The morphome as a unit of predictive value

James P. Blevins

University of Cambridge

There is broad agreement that morphological systems are more than unstructured inventories, but far less of a consensus about how they are organized. Much of the contemporary discussion is conducted between two extreme poles. At one extreme is the view that morphology is a direct conduit of grammatical meaning. This position is encapsulated in a strict morphemic model, in which the biunique relation between features and forms ensures that morphological variation mirrors the distinctive features of that system. The other extreme is represented by what Aronoff (1998: 413) memorably terms the "disease view of morphology". On this view, morphology is essentially noise within a communication channel, a pernicious source of cross-linguistic variability and language-internal arbitrariness. Most contemporary approaches stake out a position between these extremes and argue about the relative signal-to-noise ratio that can be assigned to particular types of patterns.

Yet from a traditional perspective, the entire debate is misguided. Focussing solely on one of the factors that conditions morphological variation creates a false opposition between meaning-driven and functionless variation. It is by now reasonably well established that not all morphological patterns are motivated by grammatical meaning (Matthews 1991; Anderson 1992; Aronoff 1994; Stump 2001). It is also clear that non-morphemic patterns can be highly stable, systematic and even extend their range in ways that belie the claim that they are functionless noise (Maiden 2005) . Hence while it is plainly implausible to treat all form variation as meaning-driven, it is equally misleading to dismiss stable meaning-driven patterns as purely incidental. There is little to be gained by forcing all variation to fit one type of pattern (morphemic or non-morphemic) or by demarcating the division between types more precisely. The challenge for a general model lies in characterizing the role of morphemic and non-morphemic patterns within a system, and a rigid dichotomy between meaning-driven and functionless patterns confounds this task.

The expanded notion of morphological information incorporated in a traditional model subsumes both types of pattern. This flexibility derives from the fact that the units in a traditional scheme of analysis are motivated by their *predictive value* rather than by their *grammatical content*. What Aronoff (1994) has elsewhere termed *morphomic* patterns are not random "imperfections" that arise in "the mapping between morphosyntax and morphological realization" (Aronoff 1999: 322). Instead, these patterns serve to sanction reliable deductions about the shape of other forms in a morphological system. The predictive character of morphomic patterns is, strik-

ingly, emphasized in the descriptions of Priscianic syncretism in Matthews (1991):

> For any Verb, however irregular it may be in other respects, the Present Infinitive always predicts the Imperfect Subjunctive. (Matthews 1991: 195)

> There are a few exceptions; but, in general, if the stem of the Past Participle is x, no matter how irregular it may be, that of the Future Participle is x with -$\bar{u}r$- added. (Matthews 1991: 200)

Well-documented cases of systematic morphomic patterns in Daghestanian (Kibrik 1998) and Romance (Maiden 2005) languages, among others, have a similar predictive value. In each case, patterns of stem syncretism sanction reliable deductions about the shape of other, morphosyntactically distinct, forms. Moreover, this perspective applies equally to *morphemic* variation. Patterns that exhibit a biunique association between features and forms are of value not only in identifying aspects of the grammatical meaning/function of a form but also in isolating other components of the form that recur within its paradigm or elsewhere in the morphology.

The notion of 'information' that subsumes these implicative patterns corresponds to uncertainly or *entropy* reduction (Shannon 1948). In information-theoretic terms, morphemic and morphomic patterns are both informative because the deductions they sanction reduce uncertainty about the paradigmatic (and syntagmatic) structure of a system. On this formalization of a traditional perspective, there is no need to reduce either pattern to the other or to classify either as incidental or as noise.

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