

4. Inflection

The Structure of Words (Ling 350)

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Fall 2025

What We'll Cover

1. Quiz #3
2. Quick 2-question activity (write down your answers and hand it in – not graded)
3. Inflection
4. For next time

Quiz #3

1. From last week:
 x
2. From the reading:
 y

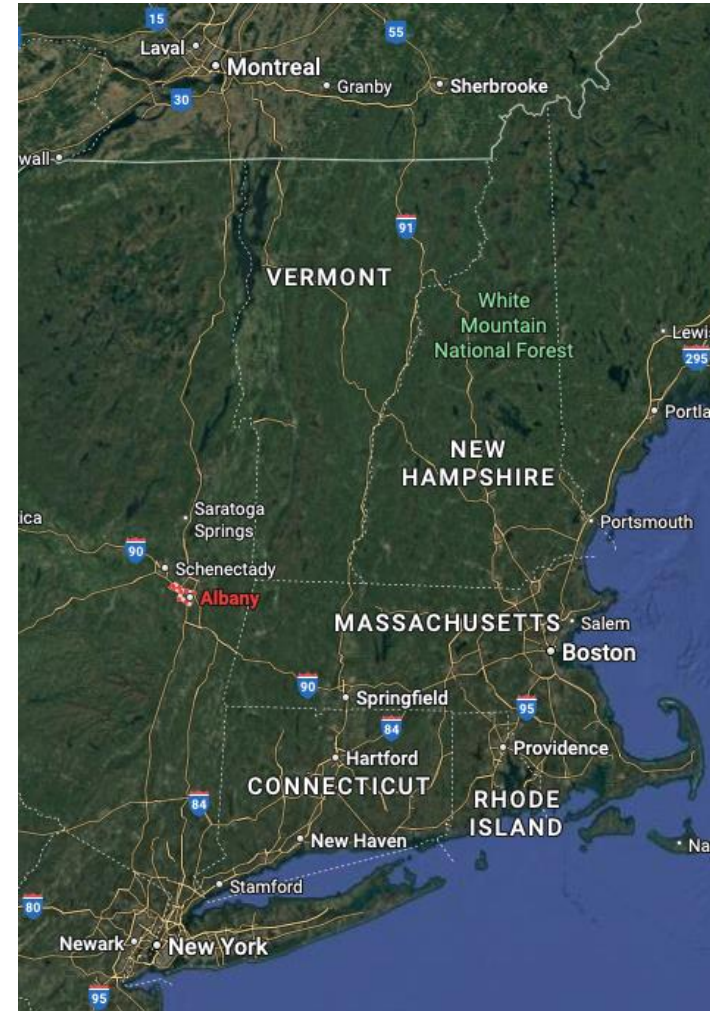
1. What is this a photo of?



2. What's the word that you'd write here?

As in “Albany is 3 hours away.
Montreal is 6 hours away. Montreal
is _____ than Albany.”

Only write one word, not a whole phrase



Word Forms

- “grammatically conditioned variants of a word that is more basic”

The pianist performs in the local hall every week.

Mary told us that the pianist performed in the local hall every week.

The performance last week was particularly impressive.

- Why are the below sentences ungrammatical?

*The pianist perform in the local hall every week.

*These pianists performs in the local hall every week.

- Because their verbs and nouns do not agree in number.

“performs”

-S

3rd person
singular present,
attaches to
verbs

“performed”

-ed

past,
attaches to
verbs

“pianists”

-S

plural,
attaches to
nouns

Word Forms

- **Inflection** adds grammatical information — like tense or number — but not lexical information.
- An inflected word form does not have an independent meaning that is distinct from the more basic word form.
- Once you learn “dog,” you know “dogs” automatically. Once you learn “occur,” you learn “occurs,” “occurring,” and “occurred” automatically. These new forms are not lexical items.
- You *don’t* automatically learn “underdog” or “occurrence,” because these words are lexical items.

“Underdog” and “occurrence” demonstrate derivational, rather than inflectional, morphology.

Lexemes and Word Forms

- A **lexeme** is the abstract notion of a word that is stored in the lexicon, your mental dictionary. The lexeme itself is uninflected and is itself unspoken (like a memory, dream, or idea).
- A **word form**, on the other hand, is inflected and actually pronounced; it is not abstract.
- Lexemes are written in small caps, and the **word forms** of that morpheme are written in italics.

PERFORM

perform, performs, performed, performing

Why is *perform* an inflected form of PERFORM if it has no affixes?

Why isn't *performance* listed as part of the lexeme PERFORM?

Lexemes and Word Forms

- Two word forms are the same if they are pronounced the same.

Jerry will *run* the dishwasher.

Do these two instances of the word form *run* belong to the same lexeme?

I went for a *run*.

Are these two instances of the word form *run* the same grammatical word?

- Another useful term is **grammatical word**. Think of ‘the past tense of the verb PERFORM’ or ‘the plural of DOG.’

Suppletion

- Sometimes, within a given lexeme, a different root is used for one grammatical word than for the others. This is called **suppletion**.
- What's the past participle of go?
- What's the difference between *went* and *gone*?

GO

go, goes, going, went, gone

Nouns

Why is possession – the –'s suffix – not considered part of a noun's inflection?

- Most noun lexemes have two grammatical words which differ in terms of number: singular and plural.

DOG

dog, dogs

CAT

cat, cats

HOUSE

house, houses

- Most nouns are pluralized with an -s suffix, but others are irregular.

TOOTH

tooth, teeth

CACTUS

cactus, cacti

WOMAN

woman, women

- Some nouns use the same word form for both grammatical words.

DEER

deer, deer

SHEEP

sheep, sheep

There is one deer.
There are five deer.

- And some nouns are not countable. They do not inflect for number at all.

RICE

rice

MUD

mud

*There is one rice.
*There are five rice.

Pronouns and Determiners

- Some determiners have a number contrast. But not all.
- Which of these do?

THIS	<i>this, these</i>	THAT	<i>that, those</i>	THE	<i>the</i>	SOME	<i>some</i>
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- Personal pronouns are inflected for case: nominative (when they're the subject of a sentence) and accusative (when they're the object).
- Which ones below show which case?

I	<i>I</i>	<i>me</i>	YOU	<i>you, you</i>	HE	<i>he</i>	<i>him</i>	
SHE	<i>she</i>	<i>her</i>	WE	<i>we</i>	<i>us</i>	THEY	<i>they</i>	<i>them</i>

Verbs

- Verb lexemes have five grammatical words.

GIVE	3S.PRES: <i>gives</i>	PERF.PTCP: <i>given</i>
	PAST: <i>gave</i>	else: <i>give</i>
	PROG.PTCP: <i>giving</i>	

What's another verb we can fill in the five grammatical words for with no syncretism?

- But some word forms may be identical. This is called **syncretism**.

PERFORM	3S.PRES: <i>performs</i>	PERF.PTCP: <i>performed</i>
	PAST: <i>performed</i>	else: <i>perform</i>
	PROG.PTCP: <i>performing</i>	

Adjectives

- For adjectives that are one syllable long, or that are a few syllables long with the second syllable ending in a vowel sound, there are three grammatical words: a positive, a comparative, and a superlative.

HAPPY	<i>happy, happier, happiest</i>
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GOOD	<i>good, better, best</i>
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← note the suppletion

TALL	<i>tall, taller, tallest</i>
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SMART	<i>smart, smarter, smartest</i>
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What's another adjective that shows suppletion?

- For other adjectives, there is only a positive, and periphrastic forms with *more* and *most* may be used to get at the comparative and superlative meanings.

INTELLIGENT

HILARIOUS

POLITICAL

AESTHETIC

Activity!

- Start with activity 1 on your sheets. Work in groups!!!!!!!!!!!!

For next time

- We will not meet again until October 8th.
- Before that class, read Carstairs-McCarthy chapter 5. There will be a quiz on this reading at the start of class.