

11. Morphemes

The Structure of Words (Ling 350)

Prof. Pentangelo

Fall 2025

Let's finish up last week's activity sheet

- Questions 3, 4, and 5.

Morphemes

- How did Carstairs-McCarthy define the morpheme? (This is the definition we've been working with since the start of the semester.)
- How does Bauer's use of "morpheme" differ from this?
- Bauer is in some ways more traditional than C-M. He talks about morphemes needing to have a meaning of their own.
- He also talks about the possibility of a single morpheme called {plural} which has a lot of allomorphs, including [s] [z] and [ɪz] as well as [i] and [ən]. What are some words that these show up in?
- Note that Bauer is English and his transcriptions use his pronunciation.

Morphemes

- Bauer talks about some problems with morphemes.
- One problem is presented by “portmanteau morphemes” – a single morpheme that does more than one thing.

| Italian | | | | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|--|
| la sedia <i>the chair</i> | le sedie <i>the chairs</i> | -a FEM.SING | -e FEM.PLUR | These morphemes do two different bits of inflection at the same time: gender and number. |
| il tavolo <i>the table</i> | i tavoli <i>the tables</i> | -o MASC.SING | -i MASC.PLUR | |

Morphemes

- Another problem is **ablaut**.
- How do we form the simple past in English?

| | | | |
|---------|--------|-------|----------|
| flirt | walk | add | measure |
| flirted | walked | added | measured |

- We've analyzed these as allomorphs of a single morpheme, which show up based on phonological conditions.

| | | | |
|-----|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------|
| -ed | [t] / C _[-voice] ___ | [d] / C _[+voice] ___ | [ɪd] / d___ t___ |
|-----|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------|

- But what about words like these?

| | | | | | |
|-------------|------------|-------------|-------------|-----------------|-----------|
| hurt → hurt | hide → hid | wake → woke | sing → sang | bring → brought | go → went |
|-------------|------------|-------------|-------------|-----------------|-----------|

Morphomes

- The **morphome**, discussed by Bauer, was introduced by Mark Aronoff in 1994. What is it?

“[a] set of morphemes which perform the same function”

(It gets a little bit more complicated.)

- So the *-en* of *oxen* and the *-s* of *cats* belong to the same morphome.
- Why?
- The morphome has been described as the “that’s just how it is” of morphology. It’s a useful way of describing unpredictable variation that needs to be learned on a case-by-case basis.
- Why do we use *-en* with *ox* but *-s* with *cat*? That’s just how it is.

Morphemes

- In English—but not in all languages—the **past participle** and the **passive participle** are part of the same morpheme. Why?

| INFINITIVE | PAST/PRETERIT | PAST PARTICIPLE |
|------------|---------------|-----------------|
| eat | ate | eaten |

| | | |
|------|--------|--------|
| walk | walked | walked |
|------|--------|--------|

| | | |
|-----|-----|-----|
| hit | hit | hit |
|-----|-----|-----|

I have eaten a sandwich.

The sandwich was eaten.

I have walked a dog.

The dog was walked.

I have never hit a robot.

The robot was never hit.

Past Part.



Pass. Part.

No more morphemes?

- Could we have morphology without morphemes?
- Some linguists think so.
- We can focus on the “word form” rather than the morpheme.
- With a word-form-based analysis, we don’t focus on “breaking” words into their morphemes.
- How would we analyze “elephants” in a morphemic theory of morphology, like what we’ve been using so far?

elephants is composed of *elephant* + the plural *-s*



No more morphemes?

- And how would we analyze “elephants” in a word-form-based theory of morphology?

elephants is the plural of ELEPHANT

“in the word-form-based account, we cannot say that the final -s in elephants ‘means’ ‘plural’: all we can say is that elephants is ‘the plural of ELEPHANT’ while elephant is ‘the singular (or unmarked) form of ELEPHANT’.”

- There are a few key differences between these two approaches.
- First, let’s try something.

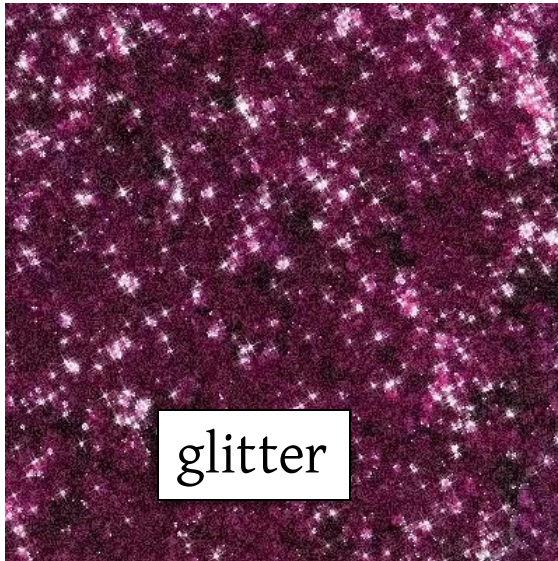


Phonesthemes

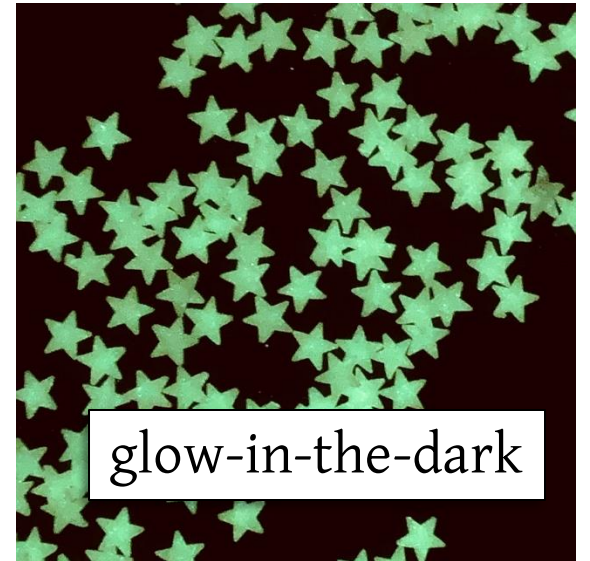
- What kind of donut is shiny?
- What's shiny stuff you buy and glue on arts and crafts projects?
- Imagine something kind of greenish that you hold up to a lightbulb and then it shines when you shut the lights. What do you call it?
- Notice anything?



glazed



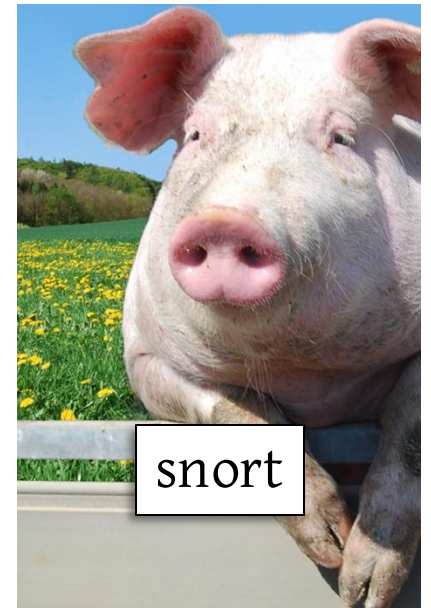
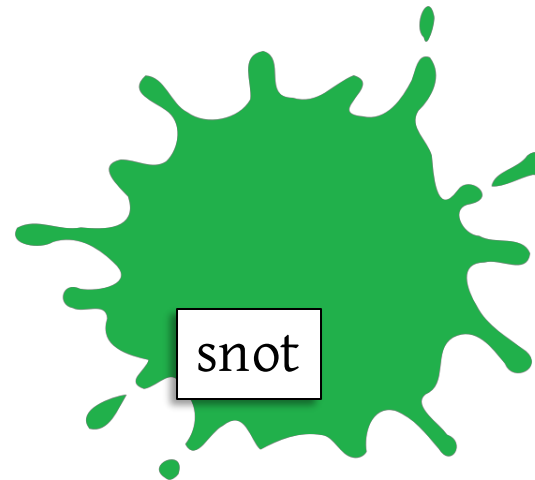
glitter



glow-in-the-dark

Phonesthemes

- What's the noise you make with your nose when you sleep?
- And when the inside of your nose is tickled (e.g. by pepper)?
- And what comes out of your nose?
- And the sound a pig makes, also when your nose makes a noise when you laugh?



Phonesthemes

“morphemes must analyse a word exhaustively: there can be no bits of the word left over which do not belong to any morpheme.”

- glaze, glitter, glow, glimmer, glimpse, glint, glisten, glory, glossy
- snore, sneeze, snot, snort, snout, snooty, sniff, snuffle
- grip, grasp, grapple, grab, grope
- crash, bash, smash, dash, mash, gnash, slash, clash, thrash

What is happening here?

- Can we analyze *gl-* as a morpheme meaning ‘shiny’?
- And how about *sn-* ‘nose-related’?

Phonesthemes

- These repeated elements are called phonesthemes. They are **not** morphemes under any analysis. But they do seem to contribute meaning somehow, and people even use them to make neologisms.
- In a word-form-based approach, we can look at all of the words in these phonestheme clusters as having something in common. (Dwight Bolinger called them ‘constellations’.)
- This is one major point of difference.



Snuffleupagus

“a morphemic theory can only pay attention to morphemes, while a word-form-based approach is [...] free to look at similarities between word-forms which are not morphemic.”

A second key difference

- Derivational morphology is a bit harder to handle in word-form-based approaches.



elephants = the plural of ELEPHANT

“There are three elephants.”

Nice!

greenness = the noun of GREEN

“Changes in the greenness of vegetation indicated changes in land use and oasis health.”

Nice!

“My favorite color is greenness.”

Huh?

- For inflection, where paradigms are clear, word-form-based approaches seem to work great. Derivation is another story.

For next time

- Read chapter 8 in Bauer. There will be a quiz on this reading at the start of class.