

Cata-prefix

Catapult. Catastrophe. Cataract. Catadromous. The element uniting these terms, the prefix *cata*, is Greek in origin and means “down.”

The word *catapult* is a good place to start in illustrating this prefix. An ancient device designed to hurl missiles, a catapult launches weapons with fatal force. The etymology of the word reflects the action of the object: the *pult* in catapult comes from a Greek verb meaning “to hurl”. Attach the *cata* prefix, and you have a word meaning “hurl down.”

A cataract is a large, rushing waterfall. This word is a blend of the *cata* prefix and a Greek verb meaning “to dash.” Cataracts literally (and etymologically) “dash down” the mountainside.

What about *catastrophe*, meaning a momentous, tragic event? With the *cata* prefix attached to a verb meaning “to turn”, we have a word that means, at heart, a turning down or overturning, suggesting violent inversion.

Finally, we have the intriguing adjective *catadromous*. A catadromous creature lives in fresh water and swims seaward to spawn. Some eels, for example, are catadromous. The *dromous* portion of this word, again Greek in origin, means “to run”. Catadromous: “running down” to the sea.

Other relatives in this word clan are *cataclysm*, *catatonic* and *catalogue*. You can find the stories behind these terms on the pages of any good dictionary.