

Introduction to Morphology and Syntax

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Key concepts, definitions, and relationships between the two main subfields of grammar.

1. What Is Morphology?

Aspect	Description
Definition	Study of the internal structure of words and how they are formed.
Goal	Explain how smaller units (morphemes) combine to create meaningful words.
Core Questions	• What are the smallest meaning-bearing units? • How do words change form to express grammatical information? • What rules govern word formation?
Main Units	Morpheme – the minimal unit of meaning or grammatical function.
Types of Morphemes	• Free morphemes – can stand alone (e.g., <i>book</i>, <i>run</i>). • Bound morphemes – must attach to another morpheme (e.g., <i>‑s</i>, <i>un‑</i>, <i>‑ness</i>).
Subcategories	• Derivational morphemes – create new lexical items (<i>happy</i> ? <i>happiness</i>, <i>teach</i> ? <i>teacher</i>). • Inflectional morphemes – modify a word's grammatical features without changing its lexical category (<i>cat</i> ? <i>cats</i>, <i>walk</i> ? <i>walked</i>).
Word Formation Processes	• Affixation – prefix, suffix, infix, circumfix. • Compounding – joining two free morphemes (<i>toothbrush</i>). • Conversion (zero-derivation) – changing category without an overt morpheme (<i>to google</i>). • Reduplication – repeating a form for grammatical or semantic effect (<i>poco a poco</i>). • Blending, clipping, borrowing – lexical innovations.

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1.1 Example: English Noun Plural

Base word	Plural morpheme	Result	Rule (simplified)
cat	?s	cats	Add ?s after most nouns.
dog	?s	dogs	Same rule.
bus	?es	buses	Add ?es after sibilants.
child	?ren	children	Irregular suppletion.
mouse	?ice	mice	Suppletion (vowel change).

2. What Is Syntax?

Aspect	Description
Definition	Study of how words combine to form phrases, clauses, and sentences.
Goal	Identify the rules that determine permissible word order and hierarchical structure.
Core Questions	• What are the permissible arrangements of constituents? • How do syntactic relations (subject, object, etc.) get expressed? • What constraints limit sentence formation?
Key Concepts	• Constituent – a group of words that functions as a unit (e.g., noun phrase, verb phrase). • Phrase structure rule – formal description of how constituents are built. • Dependency – the relation between a head and its dependents. • Syntactic categories – parts of speech (N, V, Adj, Adv, etc.) and functional categories (T, C, D, etc)