

Forms with(out) meaning: What can we learn from morphemes?

The morphological component of grammar is usually conceived as a bridge from meaning to form or viceversa. In an ideal language, we could find only biunique correspondences between meanings and exponents, which would render the form-meaning mappings trivial. Fortunately, in real languages we do not find such straightforward connections exclusively. Instead, we often find inflectional classes, syncretism, deponency and other phenomena which make the mappings between form and meaning either many-to-one or one-to-many. It is these complications that require us to posit an independent morphological component in language (Aronoff 1994).

In order to maintain the bridge-like character of the form-meaning pairings of morphology, frequent solutions have been to either incorporate a greater degree of information/granularity in individual entries (e.g. 3SG.PRES.SUBJ.CONJUGATION3) at the cost of not dealing exclusively with meaning anymore, or to posit homonymous entries whenever we would expect there to be more than one meaning under the same form (e.g. -ibus₁: DAT.PL, -ibus₂: ABL.PL). Both solutions seem inadequate. An alternative solution would be to abandon the widespread idea of morphology as a mere vehicle for meaning or morphosyntactic features (see e.g. Carstairs-McCarthy 2010).

If the morphological component is not (solely) a bridge between form and meaning we can systematically expect: i) instances of meaning without form and ii) instances of form without meaning. Concerning i), the concept of 'morphological zero' is well known (e.g. Mel'čuk 2002), as are its problems. Much easier than tracing the existence, distribution and properties of something without a visible exponence is to focus on ii), visible exponents without a (clearcut) meaning. This will be the purpose of the present paper.

So-called 'morphemes' (Aronoff 1994, O'Neill 2013) or also more recently 'meromorphemes' (Round 2013) are exponents with either no meaning of their own (Table 2) or with a meaning which can hardly be delimited (Table 1):

| | 'potato' | 'hair' | 'bump' |
|--------|----------|----------|----------|
| NOM.SG | tac | nh̄im | p̄ony |
| GEN.SG | tac-kä | nh̄im | p̄ony-kä |
| LOC.SG | tac | nh̄im-kä | p̄ony-kä |

Table 1: Noun inflection in Nuer (Frank 1999)

| | 'grow' | | 'run' | |
|-----|----------|-----------|---------|---------|
| | IND | SUBJ | IND | SUBJ |
| 1SG | crez-k-o | crez-k-a | corr-o | corr-a |
| 2SG | crec-es | crez-k-as | corr-es | corr-as |
| 3SG | crec-e | crez-k-a | corr-e | corr-a |

Table 2: Verb inflection in Spanish

Because of their peculiarities, morphemes can help us understand better the nature of morphological exponence in relation to meaning as well as the cognitive foundations and structuring of the morphological component of language as a whole. This may be the reason why the study and theoretical discussion of the phenomenon is becoming increasingly popular (e.g. Luis & Bermudez-Otero 2016).

From the perspective of Canonical Typology (Corbett 2005), my purpose will be to narrow down what precisely counts as a canonical morpheme (by paying attention to meaning, phonological or syntactic conditioning, distribution, type of exponent, allomorphy, type frequency etc.). Empirically, on the basis of the analysis of relevant phenomena from a variety of languages, I will explore which are the most common deviations from the canonical ideal and which properties of morphemes tend to cluster together cross-linguistically.

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