

MORPHOLOGY – AN INTERVIEW WITH MARGARIDA BASÍLIO

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ReVEL – What is the object of Study of Morphology?

M. Basílio – Morphology is traditionally defined as the part of grammar that studies words from the form point of view. However, it is necessary to specify the central terms *word* and *form* – both largely undetermined, aside from being common to technical and day-to-day language – in different views of the linguistic phenomenon. When considering classic grammar, for example, morphology focuses on inflexion; the study would focus on the paradigm or scheme of variations of the form of words in the expression of grammatical categories. In the 19th century, the word ceases to be a minimal unit of linguistic analysis; the comparison of grammatical elements with basis in the hypothesis of genetic relation between languages favors the adoption of a descriptive model that recognizes formatives such as roots and endings. Structuralism inherits this situation of word deconstruction, therefore the establishment of the morpheme as a basic unit of morphology is natural. The object of study in structuralism is therefore the morpheme and its patterns of combination in the IA model. Consequently, the word becomes less relevant, or even questionable as a structural unit, although Bloomfield proposes a definition of the word as having crucial relevance in the methodology of descriptive analysis. Saussure questions the scope of morphology from another angle, condemning the lack of inclusion of lexicology along with flexional morphology in the area of grammar; on the other hand, considering the area of morphology in determining word classes and forms of flexion, the author doubts that it can constitute a separate discipline from syntax.

Furthermore, Saussure explains concrete and abstract aspects of the word, and stresses the difficulties of forming a clear definition.

A major upheaval in this theme comes from generative theory: nothing more radical than the total elimination of morphology and, therefore, of its object of study as such, in the first phases of generative theory. However, even when the possibility of a morphological component is established in the original version of the Lexical Hypothesis, the object of study of morphology in Generative Theory still presents a fundamental difference in relation to previous approaches, insofar as this objective moves from the external form to internal knowledge, corresponding to the capacity of identification of structurally legitimate lexical forms. The object of study of morphology in generative theory is not the concrete form of words, but the representation of lexical knowledge, through rules that, in the first phase, represent lexical relationships and afterwards determine morphological objectives. More recently, in the focus of Distributed Morphology, morphology again becomes dominated by syntax. The morpheme can again be considered a basic unit, but the greatest relevance is attributed to the collection of formal characteristics in which the insertion of phonological characteristics can eventually occur. In this manner, we return to the situation of structuralism and the first phases of generative theory, in which the word becomes questionable as a basic unit of morphology.

Perhaps we can say, then, that the object of study of morphology wavers between two possibilities:

- (1) The word: in classical grammar, and, therefore, in grammatical tradition, morphology studies the word and its paradigm of form variations, in the expression of inflectional categories; in lexical generative theory, the objective of morphology is the word as a lexical item structured by patterns or as a product of rules of formation of morphological objects.
- (2) The fundamental elements of the word; in the comparative method, these fundamental elements (roots, endings) are concrete; in structuralism, these elements (morphemes) are mainly concrete, but also abstract, as a means of expression of

grammatical properties; in Distributed Morphology, morphemes are basically abstract, mainly constituting the collection of formal characteristics.

ReVEL – You have had an important participation in morphological studies of Brazilian Portuguese. What were the first papers on morphology published in Brazil that focus on data about the Portuguese language?

M. Basílio – This is a hard question, since there is a great risk of committing an injustice and some papers can be have more regional distributions than national ones, so let me apologize in advance for inevitable omissions.

The publications specifically about morphology in Brazil are relatively recent. Of course, there are many general publications that dedicate a section to morphology and these are older; the most obvious example is that of traditional grammar reference books. In fact, the first Portuguese grammar, the *Gramática da linguagem portuguesa* [*Grammar of the Portuguese language*] by Fernão de Oliveira, has a relatively extensive section dedicated to morphology (there is a Brazilian edition, published by Olmar Guterres da Silveira in 1954). In more recent grammars, perhaps the *Gramática Histórica da Língua Portuguesa* [*Historic Grammar of the Portuguese Language*] by M. Said Ali (Melhoramentos [*Improvements*], 3rd ed., 1964) deserves special mention, as it presents extremely clear points of view about different aspects of word formation in Portuguese.

Moving on to works related to more recent linguistic theories, the most fundamental paper to be cited, in spite of not being dedicated solely to morphology, is the book *Estrutura da Língua Portuguesa* [*Structure of the Portuguese Language*] by Professor Mattoso Câmara Jr., originally published in 1970 by Vozes, in which various chapters deal with morphological questions and the morphology of Portuguese. This book, along with others previously published by the same author such as *Problemas de Lingüística Descritiva* [*Problems of Descriptive Linguistics*] (Vozes, 1969) and *Princípios de Lingüística Geral* [*Principles of General Linguistics*] (Acadêmica, 1954, 2nd ed.), is important because of its intrinsic value and its capacity

for passing knowledge on to others. In other words, on one hand Câmara Jr.'s rare, descriptive and elegant propositions are important for the study of the structure of Portuguese. On the other hand, his work greatly influenced the students and publications that came after him, just as the education of some generations of linguists and professors of Portuguese.

Other publications that focus on Portuguese morphology in this decade include *A Estrutura do Verbo no Português Coloquial* [*Verb Structure in Colloquial Portuguese*] by Eunice Pontes, published by Vozes in 1972; and the first edition of *Princípios de Morfologia* [*Principles of Morphology*] by Horácio Rolim de Freitas, published by Presença in 1979. We see, then, a beginning of descriptive concerns in Portuguese morphology essentially inspired by structuralism.

In the generalist perspective, it is probable that my book *Estruturas Lexicais do Português – uma abordagem gerativa* [*Lexical Structures of Portuguese – a generative approach*], published by Vozes in 1980, has been the first to focus on morphology as lexical knowledge, with a specific concern with word formation in Portuguese. Even in the 1980s, in 1986, the first edition of the book *Morfologia Portuguesa* [*Portuguese Morphology*] by José Lemos Monteiro was published, which was inspired by Mattoso Câmara's work to make an all-encompassing manual of morphology centered on information about Portuguese. In 1987, the publishing house Ática published *Teoria Lexical* [*Lexical Theory*], of my own authorship, in which the relevance of the semantic factor in lexical constructions begins to be considered; in 1989, we see the publication of *Formação de Palavras no Português Contemporâneo* [*Word Formation in Contemporary Portuguese*] by Antonio José Sandmann published by Ícone, in Curitiba, which presents for the first time in a Portuguese morphology paper a survey of data collected systematically in Brazilian newspapers.

Since the 1990s there has been significant development in the area of morphology in the country, which corresponds with growing editorial activity, be it in terms of new volumes or in terms of republications. At the same time, publications in magazines and conferences have also grown significantly. Perhaps in this decade several volumes published in the area of the Grammar of Spoken Portuguese Project

containing works about the GT of Morphology deserve mention, in connection with the rare focus of morphology in a corpus of spoken language; in several publications of didactic books of morphology and lexicon, in which, using different approaches, information and questions of Portuguese morphology are presented and analyzed.

**ReVEL – What do you think of current morphological studies in Brazil?
What are the major recent studies focusing on Portuguese?**

M. Basílio – I see morphology in Brazil as a clearly expanding area, if we use the situation of marginality in which the discipline has always been as a point of comparison, although this does not necessarily mean a proportional increase within linguistic studies (for example, in the 6th International Congress of ABRALIN in March 2009, there were 15 papers submitted about the GT of Morphology, a historically significant number for the topic, but modest compared to the 33 submissions about Syntax, 45 about Semantics, 57 about Phonetics and Phonology, 51 about Applied Linguistics, etc.). We know that current studies in Discourse, Text, Semantics, Pragmatics and Applied Linguistics, in a general way, present a greater appeal than grammatical studies, given the tradition of linguistic research in Portuguese Departments. On the other hand, there is a significant development of studies on Portuguese in the Distributed Morphology approach, which is interesting, given that studies on inflection were always in the minority in relation to those derived from generative approaches to morphological phenomena, because of the Lexical Hypothesis, but always because of the strong influence of Câmara Jr.'s structuralist analyses on the inflectional morphology of Portuguese. And the growing interest in derivational information about Portuguese today is especially welcome, since the comparison of proposals will certainly contribute to a deepening of our knowledge of the morphological and lexical structures of Portuguese.

The current expansion of morphological studies to which I referred does not directly correspond to publications, although this aspect could also be included. What I consider to be most important today, however, is the quantity of projects about Portuguese morphology being proposed and/or executed, using different approaches, in different institutions throughout the country. I do not intend to single out any

particular study or group, but to emphasize a few themes and approaches. For example, apart from the development of studies of Distributed Morphology, one thing that I believe is important is the recent tendency to recover constructions such as abbreviation and vocabulary crosses, among others, which, while mentioned, were never really taken into account in morphological studies. From another perspective, the greatest discussion over the question of the (lack of) definition of lexical units continues to produce relevant studies. I also consider welcome the greatest attention that is given to prefixes, since previous studies of generative relation focus almost exclusively on suffixation because of the grammatical relevance of class movement. The investigation of morphological phenomena in analyses that use medium-sized or large corpuses and computational tools is still highly positive. Finally, morphological studies of a historic nature are beginning to emerge. It should also be emphasized that, from another angle, contrary to the 1970s and 80s, when fundamental books emerged, the most relevant thing today is the volume of more recent studies, overall in articles and theses, many of which are easily accessible over the Internet. There is no doubt that we are living in an interesting and promising phase with regards to morphological studies.

ReVEL – What is the importance of interface in morphology that also take into consideration other areas of grammar, such as interface with syntax, phonology or semantics?

M. Basílio – The importance of interface studies is obvious, not only in general, but especially in the area of morphology, since the word, which traditionally determines the area of morphology, is naturally multifaceted, therefore it is necessary to focus on it and its multiple aspects and connections. To cite concrete examples, the conventionally complex and controversial distinction between inflection and derivation is made, among other criteria, by the morphology/syntax interface; phonological and semantic factors interfere with the productivity of word formation processes; the phonological factor is essential in vocabulary crosses; and so on. On the other hand, all of these subdivisions are temporary and present imprecise limits, which should be taken into account and investigated more closely. For example, the formation of words by composition presents an obvious problem for the vocabulary

structure/phrasal structure distinction; the various types of phrases and expressions challenge traditional notions of circumscribed lexical items in morphology; and, as we discussed in the first question of the interview, different approaches establish different borders and hierarchies, so that it is practically impossible to deal with the question in a theoretically neutral way.

But what I consider to be the most relevant in terms of interface studies, straying a bit from the question's possible theoretical affiliation, are the studies that focus on morphologic questions in areas such as psycholinguistics and aphasia studies, on the one hand, and on the other, those which explore even more controversial and harder to define territories, such as semantics and pragmatics, not to mention the central question of distinction or lack of distinction between morphology and syntax or morphology and lexicon or the connection (or lack thereof) between lexical semantics and encyclopedic knowledge in word formation processes, among many other hard to define areas.

ReVEL – Could you suggest any books and texts about morphology so that our readers can begin or even go deeper into the subject?

M. Basílio – Assuming that ‘our readers’ are graduate students in Linguistics or professional linguists with other specializations, I would recommend the collection *Handbook of Morphology*, arranged by A. Spencer and A. Zwicky (Blackwell, 1998), which presents excellent articles by various specialists about practically all of the aspects of morphology, including different interfaces. The generative approach is predominant, although not exclusive.

For those interested in structuralist morphology, I would recommend the many morphology articles in the collection *Readings in Linguistics I*, arranged by Martin Joos (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1957) and especially the classic article by Bloomfield, “A Set of Postulates for the Science of Language”; and the two classic books by P.H. Matthews, *Inflectional Morphology* (CUP, 1972) and *Morphology* (CUP, 1974, 2nd ed. 1991).

In a second unit, I suggest two collections: *Handbook of Word Formation*, arranged by R. Lieber and P. Stekauer (Springer, 2005), which brings together high-level specialists of different theoretical perspectives to present a rather all-encompassing vision of the area of word formation; and *Morphology and its demarcations*, arranged by w. Dressler, D. Kastovsky, Ol Pfeiffer and F. Rainer (John Benjamins, 2005), which focuses on external and internal demarcations of morphology, and also brings together excellent authors of different theoretical convictions.