

Investigating at <wise> and <wisdom>: Are they linked by morphology or etymology?

The following is a description of an investigation from 2009.

I often get emails from teachers I work with asking about sticky spelling problems. I do not always have exact answers, but part of this is enjoying the investigation of a tricky problem. The process almost always teaches something about the writing system, even if the question that sparked the investigation isn't always fully answered. The two questions that are investigated here were sparked by Sally Watt and her Grade 4 students in Antigua. They wondered how <feat> and <feature> are meaningfully connected. They also wondered about the link between <wisdom> and <wise>.

As an example of how I start attacking a spelling/meaning question that I don't know the exact answer to yet, I thought I'd post one of these exchanges before all the answering is done. I'm

posting my own "holding theory" to what was the more difficult question for me - explaining the structure and history of the <wise> / <wisdom> connection . I Cc'd my response to the Old Grouch to get more help after having my own first try on this question. Melvyn created a great clip explaining much of what is to be learned about the link between the words <feat> and <feature>. We are told a clip on the structure of <wisdom> and its link to <wise> is coming. Come back to find out. (Since the first posting that clip has already arrived and is posted at the bottom as well).

What I want to emphasize by posting this correspondence is that Sally is showing that it is possible to be an extremely effective teacher of how the writing system before you become confident with all the details of the system. Sally knows enough about the system to recognize

that it is ordered and that there are almost always answers, even if they are not immediately obvious. As a result, she can dive in and be an effective co-learner with her students. Note that she and her class need a level of knowledge just to know that there is a question to ask about <wisdom> and <wise>. This investigation would not even occur if they were not working with the morphological structure and patterns in English.

In the same spirit, I thought I should be happy to share my first shot at an answer, where I model for this teacher my first steps at finding a solution. Here's the letter I received from this great teacher working with a grade 4 class at the Island Academy in Antigua!

***Hey Pete,
As we slowly move through word study, my class
and I have a few questions to ask you.***

***Why is the silent 'e' in wisdom dropped? It
doesn't behave like it's supposed to. We are
going to start a list of words that misbehave and***

***wisdom will be our first word. Are we correct to
assume it is misbehaving?***

***Also the word 'feature'..is the word sum like this
feat+ ure - feature and how would you explain
how the meaning of 'feat' makes sense of the
word feature? We thought the connection was
the fact that it sticks out boldly as in a feature on
a face or a movie feature?***

Help!

My response...

Of course you're right to wonder why <wisdom>. It appears to have a consonant suffix <-dom> which you can prove from words like <kingdom> and <stardom>. You obviously also are only asking your question because you know that consonant suffixes are not supposed to drop single, silent <e>s. You're also seeing the meaning connection between <wise> and <wisdom>, and thus are assuming that <wisdom> must be built on <wise>.

It is this last point where I'm confident that the answer lies. By far the more likely answer to this problem is that the tempting assumption that <wise> and <wisdom> are morphologically connected is in error, rather than all of a sudden a consonant suffix had lopped of a silent <e>. I wouldn't say it's impossible that you've found an example of a breaking of that pattern, but because I've run into similar questions in other places, I know that often what we assume at first are morphological connections are really simply words that have very similar spellings and meanings because they come from the same etymological root, but that they are in fact separate bases.

So when I go to my dictionary (on my trusty apple) I am expecting to find evidence that the base of <wisdom> is going to be <wis> and that <wise> has some information indicating that this word has arisen from some other route.

Here's what I just found:

wisdom|,wɪzdəm|

noun the quality of having experience, knowledge, and good judgment; the quality of being wise.

- the soundness of an action or decision with regard to the application of such experience, knowledge, and good judgment : some questioned the wisdom of building the dam so close to an active volcano.
- the body of knowledge and principles that develops within a specified society or period : oriental wisdom. See note at knowledge .

PHRASES in someone's wisdom used ironically to suggest that an action is not well judged : in their wisdom they decided to dispense with him.
ORIGIN Old English *wisdom* (see wise 1 , -dom).

wise |waɪz|

adjective having or showing experience, knowledge, and good judgment : she seems kind and wise | a wise precaution.

- responding sensibly or shrewdly to a particular situation: it would be wise to discuss the matter with the chairman of the committee.
- [predic.] having knowledge in a specified subject : families wise in the way of hurricane survival.

ORIGIN Old English *wis*, of Germanic origin; related to Dutch *wijs* and German *weise*, also to *wit* 2 .

The first thing that strikes me is that it cites <wisdom> as the Old English Root. Perhaps this means that the whole thing was a base?

Now I see the Old English <wis> that is related to the Germanic <weise>

This is the area that I am not confident in making solid conclusions - and will seek the Old Grouch's help for your students and myself, but we do appear to have very similar but not necessarily identical bases. I know that the history of one branch of a word can travel through another

language before returning to English and picking up spelling influences along the way.

A very important principle of English orthography that you have a brilliant opportunity to teach your kids right now is that English words avoid appearing like plurals if they are not (there are some words that appear to break this pattern - *bus*, *plus*, *was* -- but there is probably another lesson there too).

So if we got the Old English word <wis>, to turn it into an English base, we would have to prevent it from appearing like a plural. This is commonly done by adding a single silent <e>. It can also be done by using a double <s>. So one of the jobs of the silent <e> at the end of <wise> is to prevent the word from appearing like a plural, the other is indicating the pronunciation of the vowel letter <i>.

If <wisdom> was an Old English root way back then, and we just took it into English - it would not

have run into this English pattern and thus never was <wise> before adding a <-dom> suffix.

I remember long ago asking Old Grouch about the words <written> and <write>. Why on earth would I double the <t> in <written>????

That was my introduction to this caution about assuming similarly spelled words with very similar meaning are necessarily from the same base. It turns out the word <written> is built on the base <writ> which is actually still a legal term, but not the same as the base <write> which seems more obvious.

You're doing exactly the right thing Sal. Collect those confusing words, keep that curiosity going. A key point to remember is that written words almost always make structural sense. Sometimes the reasons are less obvious, but that usually just teaches you something new.

I gotta run to my class, so I'll send this only saying that your work on <feature> is great too!

dive into dictionaries for that too. Kennedy might be helpful too.

We'll see if Old Grouch can add clarity to this as well. Keep the questions coming....

Cheers,
Pete