



## **Pedagogic Value of ‘Inflectional Morphology’ for Grammar Teaching**

**Dr. J. JOHN SEKAR**

MA, MPhil, PGDTE (CIEFL), PGDHE (IGNOU), PGDCE (UH), PhD  
Head & Associate Professor  
Research Department of English  
Dean, Academic Policies & Administration  
The American College  
MADURAI – 625 002, INDIA

### **ABSTRACT**

A sound knowledge of inflectional morphology is imperative for successful grammar teaching. Though modern English is a derivational language as far as its vocabulary is concerned, it is also inflectional as far as its grammar is concerned. The inflectional nature of English grammar constitutes the contents of English grammar teaching to a very large extent. Many practicing English grammar teachers do not know where to start or how different grammar elements are interrelated. Hence, they simply follow the order of units as provided either in the curriculum or in the contents of grammar books. Inflectional morphology is to grammar improvement what derivational morphology is to vocabulary development. This descriptive and reflective paper provides a bird’s eye-view of how four major grammatical classes of words are related to different grammatical sub-categories or notions, such as number, case, gender, person, degree, mood, voice, tense, and aspect.

**Keywords:** Inflection morphemes, number, case, gender, person, degree, mood, voice, tense, aspect

### **Background of the Study**

Young teachers of English in Indian colleges are expected to teach English grammar as part of compulsory General English while all teachers of school English teachers are expected to have a thorough knowledge of English grammar that forms the backbone of English language teaching at levels and stages. There is also a problem of plenty as far as availability and accessibility of English grammar books and concerned. It also presents no clarity organization-wise so that certain questions that crop up in their minds could be answered professionally. They are ‘why are different grammar items presented





in a particular way?’ or ‘how are they interrelated?’ or ‘how are they related to bigger units that form part of syntax and discourse?’ Of the different classes of words or what is traditionally known as parts of speech, articles, prepositions, and conjunctions are organically related to lexical classes such as, nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs. In practice, majority of teachers begin with articles independent of nouns and their grammatical sub-categories.

## Objective of the Paper

The paper intends to bring about awareness among teachers of English grammar of the interrelatedness of grammatical categories and notions so that they would be able to present English grammar cohesively and organically in the class.

## Research Questions

The following questions are addressed in the paper:

1. What is inflectional morphology and how is it related to derivational morphology?
2. What are grammatical categories of lexical and sub-categories of lexical and what are their grammatical functions?

## Research Design

Reflective thinking is used as a research tool in the study. It is a process of self-observation and self-evaluation. It is a process where teachers think over their teaching practices, analyzing how something was taught and how the practice might be improved or changed for better learning outcomes. Incidentally, it is also a means of professional development that starts in the class. It has two advantages: One, it helps teachers develop a deeper understanding of their own teaching styles, beliefs, and identities. Two, it is a metacognitive strategy that helps teachers think critically upon their experiences, actions, and decisions during their teaching practices. The following three steps were followed during the reflective practice and process:

1. I was observing over a period of three decades how my colleagues and I teach English grammar
2. I questioned why it was being taught in certain ways.
3. I contemplated over if the present methods work or not





4. I interacted with students of different levels in learning grammar

Reflective teaching is a cyclic process wherein teachers start to implement changes and reflective and evaluative process begins all over again.

### **Theoretical Reflections**

Morphology is the study of the internal structure of words. In modern linguistics, a word is not the smallest unit of language, but a morpheme is. It is technical term for a 'structural part' of a word. Technically, a morpheme is defined as 'the smallest grammatically meaningful element of a language.' A morpheme has no parts. Modern linguistics defines a word as a 'free form with or without bound forms.' A word may consist of one or more morphemes.

On the other hand, every structural part of a word need not be equivalent to a morpheme. For instance, '-s' in 'brothers' or '-ing' in 'walking' or '-s' in 'walks' may be parts of these words, but they may also appear in such other nouns and verbs. They are not different morphemes in such contexts, but they represent 'plural number' or 'tense marker.' The plural number morpheme is represented in speech in three different forms, such as /s/, /z/, and /iz/. Certain other nouns have other ways of forming plural number through change of a vowel in them.

### **Classification of Morpheme**

Morphemes can be classified on the basis of formal, functional, and structural criteria. They are as follows:

#### **Grammatical vs. Lexical Morphemes**

A morpheme that has more or less independent (content) meaning is called lexical morpheme. It can be a noun, a verb, an adjective, or an adverb. On the other hand, a grammatical morpheme is grammatically significant, but semantically insignificant. It includes articles, prepositions, and conjunctions and such words are usually known as function class words and forms indicating number, gender, and tense as in -s in pencils or -ed in walked. For example, the utterance 'student draw picture pencil' is ungrammatical, but it can be made grammatical by inserting certain grammatical items: 'The





student is drawing a picture with a pencil'. In this sentence, student draw, picture and pencil are lexical morphemes and 'the, is -ing, a, with,' and 'a' are grammatical morphemes.

### Free vs. Bound Morphemes

Free morphemes are the morphemes which can occur independently or in combination with other morphemes. They can stand alone as independent words and all others are bound. Most lexical morphemes are free morphemes. Bound morphemes, on the other hand, cannot occur independently. They are always attached to other morphemes. Moreover, they do not make sense when they are used in isolation. They occur with other morphemes which may be free or bound. In 'laughed, walking, smiles, indifferent, and unnecessary, the bound morphemes -ed, -ing, -s, -in and un- are combined with free morphemes. In 'conceive,' both morphemes are bound; 'con - and - ceive.'

### Roots vs. Affixes

Morphemes may be classified as roots and affixes. The root or base constitutes the core or nucleus of words and carries the principal semantic (meaning) load. An affix, on the other hand, is a bound morpheme which is attached to another morpheme or combination of morphemes. When all the affixes are removed from the word, what remains is the root or base. For example, in kingship, king is the root and -ship is the affix and in unfriendly, friend is the root and un- and -ly are affixes. A stem consisting of a single free morpheme is a root.

Generally, affixes are secondary to roots which are the centres of such constructions as words. Moreover, it is the root that is modified by the different processes of word formation. They are often longer than affixes and generally much more numerous in the vocabulary. Affixes are attached to stems in a certain order. This order is determined by certain general rules which are stated in terms of the part of speech of the stem. Grammatical affixes are also called inflectional affixes. 'Inflection' is the traditional term for the change in the form of a word that shows its grammatical function.

The study of morphology is divided into two main branches. The study of inflectional affixes is called inflectional morphology and the study of derivational affixes is called derivational morphology. There are three sets of important features that characterise inflectional and derivational affixes in English.





1. Inflectional affixes never change the part of speech of the stem. For instance, a noun to which a plural affix is added still remains a noun and a verb to which the past tense affix is added still remains a verb. On the other hand, derivational affixes may change the part of speech of the stem though they do not always do so. Thus when 'king' becomes 'kingly' or 'kingdom' it involves a change in the part of speech but when 'happy' becomes 'unhappy,' or 'loyal' becomes 'disloyal,' there is no such change. Derivational prefixes normally but not always do not affect the part of speech of the stem. Therefore, derivational prefixes can be either class changing derivational or class maintaining derivational prefixes.
2. Inflectional affixes in English are all suffixes whereas derivational affixes occur both as prefixes and suffixes.
3. Inflectional affixes are attached to a stem after all the derivational affixes have already been attached, and usually only one inflectional suffix is attached to a word. Therefore, once an inflectional affix has been attached to a word, no other affix can be added to it. As a result, the inflectional affix forms the outer layer, while derivational affixes form the inner layers.

### Morphophonology

The pronunciation of words in linguistics is represented in phonemic notation. Phonemic notation is based on the principle of 'one symbol for one sound.' This notation is especially necessary for representing the pronunciation of unphonetic languages like English where there is no one-to-one correspondence between sounds and spellings. In fact, spelling is a poor guide to pronunciation in such languages. The symbols used for representing the plural number morpheme in English /s/, /z/, /iz/ are phonemic symbols. Most morphemes are identical with parts of words. For example, the six morphemes in the word 'examinations' are ex-, a- mi-, na-, -tion, and the plural number. These six morphemes are represented by the parts /ig ɪ mi nei ʒ/ in the spoken form. These spoken forms are sometimes called morphs to distinguish them from (written) morphemes. Morphemes are abstract grammatical or lexical units; morphs are their representations, or realizations, in the spoken form. Five morphs in the word 'examinations' are direct, one-to-one, representations of the morphemes. The sixth morph /z/, however, is only one of the representations of the 'plural number' morpheme. This morpheme is also represented by other morphs. For example, cooks, roses, men, sheep. When different morphs represent





the same morpheme, we call them allomorphs. Thus /s/, /z/, /iz/, /e/ and 'zero' are allomorphs of the plural morpheme.

A pertinent question arises here: Why should different allomorphs represent the same morpheme? or Why can the same morph not represent a morpheme everywhere? There are two kinds of reasons for this:

1. The occurrence of the allomorphs /s/, /z/, /iz/ is conditioned by phonological factors, or factors having to do with pronunciation. They are therefore said to be phonologically conditioned allomorphs.
2. The second is historical. Some words behave in an irregular way. For instance, while most nouns form plurals by taking a suffix, some nouns like 'man, woman, child, mouse, sheep' do it in a different way. Such words give rise to special allomorphs like the replacive allomorph, in which one or more sounds of the stem are replaced, and the zero allomorph where the stem remains unchanged. Allomorphs of this kind are said to be grammatically conditioned allomorphs.

The study of how morphemes of a language are represented by morphs and allomorphs is called its morphophonology.

### **Inflectional Morphology**

Inflectional suffixes (grammatical/bound morphemes) are described as those affixes which are required to be attached to stems by some rules of grammar and perform some grammatical function. Inflectional affixes generally add a fixed element of meaning to the meaning of the stem, and this meaning-element does not vary from one set of words to another. Accordingly, when an inflectional suffix is attached to a stem, the resulting word becomes more complex than it was before. Each inflectional suffix represents a grammatical category and performs the grammatical function associated with that category. English has four major parts of speech: nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. It should be borne in mind that only the words which belong to these categories have inflections.





## **Nouns**

The major grammatical categories associated with nouns are number and case. Though some nouns also express gender by taking a suffix (actress), English nouns cannot be said to express gender inflectionally by a grammatical rule. Moreover, contemporary English is increasingly becoming gender-neutral language. It is quite uncommon to use words like 'hostess, poetess, and actress.' The grammatical category of number has two subcategories of singular and plural and the contrast is expressed morphologically. It is the plural subcategory which requires a change in the form of the noun. The change is either the addition of a suffix, the replacement of one or more vowels in the stem, or both. Sometimes, there is no change in the form of the stem and we are left to guess from the context whether the singular or the plural is meant. The grammatical category of case also has two subcategories of possessive and non-possessive (or common). The traditional three subcategories (nominative, objective and possessive) are applicable for the classification of pronouns. Nouns show only two forms: the possessive form and the common or the uninflected form. The common case form is used everywhere except in the possessive relationship.

The only grammatical category that is associated with the proper noun is case. English proper nouns, therefore generally show only two forms. The possessive case form is the inflected form. The pronunciation of the inflected suffix follows the same as the pronunciation of any other –s suffix. Proper nouns sometimes also take the plural inflection but such cases are very rare and occur with very specific meanings. The two grammatical categories associated with count nouns in English are 'number' and 'case.' Accordingly, most count nouns adopt different forms to signify the singular-plural number contrast and the common-possessive case contrast. The three types of count nouns may be labelled as nouns with regular plural forms, nouns with the irregular plural forms, and nouns with the zero plural forms.

Count nouns express case-contrast in the same way as do proper nouns. The two subcategories are possessive and common. The possessive is expressed by an –'s suffix on the noun while the common case is uninflected. The possessive case of singular count nouns is always expressed by using the suffix –'s with its various allomorphs. The irregular plurals (children, men) take the regular possessive suffix –'s, while the regular plurals (boys, cats) take the zero possessive. All count nouns do not take the





possessive inflection freely. It is generally the nouns which denote persons, or animate beings in general, which take the possessive affix. Other nouns express the relationship by occurring in an ‘of-phrase’ after the noun they modify. Thus, it is “the boy’s bicycle” but the seat of this bicycle” or “the lady’s purse” but “the colour of this purse.”

### Pronouns

Pronouns differ from nouns in certain ways though they behave like nouns. Since the total number of pronouns in English is eight against a vast number of nouns, it is possible to treat them as a separate class with some special features. Grammatical function characterizes them chiefly. They serve to identify number, person, case, and gender. Pronouns are treated typically as function (or structure) words. Like nouns, pronouns too have their types, such as personal pronouns or subject pronouns (I, we, you, he, she, it, they), object pronouns (me, us, you, him, her, it, them), possessive pronoun with nouns (my, our, your, his, her, its, their), possessive pronoun without noun (mine, ours, yours, his, hers, theirs), and indefinite pronouns (someone, somebody, everyone, everybody, nobody).

The grammatical categories associated with pronouns are case, person, gender, and number. Person has three sub-categories: First person (I, We), Second person (you) and Third person (he, she, it, they). Only pronouns in the third person and singular number show gender contrast and it has three subcategories: masculine (he, him, his), feminine (she, her, hers), and neuter (it, its). Most personal pronouns have singular and plural forms which are unrelated. The number contrast is found in all cases, persons and genders of pronouns, but in the second person the contrast is not expressed by different forms and we have to rely on their clues. For instance, “You are **an adult** and should know how to deal with children. You are **all** adults and should know how to deal with children. The following table summarizes all these grammatical categories and functions:

	<i>First</i>	<i>person</i>		<i>Third</i>	<i>Person</i>	
	<i>Subject</i>	<i>Object</i>	<i>Possessive</i>	<i>Subject</i>	<i>Object</i>	<i>Possessive</i>
<i>Singular</i>	I	me	My(mine)	He/she/it	Him/her/it	His/her(hers)/its







<i>Plural</i>	we	us	Our(ours)	they	them	Their (theirs)
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## Adjectives and Adverbs

Adjectives and adverbs inflect to show degree and degree has two sub-categories of comparative and superlative. Except a couple of case, both these lexical types have identical forms, such as –er and –est to be added to the root and more and most prefixed to the root. Irregular forms are common to both adjectives and adverbs.

### Irregular Adjectival Forms

<i>Positive</i>	<i>Comparative</i>	<i>Superlative</i>
Good, well	better	Best
bad	worse	Worst
far	Farther, further	Farthest (places, direction, distance) furthest (+more, later, additional)
little	Less (amount, number) Lesser (less important)	Least
much, many	more	Most
old	Older, elder	Oldest, eldest

### Irregular Adverb Forms

<i>Positive</i>	<i>Comparative</i>	<i>Superlative</i>
John sings very <i>well</i>	John sings <i>better</i>	John sings <i>best</i>
India played <i>badly</i>	India played <i>worse</i>	India played (the) <i>worst</i>
John travelled <i>far</i>	John travelled <i>farther</i>	John travelled (the) <i>farthest</i>





## Verbs

Verbs are so essential to sentences that they are called ‘the heart of the sentence.’ In fact, there cannot be a sentence without a verb in it. If there is a sentence without a verb, it can be taken for granted that it is either understood or shortened version of a sentence with a verb. Moreover, it often decides the structure of the whole sentence. For instance, if a sentence has a transitive verb, the sentence then ought to have an object. Besides, the verb is morphologically quite complex since it inflects in different ways to express a variety of grammatical contrasts (tense, mood, number, person, voice).

English verbs are divided into three classes according to whether they function as main verbs, as auxiliaries, or as both. The verbs which function only as main verbs are called *Full Verbs* and they form a large and open class. The verbs which function only as auxiliaries are called *Modal Verbs* or *Auxiliaries* and they form a closed class since they are a few in number. They do not contribute any ‘lexical’ meaning. They usually indicate the speaker’s attitude towards the action described in the sentence. For instance, the following two sentences can be compared: John *works* hard. [description of a fact] and John *should work* hard [expression of speaker’s attitude]. Modal verbs express different kinds of attitudes, such as desirability, necessity, possibility, and likelihood. The modal auxiliaries of English are will, would, shall, should, can, could, may, might, must, ought, dare, need and used. The third category of verbs is *Primary Verbs*. They can function either as main verbs or as auxiliaries. There are only three verbs in this category: Be, Have and Do, but they are probably the three most important verbs in English. Each of them has a number of different forms according to the grammatical contrasts they express, and most of these forms can occur both as main verbs and as auxiliaries. The following are the inflectional functions of the English Full Verb:

## Person and Number

Full verbs and primary verbs like pronouns change their forms for number and person. When the number is singular and the person is the third person, the full verbs take the –s inflection. The primary verbs show even greater variation in form. Two things need to be noted about this change in the form of verbs. First, the change in the verbs is determined by the number and person of the subject. In other words, person and number are associated with the agreement between the subject noun or





pronoun and the verb. Second, full verbs show this change only in the present tense and in the past tense there is no change. Primary verbs, however, do show the change in the past tense as well. Modal verbs do not have clear past tense forms. The so-called past tense forms of some modals also, however, do not change their forms for number and person.

## Tense

Tense has only two subcategories: past and non-past (or common). It means that verbs have only two kinds of forms (tense) for the expression of time. One form locates the event and action denoted by the verb specifically in the past time and the other form refers to all times except the past (present, future or all time). The verbs do not inflect specifically to show future time. When users wish to talk of an event in the future, they generally use the modal auxiliaries 'will' or 'shall' with the base form of the verb, or use constructions like 'be going to, be about to' or they use the non-past form of the verb. Hence, future is not regarded as a subcategory of tense in English.

## Aspect

Aspect refers to the distinction between 'action in progress' and 'action completed' which is expressed by the inflectional changes in the verb. It has two subcategories: the progressive aspect and the perfective aspect. The following sentences illustrate the aspect:

1. John **is reading** a novel [action in progress in the present]
2. John **was reading** a novel [action in progress in the past]
3. John **has written** the letter [action completed in the present]
4. John **had handed** over the letter [action in completed in the past]

## Mood

A verb or verb phrase in English takes different forms depending on what kind of attitude the speaker is expressing toward what is being said, or toward the person being addressed. It takes one set of forms if what is being said is considered to be a fact. Sentences such as John is an intelligent boy, the sun rises in the east, and India won the match are all spoken as statements of fact. The verbs in these sentences are said to be in the Indicative Mood. They take different forms depending on the person and number of the subject, the tense, and the aspect that are involved. If, however, the sentence is meant as





a command, or a request, telling someone to do something, the verb forms used are said to be in the Imperative Mood, and the sentences such as 'Come here! or Be careful, or Say the prayer' are called imperative sentences.

The third subcategory of mood in English is the Subjunctive Mood. Verbs acquire still different forms when one is expressing a wish, a suggestion, a demand, a possibility, and a doubt. This is most clearly seen in clauses with third person singular subjects in the non-past tense: The principal suggests that he leave today or The court ordered that he pay the fine today or The Association demanded that the vice-chancellor leave at once. The use of the base form of the verb is called as the present subjunctive. Another subjunctive form of the English verb is the past subjunctive. The only verb with a past subjunctive is BE, and the form is 'were' which occurs with subjects of all persons and numbers. For instance, I wish I were a woman or I wish my father were here right now.'

## Voice

The category has two subcategories: Active and Passive. In the active voice, the subject is seen as the 'doer' of the action and in the passive the action is seen as done to the subject. The passive voice is recognized by the form of the verb phrase. The main verb is in the past participle form and is preceded by some of the primary verb 'be' as an auxiliary.

## Modal Verbs

Modals do not inflect for any of the grammatical categories. They have no -ing form and participle form. They therefore do not express aspect either. All modal verbs are finite verbs and they occur only as auxiliaries and express various kinds of 'moods.' Two points, however, need to be noted about the morphology of the modals. Most modals have two forms: a strong and a weak form. The strong form occurs when the modal is stressed, or when it occurs at the beginning or end of an utterance and the weak form occurs in unstressed positions and in the middle of an utterance. Two, the modals have special negative forms in speech. The negative word not is abbreviated to /nt/ and combined with different modals in different ways: 'wouldn't' 'couldn't' but 'won't' and 'shan't.'





## Primary Verbs

Primary verbs inflect for number, person, tense and aspect though not all inflected forms can occur both as main verbs and auxiliaries. In addition, like modals, they have special strong vs. weak forms and negative forms with /nt/.

## Conclusion

Reflective teaching is a means of quality English language teaching and it promote continuous professional development. Teachers can improve their teaching through conscious and systematic reflection on their teaching experiences and they should therefore continuously reshape their knowledge and learning. A sound knowledge of Inflectional Morphology is mandatory for any English teacher who wishes to teach grammar as much as Derivational Morphology required for anyone who wishes to teach word power. Inductive and deductive approaches to teaching grammar are possible only when teachers first grasp the fact that grammar is closely linked with inflectional nature of its four classes of words that are equally important for the teaching of word-formation. It provides linguistic context to the teaching of grammar and thus it avoids teaching grammar in isolation from language structure. In other words, it teaches teachers when they should introduce a particular grammatical category.

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