional morphology, it is also etymologically extremely confused, with not only Germanic elements but also Romance, Latin and Greek elements. This means that problems based on English material, apart from the obvious cases of inflectional allomorphy, are likely to be focussed on derivational material, and have to avoid a minefield of etymological traps. Some apparently simple questions are very difficult for beginning students to answer. Are -ery, -ary and -ry allomorphs of the same morpheme, and if so what is the conditioning factor? Are -er and -or allomorphs of a single morpheme? How many morphemes of form -er should we distinguish in English? What is the relationship between -able and -ible?

A simple example of the problems we face when dealing with English is that it is remarkably difficult to get clear cases of polysyllabic monomorphemic words in English. If we present most classes with a word like *hippopotamus*,

there will be one or more students who wish to split it into several morphemes on the basis of parallels like *hippodrome*. The proliferation of cranberry morphs does not worry most beginning students. Once beginning students are introduced to the notion of morphological analysis, what we might call the folk-etymological urge takes over: they see morphs everywhere, even if they are asked to justify every morph they isolate. But if we want to make sure that they can isolate morphs when they see them, we have to test them with some monomorphemic words. A word like dog is not a problem; most will expect that to be monomorphemic because it is so short. But some people will see (with some etymological justification) several morphs in quarantine. However, it seems relevant to provide a short list of polysyllabic monomorphemic words of English for such exercises. The words in (1) seem fairly clearly to be monomorphemic. We should add that words like bahuvrihi, perestroika, rangatiratanga, Schadenfreude, and Weltanschauung are probably to be treated as monomorphemic in English, even if they are not in their original languages.

(1)	Polysyllabic words which are	probably monomorphemic in	English
	antelope	cummerbund	pattern
	asparagus	cylinder	pelican
	attitude	diamond	pemmican
	bagatelle	dimple	penguin
	balderdash	domain	rostrum
	baobab	elephant	sepulchre
	basilica	entertain	seraglio
	believe	fashion	stunid
	besom	fetish	stupiu
	blaspheme	fiasco	sturgeon
	bulletin	furbelow	terrapin
	buttress	giraffe	tortoise
	caravan	guarantee	umbrella
	carpet	magazine	verandah
	catamaran	moustache	yoghurt
	chimpanzee	parsimony	

Some of these words are more easily mistaken for polymorphemic than others, but if added judiciously to lists of words for morphological analysis, they should act to countervail the folk-etymological urge. One point which it is difficult to communicate to students is the problem posed by unique morphs (cranberry morphs). The general rule is that morphological analysis demands exhaustivity of analysis: there should be no part of a word which is not attributed to one morph (and morpheme) or another (and equally, no part of a word which is attributed to more than one morph(eme)). However, we all know that unique morphs exist. Some words which probably contain unique morphs are listed under (2). The question is how frequent such an occurrence is.

(2) Words which may contain a unique morph

bilberry	curious	nightingale
bishopric	deciduous	perdition
cartoon	demolish	
clientele	fluctuate	

The general perception of phonaesthemes seems to be that they are not morphs/morphemes. One of the reasons for this is that if they were they would create far too many unique morphs. Consider gleam, glimmer, glint, glisten, glitter, gloom, which are often considered to set up a phonaestheme /gl/, connected with light. If we analyse this /gl/ as a morphological element, we imply that the remainder is also an element (or a series of elements) available for further combination. Beam exists and might be related to gleam, but bitter, boom do not seem to be related as correlates of glitter and gloom in any obvious way; shimmer exists, but there is no corresponding form for any of the other words; *flitter* and *twitter* do not appear to be related to *glitter*, although all might be said to share a semantic feature of frequentitiveness. which Marchand (1969: 273) attributes to a final -er morpheme; bloom is the only word which might be at all related to gloom on the same pattern. In other words, -eam, -immer, -int, -isten, -itter, -oom would be established as unique morphs if gl- were taken to be a morph. But if this is too much, there is no obvious level at which unique morphs are acceptable. Perhaps what we have to say is that no morph that is ever set up should have the effect of creating a series of unique morphs. Some of the examples in (2) might lead one to query the suitability of even this simple rule. Perhaps it should be modified to read 'no morph that is ever set up should have the effect of creating a series of unique morphs which outnumbers the number of words for which it provides a suitable explanation of the meaning of the words in which it occurs'. This is, of course, considerably weaker.

As well as the folk-etymological urge, another problem that besets the beginning analyser of words is the assumption that because a certain form has a given meaning in one place, it retains that meaning everywhere. This brings us back to the *governess* problem, although in *governess* the correct analysis should, we might think, also be clear on a superficial glance. Perhaps the irregularity in the formation of the word (why isn't it *governoress*? There do not appear to be any other examples where *-ess* is added direct to something which is clearly a verb) has a greater impact than we perceive.

As an example, consider words ending in *-er*. There is a great temptation to see these as being agentive (or, failing that, to be comparative). This is probably the most common use of this final syllable, and the *burgle* backformation from *burglar* shows how powerful it can be. Some examples where final *-er* is not (or is probably not — recall the *flitter*; *glimmer*, *twitter* examples) a suffix are given in (3).

aster	fever	paper
clever	hammer	patter
clover	hyper	quiver (two senses available)
clutter	inter	scatter
dagger	isomer	sever
dapper	letter (in the usual reading)	sewer (in the usual reading)
deter	litter	shelter
dicker	matter	temper (two senses available)
dither	never	utter (two senses available)
falter	otter	water
fester	over	winter

(3) Words in -er which do not contain a suffix

Again, the judicious use of such examples among others in which *-er* is a suffix can be a useful pedagogical tool. Note, too, that there are generalisations to be made here. *Deter* and *inter* cannot have the expected *-er* because of the stress; they are also verbs, which is the wrong part of speech for the expected *-er* morph (though perhaps not for the frequentative one, if that is still analysable in English); some of the words in (3) are adjectives, and a similar point can be made. Although *-er* has been used as an example here, other similar instances are not hard to find: final *-al* and *-y* are obvious places to look.

At some point in this kind of analysis, though, the question arises as to when you are dealing with two occurrences of the same morpheme and when you are dealing with two different morphemes. English abounds in such cases, and the instructor really needs some king of guidelines available for students. Bauer (2003: Chapter 9) gives some suggestions, but the criteria provided there are not always clear-cut, and are certainly not all of equal importance. The important thing is not to allow semantic difference to become the main or only criterion. It is a very important criterion, but a semantic difference can be found between the meanings of affixes in almost any two words, and students are willing to argue for semantic differences without any thought of what might be part of the pragmatics of general use and what might be part of the definition of the affix. This criterion, therefore, if overused, simply leads to unproductive discussion in the classroom.

As an example, consider *-er* again. In *bus-driver* it denotes an agent, in *concrete-mixer* it denotes an instrument (under normal circumstances, at least). Does this mean that two morphemes are involved? Or is there a higher generalisation, namely that *-er* simply picks up on the subject argument of the verb? Dressler (1986) argues that agents and instruments are, in any case, closely linked. If a class of students has a major rule that semantic difference is sufficient to establish separate morphemes, they will inevitably conclude that there are two morphemes here, whatever the instructor wants to conclude.

Some examples of instances which can be considered within this general framework are given in (4). In some cases it might seem blindingly obvious whether one or more than one morpheme is involved, in others a thesis might be required to answer that question fully. In virtually every case, though, there are general points about morphological analysis to be made. For students at the beginning of their careers, even collecting examples which might belong to each of the two categories is likely to provide a challenge. This remains true when they are encouraged to use standard handbooks, dictionaries, and reverse dictionaries such as Lehnert (1971) or Muthmann (1999).

(4)	Affix -able	Example of first use	<i>Example of contrasting use</i>
	-2010	norrangea	
	-age	parsonage	coverage
	-al	parental	rebuttal
	dis-	disown	disarm
	-en/-ed	he has eaten	he has been eaten
	-er	killer	Londoner
	-ish	waspish	thirty-ish
	-S	employs	hedgehogs

un-	unintelligent	untie
-у	modesty	constancy

The 'one or two morphemes?' question can be asked where there is synonymy as well as where there is homophony. In (5) there are some examples with synonymous or near synonymous, but not necessarily homophonous, morphs which may or may not belong to the same morpheme. The question of contrast becomes important here. In phonology problems, a single minimal pair will be sufficient to establish two phonemes (although whether *billow* versus *below* is sufficient to say that stress is phonemic in English is an interesting question). It is less clear that the pair *sailer* ('a boat') versus *sailor* ('a person') is sufficient to establish that *-er* and *-or* are morphs belonging to separate morphemes.

(5)	Form 1	Example	Form 2	Example
	-able	defendable	-ible	defensible
	-al	herbal	-ial	proverbial
	-al	suffixal	-ual	sexual
	-al	natural	-ar	polar
	demi-	demigod	semi-	semitone
	enen	enliven	-en	brighten
	-er	exerciser	-or	incisor
	-ise	legalise	-ify	simplify
	pre-	pre-pay	fore-	foretell

Note that some of these are excluded in classical morpheme theory from being allomorphs of the same morpheme because they do not share (enough) form. However, since there are no guidelines on what sufficient form is, in this context, and since Plag (1999: 204) argues that *-ise* and *-ify* should be seen as allomorphs, it seems worthwhile to widen the possible range of forms in exercises of this type.

Conclusion

Although English does not have a particularly elaborate morphology, it does present us with enough data to train students in many of the problems of morphological analysis. The instructor needs to take care in making clear to students just what will be accepted as evidence, and probably has to be willing to suspend his or her own judgement about what the 'correct' answer may be in any given instance; in some cases it may be sufficient for the instructor to be willing to play devil's advocate and argue against any proposed hypothesis. In the very nature of English, many phenomena which will create problems of analysis in other languages will simply never arise. But if students are used to thinking about potential objections and presenting arguments based on evidence, this should stand them in good stead.

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