

What Is Morphology?

Morphology is the study of word making. Of course, words (at least in spoken languages) are made of sounds, but often there are recognizable units bigger than sounds and smaller than words. For example, *rewind*, *reunite*, and *reiterate* all begin with the same two sounds: [ri]. We wouldn't want to say that *re* is a word, but we also wouldn't want to say it's a coincidence that these words begin in the same way.

Morphology examines meaning relationships between words and the ways in which these connections are indicated, for example, the relationships between *wind*, *unwind*, *rewind*, *windable*, *windy*, *winder*, and so on.

Morphology is also the study of word marking: how grammatical relationships between words are indicated. Different languages focus on different kinds of word relationships and make use of different patterns of marking. In English we find such words as *winds*, which is used in the present tense with certain subjects, and *wound*, to show that the action took place in the past.

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FILE 4.1

Words and Word Formation: The Nature of the Lexicon

4.1.1 What Are Words Like?

Every language has some (large) number of words available for its users to choose from as they need. This stock of words can be thought of as a sort of mental dictionary that language users—both speakers and hearers—have internalized as part and parcel of acquiring their particular language. We call this mental dictionary the **lexicon**. But what exactly are the sorts of things we might have in our lexicon?

In the study of morphology, one topic we will consider is how words are made, but first we must answer the question of what words are. Most everyone has an idea of what a word is. However, not all words are equally distinct from all other words. To begin, consider the following question:

- Are *cat* and *dog* the same word or different words?

Your answer, like that of almost anyone familiar with English, is very probably “Of course they are different words! Isn’t it obvious?” The reasons that this is obvious include both differences in **form**, that is, what a word sounds like when spoken (/kæt/ is quite distinct from /dag/; refer to the last page of the book for help with any unfamiliar symbols) and differences in **meaning**, such as the fact that you cannot simply use *cat* and *dog* interchangeably to mean the same thing.

On the other hand, you might say *cat* and *dog* are both kinds of pets, so the words aren’t 100% different; they do have something to do with each other. Likewise, and not coincidentally, both *cat* and *dog* belong to the same **lexical category**, that is, “noun” (often defined as “the name of a person, place, thing, or idea”). (For more information about lexical categories, sometimes called “parts of speech,” refer to File 5.3.) These sorts of similarities, however, are not enough to lead us to claim that *cat* and *dog* are the same word.

Now consider this question:

- Are *cat* and *catalog* the same word or different words?

Based on the discussion above, some readers might hesitate before answering this question. These two words share some elements of form, the /kæt/ part, but *catalog* doesn’t seem to have the meaning of *cat* anywhere in it. Similarly, the words *kid* and *kidney* may sound partly the same, but it seems that they are not actually related in their meaning. Even though it sounds like there **could** be a *cat* and a *log* in *catalog*, or a *kid* in *kidney*, and such a connection might even be used as a source of humor in a joke or cartoon, English speakers consistently distinguish these pairs as each containing two unrelated words. Thus, when looking to see whether two items are the same word, we must consider both their phonological form and their meaning. Nevertheless, the thought that one word could be found “inside” another word is an important one.

4.1.2 Derivation

In order to get at the idea of words being inside one another, consider this third question.

- Are *cat* and *catty* ('spiteful') the same word or different words?

Here, the connection is a good bit closer than in the preceding word comparisons. Cats have gained a reputation for sometimes being vicious fighters, and it is most probably in this context that the word *catty* came into existence as part of the English language, meaning something like 'behaving like a cat in a certain respect.' So the words *cat* and *catty* are similar not only in terms of their form (the /kæt/ part) but also in terms of their meaning, since both (at least potentially) engender the image of nasty fighting.

Is this enough to say that *cat* and *catty* are instances of the same word? Recall that evaluating "sameness" and "difference" between words involves several factors. If we compare *cat* and *catty* with respect to their part of speech, for instance, we note that whereas *cat* is a noun, *catty* is an adjective (a word used to describe a noun). Even though *cat* and *catty* share elements of form and elements of meaning, the fact that the words belong to different part of speech classes is a pretty clear sign that we are in fact dealing with two different words, rather than two "versions" of one word. There remains the feeling, however, that *cat* and *catty* are related in a way that *cat* and *dog*, on the one hand, and *cat* and *catalog*, on the other, are not. What is the nature of this relation? Let's compare some of the attributes of the two words:

(1)	<i>CAT</i>	<i>CATTY</i>
Form:	/kæt/	/kæti/
Meaning:	'domesticated feline'	'spiteful, (fighting) like a domesticated feline'
Part of Speech:	noun	adjective

With respect to form, *cat* is obviously a shorter word (i.e., contains fewer sounds) than *catty*. The meaning of *catty* also seems to be based on the meaning of *cat*, rather than the other way around. This suggests that *catty* is based on *cat* or, in other words, that *cat* is the **root** on which *catty* is built. This process of creating words out of other words is called **derivation**. Derivation takes the phonological form of one word and performs one or more "operations" on it, the result being a (possibly) new word. In the simplest case, the phonological form of the root is used "as-is," and one or more pieces of additional form are tacked onto that. We talk of the form of the root as the **stem**, and the added pieces as **affixes**. In the case of *catty*, both the root and stem are the word *cat*, /kæt/, and the affix is /i/, spelled <-y>, which is attached to the right edge of the stem.¹ We conclude that the word *catty* includes the word *cat*.

4.1.3 Inflection

At this point, there is one more question for you to consider:

- Are *cat* and *cats* the same word or different words?

In terms of phonological form, the difference between /kæt/ and /kæts/ is exactly the same in degree (that is, one additional sound) as the difference we saw between /kæt/ and /kæti/.

¹If you are wondering about the second "t" in *catty*, something not present in *cat*, it is important to notice that the 't' is purely a spelling convention and is not reflected directly in the pronunciation, that is, the /t/ in *catty* is not "twice as long" as the /t/ in *cat*. Although in many cases it does not cause any problems to refer to the spelling when talking about the structure of words, there are cases where the spelling can be misleading about what is actually going on with morphological processes. By and large we will disregard spelling; see File 1.3.