

Morphological Errors Made by Jordanian University Students

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Abstract

This study tries to identify, classify, describe and find out the causes of the morphological errors made by the fourth year university students majoring in English in Jordan. The students who participated in the study were 20 students from Al-Zaytoonah Private University of Jordan. The procedure followed was essay writing. After analyzing the errors, the study shows that (a) the students' competence in English morphology is poor and (b) The errors are caused by some factors such as the inconsistency in English as well as misapplication of rules. Interference and overgeneralization are also other causes. Since the course of morphology is selective in the university plan, it is also considered as an important cause. In order to reduce their errors, the researcher has suggested some remedies.

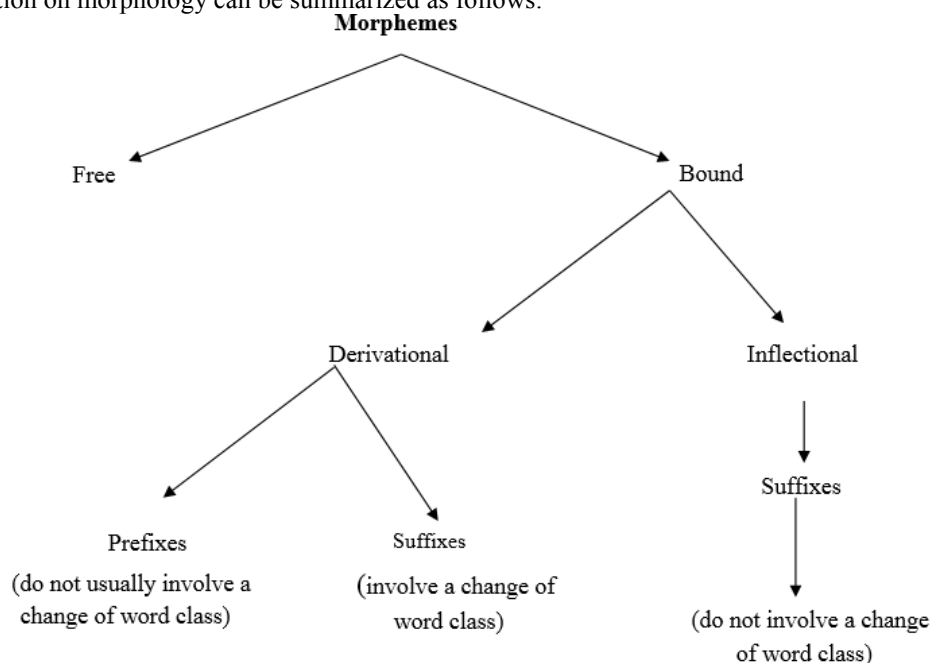
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Introduction

Morphology is the study of morphemes, which are the smallest significant units of grammar (Todd, 1987). Morphemes are of two kinds, free and bound. A free morpheme is one that can be uttered alone with meaning, whereas the bound morpheme cannot be uttered alone with meaning. It is always annexed to one or more morphemes to form a word (stageberg, 1981).

The bound morphemes are also of two types. The inflectional morphemes and the derivational ones. Inflectional morphemes come as suffixes only; they do not change the word class; and they end the words. But the derivational morphemes come as prefixes and suffixes; they change the word class; and they do not necessarily end the words. Prefixes are always considered derivational morphemes although many of them do not change the word class because the meanings of their bases are changed.

The information on morphology can be summarized as follows:



Morphology is one component of language and language is composed of different components such as grammar, phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics. Archibald (1996:508) states that it has to do with the "knowledge of the core components of the grammar, phonology, morphology syntax and semantics".

The researcher has observed that the students' competences in English language generally and in the English morphology particularly are poor although these students start learning English from the first grade and although English has become very necessary in all aspects of life.

Statement of the problem

The majority of Jordanian University students face an outstanding difficulty when attempting to derive the correct forms of words. Morphological errors indicate that learners have misconception about the meaning and

function of morphemes and about the morphological rules and their exceptions. The course of morphology is selective in the university plan which means that it is not given the emphasis it deserves. Therefore, it is very important for these students to have adequate morphological awareness in order to reduce the occurrence and frequency of morphological errors in their writings in English through working hard and effective teaching.

Importance of the Study

Morphology is as important as any other branch of linguistics: phonology, syntax, semantics, sociolinguistics, etc. It is the branch of linguistics that deals with the study of the internal structure of words and how new words are created from the existing ones through the various morphological processes namely ,affixation,compounding,conversion, blending, clipping, reduplication, etc. (O' Gradly and Guzman, 1996; Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973).

Language is a dynamic phenomenon, which takes in new words and thus enables its users to extend its vocabulary. With respect to English which is used as a second or foreign language in most parts of the world, new words keep forcing their ways into the language from time to time. While many of these new words are borrowed from other languages, majority of them are formed. This formation is possible with effective mastery of the English morphological rules and their exceptions.

More importantly, if words are not properly formed, apart from the fact that meanings would be affected, how do we hope to combine them properly in order to carry out a syntactic analysis? This means that morphology is not just important; it also facilitates the acquisition of English syntax. Therefore, it is essential for teachers and instructors of English in ESL environment to teach morphology in relation to the other branches of linguistics.

Literature Review

Many studies have been conducted on the acquisition of English morphemes by both native speakers and ESL learners; some of them will be reviewed here.

Dulay and Burt (1973) conducted a study on the acquisition of eight English grammatical morphemes which they called "Functors". The sample selected was 151 Spanish speakers in the USA whose ages range between 5 to 8 years. They used Bilingual Syntax Measure (BSM) to show samples of speech from the students. The students of the study consists of three groups. The East Harlem group, the Sacramento group and the San Ysidro group. These three groups have varying exposures to English. After analyzing the data collected through BSM, they found that " within each group those morphemes on which students were most accurate and those on which they were least accurate" were consistently the same (Hawkins, 2001: 40). The study also reveals that ESL speakers find some grammatical morphemes difficult to acquire regardless of their length of exposure to English.

McNeill (1996) carried out a study on " vocabulary knowledge profiles: evidence from Chinese speaking ESL teachers. The study consisted of two groups: the Hong Kong group and the Beijing group. The Hong Kong group included 50 English major graduates who had all been instructed through English, whereas the Beijing group consisted of 15 third year students pursuing a Bachelor of English. This group had been taught through Chinese. Thus, there was a significant difference between them.

Word meaning, phonology, morphology and sentence production were examined. Of direct relevance to this study is the aspect that deals with morphology. The study reveals that some morphological errors have to do with words whose forms are typical of the word class requested and those whose forms look like another word class or are totally unacceptable (P.52). He observed that in the noun **surgery**, some students derived deviant forms as *surgerive*, *surgerious*, *surgeral*, *surgerous*, *surgetic*, etc. In short, he concluded the following:

While the results of the study appear to confirm the view that knowledge of meaning operates at a more conscious level than formal aspects of word knowledge, it was interesting to note that a strong relationship existed between the subjects knowledge of word meaning and their ability to operate morphological rules correctly. The extent to which morphological knowledge in L2 relies on conscious processing merits further investigation.

(McNeill, 1996: 56)

AKande (2001) investigated the competence of some senior secondary school pupils in Nigeria in the area of morphology. He dealt with the following morphological processes: suffixation, prefixation, compounding, conversion, acronym, blending, clipping and reduplication. He wanted to know which of these processes are mostly used by Nigerian learners of English. The data collection procedure was written essays. After analyzing the occurrences of morphological processes and deviations, he found the following:

It was that there is a discrepancy in the subjects' acquisition and mastery of word-formulation processes. This is because while some of the processes namely acronym , blending , clipping etc. are not regularly used, suffixation is regularly used.

He also found out that suffixation is the most regularly used, but it was the most difficult to the students.

Aknade (2003) conducted another study on the acquisition of the eight inflectional morphemes in English. The purpose of the study was to find out the occurrences as well as the misuse of these grammatical morphemes. The sample included 60 students selected from four secondary schools in Nigeria. The elicitation procedures were written compositions and a grammar exercise. After analyzing the errors, the study reveals that the students have a poor mastery of the use of English past participle, possessive, past tense and plural inflectional morphemes. However, in the grammar exercise, they did well.

Babalola and Aknade (2002) conducted a study to find out the phonological, orthographic, morphological and syntactic problems concerning the morphological problems, they claimed that "English is not free of inconsistency in the area of Morphology." (P. 250).

They noticed that a morpheme may be phonologically conditioned and when this happens, a morpheme has different allomorphs. For example, {in-} which means **not** and is realized orthographically as {in-} in *indecent*, *insignificant*, *indisputable*, is realized as {im-} in *impossible*, as {un-} in *unfair*, {ir-} *irrelevant* and as {il-} in *illegal*. They go further in their illustration of morphological inconsistency by saying that the suffix {-er} usually means the person who performs the action indicated by the verb. So *writer*, *producer*, *teacher*, means somebody who *writes*, *produces*, *teaches*, but *brother*, *sister* does not mean who *brothes*, *sists*, neither does *type-writer* means somebody who *type-writes*. If someone who *sings* or *writes* is a *singer* or a *writer* respectively, why shouldn't somebody who *cooks*, *gossips*, *cheat*, *sponsors* be a *cooker*, *gossiper*, *cheater*, *sponsorer*? In English as a second language environment, such as we have in Nigeria, learners are bound to make mistakes such as identified above (P.250).

Aremo (2005) conducted a study on conversion in English in order to find as many examples as possible of nouns used in ordinary daily English which are derived from adjectives through the process of conversion. He examined Hornby's Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary of Current English (edited in 2000 by Wehmeier) and Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary (edited in 1987 by Sinclair) for several examples of nouns illustrating adjectives-nouns conversion in English; and then group them together into various semantic classes according to the meaning expressed by those adjectives converted to nouns. Some of the examples he gives for adjectives converted to nouns are *illiterate*, *imbecile*, *African*, *Nigerian*, *adolescent* and *fugitive*.

Methodology

Population of the Study

The population of this study consists of all the fourth year university students majoring in English at Al-Zaytoonah Private University of Jordan for the academic year 2013-2014. These students are expected to graduate at the end of the second semester. They were about 80 students (30 males and 50 females).

The Sample of the Study

The researcher conducted his study on a class consisting of 20 students (8 males and 12 females). The researcher himself taught this class the essay writing in the second term in 2014.

Data Collection

The students of this class were asked to write on many different topics during the whole semester. Given below are the topics on which they have written their essays:

Road Accidents in Jordan , Pollution , The Importance of English Nowadays , Smoking Cigarettes , Are the Rich Happy? , A Journey to an Interesting Place , My Favourite Sport , and Immigration from Villages to Cities.

Data Analysis

The students' essays have been analyzed for the purpose of finding out the morphological errors made by the students. The researcher has dealt with errors in the area of inflectional morphemes and the errors in the derivational morphemes as well as the errors in compounding and conversion. After analyzing the errors which the students made, he has classified, described, stated the causes of these errors, and suggested procedures to remedy the problematic areas.

Findings and Discussion

This section deals with errors in inflectional morphemes, derivational morphemes , compounding and conversion

A . Errors Made in the Use of Inflectional Morphemes

1 .Omission of Noun Plural –S Morpheme.

Students sometimes omit the –s plural suffix that is attached to the singular noun as in the examples below.

- To our parent.

- All student
- A lot of car
- These journey
- Those road

The above errors may be described as performance errors that are due to carelessness.

2. Addition of Noun Plural –S Morpheme.

Students sometimes add –s plural morpheme to singular nouns:

- In this days
- Every days
- Next times
- Each problems

The cause of such errors may be also due to carelessness.

In the following words, the students wrongly double mark plurality by adding the –s morpheme to irregular plural nouns:

- Childrens
- Mens
- Geeses
- Mices

These errors are due to overgeneralization. The errors below are also due to overgeneralization.

The –s plural morpheme is added to uncountable nouns:

- Advices
- Informations
- Furnitures

3. Wrong Formation of Past Form of Irregular Verbs.

Students sometimes add the –ed past suffix to irregular main verbs, as in

- Leaved
- Drinked
- Eated
- Falled
- Losted

The wrong use of –ed past tense morpheme can be attributed to overgeneralization, which is very common in EFL learning. The learner tries to simplify the linguistic data.

4. Omission of the Possessive –s Morpheme.

Errors in use of possessive case are of two types. In the first type, students omit the apostrophe, as in:

- My brothers car.
- My sisters cameras.
- The donkeys voices
- In the farmers fields.

In the second type, students omit the apostrophe and the –s morpheme as in

- My sister glasses
- My father bag.
- My friend meal
- My mother tongue

The errors in both types above can be due to interference. Students translate literally from Arabic.

5. Misuse of Possessive –'s Morpheme.

The students wrongly add the –'s morpheme in the following examples:

- The university's degree.
- My literature's teacher.
- Translation's classes.

These errors may be attributed to ignorance. In other words, the students do not know when and how to use this morpheme.

6. Omission of the 3rd Person Present Tense Morpheme.

In the following examples, the students omit the –s morpheme that is added to the 3rd person verb in the present simple tense.

- He try everyday.
- It pollute the air and water.
- She study everyday.

These errors may be due to ignorance or carelessness.

B . Errors Made in the Use of Derivational Morphemes.

1. Errors arising from the wrong use of prefixes.

Some students use prefixes wrongly while trying to create new words or give antonyms of certain words as in:

- It is insignificant (insignificant).
- It is unpractical (impractical)
- He is inhonest (dishonest)

These errors in the above examples were made as a result of analogous use of morphemes. For instance, it is known that the opposite of most words are formed by the prefix –un before their roots (e.g. *unacceptable, unable, unnecessary*) just as the opposite of some are formed by placing in– before them (e.g. *indecent, indispensable*). The students who made the errors in the first and the second examples above might apply this rule without being conscious of the restrictions involved. In the second example above, the correct prefix is –im and not –un because /p/ and /m/ are bilabials which reflect a partial assimilation, while /n/ is dental and does not go with /p/. In short, these students may not know the rule of assimilation in English phonology.

2. Errors Made as a Result of Analogous Use of Certain Suffixes.

- They went fastly (fast).
- My friends are gossipers (gossips)
- The inhabiters were disappointed (inhabitants)
- I do hate cheaters.(cheats)
- I know that it is insultive.(insulting)
- She was calculative.(calculating)

The errors above may be due to the ignorance of some restriction to certain morphological rules. It is known that most nouns are formed in English by adding the suffix –er to the verbs as we have in the case of *write* and *dance* becoming *writer* and *dancer* respectively. However, there are words, especially verbs, which constitute exceptions to this rule. Such verbs are *gossip, inhabit* and *cheat* whose noun counterparts are *gossip, inhabitant* and *cheat* rather than being **gossiper, * inhabiter* and **cheater* respectively. These words simply undergo the morphological process of conversion. Similarly, *fastly* is used wrongly instead of *fast* in the above example as a result of the students' experiences with adjectives such as *quick, slow* and *happy* which change to *quickly, slowly, happily* respectively when appearing as adverbs.

In the last two examples above, the word, *insultive* and *calculative* were analogously used instead of *insulting* and *calculating*. In English, we have the word *instructive* derived from *instruct* and it was probably that the students applied this knowledge in forming *insultive* and *calculative*. In other words, we can say that this type of errors may occur as a result of overgeneralization.

C . Errors in Compounding

Compounding is morphological process which depends on the combination of at least two free morphemes, such as *book+shop* (*bookshop*). According to Quirk, Greenbaums, Leech and Svartvik (1972), a compound word may be open when its constituent morphemes are written separately as in *tear gas* and *fire engine*, it may be hyphenated as in *far-fetched* and *story-telling* and lastly, it may be solid when the constituents, are written together as in *classroom, blackboard*.

The students of this study show that they do not have a good knowledge of the compounding process. The researcher has found that some solid compounds were written as open and vice versa. Similarly, some hyphenated compounds, were written as open compounds. Below are some examples from the students' essays.

- Text book (textbook).
- Black board (blackboard)
- Essay going (essay-going)
- Good looking (good-looking)
- Blue bell (bluebell)
- Wide spread (widespread)
- Down fall (downfall)

The above examples show that the students do not have a good knowledge of the spelling conventions of compound words. In other words, this finding shows the poor competence of the students in the spelling conventions of compound words. This finding also has come with agreement with that of Olaoye (2000).

D . Errors in Conversion

Few errors in the area of conversion have been found in the students' essays. Below are some examples from their writings.

- I still there.
- My brother ready to go.
- Ahmed eager to be a translator.

These errors arise as a result of the use of *still*, *ready* and *eager* without the verb BE preceding them. This type of errors is common among Jordanian users of English. The cause of this type of errors is attributed to the literal translation from Arabic. In Arabic, *still*, *ready* and *eager* are used as verbs. So this process is called negative transfer from Arabic to English.

A Summary of Causes

The causes of morphological errors can be summarized as follows:

- 1) The inconsistency inherit in English Language is one of the main causes of errors made by the students. This inconsistency is caused by the polysystemic nature of English. For example, if the plural of *knife*, *calf* and *thief* are *knives*, *calves* and *thieves* respectively, why shouldn't the plural of *chief* be *chieves*? Similarly, if the plural of *box* is *boxes*, why is *oxes* not the plural *ox*? This also applies to the formation of past tense in English. *Passed* is the past of *pass*, but *drinked* is not the past of *drink*. The derivational morphemes used to derive, for example, nouns are of different forms and there are no rules to tell the learners which morpheme goes with which words as in *happiness*, *suggestion*, *government*, *discovery*, *refusal*, *obedience*, *acceptance*, *fertility*, *comparison*, *width*, *tourist*, *speaker*. Again, in what ways can teachers of English teach their students when compound words are to be written in solid, open or hyphenated? The problem here is how can the students master numerous rules and their expectations? This inconsistency has a serious implication in the learning of English by ESL learners.
- 2) Another important cause of these errors is that the course of morphology is selective and not compulsory according to the university plan. Some students do not take this course at all. As a result of this, these students have poor competences in the word-formation processes.
- 3) Other important causes are overgeneralization and misapplication of rules. In many cases, students do overgeneralise or misapply certain morphological rules, for example, the suffix -ed is used to derive the past tense. Thus, some students overgeneralise this rule and write *cutted*, *signed*, *gived*, etc.
- 4) The last important cause is negative transfer. Many students transfer Arabic to English. In other words, they translate literally from Arabic to English.

Below are some examples to illustrate the phenomenon of interference .

- I cut the street (crossed)
- He is empty (free)
- The TV puts good programs (shows)

The verbs *crossed* and *shows*, and the adjective *free* in the above examples have the same roots in Arabic. So the students make these errors as a result literal translation from Arabic.

Suggestions for Remedy

At this poor level of the students revealed by the study, the course of morphology shouldn't be selective. In other words, it should be a compulsory course at the department of English at the university.

What is needed here is an instructional material which can take different forms, such as pedagogical approaches, practical suggestions, exercises (activities), and fruitful notes. They have been prepared by the teacher to remedy the misuse of word-formation processes. These types of remedy can be used selectively in the light of learner's level and progress.

It is necessary for word-formation processes to be dealt with in the classroom because it is expected that learners develop some language skills that contribute much to enhance the overall reading and writing abilities. The researcher agrees with Akande (2001:44) that "morphological processes should be introduced and taught at different stages in line with students' acquaintances with them as revealed in the database".

Teachers should focus on the differences between L1 and L2 in order to avoid making errors. The researcher agrees with Fries (1945) and Lado (1957) on the point that interference is a major source of learning difficulty.

Conclusion

In this study, the researcher has attempted to identify, classify, describe and state the causes of some morphological errors in the written English of some university students majoring in English. This paper also shows that there are many causes of these errors, such as interference from Arabic to English, the inconsistency inherit in English itself, overgeneralization and misapplication of rules. Based on the findings of the study, the researcher has suggested remedies

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