

## **2 Elements: Bases and Affixes**

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### **Elements vs Syllables**

Elements are parts of written words that have a consistent spelling and meaning from one word to another. Very often elements are exactly one syllable long — as with *six* and *teen*, so elements and syllables often share the same boundaries. Because many elements are exactly one syllable long and they do so often share boundaries in a word, it is tempting to assume that an analysis into elements is the same as an analysis into syllables. But the two analyses are not the same: Syllables are parts of spoken words while elements are parts of written words. And when we analyze a word into syllables, we do not worry about analyzing its meaning. But we do worry about meaning when we analyze a word into its elements.

Not all elements are exactly one syllable long. For instance, an element like *-th* in *sixteenth* does not contain a vowel sound, so it is less than a syllable. So, too, the element *-s* in *cats*. On the other hand, many elements, like *mother*, *father*, *brother*, and *sister*, are more than one syllable long. **Exercise 2.1**

### **Elements vs. Spellings**

Elements are strings of letters that have a consistent meaning or spelling from word to word and that add meaning to the words in which they occur. For instance, the spelling <cook> occurs in such words as *cook*, *cooks*, *cooked*, *cooking*, *overcook*, *undercook*, *precooked*, *cook-off*, *cookbook*. And in all of these words *cook* has a consistent spelling and adds a consistent meaning to the seven words. Also, it cannot be divided into shorter elements that go together to spell and mean what the word *cook* means the way that, say, *cookware* can be divided into the elements *cook* and *ware* that go together to spell and mean what the word *cookware* means.

Of course, the string of letters <cook> can be taken apart in various ways. For instance, it could be taken apart into <co> plus <ok>. Or into <coo> plus <k>, or even into <c> plus <ook>. And these six spellings all have entries and are defined in *Webster's Third Unabridged Dictionary*:

- c*: "the 3rd letter of the alphabet"; a common abbreviation
- co-*: "with, together, joint, jointly, shared, mutually"
- coo*: "to make the low soft cry of a dove or pigeon"
- k*: "the 11th letter of the alphabet"; a common abbreviation
- ok*: "all right, yes"
- ook*: (Scottish) "week" (also *ouk*)

Although all six of these spellings can be found in the word *cook*, none of them is an element in it. Although each of the six spellings has a meaning, no combination of

these six meanings can go together to mean anything even close to the meaning of the word *cook*. So to take *cook* apart into any of these six parts would not help us understand it better. It would not be an analysis of the word. Since it cannot be analyzed any further into shorter elements, the word *cook* is a single element. It is both a word and an element. (And it is one syllable long.) **Exercise 2.2**

### Bases, Free and Bound

There are two different kinds of elements: **bases** and **affixes**. A base is a word's core of meaning. It is the element that can have other elements affixed to it, both in front and in back, so it is where we start when we begin analyzing a word's meaning. There are two kinds of bases: **free** and **bound**. Free bases can stand free and be used as independent words. An example of a free base would be *cook*, for it can and does stand alone as an independent word. Nearly all one-syllable words are also free bases, so are many words with two or more syllables but only one element, such as *mother*, *lettuce*, *mattress*, *picnic*. Examples of one-syllable words that contain more than a free base are *tenth* [tenth] ten+th and *grows* [grōz] grow+s. **Exercise 2.3**

Not all bases are free. Those that cannot stand alone as independent words are called **bound bases**. Look at these words, for instance:

<i>evoke</i>	= e + voke
<i>invoke</i>	= in + voke
<i>revoke</i>	= re + voke
<i>provoke</i>	= pro + voke

The repeated element *voke* is the base of these four words. This *voke* can combine with other elements to form words, but by itself it cannot stand free as a word. You can evoke something, invoke it, revoke or provoke it, but you can't simply "voke" it. If you were to check for an entry spelled <voke> in your dictionary, there is probably none there. Dictionaries do not list most bound bases.

The preceding sentence says "most" because dictionaries do routinely list those bound bases they usually call **combining forms**. Combining forms can be combined with other elements — bases, suffixes, prefixes, or other combining forms — to make words. Examples are *tele+* and *electr+*. Combining forms are particularly common in the scientific and technical registers. So far I have not found any compelling reason to treat combining forms as anything different from bases, usually bound bases.

It can be hard to see the consistency of meaning an element, especially a bound base, has in different words. Sometimes you can work it out by comparing the definitions of the words that contain the element. For instance, the bound base *domin* occurs in *dominate*, *dominant*, *domineer*, and *condominium*. The definitions of *dominate*, *dominant*, and *domineer* all include the notions of "rule, control." The definition of *condominium* includes the notion of "joint sovereignty, joint control," the prefix *con-* meaning "together, joint." In a condominium, the residents own their own homes and

thus have sovereignty or control over them. So we can say that the modern base *domin* carries the sense “sovereignty, control.” **Exercise 2.4**

### Elements and Etymology

However, the base of *domino*<sup>1</sup> “a costume with mask and cape” and *domino*<sup>2</sup> “a tile used in a board game” is historically this same *domin* though here the semantic relationship with “sovereignty, control” is more remote. The changes in meaning of the base in words like *domino*<sup>1</sup> and *domino*<sup>2</sup> can limit the usefulness of comparing definitions for identifying a suspected base, but we can usually get help in a word's etymology. Look at this entry for the word *provoke* from the *AHD*:

**pro-voke** (prə-vōk') *tr.v.* **pro-voked, pro-vok-ing, pro-vokes.** **1.** To incite to anger or resentment. **2.** To stir to action or feeling. **3.** To give rise to; evoke: *provoke laughter.* **4.** To bring about deliberately; induce: *provoke a fight.* [Middle English *provoken*, from Old French *provoquer*, from Latin *prōvocāre*, to challenge : *prō-*, forth; see *PRO-*<sup>1</sup> + *vocāre*, to call . . .] —**provok'ing-ly** *adv.*

Toward the end of the entry in square brackets you can find the word's **etymology**, which describes the history of the word, working back to its original form in Latin. From the etymology you can see that *provoke* comes from the Latin verb *prōvocāre*, which meant "to call forth." The meaning "to call forth", which we find in the etymology of the word, is its etymological meaning.

We can also see that *prōvocāre* was formed from two Latin parts — the first, *prō-*, "forth," and the second, *vocāre* "to call." The bound base *voke* comes from that Latin verb, so we can say that the etymological meaning of *voke* is "call."

There has been some change in meaning over the centuries, but it is not hard to see how the etymological meaning "to call forth" could develop into the current meaning of *provoke*. When you provoke someone to fight, you can be said "to call him forth" or "to call him out," just like the showdown in the cowboy movie. Nor is it hard to see the etymological meaning "call" in other words that contain the bound base *voke*: *evoke*, *invoke*, *revoke*. For instance, the element *re-* in *revoke* means "back," and when the authorities revoke one's drivers license, they do in fact call it back.

*Voke* is the form of the base used at the end of words. In the form *voc* it appears elsewhere in words, as in *advocate* and *vocation*. Notice that we have the verb *evoke* but the related noun *evocation*.

Different dictionaries locate and organize their etymologies in different ways. You should read the section dealing with etymologies in the introduction to your dictionary to be sure you understand where to find them and how they are organized. And have your students do the same. You may have to put a little pressure on students to read the introductory material in their dictionaries, important and useful though it may be. Most

people never read the front matter in their dictionaries, and many feel it odd to do so.  
**Exercises 2.5 and 2.6**

## Elements and Meaning

This discussion speaks of a word or element's "meaning," a way of speaking that is essentially an expedient. For I believe that words and elements don't actually have meanings. They have semantic content, which is an agreed-upon range of senses that people can draw from to formulate and communicate their own meanings. The point is that words and elements don't have meanings, people do. Words and elements have content, a potential for making meanings. I believe this is a very important distinction, but trying to avoid talking about word meaning in a discussion like this one can make the descriptions seem very awkward and abstract. So, using a bit of familiar shorthand, we will speak as if words and elements did have meanings.

We've seen that the base *domin* in *dominate* and in *domino*<sup>1</sup> "costume" and *domino*<sup>2</sup> "game tile" are related historically, but the meanings of the three words are so different, how can we say that there is a consistent meaning uniting them? The set of meanings, or senses, carried by a word is a disjunctive category. That is, it is a category made up of two or more meanings that are connected by *or*. That is the way the definitions of words are presented in dictionaries. Look back at the four definitions of the word *provoke*: The word means "To incite to anger or resentment," **or** "To stir to action or feeling," **or** "To give rise to; evoke," **or** "To bring about deliberately; induce." In any given use the word *provoke* can be used to mean any one of those things.

What we are dealing with here is polysemy, the condition of having more than one meaning. Just about every word in the English language is polysemous, as a look at most any dictionary definition will show. The same is true of elements, even bound elements like *domin*. Polysemy arises because words are used by people to communicate meanings, and since people's meanings constantly change, they stretch words a bit, applying them, for instance, to refer to things or situations slightly different from what the words were used to refer to before, thus expanding the semantic meaning of the word. In time this expansion can lead to new senses being agreed upon and added to the word's content, thus creating polysemy.

As we change and expand words' meanings, we usually follow one of two kinds of relationship: those based on similarity and those based on contiguity. In the first, the new and old referents are taken to be somehow alike or similar. It is easy to see the strands of similarity unifying words like *dominate*, *domineer*, *dominant*, *dominance*, *dominion*, and even *condominium*.

The second kind of relationship is based on contiguity—that is, on contact or association with one another in time, or space, or cause and effect, or part to whole. *Domino*<sup>1</sup> "masked and caped costume" comes from a French word originally used to refer to a black winter robe worn by priests, so called perhaps in a joking reference to the Latin phrase *Benedicamus Dominō* "Let us praise the Lord." (The Latin word for *lord*, *dominus*, meant "master, controller, supreme ruler.") The priests' black robes were

seen to be contiguous with the phrase *Benedīcamus Dominō*. And in a second jump, the cloaked and masked costumes were seen to be similar (in color) to the priests' robes.

*Domino*<sup>2</sup> appears to come from the fact that the back of the domino tile used to be black like the cape of the domino costume (though another suggestion is that the connection may be that the black pips on the white domino tile look a little like the eye holes in the domino mask; etymology is not always a sure science). Thus, the connection between *domino*<sup>1</sup> "masked and caped costume" and *domino*<sup>2</sup> "game tile" is again one of similarity: some visual similarity, probably again the black color.

The meaning of the base *domin* in *domino*<sup>1</sup> is something like "masked and caped costume," and its meaning in *domino*<sup>2</sup> is "game tile." Thus, if we were to write a dictionary entry for the bound base *domin*, it could go something like "1. sovereignty, control; or 2. ruler, lord; or 3. a costume with cape and mask, usually black; or 4. a black and white game tile." In spite of the wide difference in meaning among the words that contain the bound base *domin*, we can still say that *domin* has a consistent meaning from word to word because there is a plausible chain of connections uniting the various meanings, connections based on similarity and contiguity.