

PHILOLOGICAL SCIENCES

MORPHEME MEANING AS THE BASIS OF WORD FORMATION AND SEMANTIC INTERPRETATION

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Abstract

The study of word meaning and meaning in morphemes is a fundamental aspect of modern linguistics, focusing on how the smallest meaningful units of language contribute to the formation and interpretation of words. A morpheme is recognized as the smallest two-facet linguistic unit possessing both form and meaning. While extensive research has been devoted to the phonological and morphological structure of language, the semantic properties of morphemes have received comparatively less attention. This paper examines the various types of meanings associated with morphemes, including lexical, grammatical, denotational, connotational, stylistic, functional, and differential meanings. Root morphemes primarily carry lexical meaning, forming the semantic core of words, whereas affixal morphemes often express generalized concepts, grammatical functions, or changes in word class. The analysis also highlights the role of derivational affixes in conveying emotional and stylistic nuances, as well as their contribution to the creation of new lexical items. Special attention is given to differential meaning, which distinguishes words sharing common morphemes, even in cases where a morpheme lacks an independent denotational meaning, such as in *cranberry*. Furthermore, the paper explores the relationship between morpheme meaning and overall word meaning, demonstrating how individual morphemes interact to produce complex semantic structures. By examining both theoretical perspectives and illustrative examples, this study emphasizes the importance of morpheme semantics in understanding word formation, vocabulary expansion, and language organization. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of morphological analysis and semantic interpretation, highlighting the essential role of morphemes in linguistic theory and practical language learning.

Keywords: morpheme, lexical meaning, word formation, morphological analysis, semantics.

Introduction - In modern linguistics, the morpheme is recognized as the smallest meaningful unit of language. Unlike a phoneme, which only distinguishes sounds, a morpheme possesses both form (sound or written shape) and meaning. Words are often made up of one or more morphemes, each contributing to the overall meaning or grammatical function of the word. The study of morphemes is essential because it helps explain how words are formed, how meanings are created, and how language develops. Although the phonological and morphological structures of language have been thoroughly investigated, the semantic aspects of morphemes their meanings and functions have received comparatively less attention. Understanding the different types of meanings associated with morphemes is therefore an important area of linguistic study.

A morpheme is the smallest linguistic unit that carries meaning or performs a grammatical function. Morphemes cannot usually be divided into smaller meaningful parts.

Examples: **boy** = one root morpheme, boyish = boy + -ish, boyhood = boy + -hood, unhappiness = un- + happy + -ness

Each morpheme contributes something to the meaning or grammatical role of the entire word. Morphemes are generally divided into:

Root morphemes – carry the main lexical meaning.

Affixal morphemes – prefixes and suffixes that modify meaning or grammatical category.

The most important semantic feature of many morphemes is their lexical meaning. Lexical meaning refers to the actual concept or idea represented by a morpheme. For example: boy means "a male child."

In boyhood, boyish, and schoolboy, the root morpheme boy retains essentially the same lexical meaning. Similarly: teach → teacher, friend → friendship, child → childhood. The root morpheme carries the central meaning throughout all these words. Unlike root morphemes, affixes usually express more general meanings. Examples: **-er** = one who performs an action – teacher, writer, singer; **-less** = without, homeless, careless, hopeless

These suffixes do not identify a specific object but express general concepts applicable to many words.

One important difference between words and morphemes concerns grammatical meaning. Words often possess grammatical categories such as: number, case, tense, person. For example: man, man's, men. These different forms express grammatical meanings. However, the root morpheme **man-** in: manly, manhood, manful does not show grammatical categories such as singular, plural, or case. Therefore, root morphemes are generally considered to lack independent grammatical meaning. Instead, grammatical meanings belong mainly to complete word forms rather than isolated morphemes.

Lexical meaning can be divided into two components. The first is denotational meaning. Denotational meaning refers to the direct, dictionary meaning of a morpheme or word. Examples: dog → a domesticated

animal, tree → a large plant, house → a building for living.

The same principle applies to root morphemes. For example: The root *book* always denotes the concept of a book whether it appears in: *bookshelf*, *notebook*, *bookstore*, *textbook*. The denotational meaning remains stable across different word formations. Besides denotation, morphemes may also express connotational meaning. Connotation includes: emotional coloring, evaluation, stylistic effect, personal attitude. Many suffixes carry strong emotional meanings. Examples include: **-ette** – *kitchenette*, *cigarette*. Originally meaning "small," it often suggests something smaller or less important. **-ie / -y** - Examples: *dearie*, *doggie*, *girlie*. These suffixes express affection, intimacy, or childishness. **-ling** Examples: *duckling*, *gosling*.

The suffix often conveys small size together with tenderness. Thus, affixes can contribute emotional meaning in addition to lexical meaning.

Affixes usually have generalized lexical meanings. Examples include:

Suffix	General Meaning	Example
-er	person performing an action	teacher
-less	without	hopeless
-ful	full of	beautiful
-hood	state or condition	childhood
-ship	status or relationship	friendship

Unlike root morphemes, these meanings are abstract and applicable across many words. Another important function of morphemes is expressing part-of-speech meaning. Root morphemes themselves usually do not indicate whether they are nouns, verbs, or adjectives. Consider: *man*, *manly*, *manliness*, *to man*. The same root appears in different grammatical categories. However, derivational affixes often determine the part of speech. Examples: *happy* → *happiness*, *kind* → *kindness*, *teach* → *teacher*, *care* → *careful*, *beauty* → *beautiful*. The suffix determines whether the new word functions as: noun, adjective, verb. In many derivational morphemes, lexical and grammatical meanings are closely connected.

Some morphemes possess little lexical meaning but perform an important grammatical function. This is called functional meaning. For example: *just* → *justice*, the suffix **-ice** contributes very little lexical content. Its primary function is to change: adjective → noun. Similarly:

different → difference
important → importance

The suffixes mainly alter grammatical category rather than introducing substantial new meaning. Morphemes may also possess differential meaning, a semantic component unique to morphological analysis [Cruse, D. A. 2011]. Differential meaning enables one word to be distinguished from another containing the same root. Examples: *bookshelf*, *bookcase*, *bookstore*, *bookshop*. The morphemes: *shelf*, *case*, *store*, *shop* distinguish these words from each other. Likewise: *notebook*, *copybook*, *exercise-book*, *address-book*. Here: *note-* *copy-* *exercise-* *address-* provide the differential meanings. Thus, differential meaning identifies one member of a word family from another.

Sometimes different affixes share nearly identical denotational meanings but differ greatly in connotation. Consider the following adjectives: *womanly*, *womanlike*, *womanish*. All indicate similarity to a woman. However: **-ly** - positive, admirable, graceful. Example: *womanly behavior*

-like – neutral, descriptive. Example: *womanlike appearance* **-ish** - often negative, slightly derogatory. Example: *womanish habits*. Thus, while their denotational meanings are similar, their connotations differ significantly.

Certain morphemes also possess stylistic meaning. Some suffixes are associated with scientific, technical, or formal language. Examples: *chlorine*, *rhomboid*, *effervescence*. Suffixes such as: *-ine*, *-oid*, *-escence* immediately suggest scientific or academic vocabulary. Their stylistic value helps identify the register of the language.

Some morphemes possess almost no independent denotational meaning but still serve a differential function. A famous example is: *cranberry* - The element **cran-** has no independent meaning in Modern English. Yet it distinguishes: *cranberry*, *blackberry*, *gooseberry*, *blueberry*.

Therefore, even without denotational meaning, **cran-** contributes differential meaning.

Such morphemes are often called unique morphemes or *cranberry morphemes*. Some linguists have discussed words such as: *receive*, *deceive*, *perceive*, *conceive*. If these words are analyzed into morphemes: *re-* + *ceive*, *de-* + *ceive*, *per-* + *ceive*, *con-* + *ceive* the prefixes no longer possess clear lexical meanings in present-day English.

Instead, they merely distinguish one word from another. Synchronically that is, from the perspective of present-day English their meanings are almost entirely differential.

The meaning of a word is usually the combined result of the meanings of its constituent morphemes. For example: *unhappiness* contains: *un-* = not, *happy* = feeling pleasure, *-ness* = state or condition. Together they produce the meaning: "the state of not being happy." Similarly: *carelessness* contains: *care* -*less* -*ness* meaning: "the condition of being without care."

Thus, word meaning often results from the interaction of lexical, grammatical, functional, and differential meanings contributed by individual morphemes.

The study of morpheme meaning is important because it: explains how words are formed, reveals relationships among words, improves vocabulary learning, assists in language teaching, supports lexicography, contributes to translation studies, helps understand semantic change, advances morphological and linguistic research. Knowledge of morphemes allows speakers

and learners to interpret unfamiliar words by analyzing their components.

This study is scientifically important because it provides a comprehensive analysis of the meanings expressed by morphemes, the smallest meaningful units of language, and their contribution to the semantic structure of words. By examining lexical, grammatical, denotational, connotational, stylistic, functional, and differential meanings, the research enhances the understanding of how word meanings are formed and interpreted in modern linguistics. The study contributes to the fields of morphology, semantics, and lexicology by clarifying the relationship between individual morphemes and the overall meaning of words. It also demonstrates how derivational processes enrich vocabulary and influence grammatical categories, making it valuable for linguistic theory, language teaching, translation studies, lexicography, and natural language processing. Furthermore, the analysis of differential meaning and unique morphemes offers insights into complex patterns of word formation in English, supporting further research in morphological analysis and semantic interpretation. Overall, the study advances scientific knowledge of language structure and provides a theoretical foundation for future investigations into word formation and meaning.

Conclusion - The study of word meaning and meaning in morphemes demonstrates that morphemes are the fundamental building blocks of language, serving as the smallest meaningful units that contribute to the formation, interpretation, and development of words. Although morphemes are smaller than words, they play a crucial role in expressing lexical, grammatical, functional, stylistic, connotational, denotational, and differential meanings [Bauer, L. 2003]. The interaction of these meanings determines not only the semantic content of individual words but also the organization of the vocabulary as a whole. This study has shown that root morphemes primarily carry lexical meaning, representing the core semantic content shared by related words, while affixal morphemes perform a wide range of functions. Derivational affixes contribute to the creation of new words, modify lexical meaning, indicate grammatical categories, and often convey stylistic or emotional nuances. In many cases, the meanings expressed by affixes are more generalized than those of root morphemes, yet they remain essential for understanding how vocabulary expands and evolves. Furthermore, some affixes primarily perform functional or grammatical roles by changing the part of speech of a word rather than introducing substantial lexical content.

Particular attention has also been given to differential meaning, which distinguishes one word from another within the same morphological family. This aspect of morpheme semantics illustrates that not all meaningful elements possess an obvious denotational meaning. Certain morphemes, such as those found in *cranberry* or in verbs like *receive* and *deceive*, retain significance because they differentiate words from one another, even when their independent lexical meanings

are no longer recognizable in contemporary English [Plag, I. 2018]. Such examples demonstrate the complexity of morphological structure and highlight the importance of considering both synchronic and diachronic perspectives in linguistic analysis.

The relationship between morpheme meaning and word meaning is dynamic rather than mechanical. The overall meaning of a word emerges from the interaction of its constituent morphemes, whose semantic contributions may reinforce, modify, or extend one another. Consequently, understanding morpheme semantics enables linguists to explain patterns of word formation, semantic change, lexical productivity, and vocabulary development more accurately. It also provides valuable insights into how speakers interpret unfamiliar words by analyzing their morphological structure.

From a broader scientific perspective, the study contributes to several branches of linguistics, including morphology, semantics, lexicology, cognitive linguistics, and applied linguistics. It also has practical applications in language teaching, translation studies, lexicography, corpus linguistics, computational linguistics, and natural language processing, where accurate morphological analysis is essential for effective language description and processing. Knowledge of morpheme meaning supports vocabulary acquisition, improves reading comprehension, and enhances learners' ability to infer the meanings of new lexical items through morphological analysis.

In conclusion, the semantic study of morphemes provides a deeper understanding of the structure and functioning of language. Morphemes are not merely formal components of words but meaningful linguistic units that shape lexical interpretation and grammatical organization. Their multiple semantic functions reveal the complexity and flexibility of the English language and demonstrate the close relationship between morphology and semantics. Continued research into morpheme meaning will further enrich linguistic theory, improve practical approaches to language education, and contribute to advances in interdisciplinary fields that rely on the analysis and processing of human language.

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