Vive la différence!

What morphology is about

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Whereas most linguists seem to believe that morphology is about similarities and 'recurring partials, we shall explore the idea, aphoristically advanced in Ford and Singh 1991, Ford, Singh, and Martohardjono 1997, and Singh in press, that it is actually about systematic exploitation of difference or contrast in I-lexica. The purpose of this paper, in other words, is to show that a proper focus on difference (rather than on similarity) can help morphology rid itself of problems it seems to have created for itself by going after the identification and segmentation of 'similar partials'.

The very notion of morpheme is a product of the search for recurring similar elements. Although many words share form, meaning and/or grammatical properties without being morphologically related, almost everyone seems to think that morphological relatedness has something to do with similarity. Extending the Saussurean view that words are defined by the differences between them, we shall argue that the morphology of a language resides exclusively in some of those differences (amongst its words), the ones that are exploited in more than one pair of words in it.. They alone constitute the domain of morphology. In this view, two words are considered morphologically related if they differ in exactly the same way as two other words of the same language. This conception of a morphological relation is, it is easy to see, set one degree of abstraction higher than most, and involves at least four (and not two) words. In other words, what makes English words like *completely* and *directly* interesting is not the fact that they look alike (by virtue of sharing *–ly*), but the fact that the difference between *complete* and *completely* is exactly the same as that between *direct* and *directly*.

A definition of a morphological relation based on differences is not only simple, it also makes the boundaries of morphology that much sharper, clearly adjudicating questions regarding the morphological status of, for example, Amritavalli's (1999) 'shapers' like

st- (cf. *stable/stability*) and *-ato* (cf. *tomato ,potato*), Firth's phonesthemes, and Bender's (1998) rather unhelpful 'helpers' (although not unaware of the fact that *poorer* is an adjective, *wander* a verb, and *sweater* a noun, Bender claims that 'recognizable recurring parts' help in determining parts of speech), to restrict ourselves to English examples.

We shall conclude by arguing that our view (= the focus on contrast or difference) also makes it easy to create an algorithm for the acquisition of morphology and opens the door for a variety of computational implementations. With the help of a computer-programme written by him, Neuvel shall actually provide a computer demonstration of precisely how the systematic exploitation of contrast proceeds and, analogously to acquisition (of morphology), enriches a given lexicon (within the limitations imposed by orthography). Needless to add that we take the enrichment of lexica to be not only the *raison d'être* of morphology but also the central issue of morphological theory.

Brief References

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