Linguistics 201 – Introduction to Linguistic Theory September 11, 2007
Fall 2007 – Section D

Morphological Terms

morpheme – smalles sound/meaning unit
free – a morpheme that's also a word
bound – a morpheme that needs to attach and can't occur as a word by itself

allomorph – A morpheme may have several allomorphs: variants of its pronunciation

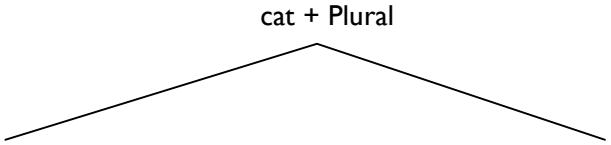
morphologically complex words – words that consist of more than one morpheme

Morphologically complex words

cats:	sound	[kæts]
	meaning	more than one of 
	…	
	part of speech	noun
	…	
	written word looks like 'cats'	

Can all of this information be recovered systematically from the parts of the word?

Morphological parts of 'cats': 'cat' + Plural



'cat'	sound	[kæt] 	Plural	sound	var. allomorphs, here [s]
	meaning			meaning	several of 'root'
	part of speech	noun		part of speech	attaches to nouns, returns nouns

It's systematic, in other plural words it works exactly the same:

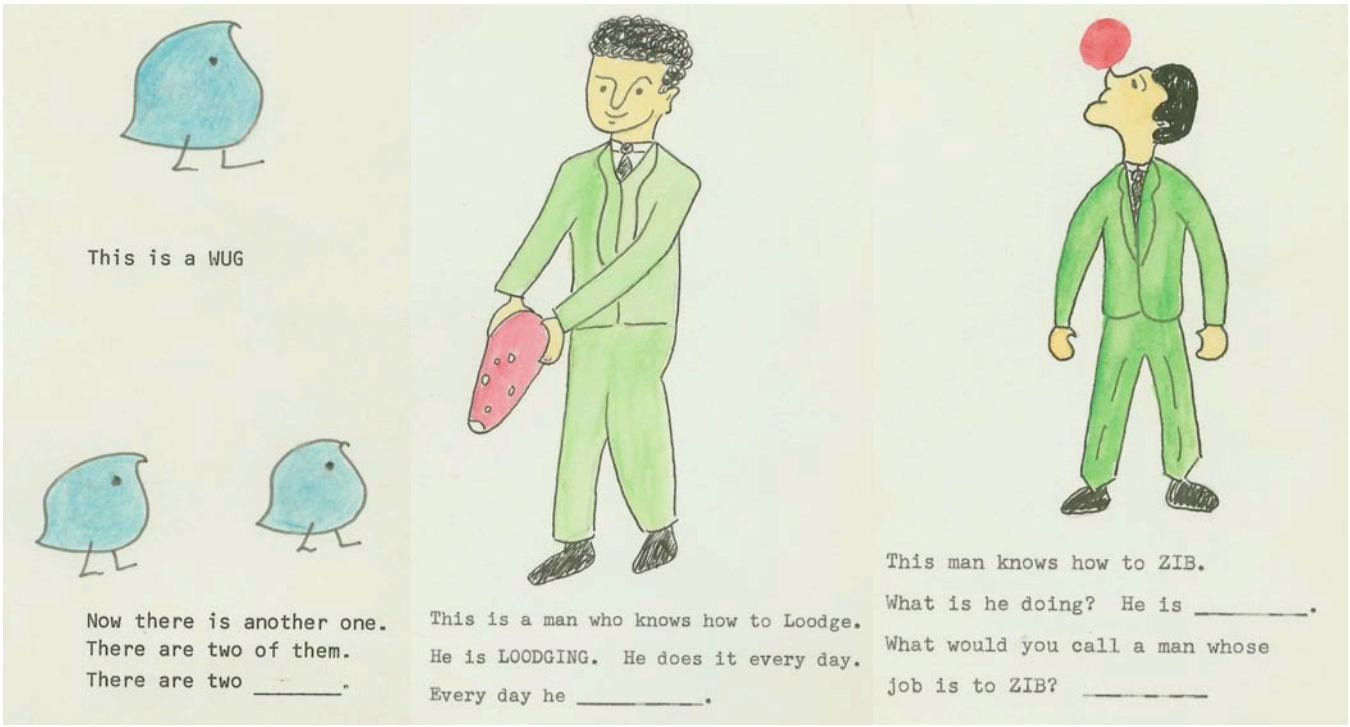
trains [tɹeɪnz]
train + Plural

train	[tɹeɪn],  , noun, …
Plural	here [z], several of 'root', attaches to nouns, returns nouns, …

etc…

In these cases we *might* still memorize the complex word, however we don't *have to*, since we can derive all of its meaning from its parts. There are cases though when we couldn't possible have memorized the complex word. These cases show us that some process to form the complex word must exist.

1) We can derive the meaning of new, unfamiliar words:



(materials from Jean Berko 'The Child's Learning of English Morphology')

2) Children will at some stage in their language acquisition process make "mistakes" that they didn't hear in their environment, but that follow the regular pattern of the language. These are not even mistakes as much as cases in which the child still lacks the irregular form in their memory and defaults back to the rule that generates the word.

	adult English forms	
"Mommy goed to the store."	*went*	**goed*[1]
"My brother holded the baby rabbits."	*held*	**holded*
"There were two mouses."	*mice*	**mouses*

These 'mistakes', where a rule is applied instead of the irregular form that speakers of that language would use, are sometimes called *overgeneralization*, or *overregularization*. We've discussed in class that we can also see this as falling back onto a default in the absence of a memorized form.

[1] The * (asterisk) is used to show forms that don't exist in a particular language. In this case, for example, **goed* means that 'goed' is not a word in adult English. Native speakers of the language consider it *ungrammatical*, that is *not part of their language*.

Remember a morpheme comprises both sound (and sound variants) and meaning – the same morpheme should always have the same meaning.

From Haspelmath (2002) *Understanding Morphology*:

> "But often formal variation in the shapes of words correlate systematically with semantic changes. For instance, the words *nuts, nights, necks, backs, taps* (and so on) share not only a phonological segment (the final [s]), but also a semantic component: they all refer to a multiplicity of entities from the same class. And, if the final [s] is lacking (*nut, night, neck, back, tap*), reference is made consistently to only one such entity. By contrast, the words *blitz, box, lapse* do not refer to a multiplicity of entities, and there are no semantically related words **blit, *bok, *lap*. We will call words like *nuts* '(morphologically) **complex words**'.
>
> "In a morphological analysis, we would want to say that the final [s] of *nuts* expresses plural meaning when it occurs at the end of a noun. But the final [s] in *lapse* does not have any meaning, and *lapse* does not have morphological structure. Thus, morphological structure exists if there are groups of words that show identical partial resemblances in both form and meaning. …
>
> "It is important that this form-meaning covariation occurs systematically in groups of words. When there are just two words with partial form-meaning-resemblances, these may be merely accidental. Thus, one would not say that the word *hear* is morphologically structured and related to *ear*. Conceivably, *h* could me 'use', so *h-ear* would be 'use one's ear', i.e. 'hear'. But this is the only pair of words of this kind (there is no **heye* 'use one's eye', **helbow* 'use one's elbow', etc.), and everyone agrees that the resemblances are accidental in this case."

Trickier cases of morphologically complex words

Sometimes it's not clear whether we see a pattern that exists among a few words of the language, or a truly productive process. It's hard to say in those cases whether the morphological makeup of these words is represented in our mental lexicon. For this class, we're interested in the cases where we have evidence for a productive process of language, and can remain agnostic about the other cases.

Example

read-er

has several meanings. Among those, there's one meaning with a clear morphologically complex make-up: *person or thing that or who reads.* It's made up of the root *read* and a suffix *–er*, that means "someone/something who/that *verb*s", where *verb* stands for the meaning of the verb –er attaches to.

Other meanings, though clearly related to reading, are more specific, and can't be fully recovered from the parts:

- a lecturer at a British university
- a collection of texts, typically connected by a common topic or purpose