

Why Do Morphemes Exist?

It may seem wayward to assert that the synchronic existence, and diachronic persistence, of 'morphemes' is determined by meaning. After all, the 'canonical' definition, elaborated by Aronoff (*Morphology By Itself*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), presents morphemes as entities independent of synchronic semantic/functional (or phonological) determinants. But if they have no 'external underpinning' why do they exist? An uninteresting answer would be that they are always the accidental residue of earlier, now defunct, extramorphologically motivated processes. The inadequacy of this assumption is apparent from the data presented in, e.g., Maiden 'Morphological autonomy and diachrony' (*Yearbook of Morphology 2004*, 137-75, 2005), where morphemes are shown to survive robustly, and to evolve, over centuries, without obvious support from anything outside the morphological system. But such data only reinforce the initial question.

I shall argue that, failing evidence to the contrary, those phenomena which are unambiguously identifiable as morphomic do indeed always originate accidentally. I shall also suggest, albeit more tentatively, that all such morphemes originate in allomorphy of the lexical root. But I shall also argue that their diachronic persistence has a rather simple, semiotic, motivation: the principle of 'one meaning - one form'. This 'meaning' is not grammatical, but lexical. The persistence of morphemes is, perhaps surprisingly, not fundamentally distinct from many cases of analogical levelling of root allomorphy which can be ascribed at least in part to speakers' expectation of a transparent relationship between form and lexical meaning. Levelling and morphomic persistence are complementary: failing the former, the latter serves to maintain a maximally predictable pattern of deviation between form and lexical meaning.

One pointer in this direction is the English past participle: it is famously presented by Aronoff as an example of a 'morpheme', displaying, equally, phonological and semantic heterogeneity. Yet it is also a textbook example of morphological 'split', such that archaic forms of participles may survive innovatory morphological changes precisely if they carry *lexical* idiosyncrasies (e.g., 'molten' vs 'melted'). I look at the 'past-participle-as-morpheme' not in English, but in the history of Romanian and its dialects. Here phonological heterogeneity is mapped onto a significantly wider range of (I argue) disparate functions than in English — the Romanian past participle also covering a set of functions usually labelled 'supine'. In fact, the Romanian data are particularly important because there is a strong case to be made that they most extensively represent what survives in Romance of yet another Aronoffian morpheme, the Latin 'third stem'.

Any morphological change historically affecting the Romanian past participle in any one of its functions can be shown equally and unfailingly to have affected it in all the others. Apparent exceptions nearly all involve forms whose meaning deviates idiosyncratically from the related verb; the remainder involves the verb 'to be' whose behaviour, I argue, corroborates my hypothesis by virtue of its *lack* of lexical meaning. A class of derived agentive nouns which, historically, shared the Latin 'third stem' with the verb has, significantly, also lost the morphological link in Romanian. Given that such nouns usually have an erratic semantic connection with their corresponding verb, this too tends supports my hypothesis. Indeed, I shall tentatively suggest that 'derivational' morphology generally lies outside the scope of morphemes, even where purely synchronic descriptions, such as Aronoff's of Classical Latin, may suggest otherwise.

