

Accepted Manuscript

Title: Word forms, classification and family trees of languages. Why morphology is crucial for linguistics

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PII: S0044-5231(15)00008-X

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1016/j.jcz.2015.02.003>

Reference: JCZ 25314

To appear in:

Received date: 2-10-2014

Revised date: 19-2-2015

Accepted date: 19-2-2015



Please cite this article as: Zeige, Lars Erik, Word forms, classification and family trees of languages. Why morphology is crucial for linguistics. *Zoologischer Anzeiger - A Journal of Comparative Zoology* <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jcz.2015.02.003>

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Word forms, classification and family trees of languages.

Why morphology is crucial for linguistics

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Abstract

'Morphology' in linguistics is the study of the structure and function of word forms. In this paper, Sections 1 and 2 will give an insight into the basic notions and subfields of linguistic morphology to illustrate the linguistic approach to structure and function. It will then proceed to identify the position of morphology within linguistics and the repeated conjunctions between biology and linguistics by glancing at the theoretical foundations (Section 3) and the history (Section 4) of morphology in linguistics as well as today's theoretical and methodological challenges (Section 5). The paper will conclude with some deliberations on the relevance of morphological studies as part of the academic canon.

Preface

Amō, amās, amat; amāmus, amātis, amant—From your time at school, you may remember, with pleasure or dismay, swotting paradigms of words from a foreign language. In the middle ages, Latin *regula* 'rule' referred to both the formation rules producing the word forms and the paradigm listing the word forms as a whole. The paradigm, in turn, was the basis on which the rules would be learnt and internalised (Law, 2003: 83–85). *Regula* meant originally 'bar, batten, measuring stick' and is etymologically related to Modern English *rule* and *ruler*—with the latter sometimes being instrumental in the learning of the former. But as a matter of fact, you tacitly acquired a great deal of abstract morphological knowledge by repeating paradigms in a particular fashion.

1. The structure of word forms: elements and relations

'Morphology' in linguistics is the study of the structure and function of word forms. It is not, however, the study of 'words', understood as the elementary units of an utterance possessing semantic or pragmatic meaning. In linguistics, 'word' is generally abandoned in favour of two more specific terms: 'lexeme' and 'word form'. Following Matthews (1974: 26), the lexeme is the fundamental unit found in the 'lexicon' of a language. The lexicon itself can be thought of as the abstracted inventory of these lexemes, the result of linguistic research much in the sense of a lexicon in a book shelf, or as the neuro-cognitive storage facility in human brains. Take for example the lexeme WALK (the notation in capitals following Lyons, 1968) and its word forms *walk, walks, walked, walking*. These word forms are the written and spoken forms which represent the lexeme in speech. Morphology studies the structure and function of these word forms. Just by glancing at the example of *walk, walks, walked, walking*, it is apparent that word forms exhibit structural properties which rest on a sub-word level. It is therefore necessary to have concepts and a terminology available which allow identifying the inventory of constructive entities and the rules of combination which constitute word forms.

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