

A deserted desert

MICHAEL BULLEY

Various ways of looking at a small group of words

This article is about a small group of words in English, ones beginning with the prefix <de->, followed by <s> and a vowel. If we omit rare words and obvious derivations, we end up with the following list¹:

desalinate, desaturate, desecrate, desegregate, deselect, desensitise, desert, deserve, desiccate, design, designate, desire, desist, desolate, desuetude, desultory

One of the things that prompted me to think of this topic is a peculiarity of French orthography². There, you find the prefix <dé->, often in a privative sense, as in *déneiger*, meaning ‘to clear the snow from’. This <dé-> is transformed into <des->, however, without the acute accent but retaining the closed pronunciation of the <e>, in words such as *desserrer*, meaning ‘to loosen’, where the root is *serrer*. In French, a single intervocalic <s> is normally voiced, with the sound of the <z> of *zip*, and it seems that the doubling of the <s> in words like *desserrer* was adopted in order to guarantee the unvoiced pronunciation, as in the <s> of *sip*. So, whereas the English word *desiccation* has only one <s>, in French we have *dessiccation*, with two.

One consideration for this group of English words is how the <s> is pronounced, voiced or unvoiced. You could also group them according to the pronunciation of the <de-> or, again, according to its sense. Yet another permutation would be based on the independence or not of the root. For example, that of *deselect* is independent, whereas that of *desist* is not, although it is in the Latin verb *desistere*², from which it comes. You could go further and consider whether the root had the same sense independently as it had in the compound. You might also consider the history of the words, seeing how and when they entered the language. If you tried to integrate all those criteria, it looks as if you would end up with a great number

of permutations, with many overlapping groups. For this article, it seemed best to group the words according to one criterion only and to look at the similarities and differences within and across the groups. I have therefore split the words up according to the pronunciation of the prefix. The three possibilities are: [di] as in *deserve*, [di] as in *desensitise*, and [dɛ] as in *designate*. Here are the groups. Note that the spellings *desert* and *desuetude* appear in two of the groups.

[di] – *desert* (‘abandon’), *desert* (‘something merited’), *deserve*, *design*, *desire*, *desist*, *desuetude*

[di] – *desalinate*, *desaturate*, *desegregate*, *deselect*, *desensitise*

[dɛ] – *desecrate*, *desert*, *desiccate*, *designate*, *desolate*, *desuetude*, *desultory*

If we consider the stress pattern, the words of the third group, the [dɛ] one, with the exception of *desuetude*, have the stress on the first syllable, the prefix, whereas those of the other two have not. It is perhaps because *desuetude* is a rather Latinate word that dictionaries are undecided about the pronunciation of the prefix. The [dɛ] version may, then, be a false nod in the direction of



MICHAEL BULLEY studied Classics and Linguistics at the Universities of Edinburgh and London. He then spent twenty-odd years teaching Classics in state education in England. In 2002, he qualified as a teacher of English in French national education. He now

works as a freelance in Chalon-sur-Saône. He has appeared many times in ET and has contributed articles to other journals on Classical, linguistic and philosophical topics. Email: michael.bulley@orange.fr

Latin. Perhaps we should remove *desuetude* from the [dɛ] group therefore and stick to the pronunciation that seems more natural for English. For the single spelling *desert*, we have two different stress-patterns. In the [di] group, the stress is on the second syllable, and there are two possible words, with different origins, one meaning ‘to abandon’ (Lat. *deserere*) and the other ‘that which is merited’ (Lat. *deservire*), the latter usually now found in the plural in the expression ‘just deserts’. In the [dɛ] group, the stress is on the first syllable, yet this *desert*, meaning ‘region lacking life’, has the same etymological origin as the one meaning ‘to abandon’.

How does the pronunciation of the prefix match that of the following <s>? In the [di] group, the <s> is always unvoiced, but in the other two there is a mixture. For the words of the [di] group, we have voicing for *desert*, *deserve*, *design* and *desire*. For *desist*, dictionaries offer both possibilities for the first <s>. I myself pronounce it unvoiced, probably because I am more influenced by the classical Latin *desistere* (unvoiced) than by the modern French *désister* (voiced). Of the [dɛ] group, three words, *desert*, *designate* and *desultory*, have a voiced <s>.

If we now think of the meaning of the prefix, it implies separation or undoing for all the words in the [di] group, but only for some in the other two. In the [di] group, it is privative for *desist*, *desuetude* and *desert* (in the sense of ‘abandon’), and in the [dɛ] group only for *deseccate* (if we exclude *desuetude*). Etymologically, the noun *desert* from that group is ‘an abandoned place’, but we do not now think of a desert in that way. The prefix, then, has a privative sense only by association with the idea of ‘lacking life’.

When it is not obviously privative, the sense of the prefix can be hard to distinguish. In *dessicate*, for example, the root already has the sense of ‘to dry’ and it is hard to see how the prefix functions other than, perhaps, to reinforce that sense. As for *desultory*, we do not now associate it with the idea of jumping from something, which is its Latin origin (Lat. *desilire*, *desultum*). With *desire*, you hardly sense the <de-> as a prefix at all. The word goes back to the Latin verb *desiderare*, which means to long for something, feeling incomplete without it. Therefore, the English word has retained the positive aspect of that, but has lost the privative one. The grammatical term *desiderative* is really cognate with the form *desire*, which is one of the two reasons I did not include it in the list. The other is that, although some grammarians may talk easily of ‘desiderative verbs’, the expression does not feature much in mainstream

communication. The prefix in some cases, as in *deserve* or *designate*, seems to have an idea of application. With *deserve*, this becomes clearer if we consider the French verb *desservir* (that double <s> again), which is the equivalent of the English word in form, but not in meaning, having more the sense of the English *serve*. So, in French, you find, for example, the railway announcement ‘Ce train dessert Beaune et Dijon’ – in English ‘This train calls at (serves) Beaune and Dijon.’

If we separate the root from the prefix, all those in the [di] group are independent. You might say *salinate* was a specialist word, but it is not unfamiliar. In the [dɛ] group, the only independent root is *siccate*, meaning ‘to dry’. I had not met this word before and such research as I was able to do leads me to conclude it is a rare word, restricted to specialized scientific contexts. Of the [di] group, only *deserve* and *design* have independent roots. Yet, there is a difference: in the compound, the *s* is voiced, but unvoiced when it is a separate word. The meaning is not exactly the same either. For we do not normally think of the root of *deserve* as having the sense of ‘merit’, except perhaps in the expression ‘it serves you right’. The same applies to *design*, and we can note that *design* and *designate* can both be traced back to the Latin *designare*, meaning ‘to describe’. So, we have two words from the same origin, which, as a result of their different historical paths, differ in stress-pattern and the pronunciation of the prefix.

It is a good idea to finish with *dessert*, and you may have noticed that the verb in my French sentence about the railway stations looks remarkably like it. The word in its culinary sense is spelled the same in English and in French. A French speaker may sense it as something served or perhaps as something eaten when the table has been cleared. A non-francophone English-speaker is less likely to hear it that way. It is another of those French words, like *desserrer* and *dessiccation*, where the <s> has been doubled to ensure the consonant remains unvoiced and not voiced as a <z>. The English version should, in principle, be spelled *desert* and belong to the set of words I have been discussing here, but it came directly from French, which is why we anglophones are condemned to spelling it with a double <s>, when it only needs a single one. We have had the last laugh, though. For, how do we pronounce that fussy double <s>? As a <z>!

Notes

1 The list was compiled using Collins English Dictionary, 3rd Edition, and then verified with reference to several online English dictionaries, such as Merriam-Webster and MacMillan (see References).

2 The source of the French and Latin words in this article, as for the etymological information, is simply the author's knowledge of those languages. For readers who would like to learn more about those words, references are given below to two standard dictionaries.

References

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