6.3: Inflectional Morphology

Bound morphemes can do one of two different jobs. Inflectional morphology conveys grammatical information, such as number, tense, agreement or case. English has relatively few inflectional morphemes, but many other languages have much richer systems of inflectional morphology.

A YouTube element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/essentialsoflinguistics/?p=117

Check Yourself

1. What type of grammatical information does the inflectional affix in the word *speeches* communicate?

   • Number.
• Tense.
• Subject agreement.
• Case.

2. What type of grammatical information does the inflectional affix in the word *climbed* communicate?

• Number.
• Tense.
• Subject agreement.
• Case.

3. What type of grammatical information does the inflectional difference between *he* and *him* indicate?

• Number.
• Tense.
• Subject agreement.
• Case.

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**Answers**

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**Video Script**

We saw in our last units that words can be made up of morphemes, which are the smallest linguistic unit that links form with meaning. Morphemes can do a couple of quite different jobs in a word.

**Inflectional** morphemes are morphemes that add grammatical information to a word. When a word is inflected, it still retains its core meaning, and its category stays the same. We’ve actually already talked about several different inflectional morphemes:

The **number** on a noun is inflectional morphology. For most English nouns the inflectional morpheme for the **plural** is an –*s* or –*es* (e.g., *books, cars, dishes*) that gets added to the singular form of the noun, but there are also a few words with irregular plural morphemes. Some languages also have a special morpheme for the **dual** number, to indicate exactly two of something. Here’s an example from Manam, one of the many languages spoken in Papua New Guinea. You can see that there’s a morpheme on the noun woman that indicates dual, for exactly two women, and a different morpheme for plural, that is, more than two women.

**Manam (Papua New Guinea)**

/áine ŋara/  that woman  singular
/áine ŋaradiaru/  those two women  dual
/áine ŋaradi/  those women  plural

The **tense** on a verb is also inflectional morphology. For many English verbs, the past tense is spelled with an –*ed,*
(walked, cooked, climbed) but there are also many English verbs where the tense inflection is indicated with a change in the vowel of the verb (sang, wrote, ate). English does not have a bound morpheme that indicates future tense, but many languages do.

Another kind of inflectional morphology is **agreement** on verbs. If you’ve learned French or Spanish or Italian, you know that the suffix at the end of a verb changes depending on who the subject of the verb is. That’s agreement inflection. Here are some examples from French. You can see that there’s a different morpheme on the end of each verb depending on who’s doing the singing.

**French**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st</th>
<th>2d</th>
<th>3d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>je chante</td>
<td>tu chantes</td>
<td>elle chante</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I sing</td>
<td>you sing</td>
<td>she sings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st</th>
<th>2d</th>
<th>3d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>nous chantons</td>
<td>vous chantez</td>
<td>elles chantent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we sing</td>
<td>you (pl.) sing</td>
<td>they sing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

And in some languages, the morphology on a noun changes depending on the noun’s role in a sentence; this is called **case** inflection. Take a look at these two sentences in German: The first one, *Der Junge sieht Sofia*, means that, “The boy sees Sofia”. Look at the form of the phrase, *the boy*, “der Junge”. Now, look at this other sentence, *Sofia sieht den Jungen*, which means that “Sofia sees the boy”. In the first sentence, the boy is doing the seeing, but in the second, the boy is getting seen, and the word for boy, *Junge* has a different morpheme on it to indicate its different role in the sentence. That’s an example of **case** morphology, which is another kind of inflection.

**German**

*Der Junge sieht Sofia.*  
*The boy sees Sofia.*

*Sofia sieht den Jungen*  
*Sofia sees the boy.*