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TYPES OF LANGUAGES ACCORDING TO THEIR MORPHOLOGICAL STRUCTURE¹

The **morphological structure** of languages, i.e., the way in which languages put morphemes together to form words, is often used as reliable criterion to classify the languages of the world. The classification is made on the basis of morphological type because it is assumed that the morphological type of a language may reflect both the morphological characteristics and syntactic characteristics of the language. Then, depending on their particular morphological structure, languages are classified into two major groups, namely, analytic (al) (or isolating) languages, and syntactic languages.

1. **Analytic or isolating languages** are languages in which grammatical concepts and relationships are expressed chiefly through the use of free morphemes. That is to say, these languages are made up of sequences of single morphemes, each one constituting a word with a separate meaning; hence affixes are not generally used to compose words. Likewise, the position of a word in a sentence alone shows its function; therefore, word order is very important in analytic languages. Among the most well-known isolating languages are Mandarin (or Pekingese) Chinese and Vietnamese. For instance, in Mandarin the notions of plurality and past tense are expressed by the use of free morphemes, as is shown below.

a. /wɔ mən tan tsin/

b. /wɔ mən tan tsin lə/

I *plural* play piano ← (literal transl.) → I *plural* play piano *past*

‘We are playing the piano.’

‘We played the piano.’

¹This section of the Handbook is based on Godby et al. (1982), File 56, unless otherwise indicated.

c. /ta da wɔ mən /

He/She hit I plural (literal translation)

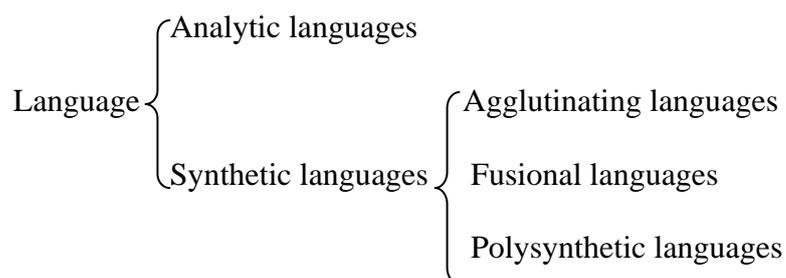
‘He/She hit us.’

Notice that in Mandarin object pronouns and subject pronouns have the same form, i.e., /wɔ mən/ = we, us (their position in the sentence determines their meaning). In Mandarin the basic word order is: SUBJECT + VERB + DIRECT OBJECT.

2. **Synthetic languages** are languages in which grammatical concepts and relationships are expressed chiefly through the use of inflections. As in these languages a word (rather, a stem) may be made up of a root plus a string of affixes, several meanings can be put together in a single word. Likewise, in synthetic languages word order is more flexible than in analytic languages.

Synthetic languages can in turn be subdivided into agglutinating languages, fusional languages and polysynthetic languages.

Figure 3.2. Language typology by morphological structure



a. **Agglutinating (or agglutinative) languages** are languages in which (a) the affixes are relatively ‘loosely’ attached to the stems; i.e., it is usually easy to determine where the boundaries between morphemes are, and (b) each bound morpheme carries

(ordinarily) only one meaning. Among the highly agglutinating languages are Turkish, Hungarian, Swahili, Japanese, and Finnish.

For example, in Turkish **ev** means 'house' and **-ler** is the plural morpheme; then the word *evler* means 'houses'. The possessive morpheme (his, her its) is **-i**, **-den** is the **ablative** morpheme 'from'; then the word *evlerinden*² (or *ev-ler-in-den*) means 'from his/her houses.'

Similarly, in Swahili, verb stems take prefixes to indicate the person (first, second or third) of the subject of the verb and also to indicate the tense of the verb, as in the following list of forms for the verb 'read'.

<i>ni-na-soma</i>	I <i>pres.</i> read.	'I am reading.'
<i>u-na-soma</i>	You <i>pres.</i> read	'You are reading.'
<i>a-na-soma</i>	He <i>pres.</i> read.	'He is reading.'
<i>ni-li-soma</i>	I <i>past</i> read.	'I was reading.'
<i>u-li-soma</i>	You <i>past</i> read.	'You were reading.'
<i>a-li-soma</i>	He <i>past</i> read.	'He was reading.'

Notice that **ni-** means 'I,' **u-** means 'you,' **a-** means 'he,' **li-** means 'past tense' and so on.

As far as word order is concerned, Hungarian, an agglutinating language, offers a good example. In Hungarian, a noun or noun phrase may appear either preceding or following the verb in a sentence and be recognized as a subject or an object, depending on whether it has the suffix **-t** attached to it or not. The suffix **-t** marks a noun or noun phrase as being the direct object. Notice the sentences below.

²The insertion of *-n* between *-i* and *-den* is automatic and regular in Turkish (Lyons, 1968). In linguistics, elements like *-n-* above are referred to as formatives. A **formative** could be defined as a transitional sound segment or segments, usually without a recognized meaning and likely to have a morphological status, which is added after a stem, before another morpheme is added. In other words, formatives are a sort of transitional morphological elements, such as *-s-* in the German word *Liebeslied* 'love song', and *-ar-* in the Spanish word *polvareda* 'a cloud of dust' (cf. Bauer, 1983).

- A kutya látja az embert /ɔ 'kutʃɔ 'la:tʃɔ ɔz `embert/ 'The dog sees the man-obj.
- As embert látja a kutya. /ɔz 'embert 'la:tʃɔ ɔ `kutʃɔ/ 'The man-obj. sees the dog.

Both sentences mean the same, namely, 'The dog sees the man.'

b. **Fusional (or inflecting) languages** are languages in which the affixes and the base to which they are attached are fused together and therefore are not easily separated from one another. In other words, it is often rather hard to tell where one morpheme ends and where the next begins. In addition, a single affix may convey several meanings. French, German, Italian, Spanish and Russian are typical fusional languages. For example, in Spanish the inflectional ending **-o** is fused with the root **habl-** to form the word *hablo*. Moreover, the suffix **-o** means 'first person singular present tense'. Similarly, in Russian **/-jet/** means 'third person singular present tense' and is fused with the root **/ta-/** 'read', as in the sentence **/tʃi: `tajet/** 'He is reading'.

c. **Polysynthetic (or holophrastic) languages** are languages in which several stem forms may be combined (along with affixes) into a single 'word'. Such a word is usually a verb with its associated nouns 'built-in' or incorporated, so that the verb alone expresses what seems to us to be about the equivalent of a whole sentence. Known representatives of polysynthetic languages are Sora (a language of India) and Eskimo (in Alaska). For instance, Sora allows the incorporation of objects (subjects, instruments, etc.) into verbs, as in the following sentences:

- [anin ɲamjɔten]

anin ɲam -jɔ -te -n

He catch fish *non-past* do `He is fish-catching', i.e., 'He is catching fish'.

- [ɲamkɪdtenai]

pam -kɪd -te -n -ai

catch tiger *non-past* do *1st. pers. agent* 'I will tiger-catch', i.e., 'I will catch a tiger'.

The incorporated or built-in form of the noun is not necessarily identical to its free form. In Sora, the free form of 'tiger' is [kɪna], of 'knife' is [kɔndi], and so on. Look at the following sentence:

- [pɔ:pɔŋkɔntam]

pɔ: -pɔŋ -kɔn -t -am

stab belly knife *non-past* thee '(Someone) will stab you with a knife in (your) belly'.

Now, notice some cases in Eskimo:

- [nigɪpkagana]

nigɪ -pkag -ana

eat (he) cause me 'He causes me to eat', i.e., 'He feeds me'

- [ɪglukpiɪŋ]

ɪglu -kpi -ɪŋ

house build you (*sing.*) '(You) house-build', i.e., '(You) build a house'

Now that the different types of languages have been described according to their morphological structure, it must be added that languages are rarely 'pure' types; they usually combine elements of a variety of types. For instance, English, especially Old English, used to be a highly inflectional language. Modern English, in contrast, has lost almost all its inflections; only eight of them remain, as was said above. To compensate for the lost of so many inflections, English now uses variable word order and function words. For its use of function words, English could be considered a somewhat analytic

language; however, it can be said that English shares more characteristics of synthetic languages than of analytic languages.