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.