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FOUR FOR ONE:
THE STUDY OF DERIVATIONAL SUFFIXES FOR BASIC WRITING STUDENTS

A student of mine handed in an essay which contained this sentence:

Fear is the biggest *retainance* which I think no one can nor ever forget.

Retainance carries the meaning of some combination of *hold, retainer,* and *remembrance*. Although English will not allow the derivational suffix *-ance* to be added to *retain,* her meaning is no less clear than if she had used the acceptable *retainment*. But despite the semantic dissonance and the unacceptable derivational suffix, my student clearly made a gallant attempt to translate her visual image into standard English. Equally clearly however, she did not yet know the rules of academic writing, so she could not recognize the dissonances. She was not yet comfortable with the written language, nor was she able to control her writing. She did not know, when she wrote it, whether or not *retainance* was a legitimate English word. In taking a chance that the word existed, she was making an attempt to approximate a language of which she knew the sounds but not the structures.

Another student wrote

A car is a nice thing to have but sometimes it can't be use, because of lack of parking spaces or there is something *machinacls* wrong with it or in my case, I don't have a liecence to drive.

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The word *machinacls* is an example of a more complicated error, an error resulting from the student's unsureness about the base word and about which derivational suffix to use to form the desired part of speech. In this case the student wanted the adverb form, *mechanically,* but the form she has written is closer to the adjective form, *mechanical.* It appears she has confused the word with another, *machine* or *machinery.* Additionally, the *-cls* ending suggests loose phonetic spelling, possibly on the analogy of *table, staple, rattle.*

Subsequently, I read 124 placement examinations, looking for similar examples of words that students made up when they didn't know which prefixes and suffixes could be attached to which root words. I counted 30 word-class errors, the second largest category of errors. (The only one larger was a catch-all category which I called "attempt at a word," containing pronunciation-influenced misspellings and incorrectly-remembered expressions.) What follows are my findings and strategies.

Characteristic errors included:

Seeing that we are all *difference* in many ways. . .
, When one *robbers* they should send him to jail not for five or ten years for twenty or thirty year.
People now are *unemployment* because the city are cutting out bugect from the city.
I am merely pointing out how *discourtesy,* unpleasant, and moody many of the drivers tend to be.
Pollution the environmental air of the place is very unplesant and unhealthy to its people.
Sanitation needs to have more *importants* put on it.
So I think if they *real* do decide the unemployment rate could be down and could stay down if the older people leave the job first.

I have concluded that errors like *retainance* and *machinacls* and word class errors in general will disappear only when the student knows that a number of specific derivational suffixes can be added, typically, to given kinds of base words, and that derivational suffixes both influence and reflect the larger syntax of the sentence. More specifically, basic writing students need to know that the choice of a particular derivational suffix determines what "sentence slot"[1] a word can be used in and, conversely, the slot that they want to fill requires a particular form of a word. Not knowing how the system works, basic writing students often choose a derivational suffix at random, plugging it into the wrong sentence slot for that suffix. Additionally, basic writing students may produce errors

in derivational suffixes by setting up syntactical patterns into which only particular word endings will fit: because they don't have access to the suffixes which will fit into specific sentence slots, they try to force known words to take new functions.

In other words, errors in word class derivation occur because basic writing students have not sharpened their linguistic intuitions to the point where they can choose the derivational suffix that will allow them to place a given root word in a given sentence slot. Basic writing students need to learn how form affects function: they need to know what forms they can use in what *sentence slots,* and what forms a given root word can shift to. When addressed in the classroom, I have found that the problem of misderived words proves relatively responsive to remediation. Because so many English base words have three or four or more commonly used derivations, students who learn how to use a small group of root words and their derivations correctly will have not only these new words to add to their vocabularies, but a means of making better guesses about new words they need to construct, a new sensitivity to the range of possibilities.

Preparation for the exercises that follow requires that the students first learn the *concept of sentence slots,* then, before they can begin to distinguish between derivational suffixes, they must come to understand

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1. The notion of a sentence slot derives from structural grammar, which defines each part of speech according to the position it can hold in a sentence. Thus Paul Roberts defines a noun, for instance, as "a word that patterns as *apple, beauty,* or *desk* do. It is a word that occurs in positions like those in which apple, beauty and desk occur. . .:

I saw the *apple.*	I was disappointed in the *apple.*
I saw the *beauty.*	I was disappointed in the *beauty.*
I saw the *desk.*	I was disappointed in the *desk.*
I saw the _____ .	I was disappointed in the _____ .

Her *apple* is gone.	*Apples* are plentiful in Washington.
Her *beauty* is gone.	*Beauties* are plentiful in Washington.
Her *desk* is gone.	*Desks* are plentiful in Washington.
Her _____ is gone.	_____ s are plentiful in Washington.

Roberts presents similar paradigms to define the other parts of speech and to use as simple tests of whether any given word can function as a particular part of speech. (Paul Roberts, *Patterns of English* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1956) p. 13)

that the same word, in the same form, can shift its class, based on the context of the sentence in which it is used. For example:

Derick and Jim *play* baseketball after school. (*verb*)

Mrs. Betterson went to see her daughter in the school *play*. (*noun*)

Alicia bought some new *play* clothes. (*adjective*)

Given words such as *murder, place, love,* that can play several roles without changing form, students can be asked to generate sentences which will use these words first as nouns, then as verbs, and, if possible, as adjectives.

Once students are comfortable with the concept of word class shifts, they can begin to deal with the additional confusion of adding the correct derivational suffix for a given sentence slot.

At this point, it might be helpful for the student to address lists of commonly-used derivational suffixes.[2] The teacher must help the students familiarize themselves with the word endings on these lists, with the intention of motivating them to refer to the lists as a resource when they are proofreading and correcting their papers.

Students might also be asked to keep a vocabulary notebook in which they enter the spelling, pronunciation, definition, and source of each new word they come across. Beneath this entry they might block out, by the addition of prefixes and suffixes, all possible forms for that particular word. For example:

Verb	Noun	Adjective	Adverb
agree	agreement	agreeable	agreeably
disagree	disagreement	disagreeable	disagreeably

Since it has been repeatedly demonstrated that basic writing students do not look closely at the ends of words, exercises which force them to do so will help to sharpen their powers of observation generally when reading and proofreading, for example, a list of words which end in

2. Shaughnessy, in *Errors and Expectations* (N.Y.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 214-15, comments on the general usefulness of studying derivational suffixes, and gives a list which she tells us has been drawn from Lee C. Deighton's valuable study, *Vocabulary Development in the Classroom* (N.Y.: Teacher's College Press, 1959).

-ment in which the student would be asked to distinguish between the *-ment* which is an intrinsic part of the word and the *-ment* which denotes word class. Students divide with a slash the words which separate into a base word and *-ment* and draw a circle around the words where the *-ment* forms a part of the basic word and cannot be separated. They may also be asked to come to class with a prepared definition for each word.

torment	shipment
judgment	denouement
argument	cement
segment	elopement
discouragement	derangement
element	ointment
tenement	detriment
augment	fragment
development	

An exercise which can help students discover inductively that the word *development*, for instance, has come to have a meaning separate and distinct from the ways they might use the word *develop* would be to put the following on the blackboard:

Let's _____ .

Let's _____ it.

In a case where the *-ment* ending denotes noun word class, the root word, a verb, will fit into at least one of the blanks.[3] The student who wants to circle *development* will have to concede that English will allow 'Let's *develop* it' where it will not allow 'Let's *frag* it.'

As Mina Shaughnessy says in *Errors and Expectations,* perhaps the most useful exercises are those which offer students an opportunity to practice word class shifts within the context of a phrase or sentence.[4] Exercises like the ones below, which can be used to supplement

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3. I am indebted to Jerome Megna of Brooklyn College for this exercise, which was originally used to distinguish between transitive and intransitive verbs.

4. She offers sample exercises, p. 216, one using blanks to be filled in like mine, one using the grid into which all existing forms of a word are inserted.

Shaughnessy's, force students to focus their attention on the relationship between the form of a word and its position in the sentence. The student's objective is to produce the form of the word that will best fit in the blank:

*differ

Unfortunately, our dreams often _____(verb)_____ from our realities.

Unfortunately, our dreams are often _____(adj.)_____ from our realities.

Neither ignore the _____(noun)_____ nor belabor the similarity.

Our new teacher runs her class _____(adv.)_____ from the teacher we had

last year.

From the same root:
*differentiate

People who are color blind can't _____(verb)_____ between certain colors.

_____(noun)_____ between certain colors is difficult for people who are color

blind.

In the last sentence, students can be led to see two possible endings (*-tion* and *-ing*) that indicate noun function for this sentence slot and made aware that the past participle *differentiated* can be used as an adjective.

In the following exercise, the student can learn the difference between a past participle that functions as an adjective, distinguish between the past participle and the adjective *employable,* and work with agent and recipient nouns and a highly productive negative prefix.

*employ

Some companies refuse to _____(verb)_____ college students.

People who are _____(p.p.)_____ have the security of a weekly paycheck.

_____(p.p.)_____ people have the security of a weekly paycheck.

Having been an executive secretary for nine years, Allison has become a highly   (adj.)   person.

Marcia's kindhearted   (agent noun)   paid her for the day of the '77 blackout.

Robin's mother is a poorly paid   (rec. noun)   at the local delicatessen.

From the same root word with a negative prefix:
*unemploy

   (p.p.)   workers may receive compensation from the government.

Workers who are   (p.p.)   may receive monetary compensation from the government.

The   (noun)   rate is getting higher because more and more people are out of work.

The rate of America's   (noun)   has been steadily rising as more and more people lose their jobs.

Besides the past participle, *unemploy* can also be made to form an adjective by use of the invariant adjective suffix *-able:*

Up until recently, handicapped people were considered virtually   (adj.) .

From the same root:
*unemployable

Because of the widespread stigma that caused their virtual   (noun)   , most handicapped people could not find employers willing to hire them.

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Taking *courtesy* through its word class shifts gives students a word which, although it cannot be made to form a verb, must be related to the verb *to court,* meaning *to endeavor to win the favor of. Courtesy,* a noun, can be made to form an adjective, *courteous,* which can then be made to form another noun, *courteousness.* Class discussion might point out why *courteousness* is the best choice in the first example, but *courtesy* is the best choice in the second example of this group:

*courtesy

_____(noun)_____ , kindness, and generosity are positive character traits.

Ileana always treats her relatives with _____(noun)_____ and respect.

People who are _____(adj.)_____ , kind, and generous are usually well-liked.

Most people appreciate being treated _____(adv.)_____ , kindly, and

generously.

From the negative:
*discourtesy

Bonita's _____(noun)_____ to her parents seemed unwarranted.

_____(adj.)_____ behavior is not appreciated by anyone.

Even after we understood why Bonita had acted so _____(adv.)_____ , we

still could not condone her behavior.

It is primarily suffixes which have been illustrated here, but basic writing students must develop an awareness of and sensitivity to information carried by both prefixes and suffixes. Exercises, such as those given here, should help them begin to see what kinds of relationships exist between words, as well as to glean information from the recognizable sounds which precede and succeed them.

Classroom follow-up dealing with word class errors culled from the students' own writing will offer the reinforcement necessary to increase and solidify the students' gains from the exercises. The teacher can put examples of errors on the blackboard and call on students to correct

them. The students may be asked to proofread their papers for word class endings: in this case they would be asked to hand in a paper with all word class endings underlined, and all erroneous forms corrected.

With the implementation of a program of instruction such as I have outlined here—a program including lists of suffixes, a vocabulary notebook, exercises which practice word class shifts in context, and follow-up with the students's own writing—the enterprising basic writing student should be able to get a grip not only on the complexities of our system of derivational suffixes, but also on the interlocking web of relationships between vocabulary and syntax.