

Why is there morphology?

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Since there are languages that nearly lack morphology, except compounding, one is inclined to think that morphology is an unnecessary luxury of language. In order to understand why languages nevertheless have more or less morphology, one has to look at the evolution of morphology. The most common view is that morphology originates from syntax in that free elements become reduced, are cliticized and finally reinterpreted as affixes. Although some forms of morphology can well be reconstructed this way, there are other forms of morphology (such as nonconcatenative morphology on the formal side, and basic voices on the semantic side) for which a syntactic origin is rather dubious. I therefore advocate a second path on which morphology can come into existence, namely (as Carstairs-McCarthy 2005 pointed out) through reinterpretation of allomorphic variation produced by rapid speech. According to this view, morphology started as early as protospeech right after the vocal-auditory modality became dominant in human communication, and therefore one can find rich morphology particularly in languages that were spoken by hunter-gatherers until today. In addition I will argue that dislocation syntax (which offered a second path to morphology, that which is commonly held) did not evolve before the neolithic transition leading to an enormous increase of the size of linguistic communities. Thus, some sorts of morphology could be regarded as traces that date back to times before the neolithic transition. If this view is on the right track, the theoretical apparatus for morphology may not be modelled too narrowly on syntax.