Inflectional vs. Derivational Morphemes Handout
Ling 201

Inflectional

- An *inflectional morpheme* is added to a noun, verb, adjective or adverb to assign a particular grammatical property to that word such as: tense, number, possession, or comparison.
- Examples of inflectional morphemes are:
  - Plural: -s, -z, -iz
    Like in: cats, horses, dogs
  - Tense: -d, -t, -id, -ing
    Like in: stopped, running, stirred, waited
  - Possession: -‘s
    Like in: Alex’s
  - Comparison: -er, -en
    Like in: greater, heighten
    *note that –er is also a derivational morpheme so don’t mix them up!!

- These do not change the essential meaning or the grammatical category of a word. Adjectives stay adjectives, nouns remain nouns, and verbs stay verbs.
- In English, all inflectional morphemes are suffixes (i.e. they all only attach to the end of words).
- There can only be one inflectional morpheme per word

Derivational

- Derivational morphemes tend to change the grammatical category of a word **but not always**!
- There can be multiple derivational morphemes per word and they can be prefixes, affixes, or suffixes. For example, the word “transformation” contains two derivational morphemes: trans (prefix) -form (root) -ation (suffix)
- Some examples of derivational morphemes are:
  - -ful like in ‘beautiful’ => beauty (N) + ful (A) = beautiful (A)
  - -able like in ‘moldable’ => mold (V) + able (A) = moldable (A)
  - -er like in ‘singer’ => sing (V) + er (N) = singer (N)
  - -nes like in ‘happiness’ => happy (A) + nes (N) = happiness (N)
  - -ify like in ‘classify’ => class (N) + ify (V) = classify (V)

Determining Derivational vs. Inflectional Morphemes

Derivational

- If it changes the part of speech, it **must** be derivational.
- If it is at the beginning of a word, it **must** be derivational
If it is followed by one of the inflectional morphemes listed above, it must be derivational.

If there is an inflectional morpheme, then every other morpheme must be derivational (since only one inflectional morpheme is allowed per word).

**Inflectional**

- If it adds a particular grammatical property like tense, number, possession, or comparison, it must be inflectional
- This is related to productivity: if it is adding a grammatical property, it is productive.