

The Significance of Semantically Non-Concatenative Morphology

Stephen R. Anderson
Dept. of Linguistics
Yale University
New Haven, CT 06520-8366 [USA]
<sra@yale.edu>

The core arguments against views of morphology based on the classical notion of the morpheme are grounded in the fact that from the point of view of form, morphology may be non-concatenative (or non-monotonic): that is, the phonological material in a morphologically complex form cannot always be segmented into discrete chunks providing a one to one correspondence between elements of form and elements of content. Aspects of a word's shape that signal content can include truncations, substitutions, re-orderings, and no overt marking at all as well as simple affixation.

The purpose of this talk is to discuss examples illustrating the other side of the same coin: instances in which some formal marker in a word's form corresponds not to the addition of content, but to some non-monotonic alteration in the content of the base form. For example, a reasonably common derivational category in a number of languages relates basic transitive verbs to derived intransitives. In some cases, this can be analyzed as the introduction of a logical operator binding one of the arguments of the underlying transitive (combined with a change in sub-categorization), but in other languages, such "de-transitivization" has to be seen as directly suppressing one of the arguments and any associated semantic predicate structure: the syntactic/semantic equivalent of morphological truncation.

Cases also exist in which what is signaled by an affix (or other marker contributing to a derived word's form) is best expressed not as addition to its content, but rather a re-arrangement ("syntactic/semantic metathesis"); or by the substitution of one content element by another ("semantic apophony," or perhaps better "aposemasia"). And of course the existence of "empty morphs" constitutes the analogue of formal zeros.

These morphological types constitute a class on the content side that corresponds to the class of non-concatenative formations, and they argue against a view of word structure that sees words as exhaustively analyzable into morphemes with the character of unitary Saussurean signs, each an indissoluble unity of a component of phonological form with a component of syntactic and semantic content.