

Reversives: The case of *un-* prefixation in verbs

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Abstract. This paper investigates the group of un-prefixed verbs or “reversives” with respect to their aspectual features. The aim is to see whether or not these verbs form a homogeneous group. With the new stream of words and the high “productivity” of the prefix *un-*, new terms are coined according to the needs and conceptualizations of language users. Examples of this sort include *uninstall*, *unlike*, *unfriend*, etc. These newly-coined terms do not easily fall into the conventional categories defined for the group of reverse verbs and show diversity with respect to their aspectual features. Therefore, the group of un-prefixed verbs cannot be defined by a set of simplistic word-formation rules.

1. Introduction

A lot of attempts have been made in order to capture the essence of *un-*prefixation in word formation. Many linguists and semanticists have so far scrutinized this type of word formation, the nature of the words and their patterns. These studies have focused on adjectives and verbs (Mettinger, 1990; Tottie, 1980; Sherman, 1976, 1973). Despite all the efforts in determining an account of word formation for the prefix *un-*, there is still a great deal of variation in this group. *The Oxford Learner’s Dictionary* provides two entries for the definition of the prefix *un-*: 1. ‘Un- prefix₁: (in adjectives, adverbs and nouns): not, the opposite of: *unable*, *unconsciously*, *untruth*’, 2. ‘Un-prefix₂: (in verbs that describe the opposite of a process): *unlock*, *undo*’. According to the OED, the first category expresses negation and applies a purely negative force to several parts of speech such as adjectives, adverbs, past participles, present participles and nouns. The second category identified by the OED expresses reversal or deprivation in verbs. This paper focuses on the second definition of the prefix *un-*, which attaches to verbs and forms reversives—referred to as the deverbal *un-*. The aim of this paper is to examine these verbs in more details, with respect to their aspectual features and investigate whether or not these prefixed verbs form a homogenous group.

First, this paper gives a brief overview of the different accounts on the categorization of the group of *un-*prefixed verbs. Next, the data used in this paper and the analysis are

introduced. In chapter 4, the aspectual features of these verbs are investigated. Finally, a brief conclusion as to the current status of these verbs in the vocabulary is given.

2. Background

The semantic effect a prefix has on a stem can usually be predicted from the nature of the stem. In the case of the prefix *un-*, if the stem is a noun, adjective or an adverb, the prefix denotes the absence of a quality while if the stem is a verb, the prefix denotes the contrary, depriving or removing an action (Mettinger, 1990). When the prefix *un-* attaches to a verb, it forms reversives, which are a form of negation. In this type of negation, a negative affix is added to a verb denoting a change of state or location (Cruse, 2011). Examples include *roll-unroll*, *hinge-unhinge*, *fasten-unfasten*, etc. According to Cruse, reversives belong to a more general category called directional opposites and they denote “[...] movement (or more generally change) in opposite directions between two terminal states” (2011: 160). These reversives denote a change of state in the opposite direction: *lock-unlock*, *load-unload*, *dress-undress*. Cruse argues that the manner in which the action happens is not of significance and does not need to be the same in the two processes, but the resulting state is what matters: the end points are reversed in the two processes.

2.1. Prefixal negation vs. sentence negation

In the case of reversives, affixal negation and sentence negation have two totally different functions. With each of these negation forms, the scope of negation changes (Cruse, 2011). Consider the following examples:

- 1) He *did not lock* the door.
- 2) He *unlocked* the door.

In example (1), the proposition, which is ‘locking the door’, is negated and cancelled. In this case, there are three possibilities: a) the door was (already) locked, b) the door was not locked, and c) there was no door. In example (2), the proposition is the reverse of the previous sentence: ‘unlocking the door’. In this case, the two last possibilities do not hold and only the first one applies. In other words, sentence (2) entails the presupposition of a condition in which ‘the door was locked’.

2.2. Word formation rules for the group of un-prefixed verbs

Novel words and meanings are constantly created based on the needs and conceptualizations of language users in various contexts. In the case of the prefix *un-*, novel productions frequently turn up in the different domains of everyday life such as the Internet (*uninstall, unlike, unfriend*), music industry and media (*unlove, unfeel, unremember, unhear*), etc. Although these productions are not confirmed by grammatical rules, they are attested and used in a natural way. Here, it is worth to discuss the notions of “possible (potential) words” and “actual words”. A possible (potential) word is a word whose semantic, morphological or phonological structure conforms to the rules of a language while an actual word is a word that not only conforms to the rules but has already been coined and is being used by the speakers (Plag, 2003). Moreover, a possible word is semantically transparent since its meaning is predictable. For instance, according to Plag (2003), for the suffix *-able*, *affordable*, is an actual word while *cannibalizable* is only a possible word which might come to existence in the sense that it might be used by speakers in certain contexts. If we consider this definition, all the *un-*prefixed words which have been attested and used by the speakers are in fact actual words, although they might not have been defined in any of the big dictionaries. It should also be noted that sometimes there is a very thin or fuzzy line between a possible (potential) word and an actual word in that it is not clear when and how a possible word turns into an actual word. Some have attempted to define the nature of the verbs which can take the prefix *un-*, and define rules for this category. The goal of a theory of word formation is to identify or describe word-formation rules that “[...] not only describe existing complex words but also determine which kinds of derivative could be formed by the speakers according to the regularities and conditions of the rules of their language. In other words, any word-formation theory should make predictions about which words are possible in a language and which words are not” (Plag, 2003: 44). This, however, is a problematic issue since the vocabulary of a language is dynamic and changes quite rapidly. Therefore, establishing a fixed set of necessary and sufficient criteria for possible words in a language can be too idealistic. Despite this, some researchers have managed to come up with certain accounts for the deverbal *un-* prefix.

One of the very first attempts was made by Whorf in his ‘Cryptotype’—“[...] that of the transitive verbs of a covering, enclosing or surface-attaching meaning, the reactance of which is that *un-* may be prefixed to denote the opposite” (1936: 71). Thus, verbs denoting

covering, enclosing and surface-attaching meaning can take *un-* and be included in this group. Others agreed on the notion that the verbs that can take *un-* inherently denote a change which can be reversed (Andrews, 1986; Dowty, 1979; Funk, 1988). Later, Sawada (1995) further classified them into six categories: ‘binding verbs’, ‘closing verbs’, ‘wrapping verbs’, ‘dressing verbs’, ‘packing verbs’ and ‘weaving verbs’. Levin (1993) distinguished two broad verb classes namely ‘combining and attaching verbs’ and ‘putting verbs’—these two groups are further subcategorized. According to Wright (1999), the base form of an *un-*prefixed verb designates an event in which an agent causes something to enter a new spatial configuration, (some kind of alteration of location, structure or shape of an entity) and the *un-*prefixed verb represents the reversal of the configuration.

These accounts can be useful in terms of a general categorization of reversives, in the sense that the majority of the high-frequency *un-*prefixed verbs are expressed within these categories. However, there are examples of the *un-*prefixed verbs which do not fall into any of these categories. Examples include: *unthink, unfeel, unsay, uninstall, unlike, unlove*, etc.

3. Data

In order to investigate whether or not the group of *un-*prefixed verbs is homogenous with respect to their aspectual features, about 100 verbs were analyzed. The data for this investigation was extracted from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). These verbs were searched for and extracted using the search string “un*.[v*]”. This search string threw up not only verbs starting with the prefix *un-*, but a number of other verbs starting with *uni, under*, etc. The list was then cleared of all the irrelevant verbs. In addition, the verbs which started with the prefix *un-*, but were not reversives and were not derived from a root verb were also removed (e.g. *unnerv*). These verbs were then coded for the three aspectual features, namely “change”, “boundedness” and “duration” (see Section 4.2). Next, a qualitative analysis of the verbs was conducted by examining each verb in its unique context and identifying diverging patterns with respect to their aspectual features. The majority of the examples in this paper are taken from the COCA corpus. In addition, a few examples were searched for and extracted from the Internet.

4. Analysis and discussion

4.1. What do these verbs convey semantically?

Based on what has been mentioned earlier, it can be concluded that the group of *un*-prefixed verbs follow a similar pattern when it comes to the semantic information they carry by means of their lexical marker, the prefix *–un*. The typical members in this group such as *fold-unfold*, *zip-unzip*, *wrap*, *unwrap*, *tie-untie* and *button-unbutton*, which form the core of the category, denote the reversal of the action of the root verb. By adding the prefix *un-* to these verbs, one intends to express the contrary or reversal of the root (the activity previously happened) or remove the previous action. See the examples below:

- 3) [...] she took a lollipop out of her bag and **unwrapped** it for him.
- 4) My not even six year old can tie and **untie** her shoes and her dog's leash.
- 5) You'll need to **unbutton** your dress so I may examine you.

Another type of meaning is denoted by the prefix *–un* in the verb group when it is added to the state verbs. This is one of the novel uses of the prefix *un-* which indicates the high “productivity” of this affix. Productivity is defined as “the property of an affix to be used to coin new complex words” (Plag, 2003: 44). The new stream of words generating from new scientific and technological developments strongly supports this high productivity of the prefix *un-*.

The novel uses of this type do not usually fit into the core category described earlier since most of the verbs which take the prefix *un-* have change as an inherent feature in their meaning. Here, however, this is not the case with the state verbs. Sometimes, when the prefix *un-* is added to a state verb, the resulting verb denotes ‘stop + root Ving’. One example of this type of meaning is the “*like/unlike*” button on Facebook. The verb *like* already forms the opposite by another prefix: *dislike*. *Dislike* is defined by the OED as: ‘to not like somebody/something’ (OED, n.d.). However, what *unlike* denotes semantically is totally different and novel. This word has no entry as a verb and is not defined in any of the big dictionaries, thus is a newly-coined term. The use of this button on Facebook is not activated until the *like* button has been clicked on. This means that the previous state of *liking* is a pre-requisite for the meaning of this verb to come to existence. When someone clicks on the *like* option, he/she is given the chance to *unlike* the post/comment/etc. i.e. stop liking it. This

way, the user ideally goes back to being neutral or having no specific opinion towards the post. Although, sometimes, *unliking* a post might have its roots in ‘not liking’ or ‘disliking’ the post. However, when the user *unlikes* a post, there is no sign of this action, thus, the *unlike* button is not meant to denote *dislike*. This means that what is intended for this button to do is to give the user an option to ‘stop liking’ the post. Another interpretation for the ‘irregular’ case of *like-unlike* is that the prefix *un-* is not added to a state verb, but is in fact added to an action verb which denotes a change, since its root verb *like* on Facebook is no longer a state verb but an action verb in the sense that it refers to the act of ‘clicking on an option to show your positive attitude towards a post/comment/etc’. In this sense, the novel term, *unlike*, also falls within the core category and conveys ‘removing an action’—the action being *like*.

Another irregular example (in the sense that it does not follow the verbal properties specific to the core of the group) is the verb *unlove*. This term is not recognized as a word by all the big five dictionaries; at least, not yet. However, a quick search on the Internet shows the frequency of its use in different contexts. This verb can be found in songs and lyrics such as ‘*I can’t unlove you*’ by Kenny Rogers or ‘*Unlove you*’ by Ashley Tisdale. Some online dictionaries (The Merriam-Webster, n.d.; Collins English Dictionary, n.d.; The Free Dictionary by Farlex, n.d.) provide the following definition for this verb:

unlove: to cease to love, to stop loving, to hate

The definitions given by the online dictionaries include both types of meaning discussed above (‘stop + root Ving’ and the opposite or reversal action). ‘*unlove*’ can have various interpretations in the same context:

- 6) Maybe you were not in love with your wife anymore, but how can you **unlove** your child?
- 7) It’s no use... I can’t **unlove** you. (*I can’t unlove you* by Kenny Rogers)

In examples (6) and (7), unless more clues are given in the context, the meanings ‘I can’t stop loving you’ and ‘I can’t hate you’ both arise. This use of the prefix *un-* in the verbs that do not adhere to the typical properties defined for this group are becoming more and more frequent. They are created every day based on the needs of the speakers and the context. They might not be included in the grammar of a language—here English—or might even

seem ungrammatical to some linguists and grammarians, but they still represent the speaker's conceptualizations of a state, process, etc. which have not been defined by any other lexical items or phrases.

Regarding the semantic nature of the group of *un*-prefixed verbs, Cruse talks about the polarity existing in some of these reversives. Polarity is the notion of negativity or positivity assigned to the opposites. One type of polarity is **privative polarity** in which positivity and negativity are ascribed to the words based on the presence or absence of a salient feature (2011: 163). Although not all these *un*-prefixed reversives follow this explanation, most of them such as *dress-undress*, *veil-unveil*, *load-unload*, *leash-unleash*, *balance-unbalance* and *button-unbutton* do. In these examples there seems to be an inherent positive and salient feature in the root verb which is then removed by adding the prefix *un*-. Thus, the non-prefixed verbs denote the presence of something positive while the prefixed verbs denote a negative attribute. Examples include *lock-unlock*, *clip-unclip*, *cover-uncover*, *mask-unmask*, etc. On the matter of negative affixation, Cruse states that the negative affixes have an aversion to the stems which have an inherent negative polarity and cannot be added to them. Examples include *unclean* but not **undirty*, *untrue*, but not **unfalse* and *undress* but not **unstrap* (2011: 354).

4.2. Aspectual features of the reversive verbs

What is intended to be discussed here is the nature of the reversives with respect to the aspectual features of the verbs. Cruse (2011) categorizes events and states into aspectual classes based on certain aspectual features. These aspectual properties are as follows:

- I. **Change.** Events are either *heterogeneous* or *homogenous*. If there is some sort of change inherent in the meaning of a verb, or if something is happening, that verb is heterogeneous (e.g. *fold*). If the event remains constant and there is no change involved, it is homogenous (e.g. *know*).
- II. **Boundedness.** Some events imply inherent boundaries in their meanings. These boundaries could be at the beginning, at the end or both. If an event construes a final end point, it is called *telic* (e.g. *wash*). If there is no final boundary, it is an *atelic* event (e.g. *think*).
- III. **Duration.** An event could take time to occur or could happen instantly. In the first case, it is a *durative* event (e.g. *read*). Otherwise, it is called *punctual* (e.g. *decide*).

All the reversives have change as an inherent entity, thus are heterogeneous. The stems of the reversives typically denote a change such as *fold, button, zip, fasten, roll, twist*, etc. This changing feature is a typical property of the meaning of the verbs in this group. When the prefix *un-* is added to these stems, it construes some sort of alteration of state, location or more generally, configuration: *unfold, unbutton, unzip, unroll, untwist*, etc.

However, not all of the verbs follow this pattern. As mentioned earlier, in the rather new stream of word production, state verbs such as *like, love, feel*, etc. can also take *un-* to mean the reverse action. These state verbs, as the name suggests, do not construe any sort of change and are homogeneous. On the other hand, the result verbs which take the prefix (*unlike, unlove, unfeel*, etc.) do denote change. More specifically, these words are produced and used by the speakers to render some sort of change, or change of state which might only be hypothetical and pragmatically not plausible. These cases might not be good examples of the conventional categorization of reversives, but are definitely attested and are becoming more common.

As regards the second aspectual feature—boundedness—the stem roots and reversives typically show boundaries or beginning and end points in their meaning. Take *pack-unpack, block-unblock, bind-unbind* and *tie-untie*; the stems and their reverses are **telic** in that they denote an end point at which the activity finishes or is completed. Once again, this feature is more salient and transparent in the core members such as the ones mentioned above. Verbs such as *like-unlike, love-unlove, remember-unremember, feel-unfeel, hear-unhear, friend-unfriend*, etc. do not manifest this boundedness the same way as the other members. For one thing, the stems do not show a clear ending boundary; they can be either states (such as *like, love*), which are naturally unbounded, or activities and processes (such as *remember*) without boundaries. The reversives of these examples can be justified in the case of boundedness by a certain explanation, that is these reversives can also be considered telic, because what the speaker intends to denote by the use of the prefixed verbs is the reverse ‘end result’ which is the removal of the action/state/process. The end result of these verbs is what makes them bounded.

The group of reversives shows a rather diverse pattern when it comes to the third aspectual feature, namely duration. Consider the examples below:

- 8) Except now he could not find any men who would **unload** the ship.

- 9) We **unpacked** our bags in the bunk rooms after dusting off the sandiest mattresses [...].
- 10) I **unzipped** my briefcase and pulled out my notebook.
- 11) She **unclipped** the papers and riffled through them.
- 12) [...] did you **unfriend** on Facebook after the movie wrapped?

As can be seen from the different examples, the verbs can show various patterns with respect to duration since their durativity is relative and changes with the context. In example (8), the time expression clearly indicates the durative nature of what happened which constitutes a long time. In examples (9) and (10), the duration of the action taking place is decreasing: ‘*unzipping* a briefcase takes less time to happen compared to ‘*unpacking* a bag. In example (11), the ‘*unclipping*’ is done much more instantly than the previous examples. Example (12), which is a new usage of the prefix *un-*, indicates durativity at its minimum; this action is done by a simple clicking on an option in the virtual space. This verb could also be considered punctual since it occurs rather instantly. This relativity is not fixed and inherent in the nature of the verb but is context-dependent.

4.3. Polysemy in reversives

The aspectual properties of reversive verbs do not only vary depending on context as explained above but they can vary with the different senses of a polysemous verb. Look at the examples below:

- 13) Her hands trembled as **unfolded** the letter.
- 14) Our understanding of how life **unfolded** is still very much incomplete.

The verb *unfold* has two senses in the OED dictionary: 1) ‘to spread open or flat something that has previously been folded; to become open and flat’ 2) ‘to be gradually made known; to gradually make something known to other people’ (OED, n.d.). The first sense in which the verb is transitive is exemplified in sentence (13) and the second sense in which the verb is intransitive is exemplified in sentence (14). In the first sense, the concept of durativity is easier to pin down since it is a concrete verb and the beginning and end points are more tangible in the pragmatic sense. Example (14) is an abstract and (probably extended use of the first sense) which does not have clear boundaries. The verb *unfold* in the second

sense functions as an activity or process which according to Cruse (2011), constitutes unbounded durative heterogeneous verbs. Now, consider another example, the verb *unleash*, in different senses and contexts:

15) After all, he saw me, thought about it and then **unleashed** his dog on me.

16) The conflict between science and religion has **unleashed** passions in school board meetings [...].

The OED dictionary gives only one definition for this verb which is shown in sentence (15): ‘to suddenly let a strong force, emotion, etc. be felt or have an effect’ (OED, n.d.). The Longman dictionary, however, provides two entries for this verb: 1) ‘to suddenly let a strong force, feeling, etc. have its full effect’, 2) ‘to let a dog run free after it has been held on a leash’ (LDOCE Online, n.d.) These two senses of the verb *unleash* are different from each other with respect to the aspectual features. Both are heterogeneous and denote change. The first sense of the verb—example (15)—is a bounded verb which has beginning and finishing points while the second sense—example (16)—denotes a beginning point and not a very clear ending boundary, thus is atelic. The first sense is durative but the second sense is punctual since it occurs instantly.

Many of these reversives are polysemous and have extended meanings that show different patterns from the other ones. Overall, the general trends in the core members of the reversive verbs are as follows: a) they denote change (either in the stem, in the reversive, or both), b) they are bounded (telic), and c) can be punctual or durative.

4.3. Lexical opposite vs. the un-prefixed opposite

Kemmerer and Wright (2002) state “[...] the prefix cannot readily apply to a verb if the resulting derived form has a meaning which is already encoded by an existing root verb”. Thus, if the intended meaning can be expressed by means of another lexical term, the prefixed verb is not applicable (e.g. *capture-reveal* vs *capture-*uncapture*). Upon first glance, this criterion can be hastily rejected. Many of the verbs which have an *un*-prefixed reversive also form an opposite with another lexical item. Examples include: *lock/unlock/open*, *close/unclose/open*, *fold/unfold/reveal*, etc. However, a closer look reveals much more information somewhat in favor of this notion. Consider the following example:

- 17) “What is it?” I cried. “What have you found?” He smiled, **unclosing** his hand so that I should see what lay in the palm of it. A scrap of stiff white cambric. (Mettinger, 1990, p. 95)

In this example, the verb *unclose* has been used instead of *open*. These two words intuitively denote the same thing, but why has the speaker used *unclose* instead of *open*? This conscious choice of words reveals something about the intentions of the speaker and the subtle difference of meaning between the two words, *unclose* and *open*. Perhaps, what the speaker intended to convey could not be adequately expressed with the verb *open*. It could be concluded that by using the verb *unclose*, the speaker was trying to create a vivid image in the mind of the addressee and help the addressee in the conceptualization of what has happened with the emphasis being on the previous state of the action, ‘*closed*’. I would like to argue that when an *un*-prefixed verb is used instead of the lexicalized opposite, the speaker intends to draw the addressee’s attention to the previous state or process. Let us consider another example:

- 18) She turns to **unlock** the door, and then he attacks from behind [...].
19) As I **open** the livingroom door, it squeaks.

In example (18), what is construed in the meaning of *unlock* is not the same as *open*. If the verb *open* substitutes *unlock*, some part of the meaning intended to be conveyed on the part of the speaker would be lost. This part concerns the previous state of the door, which was ‘*locked*’. In example (18), the previous state of the door being ‘*locked*’ is emphasized by using the verb *unlock* instead of *open*.

In the next example, *fold-unfold-reveal*, it is the second sense of the prefixed verb (*unfold*) that is synonymous with the lexical opposite (*reveal*). In example (20), *unfold* is used to mean its second sense: ‘to be gradually made known; to gradually make something known to other people’. In this case, the previous state is not significant and the verb can be perfectly replaced with the verb *revealed* without much change in the meaning.

- 20) She **unfolded** (/revealed) her story to Susan Aschoff [...].

5. Conclusion

In this paper, the homogeneity of the group of *un*-prefixed reversive verbs was investigated. The aim was to show the diversity present in this group with respect to their aspectual features. The discussion indicated that these verbs show a lot of variation and their nature cannot be captured in one or more fixed rules. The new stream of words created by the prefix *un-* (*uninstall*, *unlike*, *unlove*, etc.) do not conform to the rules put forward by different semanticists. They cannot be defined by means of a set of necessary and sufficient criteria since every day, new meanings are being created by the language users which do not fit into different categorizations or theories proposed thus far.

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