

# TELL

## Textbooks in English Language and Linguistics (TELL) 5

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### Introduction to English Morphology

EXTRACT



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Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften

# 1 Basic concepts

It has become a tradition to begin monographs and textbooks on morphology with a tribute to the German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who invented the term *Morphologie* in 1790 to refer to "eine Anschauung von den Gestalten und Wandlungen der Natur und Kunst" / 'a view about the forms and transformations of nature and art' (Kluge 2002). In the English language the word *morphology* has been used since 1828: according to the Oxford English Dictionary (henceforth OED), it originally referred to "the branch of biology that deals with the form of living organisms and their parts, and the relationships between their structures".

In this introductory chapter we will learn in which respects our present-day linguistic understanding of the term 'morphology' differs from that of Goethe and that of the 19th century biologists. In addition, the chapter discusses the relationship between morphology and other branches of linguistics as well as one of the most important theoretical concepts in morphology: the concept of a word. With regard to the latter, our focus will be on the question of whether there is at least one operational criterion, or to be more precise, a formal feature characteristic of a particular combination of sounds justifying the treatment of that combination as a word. For example, why is it that the combination of the sounds /kæt/ is usually regarded as a word? What is the difference between the word *cat* and, say, *black cat*, which is usually regarded as a combination of no less than two words: *black* and *cat*?

## 1.1 What is morphology?

In a linguistic context morphology is usually defined as the study of the internal structure of words. To illustrate what this means, let us consider the word *waitthood* 'the stage in a young college graduate's life when activities such as marrying and finding a place to live are postponed until a job is found or enough money is saved'. According to Word Spy (i.e. a freely available online database of English neologisms which can be accessed at <http://www.wordspy.com/>), *waitthood* is a relatively new word in English: its earliest citation provided by Word Spy dates September 01, 2007.

From a formal point of view, *waitthood* seems to be segmentable into the components *wait* and *-hood*. The component *wait* is a verb which, apart from occurring in *waitthood*, also occurs in sentences like *I cannot wait any longer*. And the component *-hood* is a noun-building element which, apart from occurring in *waitthood*, also occurs in nouns like *adulthood*, *boyhood*,

*parenthood*, etc. Taking this into account, we can draw an important conclusion, as far as the internal structure of *waitthood* is concerned. The word under analysis is a **complex word**, i.e. a word which can be analyzed as a combination of no less than two formally identifiable components capable of occurring in other morphologically relevant environments. (In the next section of this chapter, we will learn which environments qualify as morphologically relevant.) By contrast, the combination of the sounds /kæt/ representing the word *cat* cannot be segmented into /k/ and /æt/, or /kæ/ and /t/, or /k/ and /æ/ and /t/. Undeniably, these putative components occur elsewhere (e.g. *cable*, *at*, *cap*, *mat*), but none of these environments seem to be morphologically relevant. Accordingly, the word *cat* is a **simple word** (or a **simplex**), i.e. a word which consists of no more than one formally indivisible component.

In addition to determining whether the word under analysis is a simple or complex word, morphology also deals with the question of how new words like the above mentioned *waitthood* come into existence. Compare, for example, the formation of *waitthood* and that of the verb *to wife* 'to downplay a woman's career accomplishments in favor of her abilities as wife and mother' (Word Spy). As we established above, *waitthood* is, from a formal point of view, segmentable into the components *wait* and *-hood*. Accordingly, we can conclude that the word under analysis was created via combining the components *wait* and *-hood*: *waitthood* = *wait* + *-hood*. By contrast, the creation of the formally simple verb *to wife* seems to have involved a **semantic modification** of the already existing noun *wife*. Thus the meaning 'to wife' is **semantically more complex** than the meaning 'a wife': the former contains the meaning 'a wife' plus the additional meaning 'to downplay a woman's career accomplishments in favor of her abilities as mother'. Accordingly, we can conclude that the meaning 'a wife' served as an **input meaning** for the meaning 'to wife'.

Finally, morphology studies those modifications (of existing words) that do not give rise to new words but serve to express **grammatical meanings** such as, for example, 'plurality', 'the past tense', 'the passive voice', etc. For instance, the addition of *-s* to the noun *book* does not create a new word: both *book* and *books* refer to representatives of the same class of objects (books). However, *book* and *books* differ with regard to their grammatical meanings: while *book* is in the **singular number**, *books* is in the **plural number**. The singular–plural opposition exemplified by *book* and *books* forms the **grammatical category** NUMBER. A similar case is the **present tense–past tense** opposition, which forms the grammatical category TENSE: both *work* of *I work* and *worked* of *I worked* can refer to the same action of working. However, the forms under consideration differ with regard to their grammatical meanings: while *work* is in the present tense, *worked* is in the past tense.

The present textbook contains a detailed discussion of each of the three aspects of morphology named above. Chapters 2 and 3 deal with both the formal

and the semantic structure of English words: among other things, we will become acquainted with the types of components into which complex words like *waitthood* can be segmented. Chapters 4 and 5 deal with what has usually been called **word-formation**, i.e. processes that produce new words like *waitthood* and *to wife*. Finally, Chapter 6 deals with grammatical categories in English such as NUMBER, TENSE, VOICE, etc.

## 1.2 Morphology and other branches of linguistics

To be able to address the aforementioned issues, we will, first of all, need to become acquainted with the most important theoretical concepts pertaining to other branches of linguistics which morphology is closely connected to. These include semantics, phraseology, phonetics and phonology, syntax, and sociolinguistics.

### 1.2.1 Semantics

Semantics is the branch of linguistics which is concerned with meaning. To demonstrate in what ways morphology is dependent on semantics, let us again compare the internal structure of the words *waitthood* and *cat*.

The reason why the occurrence of *wait* in sentences like *I cannot wait any longer* and that of *-hood* in nouns like *adulthood*, *boyhood*, *parenthood*, etc. can be considered morphologically relevant is that the overall meaning 'waitthood' is closely connected to the meanings 'to wait' and 'stage', which the components *wait* and *-hood* express in other environments: e.g. while *adulthood* can be defined as the stage in our lives that involves being an adult (or, alternatively, the state of being an adult), *waitthood* can be defined as a stage in the life of a college graduate that involves waiting. This fact is the main justification for the formal segmentation of *waitthood* into the components *wait* and *-hood*.

In contrast, there is no similar justification for the segmentation of *cat* into /k/ and /æt/, or /kæ/ and /t/, or /k/ and /æ/ and /t/. In neither *cat* nor words like *cable*, *at*, *cap*, *mat*, etc., where these sounds occur as well, do they express discernible meanings of their own. Thus the meaning 'cat' does not seem to be a complex meaning segmentable into at least two independent meanings – e.g. the meanings 'animal' and 'characteristic features of cats distinguishing them from other animals' – which one could attribute to the putative components /k/ and /æt/ or /kæ/ and /t/. What justifies this claim is that other words containing these sounds (or sequences of these sounds) do not express related meanings. For example, neither the meaning of *cable*, which contains the sound [k], nor the meaning of *at*, which contains the sound sequence [æt], seem to have anything

in common with the meaning 'cat'. The same is true of the word *cap*, which contains the sound sequence [kæ], and the word *mat*, which contains the sound [t]: neither the former nor the latter are semantically related to *cat*.

In summary, a morphological analysis of the internal structure of a word depends on the semantic analysis of the meaning of that word. Accordingly, a morphologist analyzing the internal structure of some word must have a very clear idea of what that word means. But what precisely is meant by *the meaning of a word*? What does it mean *to mean something*? How do we know that e.g. the word *waitthood* means 'a particular stage in the life of a college graduate that involves waiting'?

In semantics meaning is usually defined as the **concept** associated with a particular sound form. A concept is a mental description activated by that sound form. For instance, those speakers of English who are familiar with the word *waitthood* have the concept WAITTHOOD stored in their **mental lexica**. That is, as soon as they hear the sound form /'weɪθhʊd/, their minds 'picture' a college graduate who postpones marrying until he or she finds a good job or saves enough money.

The mental lexicon is often described as a kind of dictionary (which we have in our brains) consisting of multiple sound form–concept correspondences like the one exemplified by *waitthood*. That is, the mental lexicon of the average speaker of English contains the correspondences between e.g. the sound form /kæt/ and the concept CAT (i.e. a description of an animal called *cat*) associated with it; the sound form /'ti:tʃə(r)/ and the concept TEACHER (a description of a person who teaches); the sound form /dɪ'mɒkrəsi/ and the concept DEMOCRACY (a description of a democratic political system); etc.

The key task of semantics is thus the description of the concept constituting the meaning of a particular linguistic expression. For this purpose, a semanticist can resort to two strategies. One is the identification of so-called **necessary and sufficient conditions**. These are the 'minimum requirements' whose fulfillment suffices to qualify as a member of a particular **conceptual category**. For example, it is often argued that the minimum requirement that is fulfilled by all representatives of the conceptual category MOTHER is that of being a female parent: any entity who is both female and a parent can be referred to as someone's mother. Accordingly, the features [female] and [parent] can be said to constitute the meaning of the word *mother*.

An alternative to this is the **prototype approach**. Its essence is the identification of characteristics applying to the best representative of a given conceptual category, its **prototype**. A prototypical mother, for instance, is a person

who is and always has been female, and who gave birth to the child, supplied her half of the child's genes, nurtured the child, is married to