Language Files

Materials for an Introduction to Language and Linguistics

Tenth Edition

Editors

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Morphological Types of Languages

4.3.1 Classifying Languages by Morphological Type

So far, we have considered a number of processes that a language might utilize in order to form words: affixation, compounding, reduplication, alternation, and suppletion. Some languages make use of a number of these processes; others make use of very few; still others make use of none at all. Languages can be classified according to the way in which they use or don't use morphological processes. There are two basic morphological types, **analytic** and **synthetic,** the latter having several subtypes.

4.3.2 Analytic Languages

Analytic languages are so called because they are made up of sequences of free morphemes—each word consists of a single morpheme, used by itself with meaning and function intact. Purely analytic languages, also called **isolating** languages, do not use affixes to compose words. Semantic and grammatical concepts which are often expressed in other languages through the use of affixes are expressed by the use of separate words in analytic languages.

Mandarin Chinese is an example of a language that has a highly analytic structure. In the example sentences below, for instance, the concept of plurality and the concept of the past tense are communicated in Mandarin through the use of invariant function words rather than the use of a change of form (cf. English, *I* to *we* to indicate plurality) or the use of an affix (cf. English *-ed* for past tense).

(1) [wɔ mən tan tɕin]   (tones omitted)
    I   plural play   piano
    'We are playing the piano'

(2) [wɔ mən tan tɕin lə]   (tones omitted)
    I   plural play   piano past
    'We played the piano'

Note that the form of 'we' (I-plural) that is used in the subject position is [wɔ mən] and that the pronoun has the same form when it is used as the object, placed after the verb:

(3) [ta   da   wɔ   mən]   (tones omitted)
    s/he   hit(s)   I   plural
    'S/he hits us'

Only the position of a word in a sentence shows its function. English is unlike Mandarin in this respect, since the personal pronoun *we* is changed in form to *us* when it is used as the object of a verb. But English is like Mandarin in that word order is used to show the functions of nouns in a sentence, and in that nouns (unlike pronouns) are not marked by

affixes to show their functions. For example, in the sentence *Girls like cats* the noun *girls* functions as the subject; and the noun *cats* as the direct object, but just the opposite is true of *Cats like girls;* these differences in function are signaled only by the order of words in the sentence in both English and Mandarin. Nonanalytic languages may use morphology to mark these differences.

Although only affixation has been explicitly mentioned in this section, recognize that prototypical analytic languages make use of no morphological processes at all.

4.3.3 Synthetic Languages

In **synthetic languages,** bound morphemes are attached to other morphemes, so a word may be made up of several meaningful elements. The bound morphemes may add another element of meaning to the stem (derivation) or indicate the grammatical function of the stem in a sentence (inflection). Recall that the term *stem* refers to that part of the word to which affixes are added. It may consist of one or more morphemes: for instance, in *reruns, -s* is added to the stem *rerun,* which is itself made up of two morphemes: *re-* and the root *run.*

Hungarian is a synthetic language. In the examples below, bound morphemes show the grammatical functions of nouns in their sentences:

(4) [ɔz   ɛmber   laːtjɔ   ɔ   kucaːt]
the   man-(subject)   sees   the   dog-(object)
'The man sees the dog'

(5) [ɔ   kucɔ   laːtjɔ   ɔz   ɛmbɛɾt]
the   dog   sees   the   man-(object)
'The dog sees the man'

As mentioned above, in English it is the position in the sentence of the noun phrase *the man* or *the dog* that tells one whether the phrase is the subject or object of the verb, but in Hungarian, a noun phrase may appear either before or after the verb in a sentence and be recognized as the subject or object in either position because it is marked with a bound morpheme (the suffix [t]) if it is the direct object. (Many synthetic languages behave similarly.) Therefore, both examples below mean the same thing, even though the position of the noun phrase meaning 'the man' is different with respect to the verb meaning 'sees.'

(6) [ɔ   kucɔ   laːtjɔ   ɔz   ɛmbɛɾt]
the   dog   sees   the   man-(object)
'The dog sees the man'

(7) [ɔz   ɛmbɛɾt   laːtjɔ   ɔ   kucɔ]
the   man-(object)   sees   the   dog
'The dog sees the man'

Synthetic languages like Hungarian may also use bound morphemes to indicate some concepts that English signals by means of free morphemes. For example, Hungarian indicates personal possession and location by the use of suffixes attached to the stem ([haːz], 'house'), whereas in English these concepts are expressed by the use of free morphemes. Examples are given in (8) and (9).

(8) [ɔ   haːzunk   zøld]
the   house-our   green
'Our house is green'

(9) [ɔ seːkɛd ɔ haːzunkbɔn vɔn]
    the chair-your the house-our-in is
    'Your chair is in our house'

4.3.4 The First Type of Synthetic Language: Agglutinating Languages

To be more specific, the kind of synthesis (putting together) of morphemes we find in Hungarian is known as **agglutination**. In agglutinating languages, like Hungarian, the morphemes are joined together relatively "loosely." That is, it is usually easy to determine where the boundaries between morphemes are, as shown in (10) and (11).

(10) [haːz-unk-bɔn]   [haːz-od-bɔn]
     house-our-in   *house-your-in*
     'in our house'   'in your house'

(11) [haːz-ɔd]   [haːz-unk]
     house-your   *house-our*
     'your house'   'our house'

Swahili is another example of an agglutinating language. Swahili verb stems take prefixes to indicate the person of the subject of the verb (first, second, or third) and also to indicate the tense of the verb, as in the following list of forms for the verb 'read':

(12) [ni-na-soma]   *I-present-read*   'I am reading'
     [u-na-soma]   *you-present-read*   'You are reading'
     [a-na-soma]   *s/he-present-read*   'S/he is reading'

     [ni-li-soma]   *I-past-read*   'I was reading'
     [u-li-soma]   *you-past-read*   'You were reading'
     [a-li-soma]   *s/he-past-read*   'S/he was reading'

     [ni-ta-soma]   *I-future-read*   'I will read'
     [u-ta-soma]   *you-future-read*   'You will read'
     [a-ta-soma]   *s/he-future-read*   'S/he will read'

A second characteristic feature of agglutinating languages is that each bound morpheme (ordinarily) carries only one meaning: *ni* = 'I,' *u* = 'you,' *a* = 's/he,' *na* = 'present,' etc.

4.3.5 The Second Type of Synthetic Language: Fusional Languages

In **fusional languages,** another subtype of synthetic language, words are formed by adding bound morphemes to stems, just as in agglutinating languages, but in fusional languages the affixes may not be easy to separate from the stem. It is often rather hard to tell where one morpheme ends and the next begins; the affixes are characteristically fused with the stem.

    Spanish is a fusional language that has suffixes attached to the verb stem to indicate the person (I/you/he/she/it) and number (singular/plural) of the subject of the verb. It is often difficult to analyze a verb form into its stem and suffix, however, because there is often a fusion of the two morphemes. For example, in the following forms:

(13) [hablo]   'I am speaking'
     [habla]   'S/he is speaking'
     [hable]   'I spoke'

the morphemes in (14) can be isolated:

(14) [-o]   first person singular present tense
[-a]   third person singular present tense
[-e]   first person singular past tense

However, although these forms would suggest a stem *habl-* that means 'speak,' such a form never appears in isolation in Spanish. There is no Spanish free morpheme *habl*.

Fusional languages often differ from agglutinating languages in another way as well: agglutinating languages usually have only one meaning indicated by each affix, as noted above, but in fusional languages a single affix more frequently conveys several meanings simultaneously. Russian is a fusional language in which bound morphemes attached to verb stems indicate both the person and the number of the subject of the verb and the tense of the verb at the same time. For example, in (15) the bound form [-jɛt] signifies third person as well as singular and present tense:

(15) [tʃitajɛt]   's/he is reading'

In (16) the suffix [-l] means singular, masculine, and past tense, simultaneously. (Compare the Swahili examples in (12), in which person and tense are signaled by separate affixes.)

(16) [tʃital]   'he was reading'

4.3.6   The Third Type of Synthetic Language: Polysynthetic Languages

In some synthetic languages, highly complex words may be formed by combining several stems and affixes; this is usually a matter of making nouns (subjects, objects, etc.) into parts of the verb forms. Such languages are called **polysynthetic**. Sora, a language spoken in India, allows such **incorporation** of objects (subjects, instruments, etc.) into verbs:

(17) [aninɲamjɔten]   —word of Sora
[anin -ɲam   - jɔ   - te   - n]   —the same word divided into morphemes
he   catch   fish   non-past   do
'He is fish-catching'
i.e., 'He is catching fish'

(18) [ɲamkɪdtenai]   —word of Sora
[ɲam-kɪd -te   - n - ai]   —the same word divided into morphemes
catch   tiger   non-past   do   first person agent
'I will tiger-catch'
i.e., 'I will catch a tiger'

Such verbs are roughly comparable to an English construction like *baby-sit* or *trout-fish,* but the polysynthetic constructions may be more complex, including several nouns as well as a variety of other affixes:

(19) [pɔpoʊŋkoʊntam]   —word of Sora
[pɔ - poʊŋ - koʊn -t   - am]   —the same word divided into morphemes
stab   belly   knife   non-past   you (sg.)
'(Someone) will stab you with a knife in (your) belly'

(20) [ɲɛnədʒdʒadarsiəm]   —word of Sora
   [ɲɛn- ədʒ -dʒa   - dar   - si   - əm] —the same word divided into morphemes
   I   not   receive   cooked rice   hand   you (sg.)
   'I will not receive cooked rice from your hands'

The incorporated or "built-in" form of the noun is not necessarily identical to its free form. For example, in Sora, the free form of 'tiger' is [kɨna], that of 'hand' is [siʔi], and that of 'knife' is [kondi].