

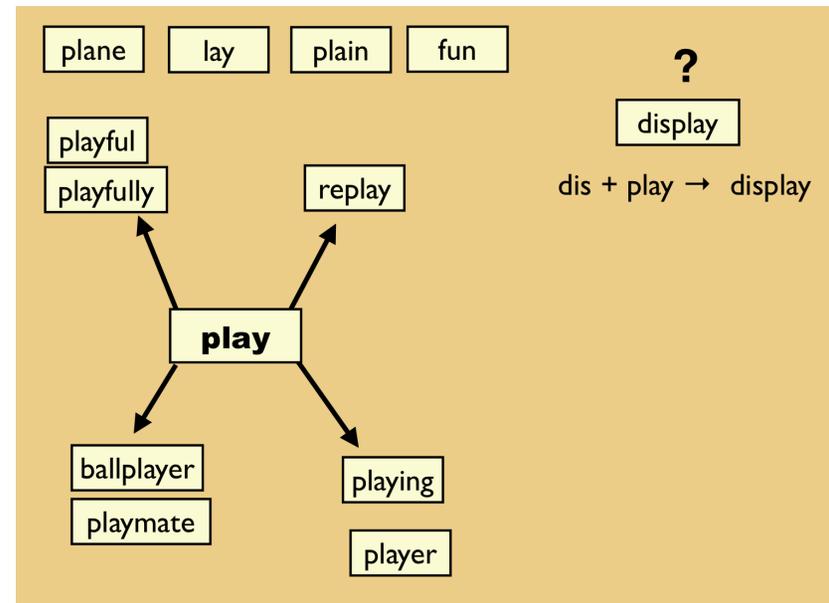
A Special WW Publication: Learning an Investigation of < special >!

Dvora Kravitz has been working hard at deepening her understanding of English orthography for some time. She is regularly engaged in the SWI Facebook groups and she has actively sought out guidance from other colleagues. She contacted me a while ago because she wanted to focus her study in an on-line course with me. She offered to put the word out and identify participants and organize the times for five 1.5 hours sessions. As a result we had our first session with a group of about 24 learners last Tuesday. The range of background included novices and others with longtime experience with SWI. Just like I like it!

It was such a joyful gathering.

At the end of our first session, I encouraged everyone to have a go with any of the ideas we had encountered. Not surprisingly, a central concept we got into in our first session was the idea of understanding “word families.” At first we looked *specifically* at orthographic morphological families -- families of words that share a base element. I didn’t actually define which kind of family we were looking at, but we had a base and looked for words that we could show shared the spelling of that base and which had a clear meaning connection. We are just heading towards becoming clear on the difference between morphological families and etymological families. But one thing we have established already is that to conclude that two words are in the same “family” (morphological or etymological) they must share some connection in spelling and some connection in meaning. Sharing a connection in pronunciation is irrelevant to the linguistic concept of “word families”.

We used that old chestnut <play> as a starter base element to look for related words to create a word web. We arrived at the web below and then started to consider whether the words along the top could or could not be considered part of the <play> family.



Notice that the words <plane> and <plain> might be perceived to have a similar pronunciation as <play>. Here is the IPA for these words:

play /pleɪ/
plane, plain /pleɪn/

So we can “hear” /pleɪ/ in all of these spoken words, but we agreed that since <plane> and <plain> did not share a spelling *and* meaning connection with the base <play>, they could not be in the <play> family.

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This is a reason to consider the use of describing words like *red*, *bed*, *fed* as a “word family” because of their common pronunciation. One problem is that words like *said*, and *read*, also share that pronunciation, but would not be considered part of that family. If we find ourselves having to be careful which words we pick to teach about certain categories, we need to be asking about the categories we are teaching!

The question we ended on was the most interesting one, however. Does the word <play> fit in this family?

We could make a word sum that seemed to work with a <dis-> prefix. But we had a question about whether there really was a *meaning* connection between <play> and <dis-> like there is between <play> and the other words in our web.

We left that as an unresolved question for now. Scholars are never in a hurry for “the answer.” Instead we enjoy taking our time deepening our understanding.

I ended the session encouraging everyone to have a go trying something they found useful in our session and to do their best to find a rich question that they could share with us. Notice [scientists are question collectors, not answer collectors!](#)

It did not take long before I received a brilliant question from one of the participants, Lynn Scott.

I responded to Lynn’s question, and asked if she would be OK if I shared her question and my response (not an answer!) with the group so that we could think more about this before our next session. I think this correspondence is so rich that I asked if I could also

share it here on Real Spellers. I’m so glad she was open to sharing her evolving thinking so that we can all learn from it.

Pay close attention not just to my response about the orthographic concepts but also to the comments about posing a scientific question.

With that preamble, I am pasting Lynn’s initial question below, and then I will include my response to Lynn that embeds my comments in the text of her mail.

Hi Pete,

Really enjoyed our first session last evening. Although the content was familiar, I could feel my understanding deepening. Having used some of the SWI methods with a student recently, I was able to make some really helpful connections to my experiences with him. This is really encouraging.

In the past week my student and I have been investigating the word "special". His hypothesis was that the base is "speci" and I thought it might be "spec". We did a matrix and looked at the etymology. When it came to looking at the spelling, I wondered if the <i> was an etymological marker, since it is not voiced, but it is voiced in the French version of this word and (I think) in the Latin specialis.

If there is time to talk about this in next week's session, I'd really appreciate your thoughts on this.

Thanks,

Lynn

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Below is my response to Lynn. (Her text in blue.)

Hey Lynn,

Really enjoyed our first session last evening. Although the content was familiar, I could feel my understanding deepening. Having used some of the SWI methods with a student recently, I was able to make some really helpful connections to my experiences with him. This is really encouraging.

I'm so glad. I know that I was treading familiar ground for many of you. But I also trusted that folks like you would see that you can understand the same content more deeply by revisiting. It always makes me a bit nervous — but it always seems to work!

In the past week my student and I have been investigating the word "special". His hypothesis was that the base is "speci" and I thought it might be "spec".

I'm just going to re-write your question using the linguistic symbols for orthographic information, the angle brackets instead of the quotation marks so you can see the difference.

In the past week my student and I have been investigating the word <special>. His hypothesis was that the base is <speci> and I thought it might be <spec>.

Sometimes I even leave a space between the letters and the angle brackets to make it even easier to focus on the orthography.

In the past week my student and I have been investigating the word < special >. His hypothesis was that the base is < speci > and I thought it might be < spec >.

It may seem like a picky point, but I find it so much easier to read writing about orthographic topics when angle brackets are used to mark orthographic information. We don't see angle brackets used for too many other things, so it just separates the orthographic representation of the morphemes that much more present in my mind when I read. The interesting thing is that I still remember when I begrudgingly started to take on that practice when I wrote to Michel. I suddenly got it that the act of stopping and spending the time to find those keys on the keyboard was making me focus more on the orthography. It also served as helpful signal to myself that I was accepting the challenge of being more linguistically precise in my thinking. See what you think.

Now to your actual question:

You both have totally reasonable hypotheses. However, the first thing you need to do when posing a question about morphological structure is to show the full hypotheses in a completed word sum like this:

Hypothesis 1) speci + al —> special

Hypothesis 2) spec + ial —> special

Now having written down Hypothesis 2, I can think of at least two other possibilities. One with a connecting vowel letter, and one with a final, non-syllabic <e>.

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Hypothesis 3) spec + i + al → special

Hypothesis 4) spece/ + i + al → special

See how writing down the first hypothesis provokes more ideas? Without finishing the word sum, the notion of a connecting vowel letter is less likely to present itself. Similarly, seeing a vowel suffix or a connecting vowel letter following a base with a final single consonant and one vowel letter immediately before that makes it easier to see the possibility of a final, non-syllabic <e>.

[We did a matrix and looked at the etymology.](#)

Given this statement, I assume you made word sums to make the matrix. I also would love to see what those matrices looked like, so I can see your thinking.

[When it came to looking at the spelling, I wondered if the <i> was an etymological marker, since it is not voiced, but it is voiced in the French version of this word and \(I think\) in the Latin *specialis*.](#)

Ah ha! You have noticed this <i> as a possible structure! Excellent. And the etymological marker hypothesis is a *great one*. And because you proposed it, I get to offer you a deeper understanding of etymological markers. A key characteristic about them is that they cannot be a grapheme representing a phoneme *in any member of the family*.

I can think of the word *speciality*, a word in which that letter <i> is behaving as a grapheme. That means we get to reject the excellent hypothesis of this letter being an etymological marker. We can, however continue to ponder if it could be a connecting vowel letter.

[If there is time to talk about this in next week's session, I'd really appreciate your thoughts on this.](#)

Indeed. What I'd like to do, if you are open to it is to share the text of this email with everyone so that we are all thinking about it before our session. You have happened up on a great rich (and complex!) word family. I think we could get a lot out of thinking about and working through your question together.

And if we do, I'd like to offer just a couple of pointers to places you all might want to investigate.

I went to Etymonline and found this for <special>.

special (adj.)

c. 1200, "better than ordinary," from Old French *special*, *especial* "special, particular, unusual" (12c., Modern French *spécial*) and directly from Latin *specialis* "individual, particular" (source also of Spanish *especial*, Italian *speciale*), from *species* "appearance, kind, sort" (see [species](#)).

So now I know that I need to click the link for <species> to find if there is a deeper written root.

species (n.)

late 14c. as a classification in logic, from Latin *species* "a particular sort, kind, or type" (opposed to *genus*), originally "a sight, look, view, appearance," hence also "a spectacle; mental appearance, idea, notion; a look; a pretext; a resemblance; a show or display," typically in passive senses; in Late Latin, "a special case;" related to *specere* "to look at, to see, behold," from PIE root [*spek-](#) "to observe."

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Now I see that the deepest written root is the Latin *spec(ere)* for “to look, see, behold”. (The PIE root is marked with an asterisk to show that it is a reconstructed root -- it was never written down.)

Note that *italics* in Etymonline always signal “non English”. These are the roots of our English words. I stopped at *spec(ere)* because that is the farthest down (farthest back in time) in the entry before getting to the PIE root with the asterisk. (We’ll talk about that in class).

And now I know that I can paste the letter sequence <specere> into the search engine of Etymonline and get a bank of words that all derive from this Latin root. I know when I do that search that I’m NOT being given “morphological relatives.” Instead, I’m getting hits for words that are “etymological relatives” That’s a bigger family. Within one Etymological family there can be many different morphological families. I think of morphological families (that you see in a matrix) as a kind of “immediate family” while the etymological family is more of an “extended family.”

Now if you paste that Latin root into Etymonline, you’ll get a great bank of etymological relatives. They all have within them some sense of the orthographic denotation “look, see, behold”.

And then it’s your job to do some morphological analysis with word sums to see what bases grow from this root.

Right now you have some hypotheses for <special>. You might find that more than one of those hypotheses works! I know you will find words that do not even have the <e> after the <p> in the base — so there will be words in this

etymological family that *cannot* be in the same morphological family.

I’d like you leave you with that provocation for further study.

If you are open to it, I would love to pass this on to everyone so that people can have a go — get stuck — and bring their questions to our next session — or even write about it to each other during the week!

Many thanks for the wonderful question!

Pete

And then Lynn followed with this...

Hi Pete,

Thanks for sharing your thoughts in such a clear and helpful way. I'd be happy if you'd like to share this exchange with other folks in the group. Fine to leave my name in it.

The word < special > does have quite a complex etymological family. All kinds of unexpected connections, like < spice >, < despise >, < perspicacious >. I have also just noticed the possibility of a twin base, since < specere > is listed with < spicere > in Etymonline's entry for < despise >. Fascinating.

Thanks too for clarifying the concept of etymological markers. That's really helpful.

This work is so interesting!

See you next week,

Lynn

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I loved that Lynn has followed up on my suggestion to collect a bank of etymological relatives of her original target word < special >.

I know from past investigations that there is so much to learn from this family. But once again, there is no hurry to come to “the answer”. I’m so impressed with Lynn’s joy at the journey rather than pushing for that answer.

I was also impressed at how Lynn adopted the challenge of marking orthographic information with angle brackets. There is one place in her email that I would point to an additional detail about distinguishing current English orthographic information and historical etymological information. Consider this sentence from Lynn.

I have also just noticed the possibility of a twin base, since < specere > is listed with < spicere > in Etymonline's entry for < despise >.

I would be tempted to signal the distinction between roots (historical, non-English) and present day English orthography this way:

I have also just noticed the possibility of a twin base, since the Latin root *specere* is listed with *spicere* in Etymonline's entry for < despise >.

See how I am using the same convention that Etymonline does to put roots in *italics*. When I want to plant the seed to help readers perceive the structure in a Latin root, I will put the Latin suffix in parentheses:

I have also just noticed the possibility of a twin base, since the Latin root *spec(ere)* is listed with *spic(ere)* in Etymonline's entry for < despise >.

I know when I saw the Old Grouch do that it helped me notice common Latin and Greek suffixes, and that in turn supported my learning about how to draw from etymological information to inform my hypotheses of current English structure.

“Scholars are people who notice things”

This is a statement that is common in the SWI community. It’s actually quite a profound prompt to think about learning *and* instruction in any topic. Once we highlight a structure or a convention in our instruction -- whether or not we say much about it -- the learner is more likely to keep noticing that structure on their own. And if they notice it enough, they are likely to ask a question about it. I can’t think of a better time to share something I know about orthography than when a learner asks me about it! This is such central aspect of my thinking that I have one of my favourite WordWorks Newsletters focus on this concept at [THIS LINK](#).

Back to Lynn’s Question...

We will go into this investigation in our next session, but I’ve posted this story here on Real Spellers so that people not in that course can have a go diving in themselves. I’d love to see ideas in the comment section.

Finally, I’m going to point to one place that I have not yet pointed Lynn or the group to yet because I wanted them to do as much of their own scientific inquiry before I shared an amazing resource that happens to be on this same etymological family.

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Some time ago, I was asked about the word < perspicuous > by a Grade 2 student who saw it in a comic book. It was a new word to me at the time! Around the same time, I had other students ask me about the word < despicable > and another the word < species >. To my surprise, it turned out these words were etymological relatives. Through morphological analysis, I was able to hypothesize that two of these words shared a base element with these proposed word sums:

per + spice/ + u + ous → perspicuous

de + spice/ + able → despicable

I had hypotheses for the structure of < species > but obviously it could not have a base spelled < spice >.

When I did that analysis with the students, I commented that I was not proposing that the base < spice > was the same base as the free base for what we put on our food. I suspected that it was a homographic bound base. To test my hypothesis, we looked up < spice > in Etymonline, and I was delighted to be proven wrong! The *spice* we put on our food is the base of < perspicuous > and < despicable >! They all share the Latin root *spec(ere)* for “look, see, behold”!

So now I had evidence that the free base < spice > had the orthographic denotation “look, see, behold” but I had no understanding of how that sense and meaning related to the idea of spice we put on our food.

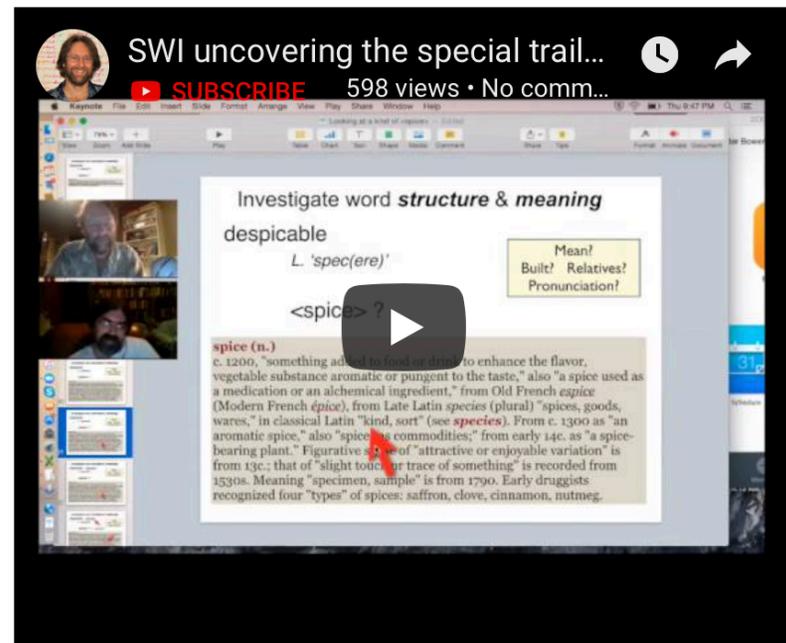
With that question in mind, I set up a Zoom video conference with Etymonline author, Douglas Harper. He

walked me through his dictionary and helped me understand the story of this amazing word family.

See that video at [this Real Spellers post!](#)

Thanks to Lynn for such a great **question!**

Pete, May 20, 2017



Above: A screen shot of Zooming with Doug about what the free base element < spice > has to do with the orthographic denotation “look, see, behold”. Take every opportunity you can to hear Douglas speak!