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Do affixes have meaning ?

Within the justly influential Word-and-Paradigm approach to morphology, much emphasis has been placed on the differences between affixes and lexemes, and some scholars have quite explicitly taken the radical position that affixes do not have meanings. In other words, the claim is that, unlike lexemes, affixes are semantically empty (see especially Beard 1995, Stump 2001). We shall look at an example that, at first sight, seems to support this.

However, I shall suggest that another interpretation is possible. More generally, though there admittedly are important differences between affixes and lexemes, the idea that affixes do not have any meaning at all is too radical (cf. Lehrer 2000). Affixes and lexemes have some common features (much as grammaticalisation studies and Natural Morphology would lead us to expect).

The following example is taken from the noun inflection of some north-eastern dialects in Norway (Østerdalen):

	non-dative indefinite sg.		non-dative definite sg.	dative definite sg.
masculine	<i>Båt</i>	'boat'	<i>båt-en</i>	<i>bå-ta</i>
feminine	<i>øks</i>	'axe'	<i>øks-a</i>	<i>øks-en</i>

(There is no indefinite dative cell, and the third gender, the neuter, has been left out, as it is irrelevant for our purposes.)

It would seem pointless to argue that the affixes *-en, -a* carry any meaning here. One might argue that *-en* means 'either masculine non-dative def.sg or feminine dative def.sg.', but since lexemes probably cannot have genuinely exclusive disjunctive meaning (Jackendoff 1985), this example seems to reinforce the wisdom of the strict division between affixes and lexemes; apparently, the example belies the claim that affixes (like lexemes) do not have genuinely exclusive disjunctive meaning (Carstairs-McCarthy 1998).

However, another account is possible. The masculine is often seen as the unmarked gender in Norwegian. Furthermore, it makes sense to analyse the non-dative as unmarked in comparison with the dative (there are no other cases in the dialects under consideration.) Thus, the suffix *-en* signals that the word-form either is 'unmarked gender, unmarked case' (i.e. masculine, non-dative) or 'marked gender, marked case' (i.e. feminine, dative). Conversely, the suffix *-a* signals that the word-form either is 'marked gender, unmarked case' (feminine, non-dative) or 'unmarked gender, marked case' (masculine, dative). This opens for an analysis in which there is no genuinely exclusive disjunctive meaning:

-en means 'agreement in markedness values for gender and case'

-a means 'non-agreement in markedness values for gender and case'

Under this analysis, affixes can have meaning, although perhaps of a somewhat different kind from lexemes. This view can be supported by cases where inflectional affixes in Norwegian display 'homonymy avoidance' (which usually is characteristic of lexemes), much as the Romance affixes examined by Maiden (2001), and the very idea of homonymy avoidance makes sense only for units which, in some way, have a meaning.

Now, it might be objected that 'agreement in markedness values' is not really a kind of meaning. I would disagree. Affixes can have meaning of a rather subtle, 'intra-morphological' kind (Carstairs-McCarthy 1994, Maiden 2001); in this perspective, the meaning ascribed to *-en, -a* under the present analysis is less surprising. Furthermore, the present approach to polarity seems to carry over rather straightforwardly to an example from the African language Tigre (as described by Palmer 1962), so it is heuristically fruitful. In fact, it could be argued that unless we look for meanings of affixes, including the more subtle ones, we are not going to find them.

References

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