

# Learning from a teacher/student SWI investigation of <adaptation>: Interpreting etymological information in Etymonline to do morphological analysis

Peter Bowers, May 4, 2017

I thought it might be valuable to share this email exchange with a Lisa Marlow, a teacher at the International School of Lausanne. (I'll be doing a [public workshop there this fall!](#))

Lisa's question highlights issues that often come up when diving into the details of Etymonline. Lisa and her students are on the right track, but they recognize the edge of their understanding, and thus seek help. As a result I can help her (and hopefully others) with some important details of how to work with Etymonline to guide investigations of morphological relations.

A key point we must keep in mind that Etymonline gives us ZERO direct morphological information. It does offer etymological information that we need in order to do our own morphological analysis.

The word <adaptation> that sparked their investigation is particularly rich for a number of reasons that you will see. There are special aspects of the etymology of this word that hindered Lisa's confidence in drawing conclusions. Hopefully this discussion will bring clarity in this word and others.

Hey Pete,

*We kicked off our new unit on <adaptation>: the kids did a word investigation on it in complete silence...it was incredible watching how they <adapted> to our "No speaking zone" in the classroom.*

*Anyhow, there were a few different hypotheses but one really got us going: ad + apt + ate/ + ion → adaptation.*

*When we looked into it further, Etymonline suggested a link in terms of "to fit" but the latin origins appear to be different (<adapt> from aptare; <apt> from apere) Therefore suggesting that they are not related???*

*Thoughts??*

*Cheers*

*Lisa*

Hey Lisa,

Sounds great.

From this string of links, it is clear that <adaptation> and <apt> are in the same etymological family.

## [adaptation \(n.\)](#)

c. 1600, "action of adapting (something to something else)," from French *adaptation*, from Late Latin *adaptationem* (nominative *adaptatio*), noun of action from past participle stem of *adaptare* "to adjust" (see [adapt](#)). Meaning "condition of being adapted, state of being fitted to circumstances or relations" is from 1670s. Sense of "modification of a thing to suit new conditions" is from 1790. Biological sense "variations in a living thing to suit changed conditions" first recorded 1859 in Darwin's writings.

### **adapt (v.)**

early 15c. (implied in *adapted*) "to fit (something, for some purpose)," from Old French *adapter* (14c.), from Latin *adaptare* "adjust, fit to," from *ad* "to" (see **ad-**) + *aptare* "to join," from *aptus* "fitted" (see **apt**).  
Intransitive meaning "to undergo modification so as to fit new circumstances" is from 1956. Related: *Adapting*.

### **apt (adj.)**

mid-14c., "inclined, disposed;" late 14c., "suited, fitted, adapted, possessing the necessary qualities for the purpose," from Old French *ate* "fitting, suitable, appropriate" (13c., Modern French *apte*), or directly from Latin *aptus* "fit, suited, proper, appropriate," adjectival use of past participle of *\*apere* "to attach, join, tie to," from PIE root *\*ap-* (1) "to grasp, take, reach" (source also of Sanskrit *apnoti* "he reaches," Latin *apisci* "to reach after, attain," Hittite *epmi* "I seize"). Elliptical sense of "becoming, appropriate" is from 1560s.

A lazy way to conclude that <adaptation> is etymologically related to <apt> is simply that Douglas has linked us from <adaptation> through <adapt> to <apt> with hot links. Words that he's linked by those "red hot links" is a way of saying these are in the same etymological family.

What he does is not give the *full* etymological information for each entry. So you notice that the deepest Latin root he cites in the entry for <adaptation> is the Latin *adaptare*. But he's saying if you want to go deeper (farther back) in the etymological family -- click <adapt>.

In the entry for <adapt> we get to the deepest Latin root *aptus* and from there we are pointed to <apt> if we want more...

In the entry for <apt> we do see that same Latin root *aptus*. And that allows us to conclude that <adaptation> and <apt> are in the same etymological family, as they share a common root.

I think you may be struggling with the following information:

...adjectival use of past participle of *\*apere* "to attach, join, tie to," from PIE root *\*ap-* (1) "to grasp, take, reach" (source also of Sanskrit *apnoti* "he reaches," Latin *apisci* "to reach after, attain," Hittite *epmi* "I seize"). Elliptical sense of "becoming, appropriate" is from 1560s.

My understanding of the asterisk in front of *\*apere* is that signals that Doug could not find written evidence of this form of the Latin root, but that we should expect there was one or perhaps could have been one. This does not say that <apt> and <adaptation> are not related. Instead, he's just giving a fuller story of the whole family.

The PIE root is deeper still.

When you get to the first reference for the Latin root *apt(us)* Doug just gives the sense "fitted". In the deepest entry, he often shares a wider sense and meaning of the root that can then be expected to surface in any of the English words that are derived from that root.

So, for your base <apt> and all of the morphological relatives *you* analyze we can expect the senses "fit, suited, proper, appropriate," And if we go farther back we can also expect the senses that come with the deeper roots as well.

Of course Douglas has given you zero information about whether <adaptation> and <apt> are morphologically related. However, your word sum analysis, provides the evidence you needed:

ad + apt + ate/ + ion --> adaptation

The words <adaptation> and <apt> share a root -- so they pass the "meaning test".

The words <adaptation> and <apt> share a base in coherently analyzed word sums -- so they pass the "structure test".

The super rich thing about this analysis is what it tells us about the meaning of Darwin's concept of evolution.

People usually misquote him by saying that he said "survival of the fittest".

But that's not what he said. He actually said "survival of what best fits."

The difference is really important. The misquote conveys the idea of "survival of the strongest". But that is not at all what evolution and adaptation are about. This is the process by which those structures (plants, animals -- and words and spellings!) which **best fit** for survival in a given environment are those that continue, while those that don't fall away.

Darwin did not notice that the birds on the Galapagos Islands that were "strongest" were the one's that survived. He noticed that the birds he saw had adapted to fit the specifics of the environment on their island. Long beaks were good for getting insects out of certain contexts, another kind of beak might be good for something else...

English spelling evolved in the context -- not of French or Japanese, or Italian speakers -- it evolved in the context of those who knew and spoke English. The words and spellings that survived were those that **best fit** for representing the sense and meaning of those who already spoke, read and wrote English.

Does that make sense?

Cheers,

Pete