

Silent letters & classical prefixes

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Spelling is a problem for the native speaker as well as for the learner of English, because the pronunciation of English has changed a lot while the spelling has not. For this reason there are a lot of letters in words which are never heard, and learners may have the temptation to leave them out, or may not know they are supposed to be there. An old joke is: How do you pronounce the word 'ghoti'? The answer, believe it or not, is /fij/ (as in 'fish')! The reason is clear if you look at the sounds in these words: 'enough', 'women' and 'nation', which together give the /f/, /i/ and /j/ sounds in combination.

Most letters can in fact be silent in English; some examples are 'b' (plumber), 'c' (indict), 'd' (Wednesday), 'f' (halfpenny), 'g' and 'h' (night), etc. Vowels too can be pronounced in a variety of ways totally unrelated to the spelling. Look at these words ending in '-ough': 'cough' (off), 'rough' (cuff), 'through' (shoe), 'bough' (how), 'though' (so), and the vowel-sound in 'bought' (short) all have the letters 'ou' but all sound different. (The words in brackets rhyme with the previous word). As a result of this the learner has to learn the spelling as part of the word, because there are no hard and fast rules to help him as there is in Spanish, where there is little real confusion over spelling.

Spelling is important in English speaking communities as an indication of socio-educational status, and for that reason it is desirable for all people who wish to appear as educated to master the system as well as possible. To give just one example, people are often unsure when a word ends in '-ceed', '-cede' or '-sede'. This is one area where it's quite easy to avoid making mistakes, if we consider the meaning of the prefix we use with each one.

Let's take the last one, '-sede', first. This can never exist alone, and can only be combined with one prefix, 'super-'. So the only word you will come across which ends in '-sede' is the word 'supersede'.

That leaves us with two choices for the rest of the doubtful words. Three prefixes can occur with the suffix '-ceed'; these are: 'pro-', 'ex-' and 'suc-', which give us the words 'proceed', 'exceed' and 'succeed'. If you can memorize these three '-ceed' words, and the word 'supersede', then you will know that the others, ('concede', 'precede', 'accede', 'intercede', 'recede', 'secede' and 'antecede' all take '-cede'.) Finally there is of course the monosyllabic word 'cede', with no prefix at all, which means to surrender formally; a country can be obliged to cede part of its territories.

All this of course is much easier if you have some knowledge of Latin. It isn't very fashionable for Latin to be taught in schools nowadays, but one consequence of its disappearance has been a decline in the quality of spelling in English schoolwork.

There is a school of thought that says that as English is not a "Latin" language we should not use "Latinisms", that is we should keep to our Anglo-Saxon roots when we speak and write. Unfortunately, in the technological world in which we live today, I feel we wouldn't get very far if we were to follow this advice, as the world of science turns again and again to Latin and Greek when looking for "names" to describe new artefacts or processes.

Let's have a look at some of these Classical "roots" which are in common usage nowadays. For reasons of space a complete list is out of the question here, but we can look at some of the more productive ones. I have given the prefix in Latin, its "meaning", and a couple of examples in each case.

Root	Meaning	Example
ante-	before	antechamber, anteroom, antenatal
com-	together with	combination, communion, communist
contra-	against	contravene, contradict, contraband
inter-	between	international, inter-galactic, interview
nov-	new	novel, novelty
retro-	backwards	retrogression, retrograde, retrospective
trans-	across	transatlantic, Transylvania, translate

and some Greek ones:

chrono-	of time	chronometer, synchronize,
hydro-	of water	hydroelectric, hydrant, dehydrated
photo-	of light	photosynthesis, photograph
psycho-	of mind	psychology, psychiatrist
physio-	of body	physiotherapy, physique

In inventing scientific words to fit in with the twentieth century's technological expansion, we very often tend to take words from Greek. Because this is the case for most language communities it means that these words tend to be very similar in different languages, with a few spelling and pronunciation changes.

This makes the possibility of computer translation of unambiguous scientific texts very much a reality today, and also means that the learner of a foreign language who has a good knowledge of how words are formed has the chance to apply the vocabulary he has in his own language to another.

For example, once he has learned the generalization that words that in Spanish end in *-ología* or *-idad* tend to end in English in '-ology' and '-ity', he can use this information productively. Of course there will be the occasional stumbling block, (false friends like *sanidad*) to be on the look out for, but on the whole it is a useful way to increase your vocabulary.

A knowledge of these words in one language, then, is very often a great help to the learner who wishes to manipulate an extensive and precise vocabulary. If he knows the words *espeleología* and *comensurabilidad* in Spanish then an educated guess together with a knowledge of the principles of word building in English will lead him to the English words 'speleology' and 'commensurability'. Of course, if he doesn't know them in Spanish, it won't make any difference !

So I suggest that time spent mastering the use of Latin and Greek prefixes and suffixes in the two languages may well be time well spent for anyone interested in improving their knowledge of both languages.

Afterword

Some words of course are often misspelled because they are confused with other words which sound similar. One example is the commonly confused pair 'principal' and 'principle'. The first of these can be a noun, meaning a leader, or a sum of money, or also an adjective, in which case it means the main or most important. ('They showed me into the Principal's office', 'He outlined the three principal reasons why my plan would not work'). The second word, 'principle', can only be a noun, and refers to a rule or basic truth, ('It's a principle of mine never to lend money').

Another pair which often gets mixed up is 'stationary' and 'stationery'. The first of this is an adjective and means not moving, fixed, while the second is a noun and refers to the paper you use to write on. The place where you buy this paper and other related goods is called the stationer's. So we can say 'While trying to park she ran into a stationary car' and 'She wrote to the Minister on her very best stationery, which she had bought at the stationer's'.