Morphology, morphemes, allomorphs, word classes

People may assume that a word can be distinguished thanks to the meaning it represents. But that is not right. Lets take the following sentence as an example: *He used to live in Prague.* The six-word sentence can be translated into Czech as *Bydlíval v Praze.* Just two words. Well, what is a word? How can the word be defined? Probably the American linguist Bloomfield brought the best-known definition. He defined the word as "a minimum free form that is the smallest form that can occur by itself." This definition works best for written English. But we as linguists have to be primarily interested in spoken language, spoken word. In spoken language the situation is not so simple. In natural speech, pauses do not occur between each word, as they can be seen in a written piece. Linguists have spent a great deal of time trying to devise satisfactory criteria. None of them is entirely successful. Nevertheless we have to take into consideration lexical, syntactic and phonological views.

Lets analyse an utterance. We may use lexical, syntactic and phonological point of view and divide a sentence into the smallest possible units. E.g.

The	fly	ing	bird	look	ed	down	to	a	sleep	y	pond.
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12

We have just found the smallest syntactic units called morphemes. Morphemes cannot be cut up into smaller syntactic elements. The words *looked* and *sleepy* consist of two morphemes. *Down* and *pond* are all single morphemes as none of them can be syntactically split up further.

Morphemes can be divided into groups according to their character. There are free morphemes that occur by themselves as whole words such as *bird, lullaby, and pond.* The other group are bound morphemes. They must be attached to another morpheme such as *–ed, -ing, anti-.* Bound morphemes are of two main types: inflectional and derivational morphemes. Inflectional morphemes bring further information about an existing morpheme, e.g. look+*ed*, fly+*ing*. Derivational morphemes create an entirely new word, e.g. sleep+*y*, hope+*less*. Inflectional morphemes can be added on to derivational ones but not vice versa. Czech language has a lot of inflectional morphemes, while English is not rich with them.

Phonemes have their allophones. Morphemes have their allomorphs. They are variants of morphemes. An allomorph can be phonologically conditioned, too. Its form can be dependent on the neighbouring phonemes. E.g. *[-z], [-s], [-iz].* Each of them occurs in a predictable set of environments. There are other allomorphs that are lexically conditioned. E.g. *sheep, oxen, geese.* These plurals are not marked as plurals but they function as plurals. They are lexically conditioned. Their form seems to be a purely accidental one, linked to a particular vocabulary item. These days most linguists accept that the form *geese* represents two morphemes, *goose + plural* and they cannot be separated.

The number of the types of lexical items is limited in every language. These types of words with common features are known as word classes (or parts of speech). They are given names, such as noun, verb, adverb, adjective … Words are classified on account of their syntactic behaviour. Just partly the morphological form is taken into consideration. Traditionally in English we recognize eight parts of speech. But this is largely based on old Latin grammars. Although nouns and pronouns have a large number of similarities, they are traditionally

classified as separate parts of speech. Different types of adverbs, on the other hand, are less similar than nouns and pronouns.

Different languages have different number of word classes. Some word classes seem to be universal (noun, verb). In English there are four major word classes: noun (N), adjective (A), verb (V), preposition (P). Then there are minor ones, such as determiner (D). Adjectives are somewhat strange. They have some noun-like qualities, and some verb-like ones.