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Lexical Memory and Morphological Structuring of Place in Shadab Zeest Hashmi's *Passing through Peshawar*: A Distributed Morphology Analysis

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Abstract

This study explores Shadab Zeest Hashmi's poem *Passing through Peshawar (2019)* using Distributed Morphology (DM). The poem creates a vivid picture of memory, place, and identity through word structures, including compounds (e.g., *telephone wires*, *Tonga-horses*), derivational forms (e.g., *belligerent*, *timeless*), and root-based words. Drawing on the work of Halle and Marantz (1993) and Embick and Noyer (2007), the study shows that the poem's words are built in the syntax and realized later, shaping meaning and cultural memory. The analysis reveals that the poem's morphology helps express nostalgia, belonging, and the passage of time, highlighting how word structure contributes to layered identity and connection to place.

Keywords: Distributed Morphology, compounding, derivation, nostalgia, memory, spatial identity, Pakistani poetry

1. Background of the Study

Shadab Zeest Hashmi's poem "Passing through Peshawar" presents a sensory reconstruction of Peshawar through memory-framed spatial references. The poem operates as a catalogue of place-based lexemes, invoking what Svetlana Boym (2001) calls "reflective nostalgia," where memory becomes fragmented yet intensely material. Morphology, within generative grammar, has evolved significantly from lexicalist models to post-syntactic accounts. The theory of Distributed Morphology, proposed by Morris Halle and Alec Marantz (1993), argues that words are not pre-assembled in the lexicon; rather, roots and functional morphemes are combined syntactically, and vocabulary items are inserted at PF (Phonological Form).

Subsequent scholars such as Embick and Noyer (2007) further refine Distributed Morphology by emphasizing the principles of Late Insertion, Underspecification, and root-based structure building, thereby strengthening the view that morphological forms are syntactically assembled and semantically interpreted at the interfaces. These principles provide a systematic framework for analyzing how complex lexical items are structurally generated rather than lexically stored.

In literary linguistics, morphological analysis has increasingly been applied to poetry to explore semantic density, stylistic layering, and identity construction; however,

such approaches have rarely been extended to Pakistani diasporic poetry within a rigorous morpho-syntactic theoretical model. By applying the principles of Distributed Morphology to this poetic text, the present study addresses this gap and demonstrates how morphological architecture contributes to the representation of memory, cultural belonging, and spatial identity.

2. Statement of the Problem

Although *Passing through Peshawar* has been appreciated for its nostalgic imagery, there has been no systematic morphological analysis of how its lexical structures construct memory and identity. The problem addressed in this study is how morphological processes particularly root insertion, compounding, and derivation function within Distributed Morphology to construct spatial memory and cultural belonging in the poem.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in generative morphology, specifically within the framework of Distributed Morphology. The primary data consists of selected morphologically complex lexical items from the poem, including "telephone wires," "belligerent crows," "Tonga-horses," "beetle-eaten," "timeless hollow," and "video game." The analytical procedure involves, first, identifying morphologically complex expressions within the text; second, decomposing these items into category-neutral roots (√) and functional morphemes such as nominalizing, verbalizing, or adjectival heads; third, applying core principles of Distributed Morphology particularly Late Insertion and Vocabulary Insertion to explain how phonological forms are realized after syntactic structure is constructed; and finally, interpreting the resulting morpho-semantic effects to demonstrate how these structural configurations contribute to the construction of memory, temporality, spatial identity, and cultural meaning in the poem.

4. Theoretical Framework: Distributed Morphology

This study is grounded in the theory of Distributed Morphology (DM), originally proposed by Morris Halle and Alec Marantz (1993). DM challenges traditional lexicalist approaches by arguing that words are not pre-assembled in a lexicon; rather, morphological structures are built within the syntactic component. According to this framework, roots are category-neutral elements (√) that acquire grammatical identity

only when merged with functional heads such as n (noun), v (verb), or a (adjective). Vocabulary items are inserted post-syntactically at Phonological Form (PF), a principle known as Late Insertion. Furthermore, DM operates under the assumption of Underspecification, whereby phonological exponents compete for insertion based on feature compatibility (Embick & Noyer, 2007). In this way, morphology is distributed across syntax, phonology, and semantics, allowing for a unified account of word formation and interpretation. This theoretical model provides the structural basis for examining how morphologically complex expressions in the poem are constructed and interpreted.

Based on the principles of Distributed Morphology, the study employs the following analytical tools:

Root Decomposition – Identification of category-neutral roots (√) within morphologically complex words.

Category-Defining Heads Analysis – Examination of how roots merge with functional heads (n, v, a) to acquire grammatical category.

Compounding Analysis – Structural examination of root–root merger within nominal projections (nP).

Derivational Morphology Analysis – Investigation of affixal attachment (e.g., -less, -ent, -en) as syntactic operations rather than lexical storage.

Participial Formation Analysis – Study of adjectival and verbal projections that create stative or resultative readings.

Vocabulary Insertion Analysis – Explanation of how phonological forms are realized after syntactic structure is built.

Morpho-Semantic Interpretation – Analysis of how structural configurations contribute to meaning, temporality, and identity construction.

5. Application of Distributed Morphology Tools to the Poem

Using the analytical tools derived from Distributed Morphology (DM) as proposed by Morris Halle and Alec Marantz (1993), this section examines how morphologically complex structures in the poem, *Passing through Peshawar* are syntactically assembled and semantically interpreted.

1. Root Decomposition

DM assumes that roots (√) are category-neutral. Several lexical items in the poem can be decomposed into roots before categorization:

a) POP LAR
b) WILLOW
c) TOWN
d) TONGA
e) HORSE
f) TIME
g) SOCKET
h) GAME

For example:

timeless

= TIME + n + a (-less)(Hashmi, 2019, p. 45)

Here, TIME is merged with a nominalizing head (n) and then with an adjectival head (a), where the privative suffix *-less* is inserted at PF. The meaning "without time" emerges compositionally, reinforcing the poem's theme of suspended temporality.

2. Category-Defining Heads Analysis

Example: *socket* (verb usage)

In the line:

"my town will once again socket into its timeless hollow"

The root SOCKET merges with a verbal head (v), categorizing it as a verb.

Structure:

SOCKET + v → *socket* (verb)(Hashmi, 2019, p. 45)

The verbalization of a typically nominal root produces a dynamic spatial metaphor. This syntactic categorization reflects how DM explains category shifts without lexical storage.

3. Compounding Analysis (Root–Root Merger)

The poem is dense with nominal compounds, which DM treats as syntactic mergers within nP.

(a) *telephone wires*

TELEPHONE + WIRE → nP

(b) ***Tonga-horses***

TONGA + HORSE → nP

(c) ***video game***

VIDEO + GAME → nP

(d) ***door-hinge***

DOOR + HINGE → nP(Hashmi, 2019, p. 45)

Compounding here builds spatial specificity. Cultural roots such as TONGA and TANDOOR introduce encyclopedic meaning at the Conceptual-Intentional interface. The structural merger encodes locality and cultural belonging.

4. Derivational Morphology Analysis

(a) ***belligerent***

BELLIGER + a (-ent)

The adjectival suffix *-ent* attaches post-syntactically, producing an attributive adjective modifying "crows." The derivation intensifies the imagery by encoding aggression morphologically.

(b) ***timeless***

TIME + a (-less)

The privative suffix *-less* encodes absence. Morphologically, negation is embedded within the structure, reinforcing memory as outside chronological time.

(c) ***rusted***

RUST + v + -ed

The participial suffix *-ed* produces a stative adjectival reading, indicating completed action and temporal decay.

5. Participial Formation Analysis

(a) ***beetle-eaten furniture***

EAT + v + -en → adjectival participle

The participial morpheme *-en* creates a resultative state. The furniture is not merely described; it is grammatically marked as affected by time.

(b) ***plums sold in crates***

SELL + v + -ed

The reduced relative clause contains a participial structure that compresses syntactic information into morphological form.

These participles function as condensed narrative units, demonstrating how syntax and morphology interact.

6. Vocabulary Insertion (Late Insertion Principle)

According to DM, phonological forms are inserted after syntactic structure is built. For example:

Structure:

GAME + n

Feature: [+Noun]

Vocabulary Item Inserted:

"game"

Similarly: TIME + a [+Privative]

Vocabulary Item Inserted:

"-less" (Hashmi, 2019, p. 45)

The phonological exponents compete for insertion based on feature compatibility (Embick & Noyer, 2007). The poem's lexical richness thus reflects structured post-syntactic realization rather than lexical memorization.

7. Morpho-Semantic Interpretation

The structural configurations generate layered meaning:

Compounds encode spatial density (*telephone wires*, *red lights*, *video game*).

Participles encode decay and temporality (*rusted*, *beetle-eaten*).

Derivational affixes encode emotional or temporal stance (*belligerent*, *timeless*).

Verbalized nouns (*socket*) produce metaphorical dynamism.

Notably, culturally specific roots (TONGA, TANDOOR, BAZAAR) activate encyclopedic knowledge, linking morphological structure to identity formation.

The poem exhibits:

High frequency of nominal projections (nP dominance)

Dense compounding

Frequent participial modification

Limited inflection but rich derivation

This pattern supports the interpretation that memory is constructed primarily through nominal accumulation rather than verbal progression. Morphology mirrors nostalgia: static, layered, accumulative.

By applying the tools of Distributed Morphology, the poem can be understood as a syntactically assembled memory landscape. Roots merge, categorize, and receive phonological realization in ways that construct spatial intimacy, cultural belonging, and temporal suspension. Morphological architecture thus becomes central to the poem's stylistic and thematic force.

6. Findings

The analysis shows that morphological structure is central to meaning in *Passing through Peshawar.* Nominal compounding (e.g., *telephone wires, Tonga-horses, door-hinge*) creates a spatial archive of memory, while derivational morphology (e.g., *belligerent, timeless, rusted*) encodes emotion, temporality, and decay. Participial constructions (e.g., *beetle-eaten furniture, plums sold in crates*) condense experiential detail and highlight temporal layering. Culturally specific roots (e.g., TONGA, √TANDOOR, BAZAAR) reinforce locality and identity, while simpler modern expressions (e.g., *video game*) emphasize contrast between memory and contemporary detachment. These findings demonstrate that the poem's nostalgic and cultural effects are systematically constructed through its morphological architecture.

7. Conclusion

Through the lens of Distributed Morphology, *Passing through Peshawar* emerges as a morphologically structured memory-map. Roots combine syntactically to create layered nominal clusters that encode place identity. Derivational morphology intensifies emotional tone and temporal consciousness. The study demonstrates that morphological architecture plays a central role in constructing nostalgia and belonging in diasporic Pakistani poetry.

This paper looks at how the poem *Passing through Peshawar* by Shadab Zeest Hashmi uses words and their parts to show memories of the poet's town; and how small word pieces called roots and affixes (like endings such as *-less* or *-ed*) are joined to make new words and describe things in the town. Words like *Tonga-horses*, *beetle-eaten furniture*, or *timeless hollow* are made from smaller parts to show feelings, time, and the special culture of Peshawar. The paper shows that the poem's power to make readers feel nostalgia, remember places, and understand local life comes not just from pictures in words but from the way words are built and connected.

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