

## Chapter 2

# Morphology: Words and Their Parts

**Abstract** This chapter is divided into two sections. Section 2.1 focuses on word classes and includes a brief introduction to some of the basic parts of speech to aid in understanding the next section. Section 2.2 focuses on morphology, the structure and form of words.

**Keywords** form class • structure class • inflectional morpheme • derivational morpheme • open class • closed class

### 2.1 Section 1: Word Classes

For many people, words are the center of language. This comes as no surprise if we consider that the most obvious, concrete, and recognizable parts of any language are its words or its *lexicon*. In any given language, there are tens of thousands of words, although most speakers will know and use only a relatively small number of them.

A primary concern of grammarians is the classification of words into groups or categories. Traditional English grammar, based on Latin, adopted terminology and classification systems that often do not reflect the actual grammar of English. Nevertheless, in order to discuss the different elements and structures of English, we need to employ some sort of terminology, so we continue to use the traditional labels and classification systems, which remain useful because they provide a common way to discuss words and structures. For example, you have probably learned that different words are classified into *parts of speech* and many grammar texts still use this classification.

Other grammar texts prefer to think of parts of speech in terms of *form* and *structure* classes. The **form** classes are composed of the major parts of speech: nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. These are the words that carry the content or meaning of a sentence. The **structure** classes are composed of the minor parts of

speech: prepositions, pronouns, determiners, conjunctions, quantifiers, and other subsets. These structure words generally accompany specific form classes. Determiners, or articles, such as *the* or *a/an*, typically occur before a noun, such as *dog*, *bed*, and *pen*.

Try Discovery Activity 1 to see how much you know about the different word classes (or parts of speech), even if you are not always sure of the labels.

**Discovery Activity 1: Introduction to Parts of Speech (Word Classes)**

1. Look at the following words:

system	in	big	communicate	between	confidentiality	relevant	rebellion
obey	under	shatter	blizzard	warn	happy	beside	weary

Create four columns. Label these columns **Group A**, **Group B**, **Group C**, and **Group D**.

2. Without using a dictionary or other reference tool, try to place the words that you think belong together in the different columns. The first four words have already been done for you as an example.

Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D
system	in	big	communicate

3. After you have categorized as many words together as you can, explain why you grouped them as you did.

4. Now make two new columns, **Group A** and **Group B**. Using the new list of words below, try to place the different words that you think belong together. As you group this new list of words, consider whether any of the words can belong to more than one group. Try to explain why or why not.

harm	remind	cancer	cup	scream	date
struggle	queen	poison	announce	style	write

**Discussion: Discovery Activity 1**

Your grouping of the words in the first list probably looks like this:

Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D
system	in	big	communicate
confidentiality	between	relevant	obey
rebellion	under	weary	shatter
blizzard	beside	happy	warn

Each of these four groups represents a word class. Even without knowing the labels for each group, you should have been able to place the words in the list together with other words performing the same function. Group A consists of *nouns*; Group B consists of *prepositions*; Group C consists of *adjectives*; and Group D consists of *verbs*.

Your grouping of the words in the second list should look like this:

Group A	Group B
harm	harm
	remind
cancer	
cup	cup
scream	scream
date	date
struggle	struggle
queen	
poison	poison
	announce
style	style
	write

Groups A and B again represent different word classes. Group A represents words that are nouns, and Group B represents words that are verbs. Some of the words fit into both groups; *harm* can be either a verb or a noun. You can *harm* (verb) someone, or you can suffer *harm* (noun).

While you may recognize that a word can fit into more than one group, you may not be able to do so without thinking of a sentence or *context* for that particular word. In English, the group or class to which a word belongs is not always obvious without context, as you probably realized when doing Discovery Activity 1. The *form* of a word in English does not necessarily determine its *function*.

Unlike many other languages, English does not always rely on word endings or word forms to determine word class. As we saw in Chap. 1, words need to occur in a certain order to be grammatical. Because word order is highly fixed, context and sentence position are key to clarifying the function of a word or phrase.

### 2.1.1 Context and Function

#### *How are the sentence position of a word and its function related?*

As the *Jabberwocky* activities and discussion in Chap. 1 illustrated, the *sentence position* of some of the nonsense words told you their function. The *context* helped you guess what word class some words belonged to.

The following sentences illustrate the importance of context in assigning function and/or class. In both sentences, you can see that the same word in different contexts has a different function:

She made a *wish* on a star.

They *wish* to learn more about effective research practices.

In the first sentence, *wish* is a noun, while in the second sentence, *wish* is a verb. In subsequent chapters we will be analyzing the clues that help us decide which function words have in different contexts.

#### 2.1.1.1 Word Plays and Context: An Additional Illustration

Newspaper headlines are famous for using short, catchy phrases with words that have different meanings depending on context. A reader's attention is caught by the headlines, which often play on the different meanings of words that have the same form. The actual meanings may only become clear after reading the articles themselves as you will see in Discovery Activity 2. The discussion of this activity is in the Answer Key at the end of the chapter.

#### **Discovery Activity 2: News Headlines**

Look at these newspaper headlines.

1. Underline the words you find ambiguous, that is, words that have more than one meaning.
2. Explain what these different meanings are.
  - (a) Students Cook and Serve Grandparents
  - (b) Kidnapped Child Found by Tree
  - (c) British Left Waffles on Gibraltar
  - (d) EMT Helps Raccoon Bite Victim
  - (e) Truck Carrying Fruit Crashes, Creates Jam

*Tell me again why I need to focus on context with my ESL/EFL learners? Shouldn't I just focus on their mastering a form and then worry about context?*

Teachers need to be aware of what learners need to know about a language and why they need to know it. Reflect again on our discussion in Chap. 1 of native speakers'

innate knowledge of grammar and Discovery Activity 1 of this chapter. Context lets native and near-native speakers “know” the function of a word without necessarily knowing *how* they know it or without knowing the labels for what they know. ESL/EFL learners, on the other hand, don’t have this type of knowledge because they are *learners* of English.

As Discovery Activity 2 highlighted, context is critical in determining meaning. Whether *left* refers to the past tense of *leave* or to the term describing political persuasion becomes clear only in the reading of the text. Words without context can be difficult to understand. Similarly, grammar taught without context has little meaning for ESL/EFL learners. Isolated grammar rules with isolated sentences may be necessary at very low levels of English proficiency to introduce learners to a particular form. However, ESL/EFL learners need to use forms and structures in meaningful and relevant contexts to truly learn the language.

Discovery Activity 3 highlights again the importance of context in understanding meaning and function.

### Discovery Activity 3: Context

Look at the following groups of sentences.

#### Group 1

- (a) I *practice* my *talk* every morning.
- (b) I *talk* every morning before the *practice*.

#### Group 2

- (c) I *present* many speeches.
- (d) I gave her a nice *present*.
- (e) The students are all *present*.

1. How does the context alter the function and meaning of the words in each group?
2. Consider how in English form is not equal to function:
  - In Group 1, are *practice* and *talk* the same in (a) and (b)?
  - What differences and similarities are there between *practice* and *talk*? Do they have the same function?
  - Do they have the same form? Can you explain why or why not?
3. In Group 2, *present* has the same form, but does not have the same function in the three sentences.
  - Explain the use of *present* in the three sentences.
  - Does *present* have the same form in the three sentences? Can you explain why or why not?

### Discussion: Discovery Activity 3

The purpose of this activity is to highlight the importance of context in understanding the meanings and functions of individual words. Words that look the same can have different meanings and functions depending upon where they occur in a sentence.

<i>Group 1</i>	
(a) practice	action word (verb) referring to what <i>I</i> (the subject) is doing
talk	a “thing” (noun)
(b) talk	action word (verb) referring to what <i>I</i> (the subject) is doing
practice	a “thing” (noun)
<i>Group 2</i>	
(c) present	action word (verb) referring to what <i>I</i> (the subject) is doing
(d) present	a “thing” (noun)
(e) present	describing something (adjective) about <i>the students</i>

ESL/EFL learners need to be aware that in spoken English, *present* is pronounced differently depending whether or not it is an action word (verb). In Sentence c, where *present* is used as a verb, it is accented on the second syllable and pronounced with a/z/sound: pre zent'. In Sentences d and e, *present* is used as a noun and an adjective, and is accented on the first syllable and pronounced with an/s/sound: pre' sent

The next part of the chapter will introduce the parts of speech or word classes. Different chapters will explore these word classes in greater depth.

### 2.1.2 Parts of Speech or Lexical Categories

As mentioned earlier, English words fall into two main categories: (1) *form* class words or major word classes, and (2) *structure* class words, or minor word classes.

The **major** category is the larger of the two categories. This category consists of the word classes commonly labeled nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs (although not all linguists agree that adverbs belong in the major category). These major word classes are made up of the words that carry the content or essential meaning of a sentence. They are often referred to as *content* or *form* words.

The **minor** category includes the classes generally known as prepositions, pronouns, conjunctions, and determiners. These words serve primarily to indicate grammatical relationships and are frequently referred to as *structure* words. Although there are fewer words in the minor classes, these words are more difficult for ESL/EFL students to master.

Take a look at the following sentence:

*Victoria ate a banana at the table.*

This sentence consists of seven words: four content words and three structure words. If you saw only *Victoria*, *ate*, *banana*, *table* in that order, you could probably make an accurate guess as to the sentence's general meaning because these four content words are crucial for conveying meaning.

The three structure words, *a*, *at*, and *the*, show the grammatical relationships of the content words:

- *a* before *banana* tells us Victoria ate one thing.
- *at* tells us where Victoria ate the banana.
- *the* specifies the thing, namely a specific table.

Content words, such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, are words that carry lexical or content meaning. These major class words are also referred to as *open* word classes. Structure words, such as prepositions, pronouns, conjunctions, and determiners, are words that show grammatical relationships within sentences. These minor class words are referred to as *closed* word classes. We will now examine why this is so.

### 2.1.2.1 Open Word Classes

Speakers are endlessly creating new English words, especially nouns and verbs, but also adjectives and adverbs. Therefore, the major word or form classes are called *open word classes* because new words enter the language constantly.

#### ***How do new words enter the English language?***

Often new words enter via informal language (slang or jargon) and, with increased use, become accepted into Standard American English as illustrated in this sentence:

The girls *dissed* Ashley during lunch.

The verb *dis* (or *diss*), meaning to make fun of, show disrespect to, or disobey, is used primarily in informal speech. It is a shortened form of *disrespect* and has come into Standard American English from African-American English via rap music.

Technology and social media are especially rich sources of new words. Nouns such as *mouse*, *surf*, *e-mail*, and *blogs* are early examples of words that have taken on new meanings or been invented in relation to the computer. Newer words include verbs such as *snapchat*, *navigate*, *unplug*, *tweet*, and *go viral*, and nouns such as *cyberstalking*, *down time*, *cookies*, and *multitasking*.

Discovery Activity 4 explores how many words you recognize that have entered English in the last 50 years or so. The discussion for this activity and the remaining Discover Activities are in the Answer Key at the end of the chapter.

### Discovery Activity 4: To Word Is Human

Look at the list below of words.

1. How many of these words do you recognize?
2. For those words you recognize, explain where you have seen and/or heard them.
3. How comfortable do you feel using each word? Explain.
  - (a) bromance
  - (b) spam
  - (c) icon
  - (d) locavore
  - (e) to google/to Google
  - (f) televangelist
  - (g) go postal
  - (h) microwave

Something you may have noticed in doing this activity is that there are several words that you may not recognize as being “new.” This is a common occurrence when words become part of everyday vocabulary. The activity also illustrates the creativity of speakers in developing new words and in giving existing words new meaning in response to change.

We now turn to look at the second category of words, *closed word classes*.

#### 2.1.2.2 Closed Word Classes

*Closed word classes* consist of the minor or structure words. They are among the most common and frequently used English words. These classes are considered “closed” for several reasons. First, they consist of small numbers of words that change very little over long periods of time and that have been in the English language for centuries. They include:

- prepositions (e.g., *in, on, at, of, from*)
- determiners (e.g., *a, an, the, this, that, these, those*)
- coordinators (e.g., *and, but, or*)
- pronouns (e.g., *it, his, you, them, mine, herself*)<sup>1</sup>

Second, words in the closed classes are fixed and invariant, meaning that they do not have other forms. There is only one form for the preposition *in*. In contrast, open class words can have different forms because they can take different endings. The noun, *dog*, for instance, can take the plural and possessive endings (*dogs* or

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<sup>1</sup>See Appendix D for more information about structure words.

*dog's*); the verb *walk* can take three different endings (*walked*, *walks*, *walking*); and the adjective *tall* can take two different endings (*taller*, *tallest*).

Third, these words occur only in a narrow range of possible positions within a sentence, and they must always accompany content words. There is no flexibility in word order. *The* must always precede a noun. It cannot follow a noun. We cannot say *dog the* but must say *the dog*.

Finally, closed word classes have little lexical or semantic function. The job of these words is to show the relationships between the different parts of sentences.

***What does it mean to say “to show the relationships between the different parts of sentences”?***

If we say, for example, *I went **to** the store*, this sentence has a different meaning than if we say, *I went **by** the store*. The only difference between the two sentences is the change of prepositions from *to* to *by*, but it is these words (prepositions) that indicate a difference in the relationship between *I went* and *the store*.

Because English depends on word order to show grammatical relationships, these structure words are essential sentence elements. Discovery Activity 5 further illustrates how prepositions function to signal grammatical relationships.

### **Discovery Activity 5: Prepositions and Grammatical Relationships**

The following pairs of headlines have different meanings.

- Explain how the inclusion or omission of a preposition changes the meaning of each pair of sentences.
- Consider what this tells us about prepositions and grammatical relationships.

*Political Headlines:*

- 1(a) Iraqi Head Seeks Arms
- 1(b) Head of Iraq Seeks Arms

*Agriculture Headlines:*

- 2(a) Angry Bull Injures Farmer with Axe
- 2(b) Angry Bull Injures Farmer Axe

*Headline News:*

- 3(a) Man Struck by Speeding Car
- 3(b) Man Struck Speeding Car

*Local News:*

- 4(a) Police Help Fire Chief
- 4(b) Police Help to Fire Chief

As you see in Discovery Activity 5, the inclusion or omission of a preposition in the headlines alters the meaning. The activity illustrates the importance of the role of structure words in establishing grammatical relationships. This role grows even more important as the complexity of a sentence increases.

We continue with a look at the traditional parts of speech that make up the major word category.

2.1.3 Major Parts of Speech

The next section is a brief overview of the major parts of speech comprising the major word category and provides the basis for our discussion on morphology.

2.1.3.1 Nouns

The traditional or standard definition of a noun is a word that refers to *a person, place, or thing*. On the surface, this definition has merit. We can easily come up with words that fit this definition of a noun:

Person	Place	Thing
girl	city	car
teacher	school	lesson
pilot	airport	wheel
doctor	hospital	bed
swimmer	beach	towel

If we expand *thing* to include two subcategories, tangible (concrete) and intangible (abstract) things, the list expands quickly:

Tangible	Intangible
bus	philosophy
wood	adolescence
water	justice
horse	suggestion
medicine	anger

We can also differentiate another subcategory, proper nouns. Proper nouns name a specific person, place, or thing and are typically written with a capital letter:

Person	Place	Thing
Dr. Smith	Chicago	Pacific Ocean
Jane	Afghanistan	Mt. Everest
Professor Jones	Europe	Lake Tahoe
President Lincoln	Florida	Erie Canal
Ms. Peters	Everglades	The Sphinx
Spaniard	Pyrenees	Spain

The basic definition of nouns works well up to a certain point and provides a starting point in determining which words are nouns. As we will see in Chap. 3, it will be necessary to revise this definition to account for nouns that do not fit neatly into this definition.

### 2.1.3.2 Adjectives

Adjectives are usually characterized as descriptive or modifying words because of their function in a sentence. Words such as *beautiful*, *hard*, *happy*, and *tall* come readily to mind. These are content words that function to create descriptive images or add color and flavor to a sentence. Multiple adjectives can be found in a sentence such as:

He had never seen such a *harsh*, *boring*, yet *beautiful* and *magical* landscape.

The adjectives *harsh*, *boring*, *beautiful*, and *magical* all describe the noun *landscape*. The author has chosen to use pairs of opposing adjectives to fix the contradiction of the landscape in the reader's mind.

Other types of adjectives and words that can function as adjectives will be examined more closely in Chap. 4.

### 2.1.3.3 Verbs

The first association many people make with the term “verb” is that of action, as in *run*, *drive*, *listen*, or *identify*. Verbs also refer to the state of something, as in *be* (*am*, *is*, *are*) or *feel*. English verbs can also indicate time: *We eat sandwiches* and *We ate sandwiches* refer to different times.

A sentence must always contain a verb. A verb and a noun are enough to form a complete sentence:

I run. They walk. We listen.

A sentence can be long and complex, and yet still contain only one verb:

Despite the long, hot, sultry day, the boys *wore* long heavy shirts, denim pants, thick cotton socks, and work boots.

As we saw in Discovery Activity 1, English verbs and nouns may have identical forms. This can make it difficult for ESL/EFL learners to identify the verb or verbs, especially in more complex sentences. Context and structural clues help determine whether the verb or noun form is being used. The forms, functions, and structural characteristics of verbs will be examined in Chaps. 5 and 6.

2.1.3.4 Adverbs

The common definition of an adverb is a word that describes or modifies a verb, an adjective, or another adverb. Yet, as we will see in Chap. 4, adverbs are difficult to characterize because the label *adverb* refers to many different kinds of words that perform a variety of functions. Essentially, adverbs can modify anything in a sentence. Adverbs are generally grouped into subcategories, according to their function as in the following table:

Manner	Frequency	Time and Place
quickly	often	now
happily	always	here
silently	sometimes	later

There are other words and subgroups of adverbs. Unlike the other parts of speech we have looked at, there is not complete agreement as to which words should be classified as adverbs or placed in separate subclasses. In addition, the distinction between adjectives and adverbs is not always clear. Some adjectives end in *-ly*, the common adverb suffix (e.g., *deadly*, *lonely*, *kindly*), while some adjectives and adverbs have the same form (e.g., *early*, *fast*, *far*). Compare, for instance:

Adverb	Adjective
Judy walks <i>fast</i> .	Judy is a <i>fast</i> walker.
Jason rises <i>early</i> .	Jason is an <i>early</i> riser.

Chapter 4 discusses adverbs and adjective in greater depth, but at this point we end our overview of the major word categories and turn to morphology, the structure and form of words.

2.2 Section 2: Morphology

In this section we examine the parts that make up the words of English. The smallest unit of meaning is called a *morpheme*. A morpheme can be a single word or other independently meaningful units, such as the *–s* ending to form an English plural.

Many words that users think of as being a single word are actually composed of several parts. For example, consider the word *book*. There is no smaller form of this word; in other words, this word *book* cannot be broken into any other units. It is a single morpheme. Now consider these words:

bookworm	bookish	books
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Most speakers will easily recognize *bookworm* as one word (a compound word) composed of *book* + *worm*. The other two words may be more difficult to recognize as consisting of two parts or two morphemes.

*Bookish* can be broken down into *book* + *ish*, and *books* into *book* + *s*. Most speakers would probably not consider *–ish* and *–s* meaningful units. Although *–ish* and *–s* are not “words,” they are independently meaningful units, or morphemes. They change the meaning and sometimes the class of a word. *Bookworm* has a meaning different from either of its parts. The addition of the morpheme *–ish* to *book* changes it from a noun to an adjective that describes a person as in *She’s a bookish person*.

Likewise, *books* can be broken down into two morphemes, *book* + *s*. Adding *–s* to certain words (nouns) indicates that there is more than one, as in *books*, *computers*, *days*, *shoes*, *pens*, and *geraniums*. This plural *–s* can also be added to *bookworm* to form *bookworms*. *Bookworms* now consists of three morphemes: *book* + *worm* + *s*. In all of these examples, *–s* is a morpheme that gives meaningful information, that is, plurality.

It is easy to confuse the concept of morpheme with the concept of syllable. *Bookworm* has two syllables and two morphemes. *Complimentary* has four syllables but only two morphemes: *compliment* + *–ary*. The next Discovery Activity will help you in distinguishing morphemes.

### Discovery Activity 6: Decoding Morphemes

Look at the following words.

1. Break the words down into the smallest possible meaningful units, or morphemes.

blizzard  
entertainment  
teachers  
often  
sincerely  
truthful  
activity  
activities

2. When you have finished, think about whether or not it was easy to find the smallest possible meaningful units. Remember not to confuse syllable with morpheme.
3. When you have finished, check your answers in a dictionary.

As you may have noticed, some of these morphemes can stand alone; that is, they don't need to be attached to a word. Examples include *book*, *worm*, and *blizzard*. Other morphemes cannot stand alone but need to be attached to a word, such as *-ish*, *-s*, and *-ly*. This is the difference between *bound* and *free morphemes*.

***What are bound and free morphemes?***

### 2.2.1 Bound and Free Morphemes

We call words such as *blizzard*, *never*, *amaze*, or *grace* **free morphemes** because they are meaningful units that do not need to be attached to another morpheme to have meaning.

Endings such as *-ful*, *-ment*, *-ly*, *-er*, or *-s* need to be attached or “bound” to other meaningful units. Since they cannot occur alone and function only as parts of words, they are called **bound morphemes**. Frequently several morphemes, both bound and free, occur in the same word:

undeniable	un + deny + able
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*Undeniable* consists of two bound morphemes *-un* and *-able* and the free morpheme *deny*. (The *y* changes to *i* in accordance with English spelling rules.) Here is another example:

backpacks	back + pack + s
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*Backpacks* is a compound word consisting of two free morphemes *back* and *pack* and the bound morpheme *–s*.

There are many compound words or words consisting of two free morphemes in English. Usually the *–s* bound morpheme can be attached to these words.

Compound Word	+ –s
firehouse	firehouses
workshop	workshops
schoolbook	schoolbooks
lifestyle	lifestyles

*Are suffixes and prefixes morphemes?*

We see that *–able* attaches at the end of *deny* and *un–* attaches to the front of *deny*. As a group, these morphemes are called **affixes**, and they are always bound. We distinguish what kind of affixes they are by where they occur. If they come before another morpheme, they are called **prefixes** (e.g., *–un*). If they come after, they are called **suffixes** (e.g. *–able*). There are many affixes in English, and extensive lists can be found on the Internet. Some common affixes are:

Prefix		Suffix	
dis–	disappear disclaimer disregard	–less	groundless fearless thoughtless
inter–	interdependent international interchange	–ness	kindness happiness blindness
re–	reappear rewrite reuse	–ment	announcement judgment excitement

*Are there different types of bound morphemes?*

**2.2.2    Derivational and Inflectional Morphemes**

Bound morphemes can be divided into two groups: **derivational** morphemes and **inflectional** morphemes. Derivational morphemes are lexical morphemes. They change the meaning of a word and/or change the class of a word. The *–un* in *undeniable* changes the meaning of the word, and the *–al* in *renewal* changes *renew*, a verb, to an adjective.

Inflectional morphemes, on the other hand, are grammatical morphemes. They provide grammatical information about a word. Adding *-s* to *chair* in English changes the word from a singular noun to a plural noun, *chairs*. Inflectional morphemes do not change the class to which a word belongs, nor do they change the meaning of a word.

### 2.2.2.1 Derivational Morphemes

Derivational morphemes have to do with the vocabulary of the language. They can come at the beginning (prefix) or at the end (suffix) of a word, and more than one derivational morpheme can be added to a word as shown here with *disagreement*:

disagreement:	<b>dis</b> + agree + <b>ment</b>
<i>dis-</i>	prefix meaning opposite
<i>-ment</i>	suffix that changes the word class to a noun and that refers to an action, process, or means

The addition of a **derivational** *suffix* often, but not always, changes the word class:

Noun →	Adjective	Verb →	Noun
child	childish	realize	realization
face	faceless	establish	establishment
trend	trendy	conform	conformity

Sometimes a **derivational** *suffix* will only change the meaning of a word but not the word class:

Adjective	Adjective With Different Meaning	Noun	Noun With Different Meaning
economic	economical	fellow	fellowship
politic	political	progress	progression

**Derivational** *prefixes* only change the meaning of a word, never the word class:

Adjective	Adjective With Different Meaning	Verb	Verb With Different Meaning
forgettable	unforgettable	appear	disappear
essential	nonessential	finish	refinish

It is not always easy to divide words into morphemes because some of them are not recognizable today as individual parts of words. Many of these morphemes

have their origins in Greek, Latin, or Old French word forms that are unfamiliar to most people. The English word *correlation*, for instance, consists of the morphemes *cor* + *re* + *lation*. The morpheme *cor* is a derivative of *com*, meaning “together,” *re* meaning “back or again,” and *relation*, meaning “report or connection.”

Breaking down words to such a degree is not important for ESL/EFL learners. The most important point in teaching derivational morphology is to help learners to recognize the more common affixes and their functions. Learning the meanings of derivational morphemes can be a powerful tool for developing one’s vocabulary and is more productive than trying to memorize long lists of vocabulary words. Knowing, for instance, that the suffix *-tion* usually tells us that the word is a noun can be helpful in deciphering new words with this suffix.

2.2.2.2 Inflectional Morphemes

Inflectional morphemes, in contrast to derivational morphemes, are a small closed set of eight grammatical morphemes. These eight morphemes serve to indicate a grammatical feature of major category words, such plural or tense, and can only occur as suffixes. Inflectional morphemes change the form of a word only. They do not change either word class or the lexical meaning of a word:

cat → cats  
walk → walked

The addition of *-s* to the noun *cats* indicates that more than one cat is being referred to. The *-ed* at the end of *walk* indicates a past action. The following chart lists the eight English inflectional morphemes.

The Eight English Inflectional Morphemes			
Morpheme	Grammatical Function	Attaches to	Examples
-s	plural	noun	desks, chairs, pens
-’s	possessive	noun	the cat’s tail, the girl’s bike
-s	3rd person singular	verb	She drives. He talks. It meows.
-ed	regular past tense	verb	They danced. She laughed.
-ed	regular past participle	verb	She has danced. They had danced.
-ing	present participle	verb	She is dancing. She was dancing.
-er	comparative	adjective/adverb	taller, faster
-est	superlative	adjective/adverb	tallest, fastest

*Do ESL/EFL learners have trouble with these—inflectional endings?*

Although English has relatively few inflectional morphemes, some of the most frequent learner errors are in the correct use of these inflections. These include omitting the present tense 3rd person singular *-s* or the past tense *-ed* to produce sentences such as:

- \*She *like* Florida.<sup>2</sup>
- \*We *walk* home late yesterday.

For ESL/EFL learners, the inflectional morphemes generally require some explicit language instruction. For one, learners may not “hear” these morphemes because they are unstressed in spoken English. For example, the past tense *-ed* of the verbs in the following paragraph is barely pronounced in natural speech:

When Margaret *arrived* at work, she noticed that her left tire was low. She called a mechanic who *discovered* a nail in the tire. He *pulled* the nail out and *patched* the hole.

Another reason learners may have difficulties with the inflectional morphemes is that there may not be anything comparable in their language. English requires multiple ways to convey identical information, that is, redundancy. In a sentence such as *Amy called her sister last week*, we see an example of this. Even though *last week* indicates that the event occurred in the past, English still requires the *-ed* inflectional morpheme on *call*. In other languages, such as Chinese, *last week* by itself suffices to indicate the time reference. In the sentence *Many teachers came in late*, we see another example of redundancy. *Many* indicates that “teacher” is plural, but English also requires the plural *-s* inflectional morpheme. Again, learners who speak languages where such redundancy is not required are likely to forget to use the *-s*.

2.3 Summary

Word classes are grouped into two categories, closed and open:

Closed Word Classes (Prepositions, Determiners, Coordinators, Pronouns)	Open Word Classes (Nouns, Verbs, Adjectives, Adverbs)
• structure or grammatical words	• content words
• provide information as to the grammar or organization of a sentence	• have grammatical function (e.g., subject of a sentence)
• have little or no lexical (content) meaning; new words are rarely added	• convey important lexical (content) meaning
• the number of words is relatively fixed	• new words are constantly being added and/or formed following the grammatical constraints of English

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<sup>2</sup>Reminder: An asterisk (\*) before a sentence indicates an ungrammatical sentence.

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Closed Word Classes (Prepositions, Determiners, Coordinators, Pronouns)	Open Word Classes (Nouns, Verbs, Adjectives, Adverbs)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>do not take inflectional or derivational morphemes</li><li>do not share any formal features such as specific derivational endings that make them identifiable as members of particular word classes. There is nothing, for example, about the form of the words <i>a</i>, <i>an</i>, or <i>the</i> to identify them as articles, nor about the form of the words <i>by</i>, <i>without</i>, <i>from</i>, or <i>on</i> to identify them as prepositions</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>can take inflectional or derivational morphemes</li><li>often take derivational forms that make them identifiable as members of a particular word class. For example, words ending in <i>-ment</i> are nouns as in <i>basement</i>, <i>replacement</i>, <i>advancement</i>, and <i>management</i>.</li></ul>

Morphemes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>are the simplest meaningful unit of a word, not to be confused with a syllable</li><li>cannot be divided into smaller units (e.g., <i>work</i>, <i>for</i>, 's)</li><li>can be free (e.g., <i>blizzard</i>, <i>elephant</i>, <i>board</i>) or bound (e.g., <i>-ly</i>, <i>re-</i>, <i>-ing</i>, <i>-est</i>)</li></ul>

Bound morphemes can only attach to major word classes. We distinguish between two types of bound morpheme, derivational and inflectional:

Derivational Morphemes	Inflectional Morphemes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>are both prefixes and suffixes</li><li>can change the word class to another (e.g., the addition of the suffix <i>-able</i> changes a noun to an adjective as in: <i>reason</i> → <i>reasonable</i>; <i>measure</i> → <i>measurable</i>)</li><li>can change the lexical meaning without changing the word class (e.g., the addition of the prefix <i>un-</i> changes the meaning to “opposite” as in: <i>conscious</i> vs. <i>unconscious</i>)</li><li>more than one can be found in a word (e.g., <i>unworkable</i> → <i>un</i> + <i>work</i> + <i>able</i>)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>are only suffixes</li><li>do not change the word class or lexical meaning of a word but provide grammatical information (e.g., plural of nouns, possessive of nouns, tense and aspect of verbs, comparison and contrast of adjectives and adverbs)</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>number in the hundreds</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>only one inflectional morpheme can be added, except the possessive <i>s</i> after a plural noun. This second <i>s</i> is only obvious in written English (e.g., <i>The boys' dog</i> = One dog belonging to more than one boy).</li><li>consist of eight</li></ul>

## 2.4 Practice Activities

### Activity 1: Identifying the Major Word Classes

1. Identify the major word classes in the following paragraph. Write **N** for noun, **V** for verb, **Adj** for adjective, and **Adv** for adverb.

*Example:*

	<b>N</b>	<b>V</b>	<b>Adv</b>
The	boy	rode	quickly.

2. Think about which word classes occur most frequently. Do you think this is typical? Explain.

During the respectful, appreciative buzz of voices that followed the speech, General Montero raised a pair of heavy, drooping eyelids and rolled his eyes with a sort of uneasy dullness from face to face. The military backwoods hero of the party, though secretly impressed by the sudden novelties and splendors of his position... [Conrad, J. (1994). *Nostramo*. (p. 109) London: Penguin Books.]

### Follow-up

Find another paragraph in a book, magazine, or newspaper. Identify the major parts of speech in the paragraph you selected.

- Do your findings support or not support your response to #2? Explain why, if you can.

### Activity 2: Derivational Morphemes

1. Look at the words in the list below.
2. Identify the derivational morphemes.
3. Explain which derivational morphemes you found that identify word class.
4. Discuss the meaning of each derivational morpheme you identified.
  - Limit your examination to common derivational morphemes. Do not look at obscure and/or forgotten roots.
  - Keep in mind that you are looking for derivational morphemes that help learners decode meaning and function.

*Example:*

partnership: partner + ship

The suffix *-ship* is only used with nouns. *-ship* refers to position or skill as in *professorship* or *penmanship*.

- (a) regardless
- (b) unhappy
- (c) biology
- (d) brutalize

- (e) journalist
- (f) terrible
- (g) positive

### **Activity 3: Inflectional Morphemes**

1. Identify the inflectional morphemes in the excerpts below.
2. Explain the function of each one.

#### **A.**

The Nile River Cruise Lines promises that its guests will have a unique experience. Each cruise includes experts onboard to discuss local sights and history. The company owns the largest fleet of ships with bigger cabins than available on most others. Nile River Cruise received two prestigious awards last year for food and service, and is striving to be number one in the industry.

#### **B.**

He established that the caves had served as a kind of boat storage depot... about 4,600 years ago... Tallet realized that he was dealing with the oldest known papyri in the world... We are standing in an encampment in a desert valley... Tallet leads us up the hillside and clambers on a rocky trail. [Stille, A. (October 2015). The power and the glory. *Smithsonian*. Retrieved from: <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/ancient-egypt-shipping-mining-farming-economy-pyramids-180956619/>]

### **Activity 4: More Decoding of Morphemes**

It is not always easy to distinguish morphemes, especially bound morphemes. Try this activity if you would like more practice in distinguishing morphemes. There are both derivational and inflectional morphemes here.

1. Identify the different morphemes that make up each word.
2. Label the different morphemes as **B** for bound and **F** for free.

*Example:*

breakwaters	break = F	water = F	s = B
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- (a) neighborhood
- (b) fashionable
- (c) forecasters
- (d) aorta
- (e) bartended
- (f) usually
- (g) renewing
- (h) inaccessibility

2.5 Answer Key

Discussion: Discovery Activity 2

In order to see the double meanings implied by the headlines, consider these questions:

- (a) Are the grandparents the food?
  - We hope not. To avoid such an interpretation—even if just for a moment, it would be better to add “... and serve *to* Grandparents.”
- (b) Can a tree find a child, or is the reference to the place where the child was found?
  - Since it is unlikely that a tree can find a child, you may want to choose to rewrite the headline as: Kidnapped Child Found *Sitting* by Tree.
- (c) Did the British leave an edible food item or are the leftists indecisive?
  - Here the writer is probably referring to the verb form of *waffles*. To convey the verb form meaning, you could rewrite the headline along these lines: British Left Waffles on Gibraltar *Decision*, or British Left Waffles on *Decision* About Gibraltar.
- (d) Did EMT personnel help the raccoon or the victim?
  - Similar to Headline b, it is unlikely that the medical personnel helped a raccoon bite its victim. You might like to rewrite the headline this way: EMT Helps Victim *Bitten* by Raccoon or Raccoon Bite Victim *Helped* by EMT.
- (e) Is a truck crash likely to result in a tasty jam?
  - While a track crash will most likely create some sort of traffic jam, it is not likely to result in breakfast fruit preserves. The simple addition of *traffic* to the headline would avoid any ambiguity: Truck Carrying Fruit Crashes, Creates *Traffic* Jam

Discussion: Discovery Activity 4

bromance	a noun referring to an affectionate and very close non-sexual relationship between two straight men. It is a combination of “brother” and “romance.”
spam	Originally a proprietary name registered by Geo. A. Hormel & Co. in the late 1930s to refer to a canned meat product, the meaning expanded to include Internet junk mail in the 1990s. <i>Spam</i> also came to be used as a verb for sending the same message indiscriminately to large numbers of e-mail addresses.
icon	Now commonly used to refer a small symbol that represents a graphical interface on a computer, smartphone, or tablet screen, it was once primarily used for a religious devotional picture typically painted on wood.

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locavore	Persons committed to eating locally grown or produced food have taken to calling themselves <i>locavores</i> , a combination of <i>local</i> and the <i>vore</i> of <i>carnivore</i> and <i>herbivore</i> . The word started in the early 2000s with a push from people dedicated to promoting and eating locally sourced food.
to google/to Google	Developed in the 1990s, Google quickly became one of the largest and most popular search engines on the web. The name has become synonymous with searching on the web and, like <i>spam</i> , is an example of a proper noun (the name of something) becoming a verb. The initial letter is sometimes capitalized and sometimes not.
televangelist	A noun referring to a Christian minister who conducts religious ministry on television broadcasts. These broadcasts became popular starting in the early 1970s. The term is derived from <i>tel</i> + <i>evangelist</i> .
go postal	The phrase originated in in the 1990s when there were several instances of disgruntled United States postal workers shooting fellow employees. It has since taken on the meaning of becoming violent or going berserk, the latter itself a borrowed expression first entering Standard American English in the early 1800s.
microwave	Although the term first entered the language in the 1930s, it only came into common use in late 1960s and the early 1970s as microwaves became inexpensive and popular.

**Discussion: Discovery Activity 5***Political Headlines:*

- 1(a) One part of a body is in search of other body parts!  
 1(b) The political leader is trying to buy weapons.

*Agriculture Headlines:*

- 2(a) The farmer was in possession of an axe. (A quick reading could also lead one to read the headline as the bull having the Axe.)  
 2(b) The farmer's family name is "Axe."

*Headline News:*

- 3(a) The car hit the man.  
 3(b) The man hit the car.

*Local News:*

- 4(a) The police assist the fire chief.  
 4(b) The police aided in the dismissal of the fire chief from his job.

Grammar for Teachers

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