



# Morphology

Morphology refers to the structure and construction of words. Morphology skills require an understanding and use of the appropriate structure of a word, such as word roots, prefixes, and affixes (called morphemes).

**Keywords:** Morphology, grammar, Brown's stages, MLU, prefix, suffix, affix, tense, negation, plurals

A *morpheme* is the smallest part of language that carries meaning. A morpheme may be a whole word (e.g. I, apple, happy) or a part of a word (e.g. un-, dis-, -s, -ed). For example;

- The word 'help' has 1 morpheme. It cannot be broken down further. Although the word 'he' can be made from 'help', it is not related to the original word of 'help'.
- 'Helpful' contains 2 morphemes – 'help' and 'ful'.
- 'Unhelpful' contains 3 morphemes – 'un', 'help' and 'ful'.

Understanding and using morphemes is a key component of language development. Using morphemes tells the listener about plurals (e.g. **pegs**), tense (e.g. **jumped**), negatives (e.g. **untie**) and word type (e.g. noun = **happiness**; adverb = **happily**; adjective = **happiest**). Students with Language Disorder often have morphology deficits, and experience difficulty learning, understanding and using the rules that govern word formation (morphemes).

As students' language develops, they begin to use and understand increasingly complex structures. This is also true for morphology. Students typically develop morphemes in the following order by age 4.

Grammatical Morpheme	Examples	Age Acquired (months)
<b>Present progressive (-ing)</b>	The girl is dancing <b>ing</b> ; Jorge is singing <b>ing</b> .	19-28
<b>In</b>	Toys <b>in</b> box; crayons <b>in</b> pencil case.	27-30
<b>On</b>	Superstar <b>on</b> TV; pencil <b>on</b> paper.	27-33
<b>Plural: regular -s</b>	Cars <b>s</b> ; Bees <b>s</b> ; Shoes <b>s</b> .	27-33
<b>Past irregular</b>	The ant <b>ate</b> the crumb; Tess <b>drank</b> some water.	25-46
<b>Possessive 's</b>	Clive's jumper; Kate's tiara.	26-40
<b>Uncontractible copula (main verb)</b>	<b>This is</b> mine; <b>Was it</b> Peter? <b>It was</b> Peter.	28-46
<b>Articles (a, the)</b>	<b>The</b> cricket pitch; <b>A</b> game of tennis.	28-46



<b>Past regular (-ed)</b>	She kicked <b>ed</b> the ball; He tickled <b>ed</b> his sister.	26-48
<b>Third person (regular)</b>	The dog <b>fetches</b> the ball.	28-50
<b>Third person irregular</b>	Pip <b>has</b> a fishing rod; James <b>does</b> soccer.	28-50
<b>Uncontractible auxiliary</b>	<b>Are</b> you going? Mo <b>was</b> driving. She <b>is</b> (Response to “who’s singing?”).	29-48
<b>Contractable copula</b>	It’s raining!	29-49
<b>Contractible auxiliary</b>	Yuna’s bouncing. David’s climbing again.	30-50

### Signs of Morphological Difficulties

- Omission or misuse of grammatical forms in spoken and/or written language. For example, *the mans eated the burrito; they is playing*.
- Use a limited number of grammatical markers (e.g. two chair(s); It (is) Eliza).
- Errors using verbs including ending (e.g. jumping), auxiliary verbs (e.g. they are) and regular/irregular past tense (e.g. bowled; caught).
- Difficulty understanding and using past, present and future verb tenses.
- Difficulty using function words such as articles (e.g. a, an, the) and prepositions (e.g. in, under, against).
- Difficulty using pronouns (e.g. she, his, their).
- Overgeneralisation of grammatical rules (e.g. hitted the ball, feets).
- Difficulty understanding and decoding grammatical morphemes (i.e. prefixes and suffixes).

### Strategies to Support Students Development of Morphology

- Model correct grammatical structure and productions in everyday classroom tasks.
- Rephrase students’ incorrect sentences with emphasis on the correction (e.g. “Omar slided down” repeated as “Omar *slid* down”).
- Emphasise target grammatical structures when reading stories and choose stories that have target structures in them (e.g. irregular past tense – “Who Sank the Boat”; pronouns – “Brown Bear, Brown Bear”; plurals – “Florette”).
- Explicitly teach target structures (e.g. regular plurals – add an /s/ to show there is more than one. One cat, two cats.)
- Occasionally make deliberate and obvious errors and encourage students to help you fix it.
- Teach strategies in a range of contexts (e.g. classroom, playground, home) as well as in spoken and written modalities to promote generalisation.



### **Want to learn more?**

To learn more about Language Disorder and how to support children and young people for whom language is their primary disorder, please **contact us**. Language Disorder Australia provides holistic, innovative and effective therapy, education and support services and has a transdisciplinary team of speech pathologists, occupational therapists, educators, psychologists and physiotherapists.

Contact: 1300 881 763 or [hello@languagedisorder.org.au](mailto:hello@languagedisorder.org.au)

Website: [languagedisorder.org.au](http://languagedisorder.org.au)

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