

12. Morphemes II

The Structure of Words (Ling 350)

Prof. Pentangelo

Fall 2025

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>
il tavolo <i>the table</i>	i tavoli <i>the tables</i>

-a
FEM.SING

-e
FEM.PLUR

-o
MASC.SING

-i
MASC.PLUR

These morphemes do two different bits of inflection at the same time: gender and number.

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___
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- But what about words like these?

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

“Whether the form has a suffix in -ed or -en, or illustrates Ablaut or lack of change from some other form, whether the meaning is the past participle or the passive participle, it is all part of the same morpheme.” (117)

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’.”

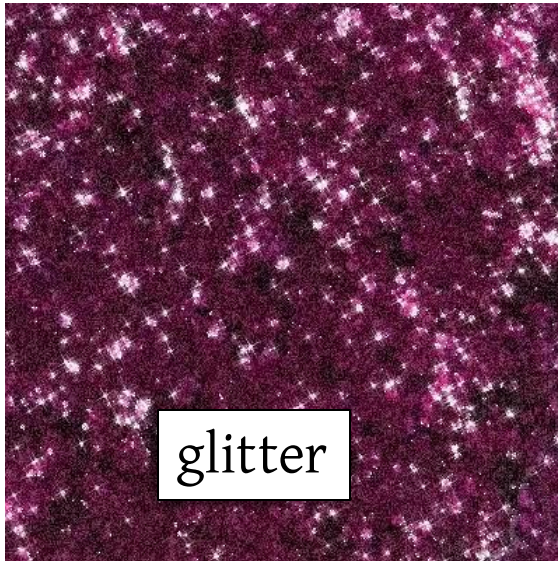
- There are a few key differences between these two approaches.
- First, let’s try something.

Phonesthemes

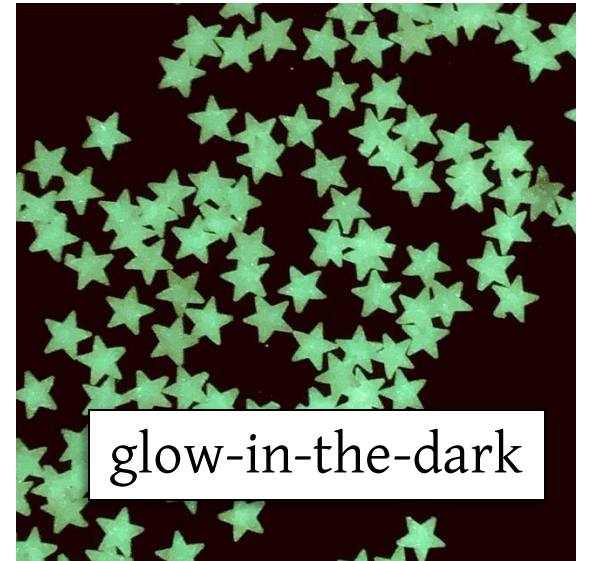
- What kind of donut is shiny?
- What's shiny stuff you buy and glue on arts and crafts projects?
- Imagine something kind of greenish that you hold up to a lightbulb and then it shines when you shut the lights. What do you call it?
- Notice anything?



glazed



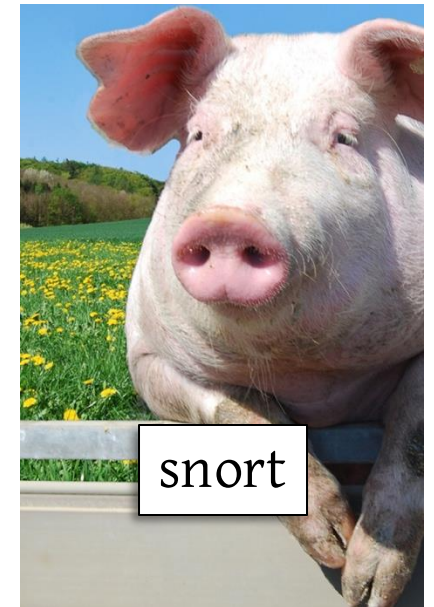
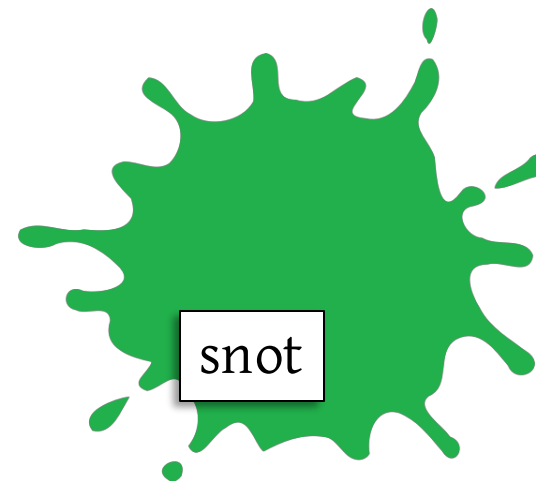
glitter



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.
- Note: The Extra Credit assignment will be due by 11:59pm on the same day as the final, 17 December.