

## Yechts

I was playing Scrabble last week and I had a seven letter word sitting on my rack: *hauling*. But there was nowhere to play it...unless it could be pluralized. Is *haulings* a word? It's tempting. Hauling is a noun...it's an activity, and that's a thing. To be sure, it's also a verb, as in "I am hauling gravel". But it's also a noun: "Hauling gravel is hard work". What else is the subject of that sentence if not *hauling*? I think that kind of noun is called a *gerund*.

But of course, not every noun can be pluralized by adding *s*. And the fact that it ends in *ing* is not necessarily the problem. You can have a number of *undertakings* going on at the same time, and that's a perfectly good Scrabble word (except it might be too long to fit on the board). You can attend three different poetry *readings* in the same evening. And so on. But can you have multiple *haulings*?

To understand what's going on here, we have to start by noting that there at least two different kind of *ing* words here. *Undertaking* and *reading* are not gerunds in the same sense as *hauling*. Well...*reading* is, if you say "Reading is fun"...that's a gerund. But the "reading" in *poetry readings* is not the plural of the "reading" in *reading is fun*. If you see what I mean.

Because *haulings* actually looks like it might be a word, as in the following conversation: Tom says, "I was hauling garbage all day"...to which Dick replies: "What did you do with the *haulings*?" It's a bit contrived, but it's arguable. Was my Scrabble partner convinced? Well...

The thing is, this is a whole new kind of *ing* noun, different from the other two we've seen do far. It's clearly different because it *only* takes the plural (or collective) form...no one takes away a single *hauling* of garbage. Or droppings. No one picks up a single dog dropping. They pick up *droppings* with an *s*. Yes, you can play *dropping* in Scrabble, if you're dropping a ball. But it's really a whole different word from dog droppings.

What about *servings*? Would you like one serving of Jello with your meal or two? I guess I'm not sure if *servings* is more like *undertakings* or *droppings*. Maybe it's somewhere inbetween...but that's not my point. I want to talk about how these things work in Yiddish. Because in Yiddish, we have three different endings instead of one.

The first one is easy, because it is close to the English ending. *Undertaking* in Yiddish is *unternehmung*. In fact, in the Galitzianer pronunciation, the *ung* ending is actually just like the English *ing*. You can pluralize it with *-en*, so you have several *unternehmungen*. Another nice word that takes this type of ending is *vorhandlen* – to negotiate. "Peace negotiations" in Yiddish are *sholem-vorhandlungen*.

What about "reading and writing"? In Yiddish, we would have *schreiben un lesen* (or *leyenen* if you're reading from the Torah...no one quite knows why!). The point is it's a different ending...it's just the infinitive form of the verb, without the *ung*. These are basically identical to the German constructions.

The third form is where it gets interesting. Have you ever heard of *drippings*? I had an English co-worker once from a very working-class background, and he once told me how his mother

always used to save the “drippins” for his father, because animal protein in any form was at a premium. He was talking about the drippings from frying bacon...but of course, my readers wouldn't know anything about that.

It's funny that in the old country, we also had a culture of poverty, and there was a food item which arguably took the role of bacon for us: it was called *grieven*, and I don't know what that word means, but it is sometimes translated as *cracklings*, and it was a special treat for the children when a goose was slaughtered...I think it was something about the way the skin got fried up in its own fat. So the English had their *drippins*, and we had our *cracklings*. But I digress...

I want to tell you about the third kind of ending...the one we use in Yiddish for words like *drippings*. It only shows up in a handful of words, but it's very expressive: *echts*, and it lends a distinctly unsavory flavor to the word it attaches to. For example, the shell of a seed is a *schâll*; to remove the shell is *schâllen*; but if you have a big pile of sunflower seeds that you've been spitting in bowl (or on the floor), it's called *schâllechts* – shellings, if you like.

Another one: saliva. To spit is *speien*, as in *speien in die kasha* (pissing in the soup, as we might say). But “saliva” in Yiddish is...yes, *speiechts!*..literally, “spittings”. Grease is *schmierechts*...you can see where that comes from. And there's one I never figured out the story on, except that it's a substance, presumably sticky and smelly, used in the process of bootmaking: *dzhegechts*. Maybe it's a Slavic word. My favorite is *ân-tuechts* – from *ân-tuen sich*, to get dressed; and you use it to describe an embarrassing or inappropriate get-up that you find yourself forced to wear. Those are all the examples I can think of now.

Where does this suffix come from? You don't see it in German...well, not normally. I sometimes visit a German Language discussion group online, and I posted the question: does the form exist in German? I got an interesting answer from one Takkat, a regular contributor, who offered the seldom-used term *kehricht*...meaning “sweepings”, from *kehren*, “to sweep”. It was the only example of this form in German that anyone could come up with, and it definitely jibes with the Yiddish pattern in terms of unsavoriness (except it's missing the final *s*).

I wonder if any of our readers can think of any more *echts* words?