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When I use a word ... Overate?

Dilation or dilatation? asked a colleague. And if dilatation is right why isn't it dilataste?

Let's start with a Latin verb, *ferre*, to carry. Just as in English we give the major inflected forms of the verb (the so called paradigm) in the form *present infinitive, past indicative, past participle*—for example, eat, ate, eaten—so in Latin the paradigm is given in the form *present indicative, present infinitive, perfect indicative, past participle or supine*—for example, amo, amare, amavi, amatum.

Now words that end in -ation or -ative or -atory in English are derived from the Latin supine; amatum, for instance, gives us amatory. But derivatives of *ferre* come from three different words and the paradigm is highly irregular: *fero, ferre, tuli, latum*. So *refer* (from *referre*, literally to bring back) is related to relation (from *relatum*, brought back); other examples are given in the table. It is notable that words that derive from -*ferre* are all in common use and need no definition, while several of those that derive from -*latum* are either obscure or obsolete (and are defined in the table).

Other words that have -atum in the supine but no -at- elsewhere in the paradigm also give words that end in -ation etc. For example, *ambulatatum* (from *ambulare*, to walk) gives us ambulation and ambulatory.

In two cases English words derive from Latin words in which the infinitive ends in -*atere* and in which the -*at-* is therefore reduplicated in the supine; they are *dilatere*, to spread out, and *natare*, to swim. The paradigm for the former is *dilato, dilatere, dilatavi, dilatatum*. So we get *dilate* from the stem of the infinitive but *dilatation* from the supine. And *natation*, swimming, comes from *natare* ... *natum*; "nation" as an alternative, along the lines of "dilation," would obviously be wrong.

It follows that we should also form "dilatator" from the supine, but although this was in use at one time, for some reason we now use the incorrect form *dilator*. This is sanctioned by long tradition—Samuel Johnson's dictionary of 1755 has "dilatation" but "dilatator."

Johnson also included "dilation" in later editions of the dictionary, but this obsolete word is different, in more ways than one: it comes from *differre* (see table) and means delay (compare, dilatory). Perhaps that explains long surgical waiting lists—dilatory dilators.

Jeff Aronson *clinical pharmacologist, Oxford*

Some English words derived from Latin words ending in "ferre" (infinitive) and "latum" (supine)

Prefix	Latin (infinitive)	English (from -ferre)	Latin (supine)	English (from -latum)	Meaning
ad: towards	afferre	afferent	allatum	allative	a case denoting movement towards
ab: away	auferre	[none]	ablatum	ablation	removal
circum: around	circumferre	circumference	circumlatum	circumlation*	bringing round
con: together	conferre	confer	collatum	collation	bringing together
de: down	deferre	defer	delatum	delation	publication
dis: apart	differre	differ	dilatatum	dilatatory	delaying
e: from	efferre	efferent	elatum	elation	being uplifted
in: in	inferre	infer	illatum	illation	inference
ob: towards	offerre	offer	oblatum	oblation	sacrifice
prae: before	praeferre	prefer	praelatum	prelation	preference
pro: forward	proferre	[none]†	prolatum	prolation	utterance
re: back	referre	refer	relatum	relation	recital
sub: under	sufferre	suffer	sublatum	sublation	removal
trans: across	transferre	transfer	translatum	translation	carrying across

*Circulation is from *circulare*. †Proffer is from *pro + offerre*.