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# *Commonality and Distinctiveness*

*Towards a Theory of Morphemics*

*Bill Palmer*

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# *Chapter 1*

## *Introduction*

### **1. Overview**

This work is concerned with the nature of morphemes. It attempts to define and characterise 'morpheme', and provide practical tools for the analysis of morphemes.

The work drew its instigation from practical problems in morphology, in which the phonological and semantic relationships between morphological objects did not parallel the relationships between the roles of those objects in word formation. These relationships are to a large extent not identifiable or describable within existing approaches to morphology. This work seeks to identify and describe these relationships as the relationships between morphemic entities. In other words, it focuses on morphemes as morphemes, rather than as the atoms of word formation, and seeks to characterise them from that perspective.

As a consequence of these concerns, the approach presented here is an approach to morphemics. It does not deal explicitly with the nature of word formation processes. Instead it seeks to characterise the nature of morphemes, anticipating that once the nature of morphemes is understood, a theory of word formation may be developed in which the intrinsic characteristics of morphemes are recognised.

This work presents a conceptual approach to morphemics, a theoretical approach to the defining 'morpheme', and a contiguous system of morphemic analysis.

### **2. The Approach in Outline**

The work proceeds from two fundamental assumptions. The first is that language is a system of form and function, in which a form is not language unless it has a communicative function, and a function is not language unless it is communicated

by a form. Consequently this work places equal importance on the form and the function of morphemes.

The second assumption is that every language contains a set of objects which are semantically undecomposable. If the utterances of a language are broken down into meaningful forms, which in turn are themselves broken down further, eventually no further meaningful decomposition is possible. At that point a set of minimum meaningful forms will be apparent, and these are the morphemes of that language.

Proceeding from those assumptions, a distinction is drawn between morphological structure (word formation) and morphemics (the nature of morphemes). A definition of 'morpheme' is proposed, taking the form of a number of morphemic principles, which characterises 'morpheme' as primarily an undecomposable correspondence of form and meaning.

Within the definition, morphemes are characterised as having an internal structure consisting of an Underlying Representation, and various surface realisations which may form subgroups of particularly closely related realisations. The Underlying Representation consists of the key formal and semantic features which characterise the morpheme, and is thus a distillation of the features found among the surface realisations. It is proposed that phonological alternations are regularities occurring automatically and are thus not features of any morpheme, and that morphophonemically generated alternations are only features of the morpheme to the extent that the rule generating them is invoked.

A systematic and practical means of conducting morphemic analysis is proposed, with its primary tool being the Principle of Commonality and Distinctiveness. This tool is effective both in isolating, identifying and characterising morphemic entities, and in determining the nature of the relationships between those entities.

A lexical structure is also proposed, allowing for the representation (and storage) of morphemic entities in a way which reflects the various formal, semantic and structural features of the morpheme as well as the relationships between its various surface realisations.

In addition, the 'submorpheme' is proposed as a kind of morphemic entity characterised by having the status of morphemic entity, but by being dependent on, and wholly located within, a host morpheme.

An effect of the proposed approach is a recognition of the pressure in language for speakers to reanalyse words and parts of words to strengthen apparent relationships between elements. This includes the desire to find semantic links between phonologically similar forms; and the drift towards phonological uniformity among semantically related and formally similar elements.

### **3. Outline**

Chapter 2 discusses in detail the kinds of problems which gave rise to the proposed approach. In the same chapter major existing morphological theories are examined for their applicability to these kinds of problems. Chapter 3 outlines the proposed approach in detail. In Chapter 4 the application of the approach is demonstrated by the analysis of a wide range of data exemplifying the kinds of problems discussed in Chapter 2. These include morphemes with complex sets of surface realisations; regular and irregular affixation; irregular paradigms including suppletion and vowel alternation; homophonous morphemes; discontinuous and replacive morphemes; and paradigmatic gaps. Following the concluding Chapter 5, two appendices provide more discussion for the interested reader. Appendix I provides further examples of data analysis, while Appendix II supplements Chapter 2 by examining in greater detail the phenomenon of phonesthemes.