

October 23, 2003

## CLASS 2: MORPHEMES AND ALLOMORPHS

### SOME TERMINOLOGY: MORPH & CO.

A **morpheme** is the **smallest string of sounds carrying information about meaning/function**.

- **free morphemes** can stand on their own, i.e. be words
- **bound morphemes** need to attach to something

- (1) a. house  
b. house-s

- morphemes that are not words (i.e. those that are bound) are called **affixes**
- depending on their position, we have a **prefix, suffix, infix, circumfix (?)**
- affixes can be **category-sensitive**

- (2) a. polite (adjective) – politeness (noun)  
b. drive (verb) – driver (noun)

We can say that affixes attach to **stems** and that the most embedded stem in a complex word is called the **root** (i.e. it is a simple stem). Note that while **all affixes are bound** (bound morphemes) **not all roots are free** morphemes, some can be bound as well.

- (3) a. leg-ible, aud-ience, magn-ify (associated with **Romance roots**)  
b. cran-berry, huckle-berry, gorm-less (**cranberry morphemes**)

**NB:** What is a word? We might now have a better answer than last class: A word is the **smallest free form** found in language. And yes, we can still distinguish **simple** from **complex** words.

- **roots belong to lexical categories** (i.e. nouns, verbs, adjectives, prepositions)

- (4) a. care (verb, root) – careful (adjective)  
b. careful (adjective, stem) – carefulness (noun)

### MORE TERMINOLOGY: THE ALLOMORPH

Morphemes may come in **more than one form**:

- (5) a. hand-s, dog-s, nun-s [z]  
b. cat-s, dock-s, trap-s [s]

The **plural morpheme** –s is pronounced differently in (5a) and (5b). Is it the **same or two different morphemes**? Answer: It is **one morpheme with two different realizations** depending on the phonological environment. It is [-s] after [t], [k], [p] and [-z] after [d], [g], [n] — What is it that makes these two sets different? **The first is [-voice], the second [+voice].**

- (6) a. [Z] → [s] / [-voice] \_\_\_\_\_  
 b. [Z] → [z] / [+voice] \_\_\_\_\_

**Vowels** can be said to be inherently voiced, so they take the [z]-realization as well: *day-s*.

**One further possibility** of the realization of the plural morpheme is **after sounds like [-s], [-z]**:

- (7) bus-es, box-es, maze-s [ɪz] (or [əz])

- (6) c. [Z] → [ɪz] / [coronal, fricative] \_\_\_\_\_

The rule in (6c) should actually **apply before** those in (6a,b). Why? Because if in the case of *bus* for example, where *-s* is [-voice], we apply the rule in (6a) that would give us the plural morpheme *-s* only, so we have no way of accounting for the presence of [ɪz]. In other words, we'll get the wrong result. (**Some sibilants are a subset of all voiceless consonants.**)

- (8) *Allomorphic English plural rule*

- [Z] → [ɪz] / [coronal, fricative] \_\_\_\_\_  
           [s] / [-voice] \_\_\_\_\_  
           [z] / [+voice] \_\_\_\_\_

The three different realizations of the plural morpheme [Z] are called **allomorphs**. In most of the cases **allomorphs are predicted by the phonological environment** (this is relevant for the relation between morphology and phonology, which we will look at towards the end, class 10).

Something very similar can be said for the **past tense morpheme -ed**: [ɪd/əd], [d], [t]. [*exercise*]

But not only phonology determines allomorphy: the **lexicon** and **grammar** do as well.

- (9) a. laugh, cliff — laughs, cliffs [s]  
 b. wife, loaf — \*wives, \*loafs \*[s]  
 c. — wives, loaves [z]

- (10) *my wife's job* ⇨ 's: [s]

It looks like the “word” *wife* e.g. comes in two allomorphs as well: **free wife** and **bound wive**.

Lastly, it must be pointed out that although intuitive, **correlating morphemes with meaning** is not (always) accurate. (Class 1: “Morphemes are the smallest unit pairing sound and meaning.”) Recall that we defined morphemes in terms of meaning **or** function above — for a good reason.

- (11) a. return, restore... [rɪ], [rə]  
 b. re-turn, re-store... [rɪ], \*[rə]

- (12) a. involve, revolve  
 b. #involution / involvement, revolution /\* revolvement

### Further readings:

📖 Spencer, A. 1991. *Morphological Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, Ch. 1