

Understanding morphology and morphemes

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STRONG FOUNDATIONS: A Literacy Framework for Primary Schools.

'Timing the explicit teaching of morphology is very important. Reserving it to middle / later primary where pupils will meet more complex words with greater numbers of morphemes, will enable them to 'operate' on various words more readily' p 55

However, the explicit teaching of morphological knowledge is very important in the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1. All words contain at least one morpheme and all morphemes carry meaning. Morphemes are the smallest units of meaning in spoken language.

Content morphemes	Function morphemes	Free morphemes	Bound morphemes
Carry lexical meaning. <i>bus, pencil, dog</i>	Carry grammatical meaning. <i>we, my, you; the, a, this; on, in, at, by; and, but, for; is, was, be</i>	Can stand alone as independent words. <i>help, jump, go</i>	Affixes that convey a change in meaning or indicate grammatical information, and must attach to another morpheme. <i>un-help-ful; jump-ed; go-ing</i>

Bound lexical morphemes carry meaning but cannot stand alone, e.g. 'spect' meaning to look/see as in *inspect, prospect*.

● How this develops

5–6 years	Adding the plural 's' is understood and used.
6–7 years	Recognising and forming compound words — bed + room = bedroom — develops a growing awareness of word building.
6–7 years	The doubling rule can be introduced when children learn to add -ed to make the past tense of regular verbs and -ing for the continuous form of verbs.

● Word meanings and vocabulary come first

Word meanings and vocabulary development are the first steps in development of morphemic knowledge. For children around four to five years old, the foundations of morphology begin with:

- Building a large oral vocabulary
- Understanding that words carry meaning
- Beginning to notice patterns within words

In the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1, children are developing an implicit awareness that changing parts of words changes meaning and this can be discussed explicitly. For example, a child may understand:

dog → dogs

MEANS "MORE THAN ONE"

jump → jumped

MEANS "ALREADY HAPPENED"

unhappy

CHANGES THE MEANING

Children use these forms in speech before they can explain them. They learn this implicitly, but understanding can be developed through explicit discussion which is an important prerequisite to learning the orthographic representations for morphemes.

Spellings are not morphemes. They are the orthographic representations of morphemes. Morphemes are the smallest units of meaning in spoken language.

Semantic development (word meaning in the context of sentence, i.e., the bow on a dress, and the bow of a ship) and vocabulary knowledge are the essential starting point for the development and understanding of morphemes.

• A fundamental misunderstanding

At the DE Conference on 9th December 2025 when discussing the slide entitled ‘A Complex code’ (slide 23), Dr Buckingham takes the example of changing the spelling of the word ‘chef’ to ‘shef’ (the etymology of the word ‘chef’ is French) and incorrectly states that

SOURCE

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/literacy-guidance>

Scroll down to find the presentation and handout, and listen to the presentation from approximately 27–29 minutes.

‘preserving the spelling helps to preserve the meaning in the written word. If you change the spelling to make it more phonetic you lose the morphemes which means you lose the ability to actually work out what that word means when you see it in print.’

DR BUCKINGHAM, DE CONFERENCE, 9 DECEMBER 2025

This indicates a fundamental misunderstanding. If English speakers agreed tomorrow to write ‘shef’ instead of ‘chef’, the word would still refer to a professional cook, would still be pronounced ‘shef’ and would still consist of exactly one morpheme. What would have changed is an orthographic spelling convention. Morphology, the system of meaning-bearing units in spoken language, would be unchanged.

Spellings are not morphemes, they are the orthographic representations of the smallest units of meaning in spoken language. **The claim that phonetic respelling “loses the morphemes” is a misunderstanding of the term morpheme.**

• What the point should have been

English spelling does preserve morphological relationships; if we simplified everything to match pronunciation, readers would lose useful cues about word meaning across related words that include the same spelling, and this will have been the point Dr Buckingham was trying to make. However, the example chosen does not demonstrate it.

NOT AN EXAMPLE OF THIS

chef

A standalone free morpheme — a word in its own right — that does not productively appear in other words.

AN EXAMPLE OF THIS

sign

A root morpheme: a morpheme that preserves its meaning across words, even though the pronunciation changes.

sign · signal · signature