

Derivation and Inflection

Derivation and *Inflection* are two functional categories of change in morphology (*suffix, prefix, etc.* are formal categories, since they refer to the *form* of the change). An affix or other chunk of morphology is usually either derivational or inflectional, though there is a certain grey area between them.

Most of the affixes we are familiar with in English are derivational; English has only 8 inflectional affixes. On the other hand, all of the commonly-studied European languages are much more inflected than English, and most of the affixes we study in learning German, French, Spanish, or Russian are inflections. It is the fact that English speakers aren't used to using a lot of inflections that makes these languages as hard as they are for English speakers to learn. That same fact makes it a bit difficult to explain the difference. But we'll try.

Below are 5 characteristics that distinguish inflections from derivations. Remember that these can apply to any formal class — suffixes, prefixes, infixes, root change, suppletion, reduplication, etc.

Derivational Morphemes ...	Inflectional Morphemes ...
1. Can change part of speech or meaning; e.g. <i>-ment</i> forms nouns such as <i>judgement</i> from verbs such as <i>judge</i> .	Do not change part of speech or meaning; e.g. <i>big</i> and <i>bigger</i> are both adjectives.
2. Typically indicate semantic relations within the word, e.g. the morpheme <i>-ful</i> in <i>painful</i> has no particular connection with any other morpheme in a sentence, beyond the word <i>painful</i> . itself.	Typically indicate syntactic or semantic relations between different words in a sentence, e.g. the present tense morpheme <i>-s</i> in <i>waits</i> shows agreement with the subject of the verb (both are third person singular).
3. Typically occur with only some members of a class of morphemes, e.g. the suffix <i>-hood</i> occurs with just a few nouns such as <i>brother</i> , <i>neighbor</i> , and <i>knight</i> , but not with most others, e. g. <i>friend</i> , <i>daughter</i> , <i>candle</i> , etc.	Typically occur with all members of a of some large class of morphemes, e.g. the plural morpheme <i>-s</i> occurs with almost all count nouns in English.
4. Typically occur before inflectional suffixes (and after inflectional prefixes, though not in English); e.g. in <i>chillier</i> , the derivational suffix <i>-y</i> comes before the inflectional <i>-er</i> .	Typically occur at the margins of words, e.g. the plural morpheme <i>-s</i> always comes last in an English word, as in <i>babysitters</i> or <i>rationalizations</i> .
5. Instantiate a single category, which may be complex, but never occurs in a paradigm; e.g. there is no paradigm of all the ways there are of forming verbs from nouns, just scattered processes on different words.	Can instantiate categories that occur in paradigmatic sets; e.g. the categories of number and person produce the various forms of the verb: <i>I am</i> , <i>you are</i> , <i>he is</i> , <i>we are</i> , <i>you are</i> , <i>they are</i> .