Etymology: The Origin of Words

Becoming Interested in the Origin of Words

Words, like facts, are difficult to remember out of context. Remembering is greatly facilitated when you have a body of information with which to associate either a word or a fact. For words, interesting origins or histories will help provide a context. For example, a hippopotamus is a "river horse," from the Greek hippos, meaning "horse," and potamos, meaning "river."

Indiana is called the Hoosier state, and its people Hoosiers. Why? In the early days, the pioneers were gruff in manner; when someone knocked at the front door, a pioneer's voice would often boom, "Who's yere?"

If you were offered a Hobson's choice, would you know what was meant? Thomas Hobson owned a livery stable in seventeenth-century England. He loved his horses, and to prevent any one horse from being overworked, he hired them out in turn, beginning with stall number one. Customers had to take the horses they were given. Thus Hobson's choice means no choice at all. (Pauk, p. 314)

Etymology is the study of the origins of words. The English language is living and growing. Although many of our words have been part of our language for many years, new words are added all the time. Following are various ways our language is influenced.

•Derived from Foreign Words - English, in many cases, has been commonly expanded by incorporating foreign words into it. Most of our language has ancient Anglo-Saxon or Latin origins. Other languages have also added to our vocabularies.

•Additions through Technology & Products - Our words often reflect current interests, trends, and innovations. One of the most recent contributors to our language has been computer technology, which has created words such as bytes, monitor, and disk.

Another way new words come into our language is through the development of products. Some examples include: Kleenex, Walkman, Scotch tape, Xerox, and Linoleum.

•People's Names - sometimes when a person invents or introduces something, that thing becomes associated with the person's name. The person, through time, is forgotten while the name lives on in our language. Examples include:

◦mesmerize - F.A. Mesmer, an Austrian doctor and hypnotist.

◦sideburns - an American English alteration of burnsides, Ambrose E. Burnside, a Union general.

•Words from Letters - The initials for the names of things may actually come to replace the names. The initials become the words that represent the thing, concept, or group. The following are examples of words that have developed from initials.◦TV - TeleVision

◦DWI - Driving While Intoxicated

◦COD - Cash On Delivery

◦ZIP - Zone Improvement Plan

•Word Histories - Some words also have interesting histories. Learning the stories behind the meanings is a good way to learn those words. The following examples will give you an idea of how history can affect language.

◦footman - It was once thought to bring bad luck if a person stepped on the door threshold when entering a house. Rich people hired a servant to stand at their doors. His job was to guard against a guest's stepping on the threshold. The guard became known as a footman.

◦hooker - A synonym for prostitute. The term became popular during the Civil War. The women involved were camp followers. General "Fighting Joe" Hooker approved their presence in order to boost the morale of his men.

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| **Interpreting a Dictionary Entry****A typical dictionary entry includes these parts:**1. the word or phrase broken into syllables.
2. the word or phrase with the pronunciation indicated through the use of diacritical marks - marks that indicate the vowel sounds such as a long vowel or a vowel affected by other sounds; accent marks, a mark called the schwa that tells you that the vowel is in an unaccented syllable of the word.
3. the part or parts of speech the word functions as -for example as a noun (n.), verb (v.), adjective (adj.), or adverb (adv.).
4. related forms of the word, such as the plural form of nouns and the past tense of verbs.
5. the definition or definitions of the word or phrase. Generally dictionaries group the definitions according to a word's use as a noun, verb, adjective, and/or adverb.
6. the origin, or etymology, of the word or words, such as from the Latin, Old French, Middle English, Hebrew, the name of a person. Some dictionaries use the symbol < to mean "came from." For example, the origin of the word flank is given as "<OldFrench *flanc*<Germanic."This tells us that *flank* came from the Old French word *fanc*. The French word in turn came from the German language. Some dictionaries use abbreviations to tell you where the item came from: OE for Old English, L for Latin, and so forth.

**Interpret a dictionary entry using the following steps:*** Pronounce the word in syllables using the diacritical marks as a guide.
* Note the part or parts of speech of the word and any related words.
* Read the definitions.
* Check the etymological reference to see if you can find remnants of the meaning of the originating word in the meaning of the entry.
* Use the word in a sentence that has a clue in it as to the meaning of the word. (Hennings, p. 5)

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| **Structural AnalysisCartoon, woman with gears turning beside her head**The Greeks and Romans came up with a system for creating words by putting together smaller word parts. They used three types of word parts: prefixes, suffixes, and roots. *Pre* means "before," and so it makes sense that a prefix comes before the main part of a word. *Suf* means "after," and so a suffix comes at the end of a word. A root word is the main part of a word, and usually comes in the middle. Many English words are composed of at least one root, and many have one or more prefixes and suffixes.Word parts contribute to the total meaning of a word. Each part has its own meaning. The meaning of an unknown word often is a combination of its parts. Splitting words into parts to discover the meaning of unknown words is called *structural analysis*.Parts of words provide the essential meanings. Studying the parts of words can tell you many things. The base of a word gives you an overall meaning for the unknown word. Affixes affect the base's meaning. Some affixes provide general meanings. Others identify the subject area of the unknown word. Affixes also help determine the part of speech of the unknown word.**Recognizing Word Roots and Prefixes**While using the dictionary is an excellent way to increase your vocabulary one word at a time, if you would like to learn whole clusters of words in one stroke, you should get to know the most common roots and prefixes in English.It has been estimated that 60 percent of the English words in common use are made up partly or entirely of prefixes or roots derived from Latin and Greek. The value of learning prefixes and roots is that they illustrate the way much of our language is constructed. Once learned, they can help you recognize and understand many words without resorting to a dictionary. With one well-understood root word as the center, an entire "constellation" of words can be built up.Although knowing the meanings of prefixes and roots can unlock the meanings of unfamiliar words, this knowledge should supplement, not replace, your dictionary use. Over the centuries, many prefixes have changed in both meaning and spelling. While some prefixes have a single and fairly invariant meaning, most prefixes have more than one meaning each.For example, the prefix *de*- means "of' or "from"; yet the dictionary lists four different meanings for it. So learn as many of the common prefixes and roots as you can, but learn them for better and more precise understanding of words you already know and words that you have yet to look up in the dictionary. When you go to the dictionary, make sure that you spend some time on the prefixes and roots that make up each word. You will soon become convinced that a word is not an assemblage of letters put together like an anagram, but the true and natural outcome of. evolution. (Pauk, p. 310) Page maintained by dspsweb@cuesta.edu. Last modified: . Warning, this page may contain links to web pages outside of Cuesta College.  |

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| **Common Word Roots**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Root** | **Meaning** | **Example** | **Definition** |
| agri | field | agronomy | field-crop production and soil management |
| anthropo | man | anthropology | the study of man |
| astro | star | astronaut | one who travels in interplanetary space |
| bio | life | biology | the study of life |
| cardio | heart | cardiac | pertaining to the heart |
| cede | go | precede | to go before |
| chromo | color | chromatology | the science of colors |
| demos | people | democracy | government by the people |
| derma | skin | epidermis | the outer layer of skin |
| dyna | power | dynamic | characterized by power and energy |
| geo | earth | geology | the study of the earth |
| helio | sun | heliotrope | any plant that turns toward the sun |
| hydro | water | hydroponics | growing of plants in water reinforced with nutrients |
| hypno | sleep | hypnosis | a state of sleep induced by suggestion |
| ject | throw | eject | to throw out |
| magni | great, big | magnify | to enlarge, to make bigger |
| man(u) | hand | manuscript | written by hand |
| mono | one | monoplane | airplane with one wing |
| ortho | straight | orthodox | right, true, straight opinion |
| pod | foot | pseudopod | false foot |
| psycho | mind | psychology | study of the mind in any of its aspects |
| pyro | fire | pyrometer | an instrument for measuring temperatures |
| script | write | manuscript | hand written |
| terra | earth | terrace | a raised platform of earth |
| thermo | heat | thermometer | instrument for measuring heat |
| zoo | animal | zoology | the study of animals |

**Common Prefixes**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ante- | before | antebellum | before the war |
| anti- | against | antifreeze | liquid used to guard against freezing |
| auto- | self | automatic | self-acting or self-regulating |
| bene- | good | benefit | an act of kindness; a gift |
| circum- | around | circumscribe | to draw a line around; to encircle |
| contra- | against | contradict | to speak against |
| de- | reverse, remove | defoliate | remove the leaves from a tree |
| dis- | apart | dislocate | to unlodge |
| dys- | bad | dysfunctional | not functioning |
| ecto- | outside | ectoparasite | parasite living on the exterior of animals |
| endo- | within | endogamy | marriage within the tribe |
| ex- | out  | excavate | to dig out |
| equi- | equal | equidistant | equal distance |
| extra- | beyond | extraterrestrial | beyond the earth |
| hyper- | over | hypertension | high blood pressure |
| hypo- | under | hypotension | low blood pressure |
| in- | in | interim | in between |
| inter- | between | intervene | come between |
| intra- | within | intramural | within bounds of a school |
| intro- | in, into | introspect | to look within, as one's own mind |
| macro- | large | macroscopic | large enough to be observed by the naked eye |
| mal- | bad | maladjusted | badly adjusted |
| micro- | small | microscopic | so small that one needs a microscope to observe |
| multi- | many | multimillionaire | one having two or more million dollars |
| neo- | new | neolithic | new stone age |
| non- | not | nonconformist | one who does not conform |
| pan- | all | pantheon | a temple dedicated to all gods |
| poly- | many | polygonal | having many sides |
| post- | after | postgraduate | after graduating |
| pre- | before | precede | to go before |
| pro- | for | proponent | a supporter |
| proto- | first | prototype | first or original model |
| pseudo- | false | pseudonym | false name; esp., an author's pen-name |
| re-, red- | back again | rejuvenate | to make young |
| re-, red- | together | reconnect | to put together again |
| retro- | backward | retrospect | a looking back on things |
| semi- | half | semicircle | half a circle |
| sub- | under | submerge | to put under water |
| super- | above | superfine | extra fine |
| tele- | far | telescope | seeing or viewing afar |
| trans- | across | transalpine | across the Alps |

**Number prefixes**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| uni- one | tetra- four | oct- eight |
| mono- one | quint- five | nov- nine |
| bi- two | pent- five | dec- ten |
| duo- two | sex- six | lat- side |
| di- two | hex- six | ped- foot |
| tri- three | sept- seven | pod- foot |
| quad- four | hept- seven |   |

**Math & Science Affixes and Roots**

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| **Root or Affix** | **Example** |
| aqua (water) | aquarium |
| hydro (water) | hydroplane |
| hemi (half) | hemisphere |
| semi (half) | semicircle |
| equi (equal) | equivalent |
| tele (far off) | telescope |
| micro (small) | microfilm |
| onomy (science of)http://academic.cuesta.edu/acasupp/IMAGES/SPACER.GIF | astronomy |
| ology (study of) | geology |
| uni (one) | universe |
| bi (two) | bicycle |
| tri (three) | triangle |
| octa (eight) | octagon |
| dec (ten) | decade |
| centi (hundred) | centimeter |
| milli (thousand) | millimeter |
| bio (life) | biology |
| astro (star) | astronaut |
| thermo (heat) | thermodynamic |
| meter (measure) | diameter |
| ped (foot) | pedestrian |
| pod (foot) | tripod |

**Prefixes that mean "no": a- de- dis-, in- non- un-, contra**Examples: disqualify, nondescript, unscrupulous, contradict, inadvertent

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| **Prefix** | **Meaning** | **Examples** |
| a-, an- | without, not | asexual, atypical, amoral, anarchy |
| de- | reverse action, away | defrost, demystify, desensitize, deduct |
| dis-, dif-, di- | not, apart | dissatisfied, disorganized, different, divert |
| in-, il-, it-, im- | not | inappropriate, invisible, illegal, impossible |
| non- | not | nonproductive, nonessential, nonsense |
| un- | not | unlikely, unnoticeable, unreliable |
| contra-, counter- | against | contrary, contradict, counterproductive |

**Prefixes that indicate "when," "where," or "more": pre-, post-, ante-, inter-, infra-, traps-, sub-, circum-, ultra­**Examples: premature, postscript, anteroom, intervene, transformation

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| **Prefix** | **Meaning** | **Examples** |
| pre-, pro- | before | pre-dinner,  preliminary,  previous,  prologue |
| post- | after | postwar,  postoperative,  postpone |
| ante- | before | antecedent,  antechamber |
| inter- | between, among | interstate,  intercept,  interfere |
| intra- | within | intramural,  intrastate,  intravenous |
| trans- | across | transcontinental,  transparent,  transaction |
| sub- | under | submarine,  submerge,  subjugate |
| circum- | around | circumnavigate,  circumference |
| ultra- | beyond, on the far side of, excessive | ultrasonic,  ultraviolet,  ultraconservative |

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| **Word Relationships****Synonyms, Antonyms, Homonyms, Analogies**In some ways words are like families. Just as there are different relationships among members of the same family, there are different relationships among words. Picture your own family. You probably have relatives who like to do the same things you do. But they may look nothing like you. You may have relatives who are from another city. They might have unusual accents and all "sound alike." There are probably still others who are rebels. They always want the opposite of what everyone else in the family wants.There are similar relationships between words. Words that mean the same thing but look different are called synonyms. Their meanings are very similar (e.g., pretty/cute). An antonym is a word that has the opposite meaning of another word (e.g., pretty/ugly). A homonym is a word that sounds like another word but has a different meaning (e.g., there/their).Because these terms are often confused, here is an easy way to keep them straight.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **H**eard alike | **S**ame meaning | **A**n opposite |
| O | Y | N |
| M | N | T |
| O | O | O |
| N | N | N |
| Y | Y | Y |
| M | M | M |

Words are related in many other ways as well. When thinking about the relationship between two words, you must examine those words for ways in which they are different, alike, or related to each other.Understanding how words fit together helps you expand and network frameworks. As an active reader, this skill enables you to analyze and synthesize information. Such knowledge is useful in building your vocabulary. This, in turn, gives you more skill in using the context (see figure below).click image for enlargement and text description Page maintained by dspsweb@cuesta.edu. Last modified: . Warning, this page may contain links to web pages outside of Cuesta College.  |

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| **Using Word Relationships**Many kinds of word relationships are possible. When looking at relationships the order of the words is important. Changing the order changes the relationship. In word relationships, the colon (:) is an abbreviation of the phrase "is to." For example, instead of "white is to black," "white: black" is written. Like all abbreviations, this one saves space and time. Again, remember that there are countless kinds of relationships that can be constructed.**Common Word Relationships**

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| **Relationship** | **Definition** | **Examples** |
| Synonym | Two words have the same or nearly the same meaning | dirty : nastyworn: usedcalm: peaceful |
| Antonym | One word means the opposite of another | hot: coldlate: earlynew : old |
| Homonym | Two words sound alike | blue: blewlie: lyehere: hear |
| Part to whole | A piece or portion of something is related to the total object | toe: footsole: shoeleaf : plantwall: room |
| Whole to part | The whole is related to one of its parts | tree : trunkhouse: roomcoat: sleeve |
| Age or size | An animate (living) or inanimate (nonliving) object is related to a younger or older object of the same type | fawn: deerfreshman: seniorcalf: cowmother: child |
| Rhyme | Although items do not begin with the same sound/letter, the ending sounds are the same | goat: boattrouble: bubbleslow : toelight: kite |
| Person to location | A person is related to the place with which he is associated  | sailor : shipcriminal : jailPresident: White House |
| Object to use | Something is related to its function | oven: bakesoap: cleanbroom: sweep |
| Source to object | The place from which an item is taken and the item are compared | pound: stray dogbakery : cookiesmind: thought |

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| **Analogies**An *analogy* is an *implied* (unstated) relationship between two pairs of objects. Because the relationship is implied, the first thing you must decide is what kind of relationship exists between each pair (i.e., synonyms, antonyms, homonyms, part-to-whole, time, place, age, etc.). This relationship can be any of the associations you have already studied.An analogy deals with the relationship between two pairs of words. The two pairs are usually dissimilar (not the same), although the relationships between each pair are similar. Because analogies require you to identify similar relationships between dissimilar objects, understanding analogies is one of the highest levels of thinking.Analogies are usually written in one of two forms:Up is to down as fast is to sloworUp : Down :: Fast : SlowThe colon (:) in the second example means "is to." The pair of colons (::) means "as." Page maintained by dspsweb@cuesta.edu. Last modified: . Warning, this page may contain links to web pages outside of Cuesta College.  |