

MORPHOLOGY – AN INTERVIEW WITH MARK ARONOFF

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ReVEL – What were the landmarks in the study of Morphology as we know it today?

Aronoff – I believe very strongly in the continuity of linguistics. The works that most influenced my own thinking from early on were the American structuralist classics: Sapir’s and Bloomfield’s *Language*, and the morphological works of Harris, Hockett, and Nida. Along with Saussure and Baudouin de Courtenay, these scholars laid out the fundamental problems facing any morphological theory and their concerns remain relevant to this day.

In the last half century, I would single out Peter Matthews’s textbook, *Morphology*, as the most important work. Most morphologists today work within the general framework that he set out.

ReVEL – Your PhD dissertation, *Word Formation in Generative Grammar*¹, is still a very influential work. Can you please comment on some of the core ideas you have developed there that are still interesting for the morphologist of the 21st century?

Aronoff – That work was based on the notion that morphology should be treated as an object of study in itself, not simply as a source of data for theories

¹ Published version: ARONOFF, Mark. *Word Formation in Generative Grammar*. Linguistic Inquiry Monograph No. 1. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1976.

about other aspects of language. I still believe that. The notion of blocking, which is very old, but which that work brought back to the attention of modern linguists, has also remained central, though more now in the study of inflection. The study of productivity has benefited from new methods, both quantitative and experimental. The best evidence that the book remains influential today is the fact that it is still in print, after over thirty years.

ReVEL – You have worked with Morphology and its relations to other areas of Linguistics, such as Phonology, Syntax, Semantics, and Psycholinguistics. How do you see the importance of Morphology and the relation between these areas? How important these interface studies are for the work in Morphology?

Aronoff –For the last fifteen years, I have pushed the notion of morphology by itself, the idea that at least certain aspects of morphology are autonomous. But the only way to demonstrate autonomy is through interaction. One of the hallmarks of language as a system is the extent to which the components actually interact. This interaction used to be seen as fairly linear, with one component feeding another (the exact order depending on your theory), but more and more it is seen as much more complex than that.

I have always been very catholic in my choice of tools and methods, using traditional linguistic analysis, experimental techniques, computational tools, whatever. Especially with the growth of the internet, there are all now many new corpus-based tools and methods available to everyone. Even such a simple tool as Googlefight (www.googlefight.com) can yield very interesting results on productivity that were completely unthinkable a few years ago.

Over the last half-dozen years, I have spent a good deal of my time studying sign languages, which provide a completely different light on morphology, because of the effect of the visual medium and the newness of many of the world's sign languages. In a few instances, we have been able to document the development of morphology almost in real time, which is very exciting.

ReVEL – A lot of recent work in Morphology and Phonology has been developed within the Optimality Theoretic framework. How do you see OT today, especially when it comes to Morphology?

Aronoff – A few years ago, my Ph. D. student, Zheng Xu, proposed to me that an OT treatment of realizational inflectional morphology was possible. The crucial idea was to encode morphological realization rules as violable OT constraints that could be rank-ordered with other constraints and to treat morphological principles in the same way. He went on to write a dissertation, *Inflectional Morphology in Optimality Theory*, fleshing out this idea and applying it to a number of outstanding problems in inflectional morphology. The two of us have written several papers working out the details of his analyses that we have presented at international conferences, some of which will be published soon.

What we do in this work is to apply OT to core morphological phenomena, those having to do with actual morphological realization, including blocking, extended exponence, multiple exponence, affix ordering, scope, and morphological templates. The OT approach to morphological realization allows for the unification of phenomena that were previously seen as unrelated. It also allows us to understand what were previously simply exceptions or puzzles.

ReVEL – Could you please suggest some essential readings on Morphology?

Aronoff – As I noted earlier, much of what I read in morphology is quite old-fashioned, because most of the core problems were best elucidated in these classic works. I revisit Sapir's *Language* and Bloomfield's *Language* regularly, even **de Saussure** and **Baudouin de Courtenay**. A lot of the best structuralist articles are readily available in *Readings in Linguistics I and II*. Peter H. Matthews is the father of modern morphology and his approach is very clearly outlined in his *Morphology* 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. Those interested in my own approach can still profit

from reading my 1976 and 1994 *Linguistic Inquiry* monographs, **Word Formation in Generative Grammar** and **Morphology by Itself**. There is also a textbook based on a course that I taught at a Linguistic Society of America Summer Institute a number of years ago (Aronoff and Fudeman 2005, **What is Morphology?** Blackwell), which is quite elementary but provides a good introduction to how I think about morphology. Modern work up to a decade or so is summarized well in Spencer and Zwicky's **Handbook of Morphology** (Blackwell, 2001). Among more recent trends, I find the work on paradigms very interesting (e.g. that of **Farrell Ackerman, Adam Albright, James Blevins, and Gregory Stump**). The **Surrey Morphology Group** has done a lot of very good typological work, much of it available on their website (<http://www.surrey.ac.uk/LIS/SMG/>). For those looking to get their feet wet in the new statistically-based research, I would recommend recent articles by **Harald Baayen, Jennifer Hay** or **Ingo Plag**. Among more traditional work, the one book that I have read recently that I have admired most is Paolo Acquaviva's **Lexical Plurals: A Morphosemantic Approach**. Oxford: Oxford University Press (2008), which combines fine-grained semantic analysis with current morphological theory in an insightful manner.