

What is phonology? / Morphology? / Syntax?

The structural description of English grammar can be recognized according to three different levels of structure. The first level is called phonology. This level refers to the description of the systems and patterns of speech sounds in English. Phonology deals with the abstract or mental aspect of the sounds. Phonology, for example, studies the alternation in pronunciation of the English plural morpheme. Accordingly, the following questions can be raised:

- What is the proper description of the three different sounds of the English plural morpheme?
- What are the conditions on such alternation that account for the different phonological forms?

The second higher level is called morphology. It deals with the study of the internal structure of words. In other words, it studies ‘morphemes’ and their different forms ‘allomorphs’ and the way they combine in word formation. A morpheme represents a short segment of language that meets three criteria:

- A morpheme is a word or a part of a word that has meaning.
- A morpheme is the smallest meaningful part of a word.
- A morpheme has a relatively stable meaning in different verbal environments. For example, the word ‘straight’ is firstly a word that carries a recognizable meaning. Secondly, dividing this word into parts results in violation of meaning. Thirdly, the word ‘straight’ recurs with a relatively stable meaning in various environments such as: ‘straighten’ and ‘straightedge’. Within the field of morphology, the following questions can be raised:

- What are words?
- What are the basic building blocks in the formation of complex words?
- How is the meaning of a complex word related to the meaning of its parts?

The third level concerns itself with the ways in which words are combined to form larger structures – phrases, clauses, and sentences. This is the area of syntax.