Roots, stems and word classes

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The assignment of a linguistic sign to a word class is an operation that must be seen as part of the overall transformation of extralinguistic substance into linguistic form. In this, it is comparable to such processes as the transitivization of a verbal base, which further specifies a relatively rough categorization. Languages differ both in the extent to which they structure the material by purely grammatical criteria and in the level at which they do this. The root and the stem are the lowest levels at which a linguistic sign can be possibly categorized. Further categorization is only achieved at the level of the syntagm.

The far-reaching differences that appear to obtain among languages with respect to the categorization that they apply to linguistic signs at the most basic levels raise the issue of the amount of structure or of grammar that is necessary for a human language.