

Lexical affixes

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Workshop description

Affixes are often assumed to belong to grammar as opposed to the lexicon. For instance, a popular introductory textbook states that “[u]nlike roots, affixes do not belong to a lexical category [...] (O’Grady, Archibald & Katamba 2011: 119), and the call for papers for a recent symposium on affixes states that “[a]ffixes are a part of grammar [...]” (<https://sites.utu.fi/affixes/call-for-papers/>). If closed-class membership were co-extensive with grammatical status, this assumption might seem sound in so far as affixes form closed classes. But closed-class membership is not co-extensive with grammatical status (e.g. Bisang 2010: 291). For instance, there is a tradition, and good arguments, for recognizing both lexical and grammatical members of closed adposition classes, at least in some languages (e.g. Bennis, Prins & Vermeulen 1983; Rauh 1993).

The assumption that affixes are grammatical items has been challenged in two ways. Firstly, it has been claimed that derivational affixes or a subset thereof are lexical. For instance, Hopper & Traugott (2003) take some derivational affixes to be lexical:

Many derivational forms add a meaning component without affecting the category in question. The *un-* of *unhappy* adds to the adjective *happy* the meaning ‘not,’ but does not change the adjectival status of the word. Similarly the *-ling* of *duckling* adds to the noun *duck* the new meaning ‘young and small,’ but does not change the nominal status of the word. Such derivational morphemes are part of the lexicon and can be called ‘lexical derivational morphemes.’ (Hopper & Traugott 2003: 5)

Secondly, the assumption has been challenged by studies of affixes in languages from a range of different language families, many of which are represented in the present workshop (e.g., Wao Terero, Murrinhpatha, Chukotko-Kamchatkan, Inuit-Yupik-Unangan, Tacanan, Sino-Tibetan). At least since Kinkade (1963a; 1963b), types of affixes characteristic of Chimakuan, Salishan, and Wakashan languages in northwestern North America have been characterized as lexical (see Bischoff 2011 for an overview). Other names that we have come across for these affixes are ‘referential affixes’, ‘etymological affixes’, ‘substantival affixes’, ‘field-affixes’, ‘verbal affixes’, ‘somatic affixes’ and ‘non-root bound morphemes’. Mithun (1997) and Bischoff (2011) describe the relevant types of affixes as forming classes that are rather large, yet relatively closed. Some are phonologically related to roots found in open classes. However, what is crucial is that they are all semantically related to roots within the language, or have ‘root-like meanings’.

A case in point is the Halkomelem suffix *-cəp* ‘firewood’ in (1)

Halkomelem (Salishan; from Gerdts & Hinkson 1996: 8)

- (1) *Ni yáq^w-əl^ʔ-cəp.*
AUX burn-CN-firewood
'He made a fire.'

As can be seen from the translation, the meaning of the suffix is most naturally expressed by a freestanding word in English, namely *fire*.

As another example, Mithun offers the following characterization of “lexical suffixes” in Bella Coola (Salishan):

While typically more general in meaning than roots, the suffixes do have strikingly concrete meanings, meanings we normally expect of roots, such as *-uc* ‘mouth/eat’ or *-lst* ‘rock’. (Mithun 1997: 364)

The discussion of lexical affixes has been hampered by the absence of a coherent theory of the lexical-grammatical distinction. According to the usage-based theory outlined in Boye & Harder (2012) and refined in Boye (2023; forthcoming), grammatical status is defined in terms of conventionalized discourse secondariness (background status), whereas lexical status is defined in terms of a conventionalized potential for discourse primacy (foreground status). The theory entails that only lexical elements can be focalized, addressed in subsequent discourse, and modified (cf. Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca 1994: 7; Keizer 2007).

In line with this theory (and actually predating it), Mithun (1997) has argued that the “lexical affixes” discussed above are in fact grammatical: the affixes are used to convey “information that is semantically or pragmatically subordinate within a particular context” (Mithun 1997: 369). In other words, the affixes are discourse secondary (cp. Mithun 1997: 362).

While at least some of the affixes that have been characterized as lexical may in fact be grammatical by the usage-based theory referred to above, then, the same theory entails that affixes that are truly lexical can in principle be identified. Some of what Mattissen (2017: 72–74) calls “non-root bound morphemes” seem to be cases in point. Mattissen’s notion includes a range of item types in addition to the affixes discussed above, for instance, the manner suffixes found in Kalaallisut (West Greenlandic). At least a subset of the Kalaallisut manner suffixes are lexical by the modification criterion. Thus, for instance, the suffix *-pallag* ‘quickly’ can be modified by means of the degree suffix *-ngaar* ‘very’.

Kalaallisut (Inuit; Naja Trondhjem, p.c.)

- (2) *Suli-palla-ngaar-mat* *tupiga-ara.*
work-quickly-very-CAUS.3SG wonder-DECL.1SG.3SG
'I am surprised how quickly he worked'.

The suffix *-pallag* corresponds semantically quite closely to adverbs in more analytic languages (Fortescue 1980: 270-71), and one might suspect that it is in fact an incorporated adverb. However, Kalaallisut also possesses non-bound manner expressions, and the non-bound manner expression *sukkasooq* ‘fast’ may in fact be combined with *-pallag* to focalize the manner meaning (Naja Trondhjem, p.c.).

Kalaallisut (Inuit; Naja Trondhjem, p.c.)

(3) *Assut* *sukkasuu-mik* *suli-pallap-poq.*
very fast-INSTR work-fast-DECL.3SG.
'He worked VERY FAST'.

Contributions to the present workshop address the following theoretical, methodological and empirical issues pertaining to lexical affixes:

Empirical issues

- What are the characteristics of lexical affixes?
- What is the range of functions lexical affixes may have?
- At which positions in the affix order are lexical affixes typically found?
- How are lexical affixes formed diachronically, and how may they develop further?
- How widespread are lexical affixes in the world's languages?

Methodological issues

- How can lexical affixes be identified?
- Which challenges does identification of lexical affixes present?

Theoretical issues

- On which theoretical basis may lexical affixes be identified?
- How do lexical affixes differ functionally from grammatical affixes and from non-bound morphemes? Are lexical affixes really affixes?
- What are the implications of lexical affixes for our understanding of words, the morphology-syntax distinction, and polysynthesis?

Abbreviations

1 = first person; 3 = third person; AUX = auxiliary; CAUS = causative mood; CN = connective; DECL = declarative; INSTR = instrument; SG = singular

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