Studies in Linguistics and Literature
ISSN 2573-6434 (Print) ISSN 2573-6426 (Online)
Vol. 10, No. 4, 2026
www.scholink.org/ojs/index.php/sll

Original Paper

On Morphological Complexity in English Language

Zhang Zhiqin[1*]

[1] Foreign Languages Department of Taiyuan Normal University, Shanxi, China

[*] Zhang Zhiqin, Foreign Languages Department of Taiyuan Normal University, Shanxi, China

Received: October 20, 2026 Accepted: October 29, 2026 Online Published: November 8, 2026

doi:10.22158/sll.v10n4p60 URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sll.v10n4p60

Abstract

Morphology is the branch of linguistics that deals with words' internal structures and rules of word formation, primarily concerned with the forms of words through the use of morpheme construct. Morphological complexity in English language is manifest in its formation and word types. The paper introduces the classification of morphemes and word types and then gives a detailed list of word formation.

Keywords

morphology, complexity, morpheme, word formation

1. Introduction

Morphology is the branch of linguistics that deals with words' internal structures and rules of word formation. Morphology is primarily concerned with the forms of words through the use of morpheme construct, for instance, the verb "simplify" consists of two morphemes; "simpl(e)" and "ify", from which a rule is derived: a new form of verb can be formed by adding "-ify" to an adjective. In view of word-formation, the morpheme is the smallest functioning unit in the formation of words. Different categorized morphemes result in different word formations, in which morphological complexity is manifest. In addition, the constant change of words in English add to its morphological complexity. In the following sections, first the classification of morphemes is touched on, then the word types and changes are introduced respectively; in the fifth section, homonymy and polysemy and the ambiguity they cause are dealt with.

2. Classification of Morphemes

Morphemes vary in function, either lexical or grammatical. They fall into several general types. Here only two types are our focus: free versus bound, derivational versus inflectional. Their scopes are not clear-cut and there is some overlapping.

2.1 Free versus Bound Morphemes

A free morpheme is one that may constitute a word by itself, such as "*word*", "*desk*", "*jump*" and "*green*". In this sense, free morphemes are identical to words. A bound morpheme is one that may occur with at least one other morpheme, such as "-s" in "*words*", "*-ed*" in "*jumped*", "*-ful*" in "*colorful*", and the list goes on.

The English language consists of a large number of words made up merely of bound morphemes, e.g., *antecedent*, which can be broken down into *ante-*, *-ced-* and *-ent*. Among them, *-ced-* is a root meaning "approach", *ante-*, a prefix meaning "before" and *-ent*, a suffix meaning "a person, a thing", so the whole word means "something that goes before". As bound morphemes are used to make up the words, they play the role of affixes. They fall into two types: inflectional and derivational.

2.2 Inflectional versus Derivational Morphemes

Inflectional morphemes, also called inflectional affixes, are used to add to the stems to show grammatical relationships. There are not many left in modern English language. They include markers of number, case, person, finite, aspect and comparative and superlative degree. They do not change grammatical class of the stems to which they are attached. For example:

(a) number chair—chair*s* house—house*s* fish—fish*es*

(b) person talk—talk*s* close—close*s* finish—finish*es*

(c) finite and aspect try—tri*ed*/try*ing* look—look*ed*/look*ing*

(d) case girl—girl*'s* Helen—Helen*'s* school—school*'s*

(e) comparative degree and superlative degree

fast—fast*er*—fast*est* early—earl*ier*—earl*iest*

Derivational morphemes, called derivational affixes, are those that are used to derive new words. Derivational affixes include prefix and suffix and can make the word class of the original word either changed or unchanged. For instance, prefixes be-, en-, em- turn the original adjective or noun into verbs, such as *be*numb, *enslave*, *embody.*

2.2.1 Word Class Changed

The following are some more affixes that change the word class.

The verb is turned into noun:

-ation; -ment; -al; -ee; -er; -age

The adjective is turned into noun.

-ness; -ity; -ism; -ist

Noun and adjective are turned into verb.

-ify; -ize; -en

The noun is turned into adjective.

-ful; -less; -ly; -like; -y; -ish

2.2.2 Word Class Unchanged

Some words remain the same class, when certain suffixes are added to them, except that they take on new lexical meaning. For instance:

gang*ster* cigar*ette* friend*ship* matt*ing* engin*eer*

manager*ess* king*dom* spoon*ful* London*er* drudg*ery*

ideal*ism* book*let* boy*hood* *il*logical impression*ism*

From the above discussion, we know that free morphemes can occur on their own and bound morphemes must be attached to a stem to form a word, and that in English word-formation is complex, that is, words are formed in different ways. In the following section, word types are discussed in terms of its formation, meaning, and number.

3. Word Types

3.1 Derivational and Compound Words

Words are classified into derivational and compound types according to their formation. As we have discussed in the previous section, bound morphemes, or affixes must be attached to roots to form words. Words that are formed this way are derivational words. Derivations can either change or keep the word class of the original word. Here we will not devote more space to it. Different from derivational words, compound words are those that consist of more than one free morpheme, or the way to join two separate words to produce a single form. In compounds, the two lexical morphemes can be of the same or different word classes. For example:

(a) Noun compounds

sun + set → sunset (N + V) saw + mill → sawmill (N + N)

book + shelf → bookshelf (N + N) play + boy → playboy (V + N)

(b) Verb compounds

mass + produce → mass-produce (N + V) sight + see → sightsee (N + V)

spot + light → spotlight (N + N) under + line → underline (Prep + N)

(c) Adjective compounds

world + famous → world-famous (N + Adj) heart + felt → heartfelt (N + V-ed)

blood + thirsty → bloodthirsty (N + Adj) duty + free → duty-free (N + Adj)

(d) Adverbial compounds

more + over → moreover any + way → anyway

(e) Prepositional compounds

along + side → alongside through + out → throughout

(f) Pronoun compounds

some + thing → something who + ever → whoever

(g) Conjunction compounds

what + ever → whatever; where + as → whereas

3.2 Content Words and Function Words

Words are classified into content words and function words in terms of their meaning expressed. According to the definitions given by Richards et al, content words are those "which refer to a thing, quality, state, or action and which have meaning (lexical meaning) when the words are used alone"; function words are those "which have little meaning on their own, but which show grammatical relationships in and between sentences (grammatical meaning)". "Function words are also called form words, empty words, functors, grammatical words, structural words, structure words. Content words are also called full words, lexical words". Such word classes as nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs fall into the category of content words; conjunctions, prepositions, articles and pronouns belong to function words. Because of the distinction of content words and function words, arises another distinction of closed-class words and open-class words.

3.3 Open-Class Words and Closed-Class Words

As the names show, closed-class words are those whose membership is fixed. No new members are regularly added to the type. Such is the case with function words, whereas the number of content words is increasing constantly with the inventions of new ideas, technology, etc. They are open-class words, which indicates that their number is not fixed or unlimited. Since the 20th century, esp. the latest 50 years, a large number of new words or meanings have appeared. For example, *euro* was added to the vocabulary when the EU members decided to adopt it as the unified currency. We have the words on space exploration such as *space-man*, *lunar-rover*, *satellite*, *cosmonaut*, *cosmonaut*, *lander*, *moonfall*, etc. We can find those *ecoactivists* and *environmentalists* are talking about *ecocatastrophe*, *ecocide* and *ecocrisis*, trying to solve problems of *air pollution*, *noise pollution*, *thermal pollution* and even *visual pollution* and *cultural pollution.* Now lots of words take on new meanings. *Mouse* has become the computing term, *break*, a kind of dance.

So far as English new words or expressions are concerned, they are added to English through various processes.

4. Lexical Change Proper

We have mentioned that some words are formed by means of affixation, which produces derivatives, and that more than two free morphemes are combined to produce compounds. Apart from them, new words or expressions are created through different processes. We discuss them respectively.

4.1 Invention

Many new lexical items come directly from economic activities, political events and technological development. Words from the consumer items are *Coke*, *Peppsi*, *Kodak*, *nylon*, etc. Words in science and technology are videotape, refrigerator, and so on.

4.2 Blending

Blending is a form of compounding, in which two words are blended by joining the initial part of a word and the final part of another or two initial parts of two words. Words formed in this way is called blend or portmanteau or telescopic word. For example, *smog* comes from the blending of two words: *smoke* and *fog*. *Motel* comes from *motor* and *hotel*. The blend roughly falls into four types in terms of their morphological structure:

(a)Formed by joining the initial part of the first word and the final part of the second word

boat + hotel → botel; smoke + haze → smaze; advertising + statistics → advertistics

automobile + suicide → autocide; channel + tunnel → chunnel

(b)Formed by joining the first word and the final part of the second word

jazz + discotheque → jazzotheque; lunar + astronaut → lunarnaut

plug + payola → plugola; work + welfare → workfare

(c)Formed by joining the initial part of the first word and the second word

helicopter + pad → helipad; medical + care → medicare

psychological + warrior → psywarrior; medical + chair → medichair

(d) Formed by joining the initial parts of two words

psychological + warfare → psywar; American + Indian → Amerind

situation + comedy → sitcom; memorandum + conversation → memcon

4.3 Abbreviation

Abbreviation is widely used in technological and news style. The words produced in this way are simple and easy to remember. For example, *bus* takes the place of *omnibus*, *plane* does *aeroplane*, *zoo* does *zoological gardens*. Abbreviation in educational domain can find *exam* for *examination*, *gym* for *gymnasium*, *lab* for *laboratory*, *math* for *mathematics*, etc. Abbreviation is also called clipping. A new word is created in three ways.

(a) By cutting the final part

advertisement → ad; bicycle → bike; delicatessen → deli

mathematics → math; fanatic → fan

(b) By cutting the initial part

helicopter → plane; telephone → phone; caravan → van; parachute → chute

(c) By cutting both the initial and final parts accordingly

influenza → flu; refrigerator → fridge; detective → tec

4.4 Acronym

Acronym is made up of the initial letters of the name of an organization or long words in science, technology and other special fields.

(a) The name of an organization

EEC European Economic Community

CIA Central Intelligence Agency

IOC International Olympic Committee

IMF International Monetary Fund

(b) The words in science, technology and other special fields

Aids acquired immune deficiency syndrome

Radar radio detecting and ranging

WASP white Anglo-Saxon protestant

VAT value added tax

4.5 Back-formation

Back-formation, contrary to affixation, is a type of word formation where a shorter word is derived by cutting out an imagined affix from a longer form already in the language. Take *edit* for example, the word *editor* appeared earlier than the word *edit*. "*or*" in editor was mistaken as an suffix and deleted to produce *edit*. The original words that produce backformations are noun, adjective. Backformations are mainly verb.

(a) Noun

peddler → peddle; beggar → beg; aggression → aggress; enthusiasm → enthuse

(b) Adjective

peevish → peeve; gloomy → gloom; frivolous → frivol; lazy → laze

4.6 Borrowing

Throughout its whole history, English has borrowed a large number of words from Greek, Latin, French, Spanish, Arabic and other languages. It is estimated that English words amount to more than one million. Lots of seemingly native words are in fact loan words. Such daily words as *cake, call crave, crop, egg, husband, ill, kind, knife, law, skill* and *take* were introduced from Danish. *Epilepsy*, *electricity*, *atom* and *obstetrics* come from Greek. *Taji*, *chow mien, wok* and *kung-fu* are Chinese origin. In the following we mainly list words from French and Latin since their number is unbelievably large.

4.6.1 French Borrowings

(a) In government and administration

crown, state, empire, realm, reign, royal, authority, sovereign, majesty, subject, rebel, traitor, chancellor, treasurer, governor, mayor, lord, earl, tyrant, usurp, tax, subsidy, revenue, madam , and etc.

(b) In law

defendant, judge, advocate, attorney, verdict, sue, accuse, indict, arrest, warrant, imprison, banish, jury, assail, assign, award, fraud, adultery, panel, felon, evidence, proof, forfeit, etc.

(c) In army and navy

peace, arms, battle, combat, skirmish, siege, defense, ambush, retreat, garrison, captain, lieutenant,

sergeant, spy, stratagem, chieftain, array, harness, brandish, vanquish, besiege, etc.

(d) In fashion, meals, and social life

a*pparel, habit, gown, robe, garment, attire, cape, cloak, coat, frock, collar, veil, train, chemise, petticoat, lace, embroidery, pleat, gusset, buckle, button, plume, boots, mitten, jewel, brooch,* etc.

4.6.2 Latin Borrowings

(a) In law

custody, conspiracy, homicide, legal, malefactor, missal, notary, prosecute, remit, testify, testimony, etc.

(b) In literature

abject, allegory, contempt, distract, frustrate, ornate, prosody, reprehend, supplicate, suppress, zephyr, incredible, etc.

(c) In theology

incubus, limbo, pulpit, rosary, secular, zenith, etc.

(d) In medicine

immune, lunatic, infancy, ulcer, nervous, delirium, arthritis, bronchitis, etc.

The above list is only a drop in the sea of English vocabulary. It is this large number of loan words in English that brings, to some extent, the richness of English in synonyms. English has a synonym at three levels—popular, literary and learned. For example,

rise—mount—ascend; ask—question—interrogate

In each of these sets of three words the first is English, the second is from French, and the third from Latin. The difference in tone between the English and the French words is often slight; the Latin word is generally more bookish. Synonymy means that for one sense, there are different expressions, so it calls for the choice of words in different styles, hence one aspect of complexity of words. To add to its complexity is that one word has more than one meaning.

5. Homonymy and Polysemy

Homonymy and polysemy are sometimes difficult to distinguish. Homonymy is commonly used to refer to the linguistic phenomenon that words are identical in pronunciation, spelling, or both but have different meanings. For example, the English verbs *lie* in *You have to lie down* and *lie* in *don't lie, tell the truth*! Polysemy are words which have two more closely related meanings, for example, *foot* in *He hurt his foot* and *She stood at the foot of the stairs*. The foot is the lowest part of the stairs just as the foot is the lowest part of the human body.

5.1 Homonymy

The following are more examples in the context to clarify homonym.

1) a. Have you paid the telephone *bill* for the last month?

b. Here is a ten-dollar *bill*. You can keep the change.

c. The *bill* was killed in Congress.

2) a. She hopes that she can *succeed* in getting into the graduate program.

b. King James I was *succeed*ed by King Charles I.

3) a. The rain in Spain is mainly in the *plain*.

b. She was a *plain*-looking woman, but she had a heart of gold.

c. Apart from armed police, there were many *plain* clothes, too.

d. I don't know why he did this. It was *plain* stupid.

The words *bill, succeed and plain* have different meanings in above sentences. In specific context, only one meaning is acceptable and others are eliminated. But there are some situations where different meanings are acceptable, then ambiguity arises. For example:

4) She cannot *bear* children.

It is ambiguous because it can be understood or interpreted in two ways:

a. She is unable to give birth to children.

b. She cannot tolerate children.

The two homographic verbs: *bear* and *bear*, which have an identical spelling but have different meanings: "to give birth to" and "to tolerate".

5.2 Polysemy

1) Mr. White, the priest, is going to *marry* Helen at the church.

In above sentence, *marry* is a polysemy, one sense of which is *to become the husband or wife of somebody*, a second sense of which is *to perform a ceremony in which a man and woman become husband and wife*. The sentence has two interpretations.

a. Mr. White is going to become Helen's husband.

b. Helen and a man will get married and Mr. White is going to conduct their wedding ceremony.

2) The girl is *mad*.

Here *mad* is a polysemous word, and can be understood as both *mentally ill* or *very angry*.

6. Conclusion

As we have analyzed, English vocabulary is not only large in number, but complex in their formation and throughout their history, it is changing constantly, enriching itself by absorbing foreign words and creating new words.

References

Hu, Z. L., & Jiang, W. Q. (2002). *Linguistics: An Advanced Course Book*. Beijing: Beijing University Press.

Ke, P. (1999). *Contrastive Linguistics*. Jiang Su, Nanjing Normal University Press.

Kramsch, C. (1993). *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*. Shanghai: Shanghai foreign language Teaching and Research Press.

Li, X. Z. et al. (1999). *An introduction to Language*. Shan Dong University Press.

Lu, G. Q. (1997). *Modern English Lexicology*. Shanghai: Shanghai foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

Robins, R. H. (2001). *A Short History of Linguistics*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

Ron, S., & Suzanne, W. S. (2000). *Intercultural Communication: A Discourse Approach*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

Wang, R. P. (2000). *Studies in English Lexicology*. Shanghai: Shanghai foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

Wu, Q. G. (1997). *Introduction to Semantics*. Hunan: Hunan Education Press.

Xu, L. J. (1988). *Generative Grammar Theory*. Shanghai: Shanghai foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.