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The Tool Box for Real Spelling



PEETE'S MAIL

Hey, fellow Real Spellers!

I had to write a quick note about Neil Ramsden's Word Searcher spelling tool.

I was doing some work where I was curious about the suffix <-let> because of a word I ran across. I could only think of <piglet> and <anklet>. I did that thing where your eyeballs look up as you try to think of other words that have some strange feature. Not much was coming to mind, and then I remembered that Neil had put this thing out a while ago.

I've worked with something like this Word Searcher before in my classroom. It dawned on me that I should give Neil's version a try for this <-let> question. The results of my search made it clear that there's a difference between a word searcher based on words that my students and I had typed in and one with 60 000 words in it!

The letter string <let> came up with 246 matches. Now of course, the machine doesn't know that I'm looking for a suffix, so tons of these words aren't what I'm looking for, but it's still fascinating to see this specific list of words and note the words that this string calls up. Among the words that I knew I had somewhere in my head but was struggling to pull from the air include <pamphlet>, <ringlet> and <eyelet>. Some words that still have me pondering - and that I want to get around to thinking about more - are words like <islet>, <inlet>, <hamlet> and of course <toilet>!

I'm not sure I know what the letter string <let> represents in these words yet, but I have my curiosity piqued.

And that got me thinking. This really is an important tool for students and teachers to play with.

I'm not teaching in a class at the moment, so I have less opportunity to dive into words searching for interesting patterns as I loved doing while teaching. I do remember, though, how frequently I would

struggle to come up with the right words to present a specific spelling pattern to my class.

For instance, I might be trying to present the suffixing pattern for when to drop the single, silent <e>. A great approach would be to come up with a number of words that have two specific characteristics. First they need to have a base or stem that ends in a silent <e>. Secondly, they need to have bases or stems which take on both consonant and vowel suffixes. For example, <forgiveness> and <forgiving> are useful because its stem, <forgive> ends in a single, silent <e> and can take on the consonant suffix <-ness> or the vowel suffix <-ing>.

The problem I had as a teacher was coming up with enough useful words to illustrate any particular pattern. The dictionary, which only sorts words by the initial letter of a word, is a terrible tool for identifying the productive words for this activity. The word searcher, by comparison is specifically suited to the task of sorting words by whatever orthographic pattern I am interested in. For example, I just did a search that would help me present the suffixing patterns for words ending in a single, silent <e>. I chose to search the string <ement\$> (the dollar sign shows I want this to be a string at the end of the word) because I can predict that this will lead to a number of words that use the <-ment> suffix on a word ending in a single, silent <e>. From that list, I should be able to come up with derivations that would use a vowel suffix and force the dropping of the single, silent <e>. My search produced 101 words. Consider the educational value to be found in just the first 12 words from that list:

abacement	abatement	abridgement	achievement
acknowledgement	advancement	advertisement	aggrandisement
aggrandizement	agreement	amazement	amusement

With this starter list, I can think of derivations that use vowel suffixes that force the dropping of the single, silent <e>. Just some of the possibilities include: <amazing>, <amazed>, <achieving>, <advertiser>, <amusing> etc.

I also have a few words here that remind me of important points I had not considered. Depending on where my students are at in studying this convention, I can choose to include or hold back on these words for the moment.

For just one example, the word <agreement> stood out. The base <agree> does not use a single, silent <e>. If I think the timing is right for my kids, I can ensure that this feature is included in my lesson by including the derivation <agreeing>. To find more examples like that, I just do a search on the string <eeing\$>.

What keeps striking me is that the word searcher not only helps me find examples to illustrate orthographic patterns that I'm thinking of, but also my searches keep alerting me to concepts or words I wasn't thinking of but that are relevant to the concept I'm intending to investigate.

While this a great tool for a teacher preparing for a lesson, my real curiosity is to see what happens when kids play with a database with 60 000 words. My guess is that it would inspire a multitude of fascinating observations that would routinely compel students to form and test orthographic hypotheses and to share them with each other. This tool, combined with guidance from a teacher who is armed with accurate orthographic knowledge from Real Spelling, has untold generative, educational potential.

So I'm jealous right now. Since I'm playing the student role myself at the moment, I don't get to have 20 or 30 kids diving into surprising, informative spelling patterns with me. I couldn't resist writing a note to those Real Spelling teachers to say, check this thing out.

I'd love to hear stories from students and teachers who have some interesting questions/experiences come out of this on the eGroup mail.

I hope some folks try it!

Pete

Some technical notes from Neil

I suggest eGroup members use this 'gateway' page which points people to the Searcher (and the Suffixer).

<http://www.neilramsdend.co.uk/spelling>

✓ ***If you are connected to internet while you are reading this eBook, you can just click on this link to open the gateway page.***

The downside of this database is quality. Although I think the author of this word bank was careful, I think noticeable anomalies crept in. So it perhaps needs a tiny bit of caution.

On the plus side, what most excited me about this set was that it included fairly common words (e.g. not obscure technical stuff) plus their inflections—ideal for the Searcher.

There are no proper names—so I think no days of the week, etc.

Just typing the letter string <let> didn't tell the machine that Pete was looking for a suffix; that's why it came up with 246 matches. But the Searcher can test for the end of word, viz. search for 'let\$' (the dollar \$ is the end signifier). That reduces the matches from 246 to 59.

It's worth starting to use regular expressions (which allow you to do this kind of stuff). You can start small: e.g. just with caret ^ for start of word to help pick out prefixes; and dollar \$ for end to help on suffixes.

(If you use them more, you'll eventually find caret ^ has a second role, for negation in square brackets, so [^aeiou] matches 'not a vowel', i.e. a consonant.)

Neil

COMMENTS ON SOME OF THE SPELLINGS FROM PETE'S MAIL

Diminutive suffixes

There are derivational suffixes whose force is to indicate a smaller version of what it is that they are suffixed to.

- A <duck + **ling**> is a smaller version of a duck.
- A <cygn> (Latin root <cygn(um)> "swan") + **et**> is a smaller version of a swan.
- A <leaf + **let**> is a smaller version of a leaf (in the sense of a sheet of paper).
- A <globe + **ule**> is a smaller form of a globe.

The suffixes <-ling> <-et> <-let> and <-ule> are said to be 'diminutive' in force because they 'diminish' the denotation of the base to which they are affixed.

The Old English diminutive suffix <-ling>

The diminutive suffix <-ling> has not changed in pronunciation, spelling or force since Old English. Here are some of the words in which it is found.

hireling	groundling	underling	hireling
darling	gosling	nestling (the noun)	
	fledgeling	underling	

- In some of these words the idea of the suffix is more "worthy only of diminished respect": <underling> <hireling> and <groundling> are of this sort.
- Occasionally the base to which <-ling> has been affixed is in an earlier or slightly altered form.
 - in <gosling> the relation with <goose> is clear.
 - in <darling> ("a little dear"!) we have the clue to help us to distinguish between the homophones <dear> and <dear>.

The suffixes <-et> and <-let>

The Old French suffix <-et> was adopted into Middle English.

There was another French suffix <-el>, which also had a diminutive force. We can still see it in French-origin words such as <damsel>.

Not infrequently, French "double-diminished" a word by affixing both <-el> **and** <-et> in what appeared to be a single suffix <-elet>.

One such French word was <bracelet>. The base <brace> (as in <embrace>) meant "arm", so a <brac~~e~~ + elet> was a rather small arm ornament. This word <bracelet> seems to have been instrumental in giving native English speakers the impression that the word's structure was actually <brace + let>, and the new English diminutive suffix <-let> was born and became quite active in word formation.

The French loan suffix <-ette>

The long-standing suffix <-et> is still alive, well and with us in Modern French. It's feminine gender form is <-ette>. It is a non-English spelling which has been borrowed into English to give a slightly exotic 'chic', or even camp, effect. Since English is one of the exceedingly rare IE languages that no longer has grammatical gender as a resource the originally feminine gender suffix <-ette> can be used at will. Here are just some of the many coinings of which it is part, not all of which still have much of the original diminutive force.

flanelette	cigarette	rosette	laundrette
kitchenette	majorette	suffragette	

The compounds <inlet> and <outlet>

I had not really thought about the structure of <inlet> before I read Pete's mail. I suppose I had assumed that this was another case of the suffix <-let>. When, though, I began to look specifically at the word I had my doubts.

- 1 If the diminutive suffix <-let> is really present I had difficulty in conceiving what a 'little in' might be.
- 2 I made the connection with its antonym <outlet>, which has all the appearance of a compound word.

It became clear to me that both <inlet> and <outlet> must be compounds. An 'outlet' is a means of 'letting out', so and 'inlet' will be a means of 'letting in'.

The amatory connections of the pamphlet

I had never really thought about <pamphlet> either. Though the diminutive suffix would certainly seem to be present in <pamphlet> — its meaning would certainly support the idea — I had no hypothesis for what a base <pamph> might mean. The dictionaries had to come into play.

A formal etymology of <pamphlet>

Here is what I found in my 1933 edition of the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary.

ME [app. a generalized use of *Pamphilet* or *Panflet*, a familiar name of a 12th C. L. amatory poem or comedy called *Pamphilus, seu de amore*]

This certainly whetted my appetite and I searched for the original.

A piece of borderline medieval pornography

What I found was a poem (its title means "Pamphilus, or About Love") written in rather racy popular Latin that is really a salacious comedy that relates the exploits of an old bawd called Pamphilus and his procuress. It is exactly what a medieval Rupert Murdoch would have been happy to include in the twelfth century equivalent of his gutter press, and its popularity at the time was about as incomprehensible as the modern spewings of the Murdoch empire.

Popular it was, though, and it soon came to be known familiarly as 'The little Pamphile' — <Pamphilet> in the medieval French of the time.

The predecessor of the tabloid press

As people began to forget the original <pamph(i)let> the term generalized to mean any short tract relating heroic acts and current affairs. They often contained scandalous reports of murders and executions, and not infrequently aimed at discrediting important people. By the sixteenth century the <pamph(i)let> had become a regular weapon of religious and political controversy.

The Greek connection

There remains the presence of the digraph <ph> in <pamphlet> to explain. It comes, quite simply, from the name <Pamphilus>.

From classical times the heroes and heroines of Latin poetry were given Greek names; it was a way of bringing a sort of slightly exotic 'culture' to the work.

There is a Greek element <παν> → <pan> "all" that acts as a prefix. We see it in such words as <pantheon> <pandemonium> <pandemic> and <panorama>.

The Greek element <φιλ> → <phil> "liking, strong affinity, love" has given us the base <phile> that we see in words such as <philanthropic> <philosopher> and <bibliophile>.

The final phone [n] of the prefix <pan-> has assimilated to the following labial phone represented by <ph> to become [m], in the same way that <syn-> becomes <sym-> in words such as <symphony>.

KIT 6 THEME B of the Tool Box has material on 'assimilation' and prefixes.

The name 'Pamphilus', then, would mean something like "All for love".

The morphology of <pamphlet>

As far as Modern English is concerned we must probably regard the whole word as a free base. The presence, though, of the final string <let> certainly echoes the diminutive suffix. The etymology of the word, too, shows that the diminutive <-et> played a part in the development of this word.

Perhaps the best way to deal with <pamphlet> is to present it as a structural base element on which hangs a most interesting tale.

What the toilet and the bureau have in common

There is a curious sense development of cloth → covering → table covered by the cloth → room that is common to both <bureau> and <toilet>.

The bureau

In medieval times, bound books were precious and treated with great care. Any table on which these books were placed — especially if the books were going to be subject to a lot of handling — was first covered with a russet-coloured thick woollen fabric called <bure>.

This 'bure' was usually seen on the writing desks of merchants when they were doing their accounts. This characteristic table covering first gave its name to a working table, often with drawers, and then to the whole room in which such tables were found and where writing of all sorts took place.

A more delicate woven fabric

There is a Latin root <tex(ere) / text(um)> "weave". A written 'text' is 'woven' with words, and a 'textile' is something woven more literally.

Latin had another word <te(x)l(am)> "web", always written <tel(am)> since classical times, which is the root of the French <toile>. *Une*

toile d'araignée is a spider's web, and *la toile* is the official term for what most of us now call *le web*!

By the sixteenth century, a piece of woven fabric used for wrapping was called *une toilette* (our diminutive suffix again). It then developed to refer to a small woven cloth covering for a lady's dressing table. Thus, to refer at that time to a lady as being "at her toilet" meant that she was at her dressing table adorning her visage.

The sense development towards the modern meaning is clearly a case of euphemism, rather parallel to the current American English use of terms such as 'rest room' or 'bath room'.

CONTACTING PETE AND NEIL

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