Morphology and Meaning

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MORPHOLOGY AND MEANING

SELECTED PAPERS FROM THE 15TH INTERNATIONAL MORPHOLOGY MEETING, VIENNA, FEBRUARY 2012

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MORPHOLOGY AND MEANING

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To the memory of Dieter Kastovsky
who has been an eminent specialist in morphology
and co-directed many international morphology conferences in Vienna

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Morphology and meaning

An overview

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1. Introduction

In a celebrated article on word formation written over one hundred years ago Hermann Paul voiced the desideratum of an "Ergänzung durch die Bedeutungslehre [supplementation by a theory of semantics]" (Paul 1981 [1896]: 18). His diagnosis was that the semantic study of word formation was much less advanced at his time than that of inflection, where the functional side was taken care of by syntacticians. Does Paul's diagnosis still hold a hundred years later? One is tempted to answer in the affirmative. In one of the few monographs on the topic, Lieber (2004: 1–2) complains: "To my knowledge there is no comprehensive treatment of the semantics of word formation in the tradition of generative morphology." A by and large similar assessment could be extended to structuralist, cognitivist, and other strands of research, though of course a wealth of studies on singular issues have appeared since the publication of Paul's article. At the last International Morphology Meeting (Vienna, 9–12 February 2012), we therefore decided to put meaning at center stage. The 18 papers from this conference selected for publication in this volume are all dedicated to some aspect of the semantics of complex lexemes and word forms. In this introductory chapter, we try to provide a state-of-the-art report relating to this highly scattered area of linguistic research. It allows us at the same time to situate the papers of the volume in the research landscape.

2. Some fundamental issues

2.1 The nature of (morphological) meaning

The nature of the central object of semantics, viz. meaning, is as controversial today as it was when the discussion about it began more than 2,000 years ago, both within semantics and across disciplines (cf. Gloning 1996, Murphy 2002, Geeraerts 2010,

Elbourne 2011). Logicians and logic-oriented linguists like to think of meaning in terms of truth conditions, Wittgenstein's followers as the conventions governing usage as shared by a speech community, psychologists and cognitive linguists as mental entities called 'concepts'. Other issues over which semanticists continue to be divided are the necessity and possibility of separating linguistic meaning from encyclopedic meaning, and whether meaning is holistic or decomposable into more fundamental, possibly universal semantic features. If we had to sort the literature reviewed for this introductory chapter into these boxes, we would be led to conclude that most morphologists try to stay above the fray, while those who place their work explicitly in a specific framework often do not feel compelled to justify their choice or demonstrate its superiority as compared with competing approaches. The same impression, by the way, can also be gathered by looking into morphology textbooks, which generally do have special chapters or sections dedicated to specific semantic issues but tend to avoid the above-mentioned fundamental issues altogether. The neophyte is simply supposed to know what *meaning* means.

To some extent, this kind of agnosticism should certainly be considered as a sign of wisdom, since semanticists themselves have not been able to reach a consensus about these issues (cf. Willems 2011, for an illuminating comparison of Cognitive Grammar and European structuralism). What is somewhat less understandable is that even specifically morphological issues of semantic theory are rarely discussed thoroughly. One such topic is the nature of the meaning of affixes. Discussions about the nature of meaning in philosophy, linguistics and psychology have concerned almost exclusively the meaning of sentences or words. The question of the meaning of affixes has occasionally been addressed by morphologists, but without going into much detail. Already a century ago, Jaberg (1905: 460) raised the issue and concluded that what we call 'meaning of a suffix' is not an autonomous concept comparable to the meaning of a word: "Was wir 'Bedeutung eines Suffixes' nennen, ist nicht ein selbständiger Begriff; es ist bloß die konstante Modifikation verschiedener Grundbegriffe." This position seems to have held some sway during much of the 20th century. Marchand (1969: 215), for example, expresses fundamentally the same opinion: "Unlike a free morpheme a suffix has no meaning in itself, it acquires meaning only in conjunction with the free morpheme which it transposes. And unlike a free morpheme (steam*boat*) a suffix (steam*er*) does not name the semantic class but merely implies it." Another, more recent defense of this position can be found in Beard (1995). Nevertheless, many morpheme-based theories of morphology proposed over the last decades routinely assume morphemes to be signs, without much discussion. In reality, it could well be the case that these two positions merely focus on different ends of a continuum that reaches from inflection-like affixes such as comparative markers to more lexeme-like affixes and combining forms. In the present volume Acquaviva explicitly addresses the relationship between the conceptual content of a lexical item and its grammatical structure. His results are in line with the traditional position according to which concepts are only associated with complex words as a whole.

Much of the discussion about the nature of meaning among philosophers and linguists has always been based on introspection. Only in the last quarter of the 20th century have psychologists begun applying their experimental machinery to the subject. In the present volume, this now thriving strand of psycholinguistic research is represented by Libben & Weber and Gagné & Spalding, who try to bring light into some of the mental mechanisms underlying the interpretation of complex words by means of experiments.

2.2   The functions of morphology

Since the advent of linguistics as a science, most studies of word formation have taken a semasiological perspective, i.e. they have studied semantics by taking as a starting point the form of a particular affix or other morphological pattern. Until the end of the 19th century, in handbooks and monographic studies affixes were arranged according to their form, and much work on word formation has continued to do so until recently (cf., e.g., Marchand's classic on English word formation). It becomes more and more apparent, however, that an onomasiological approach can lead to a fruitful shift of focus (cf. Štekauer 1998; for an overview, Grzega forthc.). Onomasiological theories adopt the speaker's perspective. From the point of view of the coiner of a neologism, in a first step, the concept to be expressed has to be structured in a way to permit linguistic expression ('thinking for speaking', in Slobin's terms), while in a second step an appropriate formal pattern must be chosen. At this second stage, the important question of competition between patterns quite naturally comes into focus, which often forces the morphologist to greater precision in the description of the meaning and restrictions of the word-formational patterns concerned. Another question that only an onomasiological perspective allows studying fruitfully concerns the relationship between word-formation patterns and extra-morphological means such as semantic extension ('regular polysemy'). Both kinds of pattern[1] have the same overall function, viz. that of enriching the lexicon, and many semantic categories are covered by both mechanisms. Furthermore, in some patterns word formation and metonymy are inextricably intertwined, e.g. in so-called possessive compounds of the *egghead* type. In the present volume, a subtle analysis of Czech and Slovak possessive compounds is contributed by Chovanová & Štichauer. In Koch's contribution, the relationship between word formation and semantic extension is treated systematically from a general perspective.

The expression of meaning, however, is not the only function of morphology. Structuralists were already puzzled by the phenomenon of so-called 'empty morphs', i.e. phonic sequences in a complex word that did not seem to have any match at the content level. More recently, Aronoff (1994) has made a forceful case that morphology

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1.   The third major kind of lexical expression is borrowing. For an interesting overview on lexical enrichment that reviews no less than a hundred different classifications proposed in the literature, cf. Sablayrolles (2000).

can also be an end in itself. In English, for example, the present perfect and the passive are always expressed by the same morph (cf. *he has/is kept, he has/is beaten*, etc.), though these two morphological categories have nothing in common semantically. The study of such 'morphomes', as he dubbed them, can safely be ignored in an overview of morphological semantics, since they are void of lexical or grammatical meaning by definition (for a recent state-of-the-art report cf. Maiden et al. 2011). It has been argued (Maiden 2008) that roots are also occasionally used as pure formatives, abstracting from their lexical meaning. For example in folk etymology, as when Middle English *bouspret* 'bowsprit' is adapted in Middle French as *beaupré*, a nonsensical combination of the formatives *beau* 'beautiful' and *pré* 'meadow'. Maiden proposes to treat such formatives "not as signantia with extramorphological signata, but as signantia whose signatum is simply that of being a lexical formative, and therefore an element available for the creation of a composite" (p. 317). The issue of folk etymology will be taken up again in Section 3.1.

3.   Compositionality

Since the object of linguistic morphology is the structure of complex words and word-forms, the issue of meaning in morphology is tightly connected to the question of how the global meaning of a complex word or word-form is related to the meanings of its constituents. Even for theories of morphology that assume no word-structure in terms of segmentable units, like Anderson's a-morphous morphology, there remains something about the meaning of a complex word that is subject to computing (cf. Anderson 1992: 262–263). Problems of analysis arise when the part-whole relation is not met, i.e. the meaning of a complex structure does not result from totting up the meanings of its parts, be they conceived as morphemes or as semantic functions or other kinds of abstract entities. Due to different traditions of labeling, a variety of terms are in circulation for the characterization of such state of affairs, among which 'opacity' (together with its antonym 'transparency') has gained prevalence.

The parameter of transparency versus opacity of linguistic constructions follows directly from the Principle of Compositionality (cf. Cruse 2011: 44), which is commonly attributed to Frege and often appears in the literature as 'Frege's Principle', although it was never formulated explicitly by him (cf. Klos 2011: 35–59).[2] This principle can be extended to any string of signs, be they morphemes making up complex words or word-forms making up complex utterances. The importance of the principle rests

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2.   The principle is presupposed and implicitly applied, e.g., in Frege (1891), but in view of the terminological and hermeneutic difficulty with his notions of 'reference' (*Bedeutung*) versus 'sense' (*Sinn*), further aggravated by their merging in certain contexts (Frege 1892), it is perhaps better to refrain from transposing Frege's statements directly to semantics at the structural level of morphology.

on the distinction between the meaning of the constituents as such and what is contributed to the global meaning of the construction by the way in which the items are arranged. In formal models this is often implemented in terms of so-called 'functional application' between daughters of a superordinate node, whereby "the meaning of one sister will take the meaning of the other one as an argument; and the value returned will be the meaning of the immediately dominating node" (Elbourne 2011: 106). The phenomenon expressed by the pairing of the antonymic notions 'compositional' versus 'non-compositional' (in terms of morphology: 'transparent' versus 'opaque') has received much attention in semantics: "It is well known that the requirement of compositionality is the stumbling block of all extant semantic theories" (Jaszczolt 2010: 202).

In the study of word formation, regularity in the relation between derivatives' meanings and the lexical meanings of their respective base forms has tentatively been captured with the term *word-formation meaning* (German *Wortbildungsbedeutung*), which is similar to Corbin's (1987) notion of *sens construit*. However, as pointed out by Pounder (2000: 97), "a strict separation of word-formation meaning from lexical meaning is rarely observed in the literature", and the significance of the concept as such, which has a longer tradition in Slavic linguistics (see Mengel 2009; also Štekauer 2005: 38–39), remains controversial (cf. Fleischer & Barz 2012: 48), especially in view of the multitude of relational meanings attested in compounds. The problem of assessing the degree of abstractness this type of 'class meaning' can assume is discussed in Pounder (2000: 99–108); cf. also Section 4.1. The issue is taken up explicitly in Natural Morphology by reference to the parameter of morphosemantic transparency, with the general observation that lexicalization prevents the meaning of derived words from ever being fully compositional (cf. Dressler 2005: 271).

For complex utterances, non-compositional meaning is most evident in idiomatic phrases, where there is either a gross deviation from regular usage in the meaning of particular constituents, as in *take it or leave it*, or no correspondence to regular meaning at all, as in *split the whistle* "to arrive just on time", while so-called 'asyntactic' (or 'extragrammatical') idioms of the type *by and large* or *all of a sudden* are rare (cf. Cruse 1986: 37–38, Croft 2007: 466). At the level of complex word-forms, non-compositional meaning can result from a variety of settings, e.g. the lack of independent meaning of some constituent, as in the case of so-called 'cranberry morphs' (cf. Section 2.2 above), or the vagueness of morphotactic arrangement, as in nominal compounds, where the semantic relation between the members can be manifold. For example, a glasshouse is a "house made of glass", just as a blockhouse is a "house made of blocks", but it could as well be a "house where glass is made, stored or sold", just as an icehouse is a "house where ice is made, stored or sold" (and not a "house made of ice"), etc. Since the issue of compound interpretation is the focus of several contributions to this volume, a separate section of this introductory survey will be devoted to that topic (see Section 4.3 below).

While it seems possible, in semantics, to present an introduction to the entire field based on the Principle of Compositionality (Zimmermann & Sternefeld 2013),

non-compositionality remains an issue for morphology, simply because of the fact that not even productivity of patterns warrants the predictability of the meaning of complex forms (cf. Bauer 1994: 3355): Koefoed & van Marle (2000: 305) see only a 'link' between semantic transparency and productivity, but emphasize that "morphological processes may vary greatly in terms of the specificness of their semantic contribution", Bertinetto (1995: 12) has pointed out the mutual independence of the parameters of productivity, transparency, regularity and frequency, even without regard to compounding, Štekauer (2005: 90) draws attention to "the competition of productive types [that can] work counter to the direct proportion between morphological productivity and predictability", among other factors, and according to Kiefer (2000: 298) "semantic transparency is not a necessary condition for productivity".

The impact of context on the semantic value of particular items in a construction prevails in word formation, however, while for prototypical inflection full transparency may be reached due to the strictly categorial meaning of markers (on the notion 'prototypical inflection' and related issues see Dressler 1989 and 1997). Since derivational markers are more closely related to lexical meaning, especially those used in so-called 'semantic derivation' (as opposed to 'categorial derivation'), semantics at the level of word formation basically works the same way as idiomaticity at the level of phrases, only that such opacity is much more frequent in word formation than at the sentence level (cf. Hoeksema 2000: 856).

In several approaches to grammatical theory, such as Lexical-Functional Grammar or Head-driven Phrase Structure Grammar, idiomaticity enjoys a prominent role as a pervasive trait of linguistic structure. In Jackendoff's Parallel Architecture (Jackendoff 2010a), the lexicon is supposed to contain "the thousands of idioms and other fixed expressions in the language [...], all of which are units known by native speakers" (Jackendoff 2010b: 589). Notice that, if 'fixed expressions' is meant to include all collocations, the number of lexical entries is multiplied considerably: "The conclusion is that the lexicon is full of redundancy" (Jackendoff 2010b: 589). Since Jackendoff takes idiomaticity in a very abstract sense, he ends up speaking of irregular word-forms as 'morphological idioms' which are "semantically and syntactically composite, but phonologically unitary" and thus parallel to 'phrasal idioms', "which are phonologically and syntactically composite but semantically unitary" (Jackendoff 2010b: 590). The lexicon is further enriched by the inclusion of so-called constructional idioms, defined as "lexical phrases with a generalized frame" (Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992: 36), i.e. constructions of the type *an X of a man*, where one constituent is a variable that can be filled with various lexical items (e.g. *brute* or *trunk* for the case at hand). In his version of Construction Morphology, Booij (2010) extends the concept of constructional idiomaticity to the word level, where it applies to bound lexemes or affixoids of the type of English *-wise*, as in *lunchwise*, thus implying that idiomaticity and productivity are not mutually exclusive properties of morphological patterns.

In view of the main goal of theoretical linguistics, i.e. to reduce the infinity of speech events, each of them singular and unique, to a finite set of constructional types,

compositionality must be accepted at least partially as a principle at work. On the other hand, the influence of context, by which not only syntagmatic co-occurrence of items is meant (i.e. co-text) but also extralinguistic setting, cannot be neglected. This seems to be the reason why proponents of Cognitive Linguistics, though not particularly attached to the implications of compositionality in terms of formal modeling, concede it a place in their framework: "While rules of semantic composition are certainly part of the story (in Cognitive Grammar, they constitute the semantic pole of constructional schemas), by themselves they are not in general sufficient to compute anything recognizable as linguistic meanings. For this reason linguistic semantics is viewed in Cognitive Grammar as exhibiting only 'partial compositionality' (Langacker 2007: 438). A more pronounced position has been taken by proponents of Construction Grammar, which has been developed mainly as a model that can handle idiomaticity as something in accordance with the general architecture of grammar and not as exceptional. According to Croft (2007: 468), "semantically idiosyncratic constructions and compositional semantic rules differ only in degree, not in kind". The contextualist approach is explicitly built into the framework of Construction Grammar, but without discarding compositionality. Certain types of idiomatic expressions are claimed not to be noncompositional, and it is argued that "many words are what one might call 'idiomatically combining words', where the meaning of a morpheme is specific to the stem it combines with (or a subclass of stems)" (Croft 2007: 470). After all, "the only difference between morphology and syntax is that elements in morphology are bound, whereas in syntax they are (mostly) free" (Croft 2007: 470). Construction Grammar resolves the dilemma of compositionality versus contextuality (or atomistic versus holistic semantics) by dissociating the paradigmatic relation between an item and its meaning, which can be more or less conventional, from the syntagmatic relation between the items making up a construction (cf. Nunberg, Sag & Wasow 1994). Along these lines, morphology is seen as part of a continuum ranging from syntax to the lexicon, with meaning being either more 'schematic' or more 'specific' in complex constructions. This brings it in a line with Jackendoff's Parallel Architecture, where "there is no principled distinction between words and rules of grammar. Both are stored pieces of structure, lying at opposite ends of a multidimensional continuum of idiosyncrasy and regularity" (Jackendoff 2010b: 592). Along similar lines, but more rigidly, Lieber (2004) has proposed a division between a compositional part of the semantic representation of complex words, which she calls the 'skeleton', and a second part, the 'body', which she characterizes as "encyclopedic, holistic, nondecompositional, not composed of primitives, and perhaps only partially formalizable" (Lieber 2004: 10).

As has become clear from this very brief overview, compositional versus contextual accounts of the part-whole relation in linguistic constructions are in lively competition (cf. Dowty 2007 and the handbook edited by Werning, Hinzen & Machery 2012). Therefore a separate section is dedicated to the discussion of holistic (or top-down) versus atomistic (or bottom-up) approaches to semantic interpretation in morphology (see Section 3.2. below).