

From *permafrost* to *permacrisis*: Prefixation or blending?

As you may well know, *permacrisis* was *Collins Dictionary* word of the year 2022. Upon learning that, I wrote an exam question asking my students how the word *permacrisis* had been formed. Several students explained that it was an example of blending, or a portmanteau word. However, one student analyzed the word as consisting of a prefix, *perma-*, added to the word *crisis*. This piqued in me an interest in whether *perma-* is a prefix.

The lone student agrees with Tréquer (2022, emphasis in the original), who explains that the word *permacrisis* consists of the prefix “**perma-**, forming nouns with the sense **permanent** —, as in ***permafrost*** and ***permaculture***” and the noun *crisis*. However, according to Turnbull (2022, emphasis added), the noun *permacrisis* is “**most widely understood** as a portmanteau of “permanent” and “crisis””.

My plan in this paper is to use search engines, and to look at English language corpora and dictionaries to investigate English words that begin with *perma-*. To give an example, the *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA) suggests that the first of these words was *permafrost*, whose attestations begin in the year 1951. To compare, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) dates the first instance of *permafrost* back to 1943. However, it suggests that the concept is older, tracing it back to an occurrence of *permanent frost* in a book translated from Russian in 1916.

To give another example, the search engine DuckDuckGo suggested that I could search for the following four words beginning with *perma-*: *permaculture*, *permafrost*, *permaguard* and *permacrisis*. The OED claims that *permaculture* is an originally Australian word and defines it as follows: “The development or maintenance of an artificial ecosystem intended to be self-sustaining and to satisfy the living requirements of its inhabitants, esp. by the use of renewable resources.” The first attested date of *permaculture* in the OED is the year 1978. *Permaguard* is a brand name describing a product that protects vinyl from stains, friction, and bacteria (Lauritzon 2023).

Time allowing, I will also search for and discuss relevant data from Finnish and Swedish. Some google searches confirmed that Finnish attests at least the words *permakulttuuri* ‘permaculture’, *permakriisi* ‘permacrisis’ and *permalinkki* ‘permalink’. However, the term *permafrost* must be translated as *ikirouta*; note that it is also possible to translate the English *permalink* as *ikilinkki*. The OED defines *permalink* as follows: “A hyperlink to a web page whose content is expected to remain the same over time.” It dates this word back to the year 1999. Interestingly, a comprehensive grammar of Finnish describes *iki-* as a “prefix-like element” rather than a prefix (VISK § 172).

References

Lauritzon. 2023. Oppaat. [Guides.] <https://lauritzon.fi/fi/tuotteet/oppaat/> (11 March, 2023)

OED = *Oxford English Dictionary*, the. 2023. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
<http://www.oed.com> (11 March, 2023)

Tréquer, Pascal. 18 November 2022. 'Permacrisis': Meaning and origin.
<https://wordhistories.net/2022/11/18/permacrisis/> (11 March, 2023)

Turnbull, Neil. 11 November 2022. Permacrisis: what it means and why it's word of the year 2022. <https://theconversation.com/permacrisis-what-it-means-and-why-its-word-of-the-year-for-2022-194306> (11 March, 2023)

VISK = Ison suomen kieliopin verkkoversio. [The online version of the big Finnish grammar.] 2008. Ed. by Maria Vilkuna. (Authors: Auli Hakulinen, Maria Vilkuna, Riitta Korhonen, Vesa Koivisto, Tarja Riitta Heinonen and Irja Alho.) Helsinki: Kotimaisten kielten tutkimuskeskus. <https://kaino.kotus.fi/visk/etusivu.php> (24 April, 2023)