Linguistics for Language Teachers

Lessons for Classroom Practice

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4 Morphology

The Analysis of Words

4.1 Introduction

So far in this book, we have seen how individual sounds are produced (Chapter 2), and how sounds pattern within a language to form meaningful utterances (Chapter 3). In this chapter, we proceed to examining a slightly larger linguistic unit—words. Words are a crucial part of our mental grammars. Without knowledge of words, we would not be able to get our meanings across to other people. Unlike phonemes and syllables, which operate only at the level of sounds, words carry meaning in addition to sounds. Words are also permanently stored in a speaker's mental dictionary called **lexicon**. This permanence distinguishes words from phrases and sentences, which are pieced together with words as needed and then discarded when the need for them disappears (we will discuss sentence structure in Chapter 5). Quite simply, words are the building blocks of communication.

What is a word? What does it mean when we say we know a word? Knowing a word means knowing both its sounds and its meaning. Every speaker of English knows that *measure* is an English word, as are *measurement, measuring, measurable*, and *immeasurable*. However, even though *street* is an English word, English speakers know that they cannot say any of the following: *streetment, streeting, streetable, instreetable*. How do English speakers know that adding *-able* to *measure* results in another word, but adding *-able* to *street* does not? Morphology tries to capture this knowledge, which is largely subconscious.

Morphology is the study of the internal structure of words—how words are formed and what their relationships to other words are in the same language. It describes which meaningful pieces of language can be combined to form words and what the effects of such combinations are on the meaning or the grammatical function of the resulting word. For example, adding *-able* to *measure* modifies the grammatical function of *measure*, a verb, to an adjective, and it does so in the same way when attached to *do (doable)*, or *manage (manageable)*. Similarly, adding *re-* to *type* changes the meaning of *type* to indicate repetition, and it does so in the same way when added to *generate (regenerate)*, or *furbish (refurbish)*.

The average six-year-old child knows about 13,000 words. If the child produced her first word at the age of two, that would mean that she has learned

3,250 words a year, an average of nine words a day. It is also estimated that the average high school graduate knows about 60,000 words. That would mean that between the ages of six and eighteen, the student has learned 47,000 words, or about 3,900 words a year, an average of about ten words a day. This stock of words constitutes the mental dictionary that the student has internalized as part of acquiring her language. The student knows that she can create and understand countless other words by applying general rules to the entries in her mental lexicon.

In this chapter, we will analyze word structure by identifying each of the components and classifying them in terms of their contribution to the meaning and function of the larger word. We will see how words are formed in different languages, and how they are marked differently to show grammatical concepts such as number, tense, person, gender, and case. This chapter will show how knowledge of the principles of word formation can facilitate students' learning of new vocabulary and what teachers can do to help students acquire this knowledge.

4.2 Morphemes

The most important part of the word is the **morpheme**, the smallest linguistic unit with a meaning or a grammatical function. Morphemes are important because all languages use them as building blocks to construct words. The word *teacher*, for example, consists of two morphemes: *teach* (with the meaning of "give instruction in") and *-er* (which indicates that the whole word functions as a noun with the meaning "one who teaches"). Similarly, the word *schools* is composed of the morphemes *school* (with the meaning of "an institution where instruction is given") and *-s* (with the meaning "more than one").

Some words are made up of a single morpheme. Such words are said to be **simple words**. For example, the word *happy* cannot be divided into smaller parts that carry information about its meaning or function. Thus, the word *happy* consists of a single morpheme. In contrast, the word *impersonal* is made up of three morphemes, *im-person-al*. Words that contain two or more morphemes like *impersonal* are said to be **complex words**. It is important to not confuse morphemes with syllables. The word *happy* [hæ.pi] is one morpheme but has two syllables. The word *impersonal* [ɪm.pʌr.sə.nəl] is composed of three morphemes but has four syllables (note that the "." in the phonetic transcriptions marks syllable boundaries). Remember that a morpheme is the smallest linguistic unit with a meaning or a grammatical function.

Complex words typically consist of a root morpheme and one or more affixes. The **root** is the primary lexical unit of a word that carries the most significant aspects of semantic content and cannot be reduced into smaller parts. Roots typically belong to a lexical category such as noun (*man, nation, color, tree*), verb (*teach, form, make, think*), adjective (*honest, small, kind, quick*), or preposition (*about, in, to, from*).

Unlike roots, however, **affixes** do not belong to a lexical category. An affix that is attached to the front of the root is called a **prefix** (*dis-* in *dishonest*, *un-* in *uncertain*), whereas an affix that is attached to the end of the root is called a **suffix** (*-ful* in *beautiful*, *-ly* in *quickly*). Some words have multiple affixes attached to them. For example, the word *internationalizing* has a prefix (*inter-*) and three suffixes (*-al, -ize,* and *-ing*) attached to the root (*nation*).

Although many languages use prefixes and suffixes, a fewer number of languages also have **infixes**, affixes that are inserted into existing morphemes. For example, in Indonesian, the infix *-em-* is inserted after the first consonant in the root to create new words. Thus, *cemerlang* ("brilliant") is derived from *cerlang* ("luminous"), and *gemetar* ("to tremble") is derived from *getar* ("to vibrate").

Some languages also have **circumfixes**, morphemes that are attached to the front and the end of the root to form new words. In Malay, the circumfix *ke—an* is attached to adjectives to form nouns meaning "the state of (the adjective)". Thus, *kebaratan* ("the state of being west"), *ketimuran* ("the state of being east"), and *kebesaran* ("the state of being big") are derived from *barat* ("west"), *timur* ("east"), and *besar* ("big"). Circumfixes are different from prefixes and suffixes because both the front and end components need to be attached to the root for it to work.

4.3 Classifying Morphemes

There are mainly two kinds of morphemes. A morpheme that can stand alone as a word is called a **free morpheme**, whereas a morpheme that can only occur in words attached to other morphemes is called a **bound morpheme**. Most roots in English are free morphemes, although a limited number of roots (*ept* in *inept*, *mit* in *remit*) are bound morphemes and must combine with another morpheme to be an acceptable word.

Free morphemes can be further divided into content morphemes and function morphemes. This is shown in the left column in Table 4.1. **Content morphemes** carry meaning as opposed to merely perform a grammatical function, and constitute the major part of the vocabulary (e.g., nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs). Content morphemes constitute what's called an **open class**, a lexical category into which new words are often introduced.

For instance, a lot of **loan words** (words that have been borrowed from other languages) tend to be nouns and belong to the category of open class. In English, loan words include terms that refer to foods (*smorgasbord, wok, satay*), popular culture (*paparazzi, karaoke, bikini*), and politics (*apartheid, realpolitik, pogrom*). As people from different cultures come into contact with one another, more and more words get added to the lexicon through borrowing. In addition, newly coined computer-related terms (*download*, *hyperlink*, *RAM, realtime*) also belong to the category of open class, as do existing words that have taken on additional meanings in online contexts (*friend, unfriend, ping*).

Function morphemes, on the other hand, provide information about the grammatical relationships between words in a sentence (e.g., articles,

conjunctions, prepositions, and pronouns). Function morphemes constitute a **closed class**, a lexical category in which members are fairly rigidly established and additions are made very rarely.

The right column in Table 4.1 shows that bound morphemes can also be further divided into derivational morphemes and inflectional morphemes. **Derivational morphemes**, when combined with a root, change either the meaning or the part of speech of the word. Derivational morphemes in English are content morphemes and include both prefixes and suffixes. Table 4.2 provides some additional examples of derivational morphemes in English. Derivational morphemes have the following properties:

a) Change the part of speech and/or the meaning of a word (e.g., *-ment* in *statement, re-* in *rewrite*).
b) Are not required by syntax (e.g., The use of *un-* in *unhappy* changes the meaning of the sentence *He is unhappy* but is not required to make the sentence grammatical).
c) Are selective about what they can combine with (e.g., we can add *-hood* to *brother* to get *brotherhood*, but we cannot add *-hood* to *friend* to get **friendhood*). Note that the linguistic notation, "*", in front of *friendhood* indicates that this particular form is not acceptable.
d) Are typically attached before inflectional suffixes (e.g., *-ment* in *statement-s* must be added before *-s*).

Table 4.1 The Relationship Between Free and Bound Morphemes and Content and Function Morphemes in English

	Free Morphemes	*Bound Morphemes*
Content Morphemes	***Open Class*** Nouns (*cat, tree, street, envy*) Verbs (*go, run, play, state*) Adjectives (*big, small, happy*) Adverbs (*fast, often, very*)	***Bound Roots*** (*ept* in *inept*, *mit* in *remit, huckle* in *huckleberry*) ***Derivational Affixes*** Prefixes: (*re-, un-, dis-, inter-* as in: *rewrite, undo, dishonest, intercede*) Suffixes: (*-al, -ize, -ness, -ship* as in: *national, humanize, happiness, friendship*)
Function Morphemes	***Closed Class*** Articles (*the, a, an*) Conjunctions (*and, or, but, so*) Prepositions (*in, on, above, beside*) Pronouns (*I, me, you, he, she, their*)	***Inflectional Affixes*** All Suffixes: (*-s, -ed, -ing, -er, -est* as in: *books, played, singing, happier, happiest*)

Table 4.2 Some Derivational Affixes in English

Affix	*Meaning*	*Examples*
Prefixes:		
a-, an-	without	amoral, anaerobic, acellular
anti-	opposite of	anticlimax, antiseptic, antihero, antidepressant
circum-	around	circumference, circumnavigate, circumvent
dis-	not	disagree, disappear, discontinue, disobey
il-, im-, in-, ir-	not, without	illegal, impossible, inconsiderate, irresponsible
inter-	between, among	international, interstellar, intercede, intersect, intervene
post-	after, behind	postmortem, postscript, postoperative
un-	not, opposite of	unfinished, unfriendly, unskilled, unfair
Suffixes:		
-able, -ible	capable of being	abominable, credible, presentable, understandable
-al	pertaining to	emotional, grammatical, regional, national, seasonal
-ment	condition of	argument, endorsement, treatment, punishment
-ize	become	modernize, humanize, socialize, nationalize
-less	without	ageless, endless, lawless, faceless, effortless
-ness	state of being	happiness, sadness, heaviness, rudeness
-ious, -ous	characterized by	nutritious, studious, poisonous, lecherous
-ship	position held	fellowship, friendship, ownership, internship

As derivational morphemes constitute a type of bound morphemes, inflectional morphemes also belong to the bound morpheme category. **Inflectional morphemes** are affixes that are added to a word to assign a specific grammatical property to that word. There are only eight of them in English and they are all suffixes (see Table 4.3). Inflectional morphemes have the following properties that differentiate them from derivational morphemes:

a) Do not change the part of speech and/or the meaning of a word (e.g., *-er* in *bigger*).
b) Are required by syntax (e.g., The third person singular *-s* in *The boy likes to read*).
c) Typically occur with all members of some large class of morphemes (e.g., The plural *-s* in English).
d) Occur at the margin of a word.

Table 4.3 Inflectional Suffixes in English

Inflectional Suffix	*Examples*
Nouns:	
plural -s	the song**s**
possessive-'s	Mary**'s** song
Verbs:	
3rd person singular -s	She write**s** beautifully.
progressive -ing	She is writ**ing**.
past tense -ed	She cook**ed**.
past participle -en/-ed	She has eat**en**/work**ed**.
Adjectives:	
comparative -er	small**er**, bigg**er**, quick**er**, clos**er**
superlative -est	small**est**, bigg**est**, quick**est**, clos**est**

4.4 Allomorphs

In Chapter 3, we explored the concept of allophones, predictable phonetic realizations of a phoneme. Here, we consider **allomorphs**, the alternate phonetic forms of a morpheme. The plural morpheme *-s* in English, for example, has three allomorphs. In forming plural nouns, English speakers typically think about adding the plural morpheme *-s* at the end of nouns. However, the morpheme *-s* is uttered differently depending on the phonetic environment. Let us consider the following data:

[s]	*[z]*	*[ɪz]*
lips [lɪps]	trees [triz]	latches [lætʃɪz]
rocks [raks]	gums [gʌmz]	wretches [rɛtʃɪz]
bats [bæts]	twos [tuz]	fudges [fʌdʒɪz]
cats [kæts]	bells [bɛlz]	breezes [brizɪz]

As we learned in Chapter 3, we can list the phonetic environments of the three forms in question as follows:

[s]	*[z]*	*[ɪz]*
p—#	i—#	tʃ—#
k—#	m—#	tʃ—#
t—#	u—#	dʒ—#
t—#	l—#	z—#

(Note: "#" means word boundary.)

When we look at the sounds that are immediately to the left of [s], we notice that they are all voiceless sounds. In contrast, the sounds that occur immediately before [z] are all voiced sounds. The sounds that are immediately left of [ɪz] form a natural class, a special class of consonants called "sibilants". Sibilants are acoustically intense sounds produced by directing a stream of air with the tongue towards the sharp edge of the teeth, which are held close together. The sounds, [s], [z], [ʃ], [ʒ], [tʃ], and [dʒ], are sibilants in English.

To understand why [ɪz] is required for words that end in a sibilant, try attaching [s] to the end of *kiss* [kɪs] and [z] to the end of *hose* [hoʊz]. When we do that, we realize that it is difficult to say [kɪss] or [hoʊzz] with two [s]'s or [z]'s produced in quick succession and that the listener may not perceive that plural nouns were in fact meant by the speaker. However, by attaching [ɪz] at the end of these words, we can more easily communicate to the listener that they are plural.

Based on the data, we can write a phonological rule regarding the distribution of [s], [z], and [ɪz] as follows:

> The English plural morpheme *-s* is pronounced as [s] following a noun that ends in a voiceless sound, as [z] following a noun that ends in a voiced sound, and as [ɪz] after a sibilant.

Likewise, the English past tense morpheme *-ed* has three allomorphs, [d], [t], and [ɪd], that work in similar ways. Consider the following data:

[t]	*[d]*	*[ɪd]*
sipped [sɪpt]	beamed [bimd]	ended [ɛndɪd]
dunked [dʌŋkt]	played [plɛɪd]	bunted [bʌntɪd]
cashed [kæʃt]	wintered [wɪntərd]	handed [hændɪd]
practiced [præktɪst]	logged [lagd]	hinted [hɪntɪd]

We can list the distribution of the three allomorphs as follows:

[t]	*[d]*	*[ɪd]*
p—#	m—#	d—#
k—#	ɪ—#	t—#
ʃ—#	r—#	d—#
s—#	g—#	t—#

Based on this list, the phonological distribution of [t], [d], and [ɪd] can be stated as follows:

> The English past tense morpheme *-ed* is pronounced as [t] following a verb that ends in a voiceless sound, as [d] following a verb that ends in a voiced sound, and as [ɪd] after a verb that ends in either [t] or [d].

Yet another example of allomorphs in English involves the phonetic variants *a* and *an* for the indefinite article *a*. Here again, the use of one or the other form is determined by the phonetic environment—*a* is used before a word that begins with a consonant sound and *an* is used before a word that begins with a vowel sound (e.g., *a boat*, *a cat* vs. *an apple*, *an orange*). Inserting [n] between two vowels in *an apple* [ə**n**æpl] and *an orange* [ə**n**ɔrɪndʒ] helps speakers avoid producing two vowels in succession and clearly communicates to the listener that a single item was meant in the utterance.

Voices From the Classroom 4.1—Teaching the Third Person Singular Morpheme -s

Sean Stinson, an elementary school ESOL teacher, asks his students to write a text on what they do on New Year's. A student might write, *I celebrate New Year's Day with my family and relatives*. Another student might write, *I make New Year's resolutions on New Year's Day*. The students then switch papers with a partner and rewrite their partner's text in the third person. So, the above sentences will be rewritten as, *Mariajose celebrate<u>s</u> New Year's Day with <u>her</u> family and relatives* and *Yuanli make<u>s</u> New Year's resolutions on New Year's Day*. Students then get in small groups to orally summarize their partner's text in the third person. This helps students to listen for the third person singular morpheme and produce it correctly.

4.5 Inflection

Inflection is a morphological process that changes the form of a word to express a grammatical function or attribute. In the last section, we saw how the plural *-s* and the past tense *-ed* morphemes are attached to words in English to express **number** and **tense**. Inflection is commonly used in many languages of the world and can affect words that belong to various parts of speech.

In Spanish, different verb endings mark the grammatical concept of **person**. For example, the verb *hablar* ("to speak") can be conjugated in the present indicative as follows:

Yo habl**o**	"I speak"
Tú habl**as**	"You (singular, informal) speak"
Él/Ella/Usted habl**a**	"He/She speaks", "You (singular, formal) speak"
Nosotros habl**amos**	"We speak"
Vosotros habl**áis**	"You speak"
Ellos/Ellas/Ustedes habl**an**	"They/You (plural, formal) speak"

As can be seen in these examples, the verb endings communicate information about the person doing the action. And because the verb endings indicate who the subject of the sentence is, the subject can be dropped in Spanish without causing miscommunication. Thus, if someone were to say, *Hablamos español* without the first-person plural subject *nosotros* ("we"), we can conclude that the subject is *nosotros* from looking at the verb ending. For this reason, Spanish (along with a considerable number of the world's languages including Arabic, Chinese, Hungarian, Persian, and Polish) is considered a **null-subject language**, a language whose grammar permits an independent clause to lack an explicit subject (see Chapter 5 for more information).

For a language like English with very little inflection, however, omitting the subject is not allowed because the verb is not inflected according to the subject of the sentence. In fact, in English, the subject is required even in cases where a sentence has no **referent** at all (a referent is a person or thing to which a linguistic expression refers). For example, *Rains* is not an acceptable sentence in English. A dummy pronoun *it* must be added to produce a grammatically correct sentence, *It rains*. In most Romance languages, however, *Rains* is a perfectly fine sentence. Therefore, one can say, *Llueve* (Spanish), *Piove* (Italian), and *Chove* (Portuguese) in these null-subject languages.

Taking another example from Spanish, we can see that the grammatical concepts of **gender** and number are marked by different endings to nouns, adjectives, and determiners. In the following phrases, the *-o* ending signifies male while the *-a* ending signifies female. The *-s* morpheme is attached to the margin of the word to denote plurality. Notice that gender and number are marked not only in the noun (*niñ<u>os</u>, niñ<u>as</u>*), but also in the determiner (*l<u>os</u>, l<u>as</u>*) and the adjective (*rubi<u>os</u>, rubi<u>as</u>*).

el	niñ<u>o</u>	rubi<u>o</u>	"the blond boy"
l<u>a</u>	niñ<u>a</u>	rubi<u>a</u>	"the blond girl"
l<u>os</u>	niñ<u>os</u>	rubi<u>os</u>	"the blond boys"
l<u>as</u>	niñ<u>as</u>	rubi<u>as</u>	"the blond girls"

Having determiner, noun, and adjective all agree in number and gender is a grammatical requirement in Spanish. However, English speakers often make errors in number and gender agreement in Spanish because (1) English does not have grammatical gender, and (2) it pluralizes nouns, but not the accompanying articles or adjectives. To help Spanish learners produce grammatical sentences then, teachers should explain these differences between the two languages explicitly and include exercises that help increase students' sensitivity to these features.

It is important for teachers to understand that different languages mark the same grammatical concepts quite differently. While plurality is expressed in Spanish (and in English) through the plural suffix *-s*, an overt affix is not required for expressing singularity. However, some languages inflect both singular and

plural nouns. In Luganda, one of the major languages spoken in Uganda, both singular and plural nouns are marked with different prefixes. In the following data from Luganda, notice that the singular morpheme *omu-* marks a noun as singular while the plural morpheme *aba-* marks a noun as plural.

omusajja	"man"	abasajja	"men"
omukazi	"woman"	abakazi	"women"
omusawo	"doctor"	abasawo	"doctors"
omusika	"heir"	abasika	"heirs"
omulenzi	"boy"	abalenzi	"boys"

Another interesting difference in grammatical marking can be found when we compare Finnish to English. In Finnish, nouns are inflected to indicate meanings typically expressed by prepositions such as *in, to*, and *from* in English.

talo	"house" (subject)	talolla	"on the house"
talon	"house" (object)	talolta	"from the house"
talossa	"in the house"	talolle	"to the house"
talosta	"out of the house"	taloa	"part of the house"
taloon	"into the house"	talotta	"without the house"

Thus, a single inflected noun in Finnish (*talossa*) is equivalent to an entire prepositional phrase ("in the house") in English. This example shows that what constitutes a "word" or a "phrase" is not the same in all languages, but rather fluid from one language to another. Understanding cross-linguistic differences like this is important for teachers who are trying to help students gain mastery of second language features.

4.6 Other Morphological Processes

In addition to inflection, different languages use a variety of other morphological processes to form new words. These include compounding, reduplication, internal modification, and suppletion. In the following, we explain each of these with examples.

Compounding is the process of building a new word by combining two or more existing words. The component words of a compound may be of the same part of speech (e.g., *bookshelf*, composed of two nouns *book* and *shelf; bitter-sweet*, composed of two adjectives, *bitter* and *sweet*), or may belong to different parts of speech (e.g., *carsick*, composed of the noun *car* and the adjective *sick*; *someday*, composed of the determiner *some* and the noun *day*). In most compound words, the rightmost morpheme determines the part of the speech of the entire word. Thus, *whiteboard* is a noun because *board* is a noun, *babysit* is a verb because *sit* is a verb, and *statewide* is an adjective just as *wide* is.

Compound words in English are not represented consistently in writing. Some compound words are written as single words (*online, backbone, blackmail*), some with a hyphen (*sugar-free, off-campus, bone-dry*), and some as separate words (*on campus*, *school bus, decision making*). Regardless of how they are written, we can make some generalizations about how compound words are pronounced. For example, adjective-noun compound words in English have the primary stress falling on the first component of the compound (see Table 4.4). On the other hand, non-compound expressions involving an adjective and a noun typically have the primary stress falling on the second component.

Although the rules for forming compounds differ from language to language, compounding is a morphological process that is very common in many of the world's languages. For one, compounding helps languages to avoid creating brand new words and get more use out of existing words to express ideas. For example, in Korean, the word *karak* "strand" is attached to words that refer to various body parts to produce *bal*<u>*karak*</u> "toe", *son*<u>*karak*</u> "finger", and *mʌri*<u>*karak*</u> "hair". The words *bal*, *son*, and *mʌri* mean "foot", "hand", and "head" respectively. Thus, in Korean, toe literally means "foot strand" and finger, "hand strand", and hair, "head strand".

Compounding can also stretch the uses of whole classes of words by changing the part of speech. In Hindi, for example, a general verb *karnaa* ("to do") can be combined with many adjectives and nouns, to form verbs. Thus, *saaf karnaa*, which is a combination of the adjective *saaf* "clean" and *karnaa* "to do" means "to clean". *Nishchit karnaa*, a combination of the adjective *nishchit* "fixed" and *karnaa* "to do" means "to decide". The verb *karnaa* can also be attached to nouns such as *pyaar* ("love") and *mazaak* ("jest") to mean "to love" (*pyaar karnaa*) and "to joke" (*mazaak karnaa*).

While compounding is commonly used in many languages, some languages are more prone to forming new words through this process than others. English speakers who glimpse texts written in German often get the impression that words are generally longer in German than in English. This is because German allows for the combination of words that typically stay separate in English. Words like *krankenhausverzeichnis* "hospital directory", *behandlungsmethoden* "treatment methods", *massenaufstand* "mass uprising", and *familienmitgliedern* "family members" are compound nouns, whose meanings can be expressed with separate words in English. Likewise, *tischtennisball "ping pong ball"* is an amalgamation of three words, *tisch* "table", *tennis* "tennis", and *ball* "ball".

Table 4.4 Different Stress Placements in Compounds vs. Non-compounds

Compound	*Non-Compound*
bluébird "a type of American songbird"	*blue bírd* "any bird that has blue feathers"
whíteboard "a wipeable board"	*white boárd* "any board that is white"
*stróngh*old "a place that has been fortified"	*strong hóld* "a grip that is powerful"

Understanding the German propensity to form new words in this way is useful for second language learners of German and can help them parse newly encountered words into smaller, more manageable chunks, rather than simply treat them as long, difficult words. The job of the German language teacher, then, is to demystify the principles of word formation in German so that they can help students in vocabulary acquisition.

Aside from compounding, another strategy that many languages use to form new words is reduplication. **Reduplication** is a morphological process that changes a word's meaning by repeating or copying all or part of the word. In Malay, duplication of root words can serve the same function that bound morphemes serve in other languages. For example, some nouns can be reduplicated to denote plurality. Examples include *buku-buku* "books", *pokok-pokok* "trees", and *orang-orang* "people", which are derived from *buku* "book", *pokok* "tree", and *orang* "person".

Some adjectives in Malay become adverbs when duplicated. Examples include *lambat-lambat* "slowly", *dalam-dalam*, "deeply" and *tajam-tajam* "sharply", derived from *lambat* "slow", *dalam* "deep", and *tajam* "sharp". In addition, some Malay verbs become nouns when partially reduplicated. For example, *sedu-seduan* "sobbing" is derived from *sedu* "to sob" and *tindak-tanduk* "action", from *tindak* "to act on". Partial reduplication also occurs in certain bound morphemes in Malay such as *haru-biru* "in great confusion", *dolak-dalik* "going back and forth", and *mundar-mandir* "walk aimlessly".

In English, we can find examples of full reduplication in words like *bye-bye*, *night-night*, and *no-no*. English also has partial reduplication in rhyming compounds such as, *walkie-talkie, mumbo-jumbo, itsy-bitsy, super-duper, hocus-pocus*, and *razzle-dazzle*, where the first word is reduplicated except for the onset of the first syllable.

Internal modification is a morphological process that substitutes one sound for another to mark a grammatical contrast. In English, internal modification can be observed in the formation of the past participle (e.g., *see/saw, steal/stole, make/made, ring/rang*). It can also be seen in the irregular plural forms of nouns (e.g., *man/men, woman/women, foot/feet, tooth/teeth, mouse/mice*). An internal modification can also involve suprasegmental features such as pitch and stress. Thus, some nouns become verbs by a change in the placement of stress (e.g., *réfund/refúnd, cónflict/conflíct, ínsult/insúlt*).

A whole set of English words can be learned by mastering this stress placement rule. Teachers can help students use the correct form of these words by presenting sentences such as, *Some people will go to great lengths to avoid _____ (cónflict). These results _____ (conflíct) with earlier findings*. Students can work in pairs to fill in the blanks and practice reading the sentences out loud to their partners, making sure to place stress accurately.

Related to these noun/verb pairs are another set of words like *decide*/*decisive*, *invade/invasive*, and *offend*/*offensive*, where a verb becomes an adjective when the ending sound *d* is replaced with *-sive*. When students are made aware of this principle of word formation, they can learn a whole new set of words relatively easily. There are also regularities in stress placement involving English words

with suffixes *-y* and *-ic* such as *ecónomy/económic*, *demócracy/democrátic*, *geógraphy/geográphic*, and *philánthropy/philanthrópic*. Notice how the stressed vowel in a word with the suffix *-y* is reduced to a schwa when the word takes on the suffix *-ic*. Since many of these words are found in academic English, teachers' pointing out such patterns can facilitate students' vocabulary growth.

Finally, **suppletion** is a morphological process that marks a grammatical contrast by replacing a morpheme with a completely different morpheme. Suppletion involves related words that look nothing like each other. These are words that teachers often tell students to "just memorize". A good example of suppletion can be seen in English, where the pronoun *I* is used for the subject of the sentence and the pronoun *me* is used for the direct object of the sentence. There is similar contrast between *he* and *him, she* and *her, we* and *us*, and *they* and *them*. As can be seen in the following, **case** involves a change in a word's form to indicate its grammatical role in the sentence (as subject, direct object, and so on).

Nominative	*Accusative*	*Possessive*
I	me	my
he	him	his
she	her	her
we	us	our
they	them	their

Thus, nominative and accusative cases refer to the subject and direct object of the verb respectively, while possessive case refers to ownership. For each

Voices From the Classroom 4.2—Churchill's Trouble With Case

Winston Churchill, one of the greatest figures of the twentieth century, had considerable difficulty with Latin grammar as a schoolboy. The following is an excerpt from his autobiography, *My Early Life: 1874–1904*.

[The Form Master] produced a thin greeny-brown-covered book filled with words in different types of print.

"You have never done any Latin before, have you?" he said.

"No, sir."

"This is a Latin grammar." He opened it at a well-thumbed page. "You must learn this," he said, pointing to a number of words in a frame of lines. "I will come back in half an hour and see what you know."

Behold me then on a gloomy evening, with an aching heart, seated in front of the First Declension.

Mensa	a table
Mensa	o table
Mensam	a table
Mensae	of a table
Mensae	to or for a table
Mensa	by, with or from a table

What on earth did it mean? Where was the sense of it? It seemed absolute rigmarole to me. However, there was one thing I could always do: I could learn by heart. And I thereupon proceeded, as far as my private sorrows would allow, to memorise the acrostic-looking task which had been set me.

In due course the Master returned.

"Have you learnt it?" he asked.

"I think I can *say* it, sir", I replied; and I gabbled it off.

He seemed so satisfied with this that I was emboldened to ask a question.

"What does it mean, sir?"

"It means what it says. Mensa, a table. Mensa is a noun of the First Declension. There are five declensions. You have learnt the singular of the First Declension."

"But," I repeated, "what does it mean?"

"Mensa means a table," he answered.

"Then why does mensa also mean O table," I enquired, "and what does O table mean?"

"Mensa, O table, is the vocative case," he replied.

"But why O table?" I persisted in genuine curiosity.

"O table—you would use that in addressing a table, in invoking a table." And then seeing he was not carrying me with him, "You would use it in speaking to a table."

"But I never do," I blurted out in honest amazement.

"If you are impertinent, you will be punished, and punished, let me tell you, very severely," was his conclusive rejoinder.

Such was my first introduction to the classics from which, I have been told, many of our cleverest men have derived so much solace and profit.

From: Churchill, Winston. (1958). *My Early Life: 1874–1904*. New York: Simon & Schuster (pp. 10–12).

case, while the meaning of the word is related from column to column, the pronoun changes form completely.

Table 4.5 Suppletion in English Verbs

	Present	*Past*
Regular form	walk	walked
Regular form	chew	chewed
Suppletive form	go	went
Suppletive form	am	was

Table 4.6 Suppletion in English Adjectives

	Adjective	*Comparative*	*Superlative*
Regular form	big	bigger	biggest
Regular form	small	smaller	smallest
Suppletive form	good	better	best
Suppletive form	bad	worse	worst

Table 4.7 Suppletive Forms of the Adjectives "Good" and "Bad" in Some of the Romance Languages and Latin

	good	*better/best*	*bad*	*worse/worst*
French	bon	meilleur	mal	pire
Spanish	bueno	mejor	malo	peor
Italian	buono	migliore	male	peggiore
Catalan	bo	millor	mal	pitjor
Portuguese	bom	melhor	mau	pior
Latin	bonus	melior	malus	peior

In addition to the pronouns, the verbs *go* and *be* in English also have suppletive past tenses (see Table 4.5). Notice that there is simply no similarity between *go* and *went*, and between *am* and *was*. It is not possible to show a relationship between these words through a general rule because the forms involved in suppletion have different roots.

The same goes for English adjectives *good* and *bad*, which have suppletive comparative and superlative forms (Table 4.6).

The comparative and superlative of the adjective *good* and *bad* are also suppletive in the Romance languages, which have evolved from Latin (see Table 4.7). Notice the striking similarities among the five languages, whose connection to the original suppletive forms in Latin is easy to observe.

4.7 Teaching Principles of Word Formation to Students

How can knowledge of word formation help language learners? One of the most important tasks facing the language teacher is helping students learn new

words and use them accurately in different contexts. Teachers can use a variety of strategies to help students in this regard.

For one, bilingual Spanish-English speakers can be taught to use related morphological structures in Spanish and English to understand sophisticated English lexical items and to expand their English vocabularies. Teachers can point out that a Spanish noun that ends in *-idad* almost always has an English cognate that ends in *-ity* (*actividad/activity, electricidad/electricity, velocidad/velocity*). Similarly, the Spanish bound morpheme *-mente* works very much like the English suffix *-ly* and changes an adjective to an adverb (*rápidamente/rapidly, perfectamente/perfectly, totalmente/totally*). If students already know the Spanish word, its equivalent in English can be pointed out. If they do not

Voices From the Classroom 4.3—"Superlatives Olympics"

Morphology definitely comes into play when I teach the grammar of comparatives and superlatives. After a lesson on how *-er* and *-est* endings change the meaning of adjectives, as well as an explanation of when to use *more*, *most*, *better*, and *best*, we have a Superlatives Olympics. Three teams send up one teammate for each event, and we compete to find out who can jump the highest, who has the longest hair, who can yell the loudest, who has the biggest feet, who has the smallest hands, who can write the fastest, who is the best singer, who is the coolest dancer, etc. Students get very competitive, and they use comparatives and superlatives to emphatically argue their teammates' victories (*Abdullah is not taller than Omar! Just look! Abdullah is shorter! Omar is the tallest!)*

Erica Ashton, ESL Teacher

know the word in either language, the Spanish and English words can be taught together to promote development of literacy in both languages.

Students can also benefit from having cognates pointed out and learning how to distinguish cognates from false cognates. **Cognates** are words that have the same linguistic derivation from the same original word or root. Examples of Spanish-English cognates include: *centro/center*, *colonia/colony, grupo/group, operación/operation, problema/problem, votar/vote*. Teachers can increase students' awareness of cognates by having students sort words in pairs. Teachers can give to each pair of students a set of word cards, each with either a word in Spanish or in English. The students sort and match the cognates (a card with the word *centro* would be matched with a card with word *center*, *grupo* would be matched with *group*, and so on). Students then discuss

in pairs what the matched words have in common. Students can talk about similarities in the sounds between the cognates and what strategies they might use to spell the words correctly in both languages.

Cognates appear across many Indo-European languages. As can be seen in Table 4.8, many science- and technology-related words are cognates that share common Greek and Latin roots such as *aud*, *eco, meta, morph*, and *organ*.

When teaching correspondences between cognates found in different languages, it is important to help students distinguish true cognates from false cognates. **False cognates** are pairs of words that appear to be cognates because of similar sounds (and meaning) but in fact are not cognates because they have different origins. Examples of false Spanish-English cognates include: *sano/sane* (*sano* means *healthy*), *embarazada/embarrassed* (*embarazada* means *pregnant*), *la noticia/notice* (*noticia* means *news*), *la librería/library* (*librería* means *bookstore*), *el negocio/negotiation* (*negocio* means *business*), *el suceso/success* (*suceso* means *event*), *el éxito/exit* (*éxito* means *success*). To help students identify false cognates, teachers can have them work in pairs to find as many false cognates as they can from a given list of words. Students can talk about similarities in the appearance and sounds of false cognates and the true meaning of the words. Each group of students can then share a pair of false

Voices From the Classroom 4.4—Cognates Have to be Explicitly Taught, Not Assumed

I was surprised when cognates were not as readily apparent to my Spanish-speaking students as I anticipated that they would be. That said, upon reflection on my own experience learning German, I could see the same effects were present when I was attempting to learn German words and phrases that I now can recognize as being very similar in construction and meaning, but different in pronunciation (e.g., *hunde* vs. *hound*, *freunde* vs. *friend*, *wasser* vs. *water*). The ability to relate form, meaning, and sounds is important for learning new words and shows how language learning is multi-modal/multi-sensory. Here, teachers can help students see connections that may not be readily apparent to them.

Steve Wagoner, Adult ESL Teacher

cognates they found with the whole class.

When teaching vocabulary, it is important for teachers to understand that knowing a word requires not only knowing its meaning, but also knowing how it relates to similar forms. For example, the word *nutrient* is related to words

Table 4.8 Science Cognates in Select Languages

English	*Spanish*	*Italian*	*French*	*German*
audiology	audiología	audiologia	audiologie	audiologie
ecology	ecología	ecologia	écologie	ökologie
metamorphosis	metamorfosis	metamorfosi	métamorphosse	metamorphose
organism	organismo	organismo	organisme	organismus

with different affixes such as *nutrition, nutritious, nutritionist*, and *nutritional*. Knowing how each form can be used accurately within a sentence is as important as knowing the meanings of the individual words. Thus, students can say, "The foods you eat supply your body with the nutrients you need" but not "Poor nutrients may increase your risk of heart disease and diabetes". Teachers can explain why the word *nutrition* is a more accurate term in the second sentence by drawing students' attention to the small but important difference in the meanings of these closely related words (*nutrient* meaning the substance that provides nourishment for maintaining a healthy body, as opposed to *nutrition*, which means the process of providing nourishment).

Knowing a word also means understanding how it relates to other related words and concepts (e.g., *calories, carbohydrates, fats, proteins, vitamins, minerals*). New words are more meaningful when they are understood in conjunction with other words related to the same general topic. The good news for language teachers is that students are already exposed to these and many academic words in everyday conversations and in their encounters with a variety of written materials available on- and off-line. Since students learn vocabulary most effectively in real context and related to topics that interest them, teachers should expose students to reading materials that they care about and encourage them to read widely. In all of this, teachers should remember that helping students to gain a deeper understanding of individual words and how to use them accurately is as important as helping them to acquire more vocabulary.

Recommended Websites

¡Colorín Colorado! offers a wealth of bilingual, research-based information, activities, and advice for educators and families of English language learners. www.colorincolorado.org/

WordSpy is an online bank of new words added to the English language. www.wordspy.com/

Further Reading

Arnoff, M., & Fudeman, K. (2010). *What is morphology?* (2nd ed.). Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Haspelmath, M., & Sims, A. (2010). *Understanding morphology* (2nd ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.
Katamba, F., & Stonham, J. (2006). *Morphology* (2nd ed.). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Stahl, S. A., & Nagy, W. E. (2006). *Teaching word meanings*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Exercises

1. Consider the following words in English. For each word, determine whether it is a simple word (made up of a single morpheme) or a complex word (composed of two or more morphemes). For the complex words you identified, circle all the bound morphemes.

(a) bike	(e) greener	(i) friendship	(m) habitual
(b) clever	(f) review	(j) gladness	(n) nonbinding
(c) lightly	(g) distrust	(k) forest	(o) active
(d) respectful	(h) yellowish	(l) uncaring	(p) statement

2. The following words are made up of two or more morphemes. For each word, isolate the morphemes and determine whether each morpheme is free or bound. For each bound morpheme, determine if it is derivational or inflectional.

(a) joyful	(e) unhealthy	(i) multicultural	(m) globalization
(b) staplers	(f) boyfriend	(j) crazier	(n) thunderstorm
(c) glorify	(g) judgment	(k) recreational	(o) tallest
(d) birthdays	(h) unthinkable	(l) colorlessness	(p) governments

3. Consider the two columns of words below and answer the questions that follow.

straight	straighten
hard	harden
sweet	sweeten
awake	awaken
ripe	ripen
bright	brighten
worse	worsen

   a) What part of speech does the suffix *-en* attach to?
   b) What part of speech is the resulting word after the suffix *-en* has been attached?
   c) How does the suffix *-en* change the meaning of the word that it is attached to?

4. Each word in the following two lists is preceded by a prefix *un-*.

undo	unafraid
unbend	unconscious
unfold	unfair
unpack	unable
unwind	unlucky
unzip	uncertain
untangle	unseen

   a) What part of speech are the words in the left column before and after the prefix *un-* is attached? What part of speech are the words in the right column before and after the prefix *un-* is attached?
   b) How does the prefix *un-* change the meaning of the word it attaches to in the left column? How does the prefix *un-* change the meaning of the word it attaches to in the right column? How is the change of meaning in the left column different from that in the right column?
   c) Based on this evidence, would you say that the two columns represent words with two different prefixes?

5. The Turkish plural suffix has two allomorphs, *-lar* and *-ler*. Consider the following data from Turkish and determine the phonetic environments in which each allomorph is used. Note that "ü" is a high front rounded vowel, "ö", a mid front rounded vowel, and "ı", a high back unrounded vowel. (Hint: Rather than simply list the sound that is immediately to the left of the allomorph, try looking at the last vowel in the root word. See if you can identify any natural class among the last vowels in the left column vs. the last vowels in the right column.)

-lar		*-ler*	
kitap "book"	kitaplar "books"	ev "house"	evler "houses"
araba "car"	arabalar "cars"	gün "day"	günler "days"
yol "way"	yollar "ways"	göz "eye"	gözler "eyes"
okul "school"	okullar "schools"	el "hand"	eller "hands"
kız "girl"	kızlar "girls"	diz "knee"	dizler "knees"

6. Working with a partner, select a paragraph in any news article and list as many compounds as you can find. Remember that compounds can be a noun (*football, distance learning, standby*), a verb (*freeze-dry, highlight, blackmail*), an adjective (*awe-inspiring, blue-green, over-ripe*), an adverb (*forthwith, straightaway*), or a preposition (*within, without*), and can be written as single words, with a hyphen, or as separate words.

6 Semantics and Pragmatics

The Study of Meanings

6.1 Introduction

In the last several chapters, we have been building up language from the smallest component all the way to complex sentences. We have learned how to structure sounds and words, phrases, and clauses. However, what is structure without meaning? To explore this question, let us consider a famous sentence in (1).

(1) Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.

While the sentence is structurally sound and grammatically correct, there are some problems with the meaning. We might point out that something colorless cannot also be green, that ideas cannot be colored, that ideas do not sleep, and that sleeping cannot be done furiously. This sentence demonstrates that even if you follow all the phrase structure rules of a language—in fact, you can probably diagram this sentence after reading Chapter 5—it can still yield a meaningless utterance. Thus, it is not enough that a language learner acquire the structures in the target language; the learner must also understand (1) meanings of individual words, (2) how words function together in phrases and clauses to make meaning, and (3) how the speaker and listener make sense of this through context, norms, and other non-linguistics elements. Semantics is the layer of language that provides this understanding.

In this chapter, we will begin by discussing **lexical semantics**, or how meaning is created within and between words. Next, we will describe how meaning is derived from phrases and sentences. This chapter also discusses how non-grammatical factors such as speaker attitudes and situational context contribute to meaning. It explains how meaning is communicated in conversation and shows that what people say and how they say things are culturally conditioned (cross-cultural pragmatics). Finally, we will provide some strategies for helping learners to use language in culturally appropriate ways.

6.2 Lexical Semantics

6.2.1 Sense and Reference

Let us begin with a single word. Meaning can be constructed in many ways, but at the word level, it comes down to two things: **sense** and **reference**. Sense is defined as the concept or mental representation of a word. If you hear the word *bird*, you might imagine a feathered and winged animal. Reference, however, is the relation between the linguistic expression and the existence of that entity in the real world. You might look outside and see a bird, and that feathered and winged animal you see is matched up with the verbal expression [bɹd]. Since birds are both conceptual and real—and most people have seen one—the word [bɹd] has both sense and reference.

It is possible for words to have different senses but the same reference. Look at the underlined words in the following sentences.

(2) a. My brother likes tacos.
b. Jason likes tacos.
c. He likes tacos.

The words *my brother, Jason*, and *he* are all different in sense, conjuring up different mental representations: *my brother* is a familial relation, *Jason* is a name, and *he* is a masculine singular pronoun. However, they all refer to the same person in this case. It's also possible to have the same sense but different references, as in the sentence below in (3).

(3) This little piggy went to market; this little piggy went home.

In this segment from a children's nursery rhyme, the subject of both clauses is *this little piggy*, which both have the same sense; both conjure up the image of a small pig. However, in this context there are two references, or two piggies, and they went in two different directions. In fact, the nursery rhyme is recited with emphasis on the word *this* to indicate that there are indeed two different piggies. Thus, it is possible to have one sense and multiple references.

Are there words in language that have only one or the other? In other words, can you have a concept of something (sense) but not have an example of that meaning in the real world (reference)? Certainly. A dragon, for example, has sense: you can picture a large, scaly creature with wings that breathes fire. However, it does not have an actual referent in the real world as it is a fictional animal; thus, it does not have reference. In reverse, you could experience something in the real world (reference) but not have a word or expression for it (sense), at least in the languages you know. In this case, it has reference but not sense.

Language learners, especially younger students, tend to find words with reference much easier to learn than words without reference. Babies learning

their first language often start with words of family members or common items around the house, in large part because the referent is immediately present and readily available. For second language learners, this is also the case. When first learning a new language, most teachers start with vocabulary pertaining to tangible objects around the room, or common greetings that can immediately be put to use. Older students learning a word without a reference might access a translation to learn the new word in the target language; even if a dragon does not exist in the world, there is a word for it in their other language and you already have the concept of a dragon in your head. But if you have never even seen a picture of a dragon, learning the meaning of that word without the reference or sense tends to be more of a challenge.

6.2.2 Word Relations

We learned in Chapter 5 that words are grouped into structural units called constituents. Linguists have also learned that words are grouped into meaning units as well. When learning a list of vocabulary, learners tend to do better when they learn the words grouped into categories. Some semantic categories we will discuss here are **synonyms**, **antonyms**, and **hyper-/hyponyms**.

Synonyms are words that are similar in meaning. Some examples of synonym pairs are *trash-garbage*, *eat-consume*, *beautiful-lovely*, *watch-look*. We are careful not to say synonyms have identical meanings. In fact, words in languages tend not to be redundant. Even if there is a word that seems almost interchangeable with the other, there tends to be small nuanced differences. Let us take trash and garbage, for example. In American English, trash and garbage tend to be used by similar groups of people; in other words, it is not necessarily a dialectal difference, where some regions prefer the word *trash* and other regions use *garbage*. A single speaker might use both words. That single speaker might swear there is really no difference for them. However, does it truly have the same exact meaning for that person? A *trash can* and a *garbage can* might yield different senses and references (Is one metal? Is one kept inside the home whereas the other is outside?). *Trash disposal* versus *garbage disposal* might conjure up different images as well. The adjective forms *trashy* versus *garbagy* might also be different. Many people realize there are minute differences that can be teased apart when you take some time to analyze your own language use. Synonyms are thus words that have similar meanings, but it is challenging to find two words within the same language that have the exact same meaning and use.

Antonyms are words that have opposite meanings. There are four types of antonyms: complementary antonyms, gradable antonyms, reverse antonyms, and relational antonyms. Complementary antonyms are words that are direct opposites of the other, where typically one falls under one category or the other: X vs. not X. Such a pair would be *alive-dead*, where *dead* means not *alive*. Other complementary antonyms include pairs such as *married-unmarried, mortal-immortal*, and *on-off*. Gradable antonyms are words whose meanings

fall on opposite sides of a spectrum, but there are in between states between the two words. An example of a pair of gradable antonym is *big* and *small*, in which the two words indicate opposite meanings on a spectrum of different sizes. Other examples of gradable antonyms include *hot-cold*, *light-dark*, and *happy-sad*. Reverse antonyms are words whose meanings suggest movement, and one word undoes the other movement, like *right-left, push-pull*, or *break-fix*. Finally, relational antonyms are opposite words whose meaning only exists if the other exists. Such an example is *teacher* and *student*, where teacher cannot exist without any students to teach, and one cannot be a student without a teacher of some sort. Other examples of relational antonyms are *borrow-lend* and *over-under*.

There are many words where a true polar opposite does not exist or is debatable. What is the antonym of *dog*? A student might say *cat*, because culturally, we think of them as pets that do not get along (not always true) but both are common household domesticated mammals and have many similarities—perhaps more similarities than there are differences. Even more tricky is identifying an antonym for a verb. For instance, what is the antonym of *run*? Is it to stand? Sit? Walk? This might differ depending on the context. For instance, in the context of running a marathon, the opposite would be to *not* run a marathon, in which case you could be standing still or sitting. Antonyms for adjectives, adverbs, and prepositions tend to be easier because they tend to take on a modifying role, but it tends to become more open to debate when it comes to identifying antonyms for verbs.

The last two word relations are actually antonyms themselves: hypernyms and hyponyms. Hypernyms are superordinate words that form a set or category in which other specific words fall under. For instance, *color* is a hypernym of the word *green*, because *color* is the set or category for specific words such as *green*. Hyponyms are words with a specific meaning that falls under a general category or set. The word *green* is a hyponym of *color*, because *green* is a specific word that belongs under the category of *color*. Some other examples of hypernym-hyponym pairs are *clothing-socks*, *insect-ant*, and *move-run*.

6.2.3 Homophony and Polysemy

In many of the world's languages, there are areas of ambiguity that stem from a lack of one-to-one correspondence between words and the meanings represented by them. We discussed in Chapter 2 that in English, some letters make more than one sound, and some sounds are represented by more than one letter. Meaning works the same way. **Homophony**, or the phenomenon in which multiple words with different meanings have the same pronunciation, causes difficulty for learners, native and nonnative alike. For example, in English the words *two, too*, and *to* are challenging because they are pronounced the same way but mean three different things. In spoken language, one can easily disambiguate these based on context, but in writing learners have the task of corresponding the right meaning with the right spelling.

Even more challenging still is **polysemy**, in which one word can have multiple meanings. An example of polysemy in English is *duck*, where one meaning is a noun for a water bird and another is a verb referring to the act of quickly lowering one's head. Other examples of polysemy include *fire* (set *fire* to something; *fire* an employee), *cast* (wear a *cast* on my arm; the *cast* of *Cheers*; *cast* a spell; *cast* something aside), or *stick* (a tree *stick; stick* a note on the door; *stick* the landing). While proficient speakers can usually figure out the intended meaning based on context, learners of the language have trouble with polysemy. This is because learners tend to learn first the most common definition of a word. For instance, when a learner hears the word *stick*, probably the most likely meaning they have in mind is a stick from a tree. They may not have heard *stick* being used as a verb to mean attach, and most assuredly they are probably not familiar with the very specific usage as in *stick the landing*.

However, a surprising number of academic jargon is polysemic, and it typically has very specific meanings. Some examples are *class*, *report*, *board*, or *subject*. *Class*, for example, is a high-frequency word that beginners might know to mean a group of students learning together. They might even learn that it can be modified with the subject, like *math class*, *music class*, etc. and that it can be used as a vocative to address the students (e.g., *good morning*, *class*). However, *class* can also mean a body of students whose year of graduation is the same (*the class of '02*) or level in school (*sophomore class*), which have slightly different nuanced uses. Even more technical still, *class* can refer to one's socioeconomic level, and it can also signify etiquette or polished behavior (e.g., *to have class*). *Class* can also be a specific word in biological taxonomy just below *phylum*, or it can be a word signifying a set of variables in mathematics. These are just the nouns. Disambiguating such a word and knowing which meaning is being employed is a challenging task. Academic texts are full of such specific uses, where polysemy can often cause difficulties for language learners.

This is one of the pitfalls of dictionaries. While looking up a word is a simple mechanical task, trying to figure out which definition is being used requires a basic understanding of each definition. More difficult still is then producing that word in the right context. To go one step further, dictionaries may not always provide the true meaning of something. Recall in Chapter 1, we explored the meaning of *red* versus *red-red*, and how that second term implies a prototype for a meaning. *Red-red* is not something you can look up in a dictionary. This brings us to the question, what does it mean to know a word? While most might say it means knowing the definition of that word, we have learned that it goes beyond just the definition. What teachers often focus on is students understanding and having a large breadth of vocabulary knowledge; the more words you know, the better. However, we might argue that to truly crack the lexical semantics layer, you also need to have depth of vocabulary: knowing all the layers of meaning one word can have (e.g., *class*) and also understanding the usage.

6.3 Phrasal Semantics

Meaning does not stop at the word boundary, of course. Meaning can be constructed and construed at the phrasal or sentence level, a subfield referred to as **phrasal semantics**. A word's relationship to the other words around it, as well as the role within the constituent, is an important part of phrasal semantics. This is where semantics interfaces with syntax. **Semantic roles** (or sometimes called **thematic or theta roles**) are the functions that a predicate can assign to the various constituents around them. For instance, let us take a verb like *hit*. Such a predicate requires two entities: the entity that does the hitting (X), and the entity that is hit (Y).

(4) X hit Y.

Entities that are capable of doing the hitting are usually animate. We call these doers of actions, or *agents*. The entity that gets hit—animate or inanimate—is the target of the action. These undergoers of action are called *patients*. Agent and patient are semantic roles. In a sentence like *Jane hit the baseball*, the agent is *Jane* and the patient is *the baseball*.

Different predicates require different semantic roles. Some examples of these semantic roles can be seen in Table 6.1. In a predicate like *to fall*, for instance, there is not an active causer of the action; usually, falling is incidental. Thus, the entity that did the falling is neither an agent nor a patient, but an *experiencer*. X experienced falling.

(5) X fell.

In a sentence like *The child fell*, the experiencer is *the child*. The predicate *fall* also does not require a direct object, so you cannot have a sentence like *The child fell the chair*.

Table 6.1 Semantic Roles

Semantic Role	*Definition*	*Example*
Agent	Doer of the action or event	*Andrew* kicked the ball.
Patient	Undergoer of the action or event	Andrew kicked *the ball*.
Experiencer	Living entity that experiences the action or event	*Andrew* fell on the ice.
Instrument	Entity used to accomplish the action or event	Andrew hit the ball with *a bat*.
Theme	Entity that is moved by the action or event	Andrew sent *a message*.
Source	Location or entity that something moves from	Andrew left *the house*.
Goal	Location or entity that something moves to	Andrew went to *school*.
Benefactive	Entity that benefits from the action or event	Andrew gave *me* a gift.

Why are these semantic roles important? Learning about semantic roles shows how predicates are all quite different in their requirements. All of these words are verbs—think, kick, send, read—but they have different requirements for what can be its subject and what can be its object, if any. Remember our nonsensical sentence *colorless green ideas sleep furiously*? For the verb *sleep*, you cannot have that subject be a inanimate noun (e.g., ideas); *sleep* requires an experiencer as its subject, and ideas cannot experience. Even if you have a perfectly grammatical sentence that is syntactically sound and follows all the phrase structure rules, if you disobey the semantic roles the predicate requires, the sentence won't make any sense:

(6) The carpet thinks.
(7) A window kicked the man.
(8) Fear sent the tree my mother.
(9) Clarification read a book.

Certainly, musicians, poets, and other literary minds can intentionally flout those semantic roles for rhetoric intent. A beautiful sentence like *the sea whispered secrets to the wind* breaks the semantic roles required of the verb *whisper*. However, to be able to intentionally bend these rules, the user must first understand what those rules are. And outside of these highly specialized uses, semantic role requirements must be followed.

Closely related to semantic roles is what is known as **transitivity**, a property that predicates can have that determine whether or not it has a direct object. Predicates can be transitive, intransitive, or ditransitive. **Transitive** predicates, such as *hit*, require a direct object. When transitive predicates appear with no direct object, they sound awkward: *I hit*. In contrast, **intransitive** predicates, such as *fall*, require no direct object. Intransitive predicates sound awkward when a direct object does appear, such as *The child fell the chair*. Ditransitive predicates are ones in which two objects are required: a direct object and an indirect object. An example of a ditransitive predicate is the verb *give*, as in *I gave my mother a gift*, where the NP [*my mother*] is the indirect object with the semantic role of "benefactive", and the NP [*a gift*] is the direct object with the semantic role of "theme".

The neat thing about semantics and semantic roles is that you can make sense of it in the real world. It follows that you cannot hit unless you have something to hit (otherwise, it's not a hit; it's a miss). Falling is something that just happens to someone or something, however. You can cause something to fall, but you would use a different verb or construction (I pushed, knocked down, etc. or I made it fall). And when you *give*, you have the item you are giving and the person or entity you are giving it to. If you are standing there holding a gift but it hasn't reached the recipient, you haven't *given* it yet.

6.4 Pragmatics

So far we have discussed how meaning is created at the morpheme level (*happy* → *happily*), word level (*duck* vs. *duck*), and phrase level (*Vincent sent a*

letter). In this section, we talk about how meaning is created through use and context, a branch of linguistics called pragmatics. Meaning can be generated and inferred not just through our knowledge of the sense and reference of a word or how that word is used in a phrase, but also our knowledge about the situational context and our knowledge about culture.

6.4.1 Context

The context of when, how, and with whom language is used is an important layer of language. Think about a phrase that would be perfectly appropriate in one setting, and awkward or rude in another. Think about the way you would speak in a job interview versus how you might speak to your closest friend. It is not enough to simply utter well-formed utterances; you have to understand the situation and setting and know what is appropriate for that circumstance.

Context can change the meaning of a single word. The word *okay* might be defined in a dictionary as a statement of consent, agreement, or a description. But how you say it, when you say it, and who you say it to can drastically change that meaning. Try saying the word *okay* to convey the following meanings with different contexts:

(10) You are uncertain about what just happened
(11) You want to seem dispassionate but you are actually very excited about an offer
(12) Someone makes a rude comment
(13) A child tells you something inane and you have to pretend to be impressed

A single word can have dozens of meanings, and the tone of how you say it paired with the context can change it from one meaning to another.

Meaning can also be created and inferred through different situational contexts. Every sentence in the following conversations are well-formed and are perfectly fine in isolation. However, given the context, they are inappropriate or awkward. See (14).

(14)

a. Laura: Hey, John, can I talk to you about something?
   John: I'll see you later.

b. Teacher: John, can you close that window, please?
   John: Yes, I can. [does nothing]

c. CEO: Good morning, Mr. Sullivan, thank you for coming in for an interview.
   John: No prob, kiddo.

The first conversation in (14a) is awkward because Laura seems to want to talk to John about something serious, and John responds with a farewell greeting.

The immediate rejection is potentially hurtful to Laura and awkward to the overhearer. In the second conversation in (14b), the teacher is asking John to close the window, framing it in a question with the modal *can* to be polite (as opposed to simply ordering him to close the window: *John, close the window*). However, the response is quite awkward because John responds by saying he can close the window, possibly interpreting it as a question of whether he has the physical capacity to close it, and does not actually perform the action. In (14c), the CEO of the company with whom John is interviewing addresses John in a formal way, using the salutation *Mr. Sullivan*. However, John responds in an informal manner, calling the CEO *kiddo* and using the phrase *no prob*, both of which would be perfectly fine in some contexts but unusual in a job interview. In all three cases, John's (non)response is rude or awkward because he does not understand or misreads the situational context. It is also possible he does understand the situational context and is responding in this manner to be intentionally discourteous.

The point here is that meaning is not just words and phrases; it's understanding the how, who, and why of your surrounding context. This is something that young children sometimes take a while to learn. A child might have excellent syntax and phonology, but it is not for several years later that the child develops awareness of what is pragmatically appropriate or inappropriate. You might have heard a child ask an awkward question or say something loudly in a public place that might be construed as inappropriate or awkward had it been an adult speaker. Often times, when a young child does something like this, people are pretty forgiving. However, the same courtesy is not granted when it is a language learner, especially if the learner is older. Pragmatic competence is language-specific, so what is considered appropriate does not necessarily translate from one language to another. Thus, pragmatic competence is something language learners need to focus on and learn explicitly. Teachers can help learners practice this by giving them fictional contexts, such as in the *okay* exercise above, and responding with the same word with various intonations. Teachers can also provide students with example conversations where something has gone awry and ask students to identify what went wrong and how to fix it.

6.4.2 Culture

Related to the foregoing discussion, culture and cultural context can factor into meaning. One might assume that what is pragmatically acceptable in one culture is the same in another, but if you ever travel to another country or region, you will quickly notice that this is not the case. What is taboo in one area—whether that be religion, age, job, death—is not necessarily the case in another area.

Take apologizing, for example. In your most familiar culture, what would be the appropriate apology, if any, if you are standing in a crowded bus or

Voices From the Classroom 6.1 — Formality and Audience

With an increased use of technology in classrooms and overall student life, teacher and student communication has shifted from in-person interactions to more emails and internet platform messaging. This being said, I work with students on email formatting including appropriate greetings, wording, and formatting depending on audience. I introduce levels of formality, which may differ in their native countries, and provide examples of emails directed to employers, supervisors, teachers, and peers. I've found that it is a low risk opportunity for code switching and kids are able to double check that what they're trying to say is actually what they're writing down.

Gabriela Melendez, High School Bilingual Teacher

train and you accidentally and lightly bump up against someone you do not know? In one culture, it might be normal to say quietly *sorry* without making eye contact and without need for response. In another culture, you might have to say *oops, sorry about that!* and the other person has to say something like *no problem!*, which might lead to some comment about how the bus is especially crowded today. In other cultures, no apology is necessary, and verbally apologizing would actually be an annoyance or embarrassment to the other person.

The same range of pragmatic appropriateness applies for complimenting. In some cultures, it is polite and expected to compliment someone. Among people in the U.S., for example, it is not uncommon for one person to compliment the other on a clothing item or accessory (*I love your earrings*) as a generic conversation starter or signal of openness and friendliness, even if the speaker is not necessarily interested in the particular item. In other parts of the world, it would be highly embarrassing to point out what someone is wearing. More interesting yet is the expected response: in some cultures you would downplay the value of the thing you were complimented on (*oh, this old thing? It's old and falling apart*), in others you would explain in great detail where you got it, especially if it was acquired through a particularly good deal, and in other cultures you would be expected to gift the item to the complimenter. Again, the take home point is that meanings for what might seem grammatically the same thing (*I like your watch*) are determined culturally and can change drastically from *I'm being friendly* to *Give me your watch*.

Voices From the Classroom 6.2—Teaching Pragmatics in the Language Classroom

Sean Stinson, who teaches ESOL in an elementary school, uses pragmatics for both language acquisition and classroom management. He emphasizes the vocabulary of politeness and teaches formulaic expressions such as *excuse me, please*, and *thank you* early on to newcomers and low fluency learners. He then moves on to other expressions necessary to move conversations along such as *That's interesting, I'd like to add . . .* or *That's an interesting answer, but I think . . .* while at the same time urging students not to interrupt each other. Sean teaches more advanced students that the past tense is considered more polite, as in *I was wondering . . . .* In a communicative context, learners are acquiring cultural and language competencies. At the same time, Sean is creating a learning environment where trial and error, thinking out loud, and peer support are encouraged.

Owen Andrews, Adult ESL Teacher

6.4.3 Attitude and Perspective

Meaning can also be determined through the attitude of the speaker or listener. One's attitude, preconceived notion, perspective, and other nonlinguistic psychological states can change the meaning of a particular utterance or the interpretation of an utterance. For example, you can hear an identical word said exactly the same way in different ways depending on your point of view. You may have experienced a time where you and another person heard the same thing but had two very different interpretations. Perhaps you thought the speaker was kind and welcoming, while your friend thought the speaker was rude and pretentious. The attitude and perspective of the speaker and listener can inject meaning that transcends grammatical structure. Likewise, preconceived notions can alter one's perception of meaning. If two people with very different ideals listen to the same political speech, for instance, the person whose values align with the politician might evaluate the speaker as astute, clear, and provocative while the person whose values differ from the politician may believe that the speaker was obtuse, unintelligible, and unoriginal.

An empirical example of this comes from a study by Rubin (1992). The researcher investigated undergraduate students' perceptions of their instructors based on physical appearance. In one part of the study, Rubin played an audio of a recorded lecture by a woman—a native speaker of English—to one group of students while projecting a still picture of a Caucasian woman on

the screen in the front of the room. Then, the students were asked various questions about the clarity, effectiveness, and speaking ability of the audio lecture. Students thought that the woman was clear, easy-to-understand, and seemed generally positive about the lecture. Then, Rubin played the identical audio file to another group of students, but this time he displayed a photo of an Asian woman on the screen. Students were asked the same questions, but this time students overall thought the lecture was not as effective, and some of the students said that the lecture was hard to understand because of the woman's accent. Keep in mind, of course, that it was the same audio recorded by a native English speaker that the first group of students heard. It appeared from the study that students actually heard an accent where there wasn't one. Generally, students in the group with the Asian woman's photo felt that the lecture was not as good. This suggests that even when two people—or two groups of people—hear the exact same thing, the meaning and overall impression can change given their perception of the speaker. By simply changing out the image of the person who they assumed was the speaker (even though that information was not given), the listeners received different meanings and had different experiences of listening to the lecture.

It's important to understand this as a language teacher and educator in general. Try as they might, teachers do not always have the same attitudes toward every student. Often times, students that are quieter might seem like they do not have as much language competence, while others that are more outwardly vocal seem like they are taking more risks and developing the language more effectively. Sometimes, teachers might have less patience with students that act out in class, and that might alter how they judge that student's true language ability. It takes a careful eye and conscious effort to discern that your attitude toward an idea, a situation, or another person might be affecting the meaning you take away from that person.

6.4.4 Having Effective Conversation: Grice's Maxims

We have discussed how meaning can be altered based on elements outside of phonology, morphology, or syntax, such as through context, culture, and attitude. Paul Grice, a British philosopher of language, is best known for his "**cooperative principle**", which describes how people achieve effective conversational communication in social situations. According to Grice, listeners and speakers act cooperatively and accept one another to be understood in a particular way. Grice's Maxims of Conversation take these into account, but also suggest a set of guidelines that, when followed, tend to have good results in human conversation. The four rules are as follows:

Maxim of quality: be truthful
Maxim of quantity: be as informative as required, no more than is adequate
Maxim of relevance: be as relevant as possible
Maxim of manner: be orderly and clear, do not be ambiguous

The **maxim of quality** suggests that generally, you should tell the truth or what you know to be true. When you take a French class, you should be able to assume that what your French teacher is teaching you is actually French. Or, if someone asks you on the street which way it is to the bus stop, you ought to point them to the actual direction of the bus stop rather than intentionally pointing them in the opposite direction. Grice recommends that generally people tell the truth or what they believe to be the truth.

The **maxim of quantity** advises that you be as informative as is required, but provide no more than what is adequate. In other words, we strive to say enough but not too much. For instance, if you are at a restaurant with a friend and he asks what you're thinking of ordering for your meal, it is appropriate to respond with a brief description of the two things you are considering, but perhaps not regale the person with why those two choices are specifically superior than all the rest of the food items on the menu. That falls under the category of too much information. On the other hand, if you simply reply to your friend "food", it comes off a bit curt and does not really answer the question adequately. This response is not enough quantity.

The third maxim is the **maxim of relevance**, in which we are recommended to be as on-topic and relevant as possible. In other words, conversations generally go better if one does not hop around topics haphazardly. As an example, if your colleague invites you to a social gathering, a relevant response should have something to do with the invitation, such as *I would love to stop by*, or *I wish I could, I have a prior engagement*, or even *I'm not sure, but thanks for the invite*. It would disobey the maxim of relevance if your response to such an invitation was *It took me forever to get to work this morning!* Or *Did you have lunch yet?*

Lastly, the **maxim of manner** suggests that we be orderly, clear, and avoid ambiguity. In other words, this maxim asks participants in an interaction to not make it extra difficult for the other people involved in the conversation. Consider a scenario in which you are conversing with a small group of people, perhaps to make plans for a weekend. Being orderly might mean you wait for one person to finish an utterance before speaking. Being clear could mean that you articulate your preferences so that everyone understands. Avoiding ambiguity might mean, for example, you use terms of address so people know you're talking to one person versus the whole group: "could I get a ride with you, Melissa?" versus "could I get a ride?"

The maxims of conversation, when unintentionally violated, can result in appearing awkward or clueless at best, offensive or hurtful at worst. However, Grice's maxims are intentionally flouted quite often. This is what results in humor, irony, or sarcasm. Take humor, for example: sitcoms and other comedies are riddled with maxim flouting. The last frame of a comic strip usually incorporates some form of bending the rules of a maxim or two. In a film, every time a blatant untruth is told, a character abruptly changes the topic, or gives an unexpectedly long-winded response, a maxim is being flouted. Maxims are also violated intentionally for purposes of irony or

sarcasm, saying the opposite of what you mean or intentionally not giving enough information.

6.4.5 Speech Acts

While we think of actions as being performed through physical action and motion, language can be an action, too. **Speech acts** are actions performed through language. We perform a speech act when we greet, compliment, thank, command, refuse, or ask permission. Speech acts come in five categories: **declaratives**, **commissives**, **expressives**, **representatives**, and **directives**. A declarative speech act changes the world around the speaker. Some examples of a declarative speech act are a *decree* or a *pronouncement*. A commissive speech act affects the speaker and commissions oneself to a course of action: *promise, swear, threat, offer, vow*. An expressive speech act is one in which the speaker expresses one's attitudes or state of affairs. Examples of expressive speech acts include *thank, hate, regret, apologize*. Representative speech acts are assertions or claims that the speaker believes to be true: *assert, believe, conclude, deny*. Finally, directive speech acts are ones where the speaker compels the listener to do something, such as *invite, command, request, warn*.

A special type of speech act across these five categories is what is known as a **performative speech act**. Performative speech acts are ones in which the words themselves are the action. For example, when someone says *I promise*, that promise is happening at the moment of—and through—the words themselves. Without saying the words, the action of promising does not happen. Another example of a performative speech act is when a pronouncement is made. The words *I pronounce* themselves perform the action of pronouncement.

Speech acts are of interest to language teachers and learners because there are multiple ways to accomplish one particular speech act. And like our discussion of culture earlier in this chapter, how you accomplish a speech act can be different from language to language. As an exercise, think of how many different ways you can refuse a dinner invitation. It depends on who the invitation was from, of course, and what the reason was that you could not (or did not want to) attend. The refusal itself could be done with as few words as "sorry, can't make it" to a long drawn out explanation of why you cannot attend and how much you wish you could. Language learners tend to have difficulty with this because there are many cultural and linguistic waters to navigate: different levels of formality, consequences for refusal, expression of regret. In some languages, like English, longer utterances typically sound more polite than shorter utterances, which then disadvantage the language learner.

Another reason why speech acts can be challenging for learners is that the function of the speech act does not always match the syntactic structure. In other words, syntactically speaking, we typically have declarative, interrogative, imperative, and exclamative sentences. Students are generally taught that declarative sentences are statements, interrogative sentences are questions, imperatives are commands, and exclamatives are exclamations.

Table 6.2 Syntax-Speech Act Mismatches

Speech Act	*Syntactic Structure*	*Example Sentence*
Question	Declarative	I was wondering if you can come.
Command	Declarative	You will put your shoes on *now*.
Command	Interrogative	Can you please be quiet?
Exclaim	Interrogative	What in the world is this?
Greet	Imperative	Take care.
Offend	Imperative	Don't cook that again anytime soon.
Offend	Exclamative	What a silly outfit!
Greet	Exclamative	What a long time it's been!

However, a declarative speech act does not always utilize declarative syntax, and a questioning speech act does not always appear in the form of a question. In Table 6.2, you will see some examples of these syntax-speech act mismatches.

The trouble with the mismatch is that you do not have a one-to-one correspondence between the speech acts and syntactic structures. However, people tend not to be consciously aware of this, and language learners are rarely taught that there are multiple syntactic structures for one speech act and multiple speech acts for one syntactic structure. The mismatch can be misleading when students are taught that declarative sentences are statements, interrogative sentences are questions, and so on, resulting in possible misinterpretations or missed opportunities for further tools for expression.

To help students understand the differences between speech acts and syntactic structures, choose one speech act, such as *command*, and brainstorm together as many different ways to command someone to do a particular task (e.g., close the door). The brainstorm can include a range of delicately polite to downright offensive ways to command someone, which can also be a lesson on what constitutes rude versus polite rhetoric in the target language. Students can then identify the different syntactic structures used, grouping them together into categories. A discussion of the range of syntactic structures in conjunction with speech acts used may lend itself to discovery about the vast array of syntax that can accomplish the same speech act, but also identify any patterns within the target language (e.g., Does using more words sound more polite? Does commanding someone using a question sound more polite than a straightforward one? Does this differ between the student's dominant language and the target language?).

Further Reading

Löbner, S. (2014). *Understanding semantics*. New York: Routledge.

O'Keeffe, A., Clancy, B., & Adolphs, S. (2019). *Introducing pragmatics in use*. New York: Routledge.

Exercises

1. Identify the following pairs of words as synonyms, antonyms, or hyper/hyponyms. If they are antonyms, name what type they are. If they are hyper/hyponyms, identify which is the hypernym and which is the hyponym.

   a. sink-basin
   b. fork-utensil
   c. clear-opaque
   d. dish-plate
   e. fish-trout
   f. true-false
   g. huge-enormous
   h. in-out
   i. tighten-loosen
   j. tulip-flower
   k. love-hate

2. In each sentence, identify the semantic role of the underlined noun phrase.

   a. Petra scheduled the meeting.
   b. The students studied for the exam.
   c. I sent it to the main office.
   d. Jamie dug a hole with a shovel.
   e. The email was from the dean.
   f. We overheard them talking.
   g. I'm running errands for my sick roommate.
   h. They brought drinks to the picnic.
   i. Jessie saw the snow falling.

3. Technology allows us to have instantaneous conversations through writing. Consider and discuss how punctuation and capitalization changes the meaning of the same word or sentence. How is the punctuation or capitalization in written communication analogous with strategies for conveying meaning in oral communication?

4. Find a 5- to 10-minute clip of a television sitcom. Identify some examples of maxim flouting and discuss how each contribute to the humor of the situation, character, or show.

5. What is the speech act performed by each of the underlined sentences in the following conversation? Classify each speech act into one of the five categories: declaratives, commissives, expressives, representatives, and directives.

   A: Excuse me, do you happen to have the time?
   B: It's 7:45.

A: Okay, thanks. I thought the train was supposed to come at 7:40.
B: Yeah, it's never on time.
A: Oh, really? Ugh, I hope I'm not late to my meeting.
B: Where are you going? Downtown?
A: Yeah, city center. It said it was supposed to take only half an hour, but now I'm worried.
B: Usually it comes no more than like 10 or 15 minutes late. What time's your meeting?
A: At 9 o'clock.
B: Oh, you should be fine.
A: Oh really?
B: Yeah, my office is in city center and I always make it there by like 8:30.
A: Okay, whew.

Reference

Rubin, D. L. (1992). Nonlanguage factors affecting undergraduates' judgments of non-native English-speaking teaching assistants. *Research in Higher Education*, *33*(4), 511–531. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00973770