A LINGUISTIC THEORETICAL STUDY OF THE UNIQUE QUALITIES OF THE '-S' MORPHEME[i]

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Abstract:

This paper is a linguistic theoretical study of the unique qualities of the 's' morpheme. It explores the phonological, semantic and syntactic features of the 's' morpheme as used in our day-to-day conversations. The aim of this study is to highlight some salient qualities of the '-s' morpheme. It is a known fact that the '-s' morpheme is an inflectional morpheme; however, this study attempts to highlight more facts to show that beyond its inflectional role, it plays other linguistic roles that most times, the user of the English language undermines. Moreover, these other roles are nexus, because they connect the three areas of the English language: phonology, semantics and syntax. Samples of words are derived from different secondary sources and are analyzed phonologically, semantically and syntactically. The paper concludes that the '-s' morpheme application in our daily written and oral expressions is not negligible.

Keywords: '-S morpheme', English language; phonology, semantics and syntax

Abstrait :

Cet article est une étude théorique linguistique des qualités uniques du morphème 's'. Il explore les caractéristiques phonologiques, sémantiques et syntaxiques du morphème « s » tel qu'il est utilisé dans nos conversations quotidiennes. L'objectif de cette étude est de mettre en évidence certaines qualités saillantes du morphème '-s'. C'est un fait connu que le morphème '-s'est un morphème flexionnel ; cependant, cette étude tente de mettre en évidence plus de faits pour montrer qu'au-delà de son rôle d'inflexion, il joue d'autres rôles linguistiques que la plupart du temps, l'utilisateur de la langue anglaise sape. De plus, ces autres rôles sont liés, car ils relient les trois domaines de la langue anglaise : la phonologie, la sémantique et la syntaxe. Des échantillons de mots sont dérivés de différentes sources secondaires et sont analysés phonologiquement, sémantiquement et syntaxiquement. L'article conclut que l'application du morphème '-s'dans nos expressions écrites et orales quotidiennes n'est pas négligeable.

Mots-clés : '-S morpheme', langue anglaise, phonologie, sémantique et syntaxe

1. Introduction

The grammar of the English language has a rank scale with the morpheme as the least within this scale. However, this does not mean that the role of the morpheme is insignificant because of its least position on the scale; this is because these units act as a conveyance in the English grammar:

- Sentence
- Clause
- Group
- Word
- Morpheme

The diagram of the scale has buttressed our earlier position that the morpheme is the least in the grammatical units. However, this does not mean that its role cannot be accounted for. As small as the morpheme may look like, it plays a significant role in the actualization and interpretation of words-formation. If we take the word-forms of 'talk', 'talker', 'talks', 'talked', and "talking", we realize that they consist of one major element **'talk'** and other elements such as **'-s', '-er', '-ed', and '-ing'** all these elements are described as morphemes. This explains why Yule defines a morpheme as "*a minimal unit of meaning or grammatical function*" (Yule, 1997). Likewise, Tomori defines it as "*the small unit of speech that has semantic or grammatical meaning*" (Tomori, 1977).

These definitions can be clarified further with more examples. For instance, in the sentence; '**the doctor re-examined the patient**'. The word 're-examined' consists of three morphemes; one minimal unit of meaning which is **'examine'**, another minimal unit is**'-re'** (meaning again) and another minimal unit of grammatical function is **'-ed'** (indicating tense). The word '**visitors**' also consists of three morphemes. This example also shows that it has its major element as '**visit**'. There is one minimal unit of meaning '**-or**' (meaning

person who does something) and a minimal unit of grammatical function **'-s'** (indicating plural).

2. Statement of the Problem

This study makes an effort to clarify the fact that the 's' morpheme is distinct, if not unique in itself. This is because there is striking evidence that highlights the fact that the morpheme 'S' cuts across the three main components of the English language; phonological, semantic and syntactic. But most times we limit the 's' morpheme to one of its most frequent functions, which is its ability to inflect. However, our main purpose in this study is to create a grammatical awareness that the 's' morpheme has its own principles and rules that the user of the English language must adhere to, otherwise, the users' message could be misconstrued if these rules and principles are broken.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Andrew Radford's minimalist approach to grammar and Gimson's principles of graphemics. According to the minimalist perspective, morphology and syntax are integral parts of grammar. It highlights how the components parts of a word are formed to get a whole in relation to how these parts are combined together to form phrases and sentences. In a nutshell, the minimalist theory is the principle which governs the formation and interpretation of words, phrases and sentences. It went further to state that all words in the English language belong to a grammatical category; a grammatical category is a class of expression that shares a common set of grammatical properties. On the other hand, Gimson is of the view that the phonemic system of a language is relatable to the writing system: the relationship between the phonemes of a language and the letters used in its writing system is called graphemics. These arguments become the thrust of this study.

2.2 Free and Bound Morphemes

From our discussion so far, we can make a broad categorization of the two types of morphemes, they are; **free morphemes**, that is, morphemes which can stand by themselves as single words e.g., **'examine' and 'visit'**. There are also **bound morphemes**, just as the name means, that is, those which cannot normally stand alone, for example **-, re', '-ed', '-or', '-s'**. This last set is what Yule refers to as affixes (Yule, 1997). All affixes in English are bound morphemes. Affixes are normally added to either the beginning (prefix) or ending of words (suffix). The basic word-form that is joined to another morpheme is called the **stem**. For examples:

unlocked

un	-lock	-ed
prefix	stem	suffix
bound	free	bound

At this point, it should be noted that this form of description only partially reflects English's morphological facts. There are several English words in which the element seems to be 'stem' and is not, in fact, a free morpheme. For example, in words like **'receive', 'reduce', 'repeat',** we can accept the bound morpheme to be **'-re'** but the elements' **-cieve', '-duce', '-peat'**, are clearly not free morphemes.

2.3.1 Free Morphemes

Free morphemes can be divided into two. The first type is primarily referred to as **nouns, adjectives, adverbs** and **verbs**, they usually carry the content meaning of the messages we convey. They are otherwise called **lexical morphemes**. For example, **girls, woman, shoes, tally, lion, house, job,** etc. In these examples, we can add new lexical morphemes to the language rather easily; as such, they are referred to as **open class of words**. Functional morphemes are the name given to the other kinds of morphemes. The following are some examples: and, but, when, because, on, she, he, the, that, it, etc. This set consists mainly of the functional words in the language such as conjunctions, prepositions, articles, and pronouns. Additionally, they are referred to as a closed class of words because they almost ever introduce new functional morphemes to the language.

2.3.2 Bound Morphemes

This type of morpheme can be divided into two, that is, derivational and inflectional morphemes. Derivational morphemes are frequently employed to produce words from the stem that fit into several grammatical categories. For example, adding the derivational morpheme "-ness" transforms the adjective "good" into the noun "goodness." Similarly, the noun "care" can be transformed into the adjectives "careful" or "careless" by adding the derivational morphemes "-full" or "-less". Inflectional morphemes are the common name for the second class of bound morphemes. They serve to highlight specific grammatical elements of a word rather than creating new words in the English language. Inflectional morphemes are employed to indicate a word's gender—singular or plural, past or present tense, comparative form, or possessive form. It should be stated that the English language has only eight inflectional morphemes, as illustrated in the following sentences:

> *"I should tell you about Oghor's sister."*
> *"Dafe likes to have fun and he is always playing."*
> *"Mine likes to study and has always taken his study seriously."*
> *"She is the loudest person in the class and the other is quieter than a mouse."*

The examples reveal that two of the inflections **'-s'**, (possessive) and **'-s'** (plural) are attached to nouns. There are four attached to verbs, **'-s'** (3rd person present singular), **'-ing'** (present participle), **'-ed'** (past tense) and **'-en'** (past participle). There are two inflections, **'-est'** (superlative) and **'-er'** (comparative) attached to adjectives. It should be noted that in English all inflectional morphemes listed above are suffixes.

Noun + -'s.-s
Verb + -s -ing -ed -en
Adjective + -est, -er

It should be noted that these inflectional morphemes can have different forms; for instance, the possessive can occasionally be written as "-s" (as in "those guys' bags") and the past participle can sometimes be written as "-ed" (as in "they have finished").

The distinction between derivational and inflectional morphemes is important to note and needs to be stated at this point. A word's grammatical category will never change as a result of an inflectional morpheme. For instance, the suffix "-er" just generates a distinct version of the adjective; both "old" and "older" are adjectives. A word's grammatical classification can be altered by a derivational morpheme, though. The suffix form "-er" can be an inflectional morpheme as part of an adjective and also a distinct derivational morpheme as part of a noun, turning the verb "teach" into the noun "teacher" when we add the derivational morpheme. They may not perform the same type of work just because they share the same '-er' appearance. They are bound morphemes in each case. Whenever a word has both an inflectional and a derivational suffix attached, they typically always appear in that order. First, the derivational '-er' is attached to **"teach**", then the inflectional' **-s'** added, to yield **teachers**.

The purpose of our discussion up to this point has been to clarify the different categories of morphemes, and we have highlighted that the morpheme "-s" is an inflectional morpheme.

The (-s) morpheme is more than just an inflectional morpheme, and this study aims to go beyond that. It is also true that the (-s) morpheme has several striking characteristics that the ordinary observer or English speaker might not pay close attention to. Additionally, the (-s) morpheme's special properties span the three linguistic domains of phonology, semantics, and syntax. This is a fact that Bloomfield accentuates:

"The description of a language then begins with phonology. When the phonology of a language has been established, there remains the task of telling what meanings are attached to the several phonetic forms. This phase of description is semantics. It is ordinarily divided into grammar and lexicon" (Bloomfield in Ajulo, 1994)

The phonology, semantics, and syntax are the three main components of the English language, as explained by Bloomfield in the aforementioned sentence. Notably, the morpheme "-s" is crucial in several important domains of the English language. Now let's try to confirm these crucial functions, starting with the phonological component.

The "-s" morpheme is an alveolar fricative consonant that is voiceless and fortis strong in phonology. And it is discovered in settings where it naturally has no place. It is realized, for instance, in its natural setting as in;

dress - /dres/;
ass - /æs/;

suck /sxks/;
case - /kæɔs/.

It is realized in a setting where it should not be realized as 'c' but rather as 's' orthographically:

'c'		*'s'*
fence	-	/fens/;
icy	-	/ais/;
vice	-	/vais/;
face	-	/feis/;
peace	-	/pi:s/;
cell	-	/sel/.

/x/	-	/Ks/

'x' is realized as 'ks'

tax	-	/tæɔks/;
axe	-	/æɔks/;
fox	-	/fɔks/;
fix	-	/fiks/;
mix	-	/miks/;
lax	-	/læɔks/.

'z' is realized as 's'

quertz	-	/kwa:s/;
chintz	-	/ʧints/;
waltz	-	/wɔ:ls/.

Additionally, there are cases where the '-s' morpheme is orthographically realized but not phonetically;

debris	-	/deibri/;
island	-	/ailənd/;
aisle	-	/ail/;
corps	-	/kɔ:/;
Asia	-	/eiʒə/;
treasure	-	/treʒə/;
measure	-	/meʒə/;
tension	-	/tenʧn/.

The next section of this study will look at the semantic shape of the "-s" morpheme and how it affects the meaning of words when combined with other words. We would be doing this while keeping in mind the four requirements for semantic theory;

> *"First it must make reference to the syntactic structure in a precise way; secondly, it must systematically represent the meaning of the single word (or, more generally of the lexical elements, including lexicalized phrases like idioms, isolated compounds etc.), thirdly, it must show how the structure of words and syntactic relations interact in order to constitute the interpretation of sentences; and lastly, it must indicate how these interpretations are related to the things spoken about (Bierwisch:168). Similarly, Wale states that although Bierwisch's conditions above present the goal of a linguistic perspective of meaning, it is clear that in many respects, the goal is grouped and may not adequately account for several occurrences of features of meaning ...."* (Bierwisch, 1970)

With these justifications, we will now attempt to investigate how the addition of the '-s' morpheme alters the interpretation or meaning of a particular word;

Table 1

Word	Class	Meaning	Word	Class	Meaning
damage	noun verb	physical harm caused to make it less attractive	damages	noun	an amount of money that a court decides should be paid to, by the person or company that has caused harm
empty	adjective, verb	no people or things inside	empties	noun	bottles or glasses
God	noun	ill Christianity, Islam and Judaism, the Being or Spirit that is worshiped and is believed to have created the universe	the gods	noun	the seat that are high up at the back of a theatre, used to show
			ye gods!	noun	surprise, lack of belief
good	adjective, noun, adverb	high quality or an acceptable standard	goods	noun	things that are produced
hand	noun	the part of the body at the end of the arm, including the fingers and thumb.	at the hands fall into hands	idioms	they are the cause of it to become controlled by
oil	noun	a thick liquid that is found in rocks underground or a smooth thick liquid that is used for cooking	oils	noun	coloured paint, containing oil used by artists
optic	adjective, noun	Connected with the eye or the sense of sight	optics	noun	the scientific study of sight and light
property	noun	things that are owned, a possession	properties	noun	a quality or characteristics
race	noun	competition between people, animals, vehicles, etc.	the races	noun	a series of horse races that happen at one place on a particular day or the main groups that humans can

					be divided into according to their physical differences.
racket	noun	a loud unpleasant noise	rackets/racquets	noun	a game for two or four people.
rail	noun, verb	metal bar placed around as a barrier or to provide support	rails	idioms	to become successful again after a period of failure, or to begin functioning again.
rank	noun, verb, adj.	the position especially a high position, that has in a particular organisation, society etc.	the ranks	noun	the position of ordinary soldiers rather than officers.
regard	noun	respect and admiration, formal attention or consideration, relating to a particular subject, relating to something you have just mentioned	regards	noun	used when sending your good wishes to someone or when ending a short letter or massage
sale	noun	an act or the process of selling	sales	noun	number of items sold
salt	noun, verb, adjective	a white substance that is added to food to give it a better flavour or preserve it	salts	noun	a substance that looks or tastes like salt, bath salts (to give a pleasant smell to bath water), smelling salts etc.
soap	noun, verb	substance that you use with water for washing	soaps	noun	opera on TV
snuffle	verb, noun	to breathe noisily because you have a cold or you are crying	snuffles	noun	to get/have cold
stand	verb, noun	to be on your feet, an opinion that you make	stands	noun	sports or a castle ground
stich	noun, verb	a small line of thread that you can see on a piece of cloth after it has been sawn	stiches	verb	laughing a lot
stock	noun, verb, adjective	a supply of goods that is available for sale	on the stocks	idiom	in the process of being made, build/or prepared
thank	verb	to tell that you are grateful	thanks	noun	exclamation (ironic) to show that you are annoyed
tab	noun, verb	a small piece of paper, cloth, metal that sticks out from the edge	tabs on	idiom	to watch carefully in order to know what is happening so that you can control a particular situation
water	noun, verb	a liquid without colour, test, or smell	waters	noun	an area of sea or ocean belonging to a particular country
wood	noun	hard material or branches of a tree	woods	noun	an area of trees smaller than a forest
work	verb, noun	physical or mental effort	works	noun	books, music, paintings, activities involving building or .. repairing, a place where things are made or where industrial process take place

We were able to demonstrate how the '-s' morpheme, when combined with some of the terms listed above, can readily change the meaning of words. The next analysis would aim to demonstrate the '-s' morpheme's syntactic consequences in relation to its use. This is due to the fact that inflections are a crucial component of syntax.

The' **-s**' morpheme is used to indicate the plural of nouns;

a. regular plurals (ending in **-s -es**)
boy – boys;
ant – ants;
chair – chairs;
box – boxes;
fox – foxes;
church – churches;
chief – chiefs;
beliefs – beliefs;
roof – roofs;
proof - proofs. etc.

b. plural of compound nouns
assistant manager - assistant managers;
boyfriend – boyfriends;
grown-up – grown-ups.

c. invariable (unchangeable plural) marked (with '**-s**'/'**-es**' ending)
pliers, shoes, scissors, wages, shorts, trousers, earrings, troops, valuables, particulars, premises etc.

d. generally, to indicate more than one noun (name):
Johns (-the John family);
the Americas (-North America and South America);
the Canaries (-the Canary Islands).

e. the' **-s**' morpheme is also used to indicate possessions as in the following;
James' book;
Victor's house;
She told him about Peter's sisters.

f. the '**-s**' morpheme is also used to indicate the 3rd person present singular form;
She likes to have fun.
He drinks too much.

g. situations when the '**s**' morpheme is treated as singular and sometimes as plurals.

draughts, headquarters (also pl), measles (also pl), news, mathematics, physics, statistics, Algiers, Athens etc.

h. the **'-s'** morpheme is also used in combination with the apostrophe (') to indicate a period of time. For example:

In the late 1970's;
In the 1980's;
Between the 1960's and 1970's.

5. Conclusion

What we have tried to establish in this study, is to bring to the attention of the casual user of the English language, whether spoken or written English, those salient qualities that are embedded in the '-s' morpheme. Most English language users occasionally disregard these virtues. If this issue is not effectively resolved, there are resultant effects on how the language is used. We hope that the aforementioned analysis may be helpful to anyone who has been struggling to correctly employ the "-s" morpheme.

Notes

For the semantic meaning of the words analysed, please look up the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 9th Ed. By A. S. Hornby. Eds. Leorie Hey and Suzanne Holloway. Oxford University Press, 2018. For the transcription of the words analysed under phonology, please refer to Cambridge English Pronouncing Dictionary, New 17th Ed. By Daniel Jones and Ed. By Peter R., James H., and Jane Setter. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Conflict of Interest Statement

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