

Exploring word formation and syllable structure: Totesing

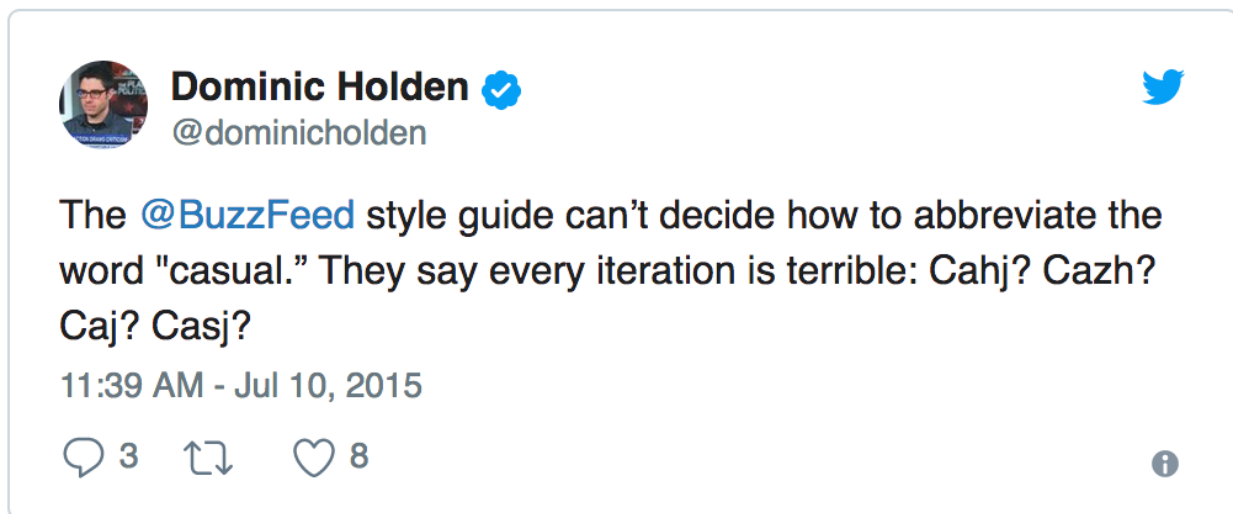
Materials: “The totes amazesh way millennials are changing the English language” by Jeff Guo of the Washington Post: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/01/13/the-totes-amazesh-way-millennials-are-changing-the-english-language/>. (Note: most of the material in this activity is drawn from Guo’s article, but the article itself is not needed for the in-class portion. The article is only required for the optional follow-up activity).

Context: this activity is intended to be done in class. It could be used during a phonology unit after students have learned about basic components of syllable structure. Specifically, this activity will require students to be familiar with the IPA, as well as the concept of main word stress and the components of the syllable (onset, nucleus, coda). This activity is meant to be facilitated by the teacher with frequent student participation.

Objectives: after this lesson students should be able to:

- Demonstrate how knowledge of syllable structure can be used to explain a word formation process
- Formulate a hypothesis about a word formation process using a data set

Warm up: Show the following tweets on the projector (alternatively, feel free to use any Tweets you like that contain totesing):





Call students' attention to 'Cahj,' 'Cazh,' 'Caj,' and 'Casj' in the first tweet and 'impress' in the second tweet. Have a brief discussion about this kind of 'totesing.' For example, ask students to respond to the following questions:

- Have you seen this type of language before? Do people even still do this? Where do you usually see this kind of language? Do you use it yourself? Can you think of other good examples of this kind of word formation process?

Explain to students that linguists have named this kind of word formation 'totesing' after the word 'totes,' which is a commonly used example of this process. It may seem like random shortening of certain words, but, like most other processes in language, it is actually rule governed. We can start to form a hypothesis about how this process works using our knowledge of syllable structure.

Exercise: display the following data set on the projector. Divide students into small groups (ideally 3-4 students per group). Ask them to consider the data and formulate a hypothesis about how this process works. Give students approximately 10 minutes to work on this task. Check in on individual groups as needed.

(note: students may need to be reminded how primary word stress is marked in IPA).

Atrocious	ə.'trɒʊ.fəs	ə.trɒʊf
Precious	'prɛʃ.əs	prɛʃ
Relationship	ri.'lei.ʃən.ʃɪp	ri.leɪʃ
Vacation	veɪ.'keɪ.ʃən	veɪ.keɪʃ
Tragic	'trædʒ.ɪk	trædʒ
Pregnant	'preg.nənt	preg
Fiddler	'fɪd.lər	fɪd
Republic	ri.'pʌb.lɪk	ri.pʌb
Jealous	'dʒel.əs	dʒel

After students have had time to consider the data, come back together as a class. Ask students to discuss their hypotheses. What is going on when speakers are ‘totesing?’ If students are having trouble formulating a hypothesis, call their attention to the stressed syllable of each word and the structure of that syllable.

Target hypothesis: each word is truncated after the syllable bearing primary word stress. If the stressed syllable does not have a coda, the onset of the following syllable in the untotesed word becomes the coda of the final syllable in the totesed word.

Optional: follow up homework assignment. Ask students to consider the examples of totesing they thought of earlier. Is our hypothesis adequate for explaining all of these examples? (it isn’t). Briefly discuss the process of hypothesis formation and revision based on new data.

Ask students to read the Washington Post article by Jeff Guo on totesing. Ask students to answer the following questions:

- The author of this article describes the steps of ‘totesing’ a word. Step 2 is “cram the consonants together.” How would you describe this part of the process using the concepts we have learned about syllable structure?
- In class we formulated a hypothesis that explained some of the totesing data, but we discovered that it was not sufficient for explaining all of it (e.g. ‘totes,’ ‘adorabs,’ ‘jelly,’ etc.). Some of these forms are explained by the author in step 3. Describe in your own words how this part of the process works using the chart provided for the word ‘jealous’ as an example.
- This article was written about work done by linguists Lauren Spradlin and Taylor Jones, but the author is not a linguist. Who is the intended audience for this article? Does this article tell us anything about what kinds of linguistics topics seem to capture the attention of the general public?