

Productivity in Distributed Morphology

Heidi Harley
University of Tucson, Arizona

Distributed Morphology integrates the production of morphological and syntactic forms under a single generative umbrella; morphology is just syntax of sub-word-level forms. Since word-level forms are mostly prosodically or phonologically defined, we see a lot of prosodic and phonological information included in the specifics of this morphological syntax. The fundamental form for the statement of combinatoric possibilities, however, does not differentiate between morphological and syntactic structure-building. The generation of both 'morphological' and 'syntactic' forms exhibits semantic and categorial selection, feature-checking and realizational considerations, all of which are subject to 'exceptions' and 'idiosyncrasy', and all of which can be modeled using the same kinds of tools.

But isn't syntax the domain of the ruly and morphology the domain of the unruly? Syntax is fully productive and morphology is filled with exceptions and sub-generalizations. A modular, 'lexicalist' morphology is thought to be supported by speakers' experience of the status of certain nonce morphological forms as well-formed but non-existent words, in a way that doesn't have a good equivalent in syntax: there aren't well-formed but impossible sentences, are there? I'll argue that this represents a fundamental misconception: a) there are well-formed but impossible sentences particularly within 'first-phase syntax'; b) there are linguistic systems that have lots of fully productive morphological processes, in which there is much less use for the notion of a well-formed but impossible word.

Well-formed but impossible sentences are everywhere in languages that make extensive use of light verb constructions; there's a clear sense of which light verb can enter into construction with which predicative content. We see this even in English, with forms like *take a bath*, *take a piss/nap/snooze*, *take a look/peek/gander*, contrasting with **take a touch/feel/stroke*, **take a cough/blink*, *#take a scrub/brush*, but it's also everywhere in languages like Persian/Farsi, which have light verb constructions as the mainstay of their grammars. And of course similarly languages like Yupik or Turkish have famously 'productive' morphological systems. So both syntax and morphology have similar phenomena of gappiness, although since morphology has more possible conditioners of such gappiness, since phonological, prosodic and morphological considerations are in play as well as selectional and semantic ones, it's more obvious there.

I'll address the relationship between 'productivity' and the various types of formalism available in this syntax-based approach, showing where probabilistic considerations can come into play and emphasizing the need for deep, language-specific analysis to understand the etiology of a particular gap, making corpus-based approaches to productivity a good but far from definitive source of evidence about the status of gaps in a given grammar.