

What is a morpheme?

Generated: Jan 26, 2026

What is a morpheme? Distinguish between free and bound morphemes.

A morpheme is the smallest unit of meaning in a language. It cannot be broken down into smaller parts without losing its meaning. Linguist Jan Baudouin de Courtenay first introduced the term "morpheme" in 1880. Morphemes are categorized into two main types: free morphemes and bound morphemes.

Free morphemes: These can stand alone as words. For example, in the word "book," "book" is a free morpheme because it can exist independently. Free morphemes are complete words by themselves and do not need any additional elements to convey meaning. Other examples of free morphemes include "cat," "run," and "happy." Free morphemes (in the study of words) are like principal clauses (in the study of sentences).

Bound morphemes: These cannot stand alone. They must be attached to other morphemes to convey meaning. These morphemes include prefixes, suffixes, infixes, and circumfixes. For instance, in the word "unhappiness," "un-," and "-ness" are bound morphemes. They need to be connected to the free morpheme "happy" to create a meaningful word. Bound morphemes modify or refine the meanings of the words they attach to. Examples of bound morphemes include "pre-," "-ed," and "-ing."

To sum up, morphemes are fundamental units of meaning in language. Free morphemes can stand alone, while bound morphemes must attach to other morphemes. Studying morphemes gives us insights into word formation and language structure. Understanding morphemes is essential for analyzing how words are constructed and how they function within sentences.