# The morphology and etymology of <competition>, <compete>, and <repeat>
## Learn along with the 4 teachers and students at the Dresden International School

Pete Bowers, June 4, 2017

Anne Rénes is Grade 4 Teacher and the Dresden International School who has been working with structured word inquiry for a little while now. She recently sent an email about a question that arose with her class and a fellow teacher while investigating the word <competition>.

As is often the question, diving into one question led to a second question from the same family. Like so many questions I get as teachers get stronger and stronger with SWI, the issues here have to do with refining understanding about morphological and etymological relatives. I often present these questions in terms of a "structure and meaning test" and some conventions for how to represent the nature of these interrelationships that is sometimes described as an "oval and rectangle" diagram.

Throughout the correspondence I point to a few external resources that are very helpful. If these concepts are fairly new you you, you might find it useful to watch THIS VIDEO about morphological and etymological relationships before reading on. Or read first and watch the video after. Anne commented on how much that frame helped her.

Also, representing this correspondence allows me to step back now and again to make observations about some of the instructional choices I made in how I responded or didn't respond to Anne's excellent questions. I've only made light editing to the correspondence for clarity.

See how you go!

Hi Pete,

So, today we were looking at the word competition and I had the students write as many possible word sums as they could come up with. After examining them one by one, we quickly ruled out all but two.

compete+it+ion--> competition

compete+ite+ion--> competition

My initial thought was that the second one is correct, as I can easily think of words with a <-ite> suffix. Then one of my students came up with the word orbit. His word some was orb+it--> orbit. He checked it for meaning and structure and I agreed with his word sum.

Nice!

Your student did find an <-it> suffix in <orbit>. Well done! My favourite relative of that word is the word <exorbitant> -- as in a price that is so crazy high, it's out of this "orbit". I love that, because I could never remember how to spell that word until I analyzed that connection my self. I always wanted to make that first <t> a <d>. I'm still affected by that phonology first fallacy!

So my question is this. How do we know if it's an <-ite> or <-it> suffix in the word <competition>? Where can I go from here with my students? I'm very impressed that they got this far and they are confident enough to challenge me and find evidence for their word sums. I just don't know what the next step is. Any feedback would be greatly appreciated.

You are asking exactly the right questions. Well done.

The issue you are struggling with is that you can't prove your understanding with the structure test, since both <-it> and <-ite> *could* work for <competition>.

That means the understanding has to lie in the "meaning test". Is there something about the etymology of these suffixes that can tell us which one we need for <competition>.

So a key gift your student is giving you -- is recognition that affixes have etymologies too!

I do know of other words with that <-it> suffix (e.g. <credit>), but in my quick search I have not found information on the etymology of <-it>. I did find information for two <-ite> suffixes in my Mac dictionary:

-ite ¹ |ʌɪt|

suffix

**1** forming names denoting natives of a country: *Israelite | Samnite*.

• often derogatory denoting followers of a movement, doctrine, etc.: *Luddite| Jacobite*.

**2** used in scientific and technical terms.

• forming names of fossil organisms:*ammonite*.

• forming names of minerals: *graphite*.

• forming names of constituent parts of a body or organ: *somite*.

• forming names of explosives and other commercial products: *dynamite| vulcanite*.

• Chemistry forming names of salts or esters of acids ending in - *ous*: *sulfite*.

ORIGIN from French **-ite**, via Latin **-ita** from Greek **ītes** .

-ite ² |ʌɪt|

suffix

**1** forming adjectives such as *composite,erudite*.

**2** forming nouns such as *appetite*.

**3** forming verbs such as *unite*.

ORIGIN from Latin **-itus**, past participle of verbs ending in **-ere** and **-ire** .

Now, clearly if <competition> uses the <-ite> suffix, it is not the one for denoting the country a person comes from or the scientific/chemical terms.

But the second <-ite> suffix is very possible.

We have the issue that <competition> does not have the <-ite> or <-it> suffix final, so we can really tell what part of speech it is. Perhaps there is a word <competite> without the <-ion> suffix that I just don't know of.

So here is a way I can suggest we can represent our current understanding with a word sum:

**compete/ + it(e)/ + ion --> competition**

The parentheses around that <e> signals a "potential <e>". Until we find conclusive evidence we understand, I'm happy to leave the analysis at this point.

I need to do more research to resolve this question for my self. So I'm grateful for your student's sharp eye. I clearly need to understand the <-it> suffix better!

Anne, her students and I would love to suggestions in the comments for this Real Spellers post to help us understand what the most coherent analysis of the suffix in question. Also, some of you may have noticed an incomplete analysis that I did not comment on. Read on to see why I'm glad I held back on raising that issue in my first response!

Anne's next email…

This is great, thanks! It definitely helps. And yes, feel free to post this on RealSpellers.

Thanks...

Now we've travelled down a wormhole of SWI. We thought, what about this word sum

com+pete+it(e)+ion?

Nice!

One recommendation. When you write word sums on the computer or by hand, I recommend making sure that you leave white space between the plus signs and the morphemes. It will make is *soooo* much easier for the people reading it to actually see the written structures. That is actually an important part of building up our ability to recognize written morphemes when we read.

You also wan to mark suffixing changes, and use the re-write arrow. So your new word sum hypothesis would look like this...

com + pete + it(e)/ + ion --> competition

Notice that I made the choice (for good or bad) not to mention this detail about writing word sums in the previous mail. Now that we've gone this far, however, I made the judgement that this was just too important a point to let slide any longer. It may be that Anne would type her word sums differently for her students, but personally, I've found it essential to my own understanding to commit myself to this kind of linguistic precision regardless of the audience. Composing with precision brings precision to my thinking.

Then we founds words like petition and repetition and it fit both with structure and meaning (we checked etymonline). We were happy to say that we identified the bound base <pete>.

Yes!

Note that in Anne's first question, whether or not <compete> was a base or complex was not actually relevant to her question about the suffix <-ite> or <-it>. Although I've encountered this family before and knew about the bound base <pete>, I chose not to mention it. When Anne sent her follow-up email, I was so grateful that I had kept that knowledge to myself. How much richer that she saw this analysis for herself!

And remember, when you refer to this base, or any morpheme, you shouldn't be attempting to pronounce it - but naming it by its spelling. Notice that in the word <competition>, the base <pete> is not pronounced at all like my name!

However, this brought up the word <repeat>! Re+peat doesn't seem to make sense when looking at the possibility of the base <peat>. Plus, repeat and repetition are definitely related. Why is it not <repete>?

Let's see...

### compete (v.)

1610s, " to enter or be put in rivalry with," from Middle French *compéter* "be in rivalry with" (14c.), or directly from Late Latin *competere* "strive in common," in classical Latin "to come together, agree, to be qualified," later, "strive together," from *com* "with,

together" (see **_com-_**) + _petere_ "to strive, seek, fall upon, rush at, attack" (see **_petition_** (n.)).

## repeat (v.)

late 14c., "to say what one has already said," from Old French _repeter_ "say or do again, get back, demand the return of" (13c., Modern French _répéeter_), from Latin _repetere_ "do or say again; attack again," from _re-_ "again" (see **_re-_**) + _petere_ "to go to; attack; strive after; ask for, beseech" (see **_petition_** (n.)).

So we see from Etymonline, that the words <compete> an <repeat> **are** definitely in the same ETYMOLOGICAL family. But we must remember that Etymonline does **not** tell us if two words share a base (morphological relatives).

It would make sense structurally and in meaning.

Ah! Here's the confusion. Your question is this: Are <repeat> and <compete> morphological relatives?

To answer that you need to assess two "tests" that can be thought of as the "structure test" and the "meaning test"

To conclude that your words share the same base element (morphological relatives) they MUST pass both tests.

To pass the "meaning test" you must show that your two words share the same root. That means they must be in the same etymological family. The evidence from Etymonline shows that both these words share the Latin root _pet(ere)_ for "got; attack; strive after; ask for, beseech." Thus your two words pass the meaning test. They are in the same ETYMOLOGICAL family.

But do they pass the "structure test"?

Your base element for <compete> is <pete>. But there is no way you can add any morpheme to <pete> to arrive at the spelling <repeat>. That means you do NOT pass the structure test.

This means that we can conclude that <compete> and <repeat> are etymological relatives, but not morphological relatives.

Shawn and I tried to sort out what is going on, but we're stuck. It can't be for sound, because the digraph <ea> and the <e>_e both represent a "long e" phoneme. I also don't see it being an <a> marker because I can't seem to find any relatives that also have the <a> (like twin, two, twenty...yadda yadda yadda). We're not sure what other questions we should be asking at this point to sort out the answer.

What you have done is excellent scientific work. You analyzed as far as you could, and identified exactly what you don't know. And when you reached that point, you sought advice with a very clearly described question.

What you didn't recognize, but now will understand much better is simply this...

The fact that you could not make a coherent word sum that linked the spelling of the words <repeat> and <compete> was evidence FALSIFYING your hypothesis. Once you recognize that the failure of a word sum to resolve to your expected spelling is not a sign of _your_ failure -- it is simply the gift that scientific inquiry gives us. The word sums gives us the ability to confidently reject hypotheses that turn out not stand up, even though we so certain when we started the investigation!

The meaning connection you rightly perceived is not the result of a morphological connection. Instead it is the result of an etymological connection.

Since you've hit this excellent investigation that has highlighted exactly the orthographic content you need to refine your understanding about, I recommend that you make a point of going to watch THIS VIDEO that I posted a while ago about investigating morphological and etymological families. You will see that I use an "oval and matrix" diagram to represent these interrelations.
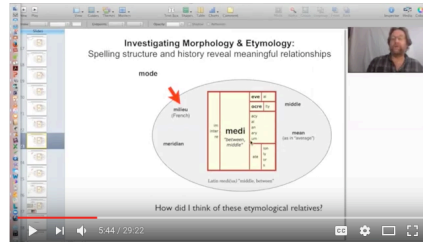
I think you and your students will find it rich that you can represent a number of words in a matrix with the base <pete> that can go inside an oval that represents words of the "extended" etymological family of the Latin *pet(ere)* for "got; attack; strive after; ask for, beseech". While <repeat> will not be represented by that matrix, it WILL fit perfectly within that oval. Perhaps you can even make a matrix with other words with a base <peat>.

And here's a way to start your search for more ETYMOLOGICAL relatives...

Go back to Etymonline, and paste the Latin root *petere* in the search engine. When you do that it will bring up entries with that letter sequence in them. The first hits will most likely be those that have that root identified in the entry. You always have to double check. It will find you any entry with *petere,* but it may also give you some false positives as well.

But what you get then are the ETYMOLOGICAL relatives. Words that fit inside the perimeter of the "oval". It is then entirely up to you and your word scientists to do the structure test with word sums to see how many of those words can be analyzed with a <pete> base, and whether there are others with a <peat> base.

After you watch the film, I think that will make better sense.


Great stuff!


Pete


Many thanks,

Anne