

MAIN PRINCIPLES OF CLASSIFICATION OF AFFIXES

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Introduction

Affixation, as a central morphological process in language, plays a pivotal role in word formation. The classification of affixes is essential for understanding the structure of words and the dynamics of linguistic productivity. Linguists have proposed several principles for categorizing affixes based on their form, function, position, and origin. This article seeks to explore the main principles of affix classification through both traditional and modern linguistic perspectives.

1. Positional Principle

One of the most common and straightforward ways to classify affixes is based on their position relative to the root or base word. This approach divides affixes into:

- Prefixes – attached at the beginning (e.g., un- in undo)
- Suffixes – attached at the end (e.g., -ness in happiness)
- Infixes – inserted within a root (rare in English, but common in some Austronesian languages)
- Circumfixes – affixes that appear both before and after the root (found in languages like German or Malay)
- Interfixes – elements that link roots in compounds (e.g., -o- in speedometer)

This classification is essential in morphological parsing and structural analysis.

2. Functional (Grammatical vs Derivational) Principle

Affixes may also be divided based on their function in grammar and word formation:

- Derivational affixes – create new words by changing the meaning or category of a base (e.g., happy → unhappy, create → creation)
- Inflectional affixes – indicate grammatical relationships without altering the word class (e.g., walk → walked, cat → cats)

This distinction is crucial in understanding how languages encode syntactic and semantic information.

3. Semantic Principle

Some scholars focus on the semantic role of affixes. For instance:

- Negative (e.g., in-, un-)
- Diminutive (e.g., -let, -y)
- Augmentative (e.g., mega-)
- Pejorative (e.g., -ard in drunkard)
- Gender-marking (e.g., -ess in actress)

This classification helps linguists and language learners understand the meaning encoded in affixation.

4. Origin or Etymological Principle

Affixes can also be categorized based on their origin. For example:

- Native affixes – originated within the language (e.g., -ness, -ful)
- Borrowed affixes – adopted from Latin, Greek, or other languages (e.g., anti-, -ology)

Understanding the etymology of affixes aids in deciphering word meanings and building vocabulary, especially in academic and scientific contexts.

5. Productivity Principle

Affixes vary in their ability to generate new words. On this basis, they can be classified as:

- Highly productive affixes – widely used in new word formation (e.g., -ness, un-)
- Semi-productive affixes – used in limited or genre-specific contexts (e.g., -ette)
- Unproductive affixes – no longer form new words but persist in existing vocabulary (e.g., -th in width)

Productivity analysis helps linguists track language change and innovation.

6. Phonological Principle

This principle classifies affixes based on how they affect the phonological structure of a word:

- Stress-shifting affixes (e.g., -ity in electric → electricity)
- Neutral affixes (e.g., -ness in kind → kindness)
- Allomorphic behavior – when an affix changes form based on phonological context (e.g., -s in cats, dogs, horses)

Such classification is essential in phonological modeling and morphophonemics.

Conclusion

The classification of affixes is not a mere technicality but a window into the cognitive and functional mechanisms of language. The principles outlined above offer a multidimensional understanding of affixation, each illuminating a different facet of morphological structure. An integrated approach that considers positional, functional, semantic, etymological, productive, and phonological perspectives enables a more holistic grasp of affixes in any language.

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