Nida (1949): Principles of morpheme identification

This handout is based on the following optional course reading:

Nida, Eugene A. 1949. Chapter 2, The identification of morphemes. *Morphology: The Descriptive Analysis of Words,* 2ed, 6-61. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

(1)   Principles employed in the identification of morphemes (p 7)

"There are six principles which we may apply in isolating and identifying morphemes. ... [E]ach is supplementary to the basic definition..."

- We will actually consider only four of Nida's six principles; the other two are specific to Nida's theoretical assumptions and/or less generally useful for our purposes.

- These "principles" give us a useful starting point for this course, but they are far from the last word on the subject. Be prepared to refine our notion of 'morpheme' as we go along this semester.

(2)   Basic **definition of the morpheme** (pp 6-7; quotation from Bloomfield (1933: 161))

"A linguistic form which bears no partial phonetic-semantic resemblance to any other form is ... a morpheme."

(3)   Nida's commentary on Bloomfield's definition (p 7):

"It means that forms belonging to the same morpheme may not consist of identically the same phonemes and they may not have precisely equivalent meanings, but if these varying forms with correspondingly different meanings still do not overlap on other sets of forms with their respective meanings, then they may be regarded as constituting a single morpheme."

• **Getting more specific:**

(4)   **Principle 1** (p 7)

"Forms which have a common semantic distinctiveness and an identical phonemic form in all their occurrences constitute a single morpheme."

- This is the easy case. Can we find any morphemes like this in the Chichewa data set?

(5)   **Principle 2** (p 14)

"Forms which have a common semantic distinctiveness but which differ in phonemic form (i.e. the phonemes or order of the phonemes) may constitute a morpheme provided the distribution of formal differences is phonologically definable."

- What is meant by "phonologically definable"? Are there any cases like this in the Chichewa data set?

(6)   **Principle 5** (pp 55-56)

"Homophonous forms are identifiable as the same or different morphemes on the basis of the following conditions:

"1.   Homophonous forms with distinctly different meanings constitute different morphemes.

"2.   Homophonous forms with related meanings constitute a single morpheme if the meaning classes are paralleled by distributional differences, but then constitute multiple morphemes if the meaning classes are not paralleled by distributional differences."

- Most modern linguists would probably agree with point 1. but not with point 2. Comments?

(7)   **Principle 6** (pp 58-59)

"A morpheme is isolatable if it occurs under the following conditions:

"1.   In isolation.

"2.   In multiple combinations in at least one of which the unit with which it is combined occurs in isolation or in other combinations.

"3.   In a single combination provided the element with which it is combined occurs in isolation or in other combinations with nonunique constituents."

- How would English words like *cranberry* or *crayfish* on the one hand, and *transmit* or *receive* on the other, be analyzed according to Principle 6? Any comments?

- How do the results of this analysis relate to Nida's/Bloomfield's "basic definition" of the morpheme as introduced above?