

A Talk to Future Language Arts Teachers

This piece is an edited version of a talk I gave some years ago in a colleague's class in English grammar for teachers. It repeats some things said elsewhere on this site – especially in “Words and Some of Their Ways” – but the audience is different and there is more said here about the use of etymology in the classroom. Besides, repetition can be relaxing.

I'm an old English teacher, so it's not out of character for me to start with a few lines of poetry. In his “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood” William Wordsworth says that we come into this world

Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness
But trailing clouds of glory . . .

The British philosopher John Austin said that words trail “clouds of etymology,” and that a word “never – well, hardly ever – shakes off its etymology and its formation” (“A Plea for Excuses” in *Philosophical Papers*, 2nd ed., p. 201). In short, words also come into this world not in entire forgetfulness and not in utter nakedness, but trailing their own clouds – of etymology. Today I'd like to spend a little time thinking about that unforgotten information and that clothing from the past.

I'd also like to speak to your future language arts work with your students – elementary, middle, secondary, and even college-level students. When many, or probably most, if not all, of your students use words, they are focused on the words' meaning, not on how they look or sound. And when they do look at words, they usually will see only strings of letters, more or less blurred together. And when they hear them, they usually will hear only strings of sounds, also blurred together. They experience English words as single, isolated things to be memorized one after another – pretty much like the spelling lists that are given on Monday to memorize for a test on Friday. Their knowledge of words is like Romeo's love for Rosaline, which “did read by rote and could not spell.”

They will not automatically experience words as things with a formation

that they can understand, so they can have trouble seeing patterns or unities among them. I believe that language can seem to them to be an arbitrary and foreign thing, a thing from which they feel alienated. And to feel alienated from your own language is no small matter.

My first main point is that the systematic study of our English lexicon can help you help your students with their vocabulary, their spelling, their reading – and in a more general way, with their cognitive skills, especially their inductive reasoning

Ironically enough, back in high school I joined the debate team and worked on the annual staff in order to avoid an English teacher with a reputation for requiring lots of work with English grammar – which I was very poor at and detested. (Which was cause and which was effect, I don't know.) But borrowing from my days as a debater, my second main point is that lexical study is not only efficacious, but also practicable – efficacious because it can help, practicable because there is an immense amount of useful knowledge in our words, useful to be taught and to be learned – more than enough to sustain any number of good and useful lesson plans.

Today I want to talk about two aspects of the lexicon – morphology (or word structure) and etymology (or word history). In morphology we will be discussing prefixes, bases, and suffixes – the meaningful parts from which words are formed. In etymology we will be discussing where words come from (or for the grammatically hypersensitive, from whence words come).

Consider these words, each of which contains some form of the prefix (*ad-*:

addict	advance	address	admit	adopt
apply	alloy	appoint	assist	announce
allude	appear	assure	affair	ally
arrest	attack	affect	annex	arrive
attempt	aggress	account	assault	attract

These words all consist of a prefix and a base. Bases are word parts that carry the core of the word's meaning. Prefixes are fixed at the front of bases (thus the (*pre-* in *prefix*) and add something to that core meaning – in the case of the prefix (*ad-* that added meaning is “To, toward.” Prefixes usually affix to bases by simply being stuck on with no changes, as in *addict*, *advance*, *address*, *admit*, *adventure*. But very often the sound [d]

and the letter <d> change to be more like or identical to the first sound and letter in the base, as in *apply*, *alloy*, *assist*, *announce*, and all the others in the array. So *addict* can be analyzed as simply (ad+dict), and *adopt* can be analyzed as (ad+opt), but *apply* has to be analyzed more complexly as (ad+p+ply), indicating that the letter <d> is deleted and replaced by a <p>, thus making the double <p> near the front of the word. This replacement is due to a historical process called assimilation, which serves to make words easier to pronounce.

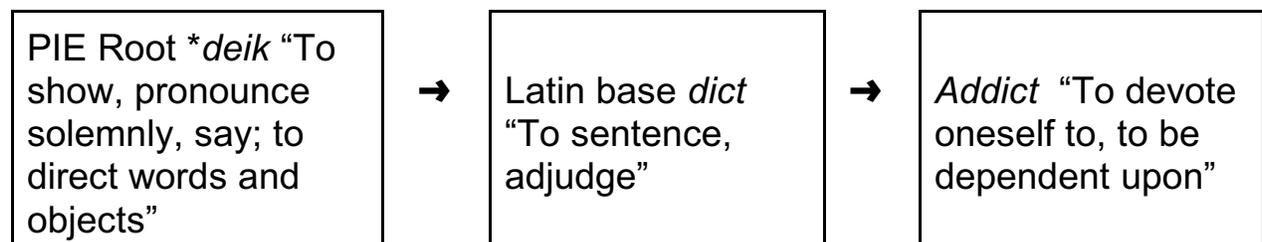
If we trace back the history of the meanings of the word *addict*, we find the following: Our modern meaning comes from the earlier meaning “Bound, obliged” which in turn came from the earlier “To bind or attach oneself, as, for instance, a servant” from the even earlier “To sentence” from the still earlier “To adjudge” from the original **deik* “To show, pronounce solemnly, say”.

That **deik* is a reconstructed root from Proto-Indo-European, the assumed mother tongue of many modern languages, including among several others, some of which are not longer spoken, Hindi, Kurdish, Greek, Latin, and thus French and the other Romance languages, Gaelic, Russian, Czech, German, Swedish – and English, a huge language family. Proto-Indo-European is assumed to have been spoken – never written – around 5000 BC in an area north of the Black and Caspian Seas in modern southwestern Russia. Judging from the spread of their language, those Proto-Indo-Europeans clearly got around.

A sample of some other words that descend from PIE **deik*:

abdicate	disc	judicious	taught
addiction	discotheque	juridical	teach
adjudicate	dish	jurisdiction	tetchy
benediction	diskette	malediction	theodicy
condition	ditto	megabit	tiptoe
contradict	ditty	mistletoe	toe
dedicate	edict	paradigm	token
desk	hoosegow	preach	valedictorian
dictate	index	predicament	vendetta
dictator	indicate	predicate	vendetta
diction	indict	predict	verdict
dictionary	interdict	prejudice	veridical
dictum	judge	revenge	vindicate
digital	judicial	syndicate	vindictive

The history of the word *addict* is an example of **pejoration** – the process by which the meanings of words become more negative over time. Another example is *demon*, which originally just meant “Genius or guiding spirit.” Pejoration is the opposite of **amelioration** – the process by which meanings of words become more positive over time – as, for instance, with *nice*, which originally meant “Stupid, foolish, wanton” and the like.



Looking at the history of *addict*, from the root **deik* through the Latin base to our modern word, the first question that arises is likely “What in the world is the connection between saying something or pronouncing solemnly and the later sense of being addicted to?” Having students try to identify the various developments in that evolution engages them in some good cognitive exercise. I’m not sure what they claim nowadays, but back in the day I recall cognitive scientists talking in terms of the depth of integration of knowledge in one’s mind: the deeper the integration, the stronger and more durable the learning. Rote learning leads to very shallow

learning, easily forgotten, but even the simple cognitive exercise involved in coming up with scenarios that can explain the changes and developments in its meaning, will deepen the the students' learning of the word *addict* and of a broad spread of related words. It really doesn't matter if the students' scenarios don't agree with the accepted views of linguistic scientists; the important thing is that the students do the connection-making and scenario-building. And it's quite possible that the linguistic scientists will eventually change their minds anyhow.

The list of other words that descend from PIE **deik* opens up a whole new range of cognitive work for the students to do. The list above is just a sample of the list in Calvert Watkins' paperback *The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots* – and Watkins' list is itself just a sample. Obviously **deik* relates to a whole lot of modern words – all of which are bound together in various ways in form and meaning. There are surprises there: Why would *addict* and *teach* share a common root? How does **deik* show up in words like *judge and revenge*? What links unite all those words with the bases *dict, dic* – and *dex*?

So there is an example of the amount of potentially useful information involved in a close look at just one – quite simple and common – word's morphology and etymology.

Look at the following two groups of words, all of which contain the base *+fer*:

1	differ	offer	proffer	suffer	
	differed	offered	proffered	suffered	
	differing	offering	proffering	suffering	
	difference	offerer	proffers	sufferer	
2	infer	defer	prefer	confer	refer
	inferred	deferred	preferred	conferred	referred
	inferring	deferring	preferring	conferring	referring
	inference	deference	preference	conference	reference
	inferential	deferential	preferential		referential

There are many useful things to do with an orderly list like this. For instance, what can we say about the meaning that *+fer* adds to all these words? It's easier if we think about the meanings of the prefixes and bases together. For instance, the dictionary tells us that the prefix (*re-* means "Back, again": If you repay someone, you pay them back; if you repaint something, you paint it again. The etymology of, say, *refer*, tells us that the earlier meaning of the bound base *fer* was "Carry, bring,

bear.” So the earlier meaning of *refer* must have been something like "Carry back" or "bring back." And when you think about it, "Carry back" is not a bad way to define *refer*. When we say, for instance, that a certain pronoun refers to a certain noun, we are saying that the pronoun carries our thought back to that noun. When an issue has to be decided by a vote of the people, it is called a referendum. The issue has been carried back to the people for their vote and decision.

A word like *suffer* is more complex. For one thing, (*suf-* is an assimilated form of the prefix (*sub-*. The dictionary tells us that (*sub-* usually becomes (*suf-* before bases that start with <f>. (*Sub-* assimilates in different ways in several words, for instance:

suffer	support	suffuse	supply	success	suffix
suggest	suppose	succinct	suffrage	summon	suppress

So the students can get another lesson in assimilation, and in analyzing and constructing words.

The prefix *sub-* usually means "Under, below," as in *subnormal*. But it also means "Up from, up from under." That is its sense in *suffer*: The bound base *fer* means "Bear" and the prefix means "Up from under." So the early meaning of *suffer* was "Bear up from under"; today we would say "Bear up with, put up with." When you suffer something or when you suffer from something, you must bear up under it.

One final point, which has to do specifically with spelling: Notice that in group 2 all of the words, when they add the past tense suffixes (*-ed*) or (*-ing*), twin the <r>: *inferred*, *conferring*, etc. But not so in group 1: *offered*, *suffered*, etc. The difference has to do with the rule for twinning final consonants: When you add a suffix that starts with a vowel to a word that ends with a consonant followed by a single vowel followed by a final single consonant (as in *fer*), you twin that final consonant only if there is stress on the vowel both before and after you add the suffix. All of the words in group 1 have no stress on the <e> in *fer*, so there is no twinning; but all of the words in group 2 do have that stress, and when the suffixes (*-ed*) or (*-ing*) are added, the stress stays on *fer*, and so the final <r> is twinned. But we do not twin in words like *reference* and *preferential* because although the *fer* is stressed in *refer* or *prefer*, when you add the suffixes (*-ence*) or (*-ential*), the stress moves.

So there are things to be taught and learned here about spelling and stress. Work with word stress can lead naturally to work with poetic rhythm and meter – which

gets us back to poetry where we started – “trailing clouds of glory.”