

LEXICAL NEGATION IN ENGLISH: THE CASE OF *UN-* AND *IN-*

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Abstract: In- and un- are two negative prefixes that may appear to be quite similar both semantically and morphologically. In some cases, particularly when the adjectives are used predicatively, in- and un- can easily be glossed by not: ‘This is impossible’ is more or less interchangeable with ‘This is not possible’, and ‘Detention beyond a reasonable time would be unlawful’ is quite similar to ‘Detention beyond a reasonable time would not be lawful’. They are comparable in that they appear mainly in adjectives and, to a lesser extent, in nouns. Un- is also a verbal prefix, but historically that prefix is a different one. Because of the word categories they concern, their widespread use, and the gloss they can undergo, one could assume that the only difference between them is that in- appears in lexemes of Latin origin while un- is more compatible with items that are morphologically more varied. Nonetheless, there are reasons to question such an assumption, and my hypothesis will assert that the distribution of un- and in- may be based on semantic variations. In this paper, I will try to determine what these semantic reasons are and then attempt to account for them.

1. Common Features Between Un- and In- in Adjectives

1.1. Two Types of Adjectival Meaning

Un- and in- can both be paraphrased by not. However, they occur only in limited semantic fields. This is brought to light by the contrast between un- and in-, on one hand, and non- on the other.

The adjective *human* has two negative ‘counterparts’: *non-human* and *inhuman*. However, the latter does not seem to negate the same meaning of *human*. Consequently, the adjective is polysemous and can be said to have two main orientations. On one hand, it characterizes what is connected with humans as opposed to what is not (and is therefore associated with animals, machines, or gods). On the other hand, it alludes to qualities that are supposed to be shared by human beings and may even be considered quintessential elements of ‘human nature’. Now, *non-* negates only the first meaning of *human*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* proposes the following definition for *non-human*: “that is not of the human race; not belonging or characteristic of a human being”. Conversely, *inhuman* is concerned only with the second meaning. The *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* defines it as follows: “lacking the qualities of kindness and pity; very cruel... 2. not seeming to be produced by a human and therefore frightening”.

Similarly, *non-professional* means “doing sth as a hobby rather than as a paid job”, according to the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*¹, while *unprofessional* is defined in the same as “not reaching the standard expected in a particular profession”.

What is striking in these examples, both of which are representative of what often happens with *in-* and *un-*, is that these affixes encode the same semantic element as *not*, but not with just any adjectival meaning. To a large extent, *in-* and *un-* have to do with what D.C. Ferris calls

“ascriptive adjectives”, whereas *non-* has more to do with “associative adjectives”.² What can be inferred from this is that *un-* and *in-* enter the composition of adjectives whose role is to *characterize* and not to *classify*. Such adjectives add a property to the representation of an object (in the broadest meaning of the term) and do not “put it in a box”. In this sense, they both fulfil the same function.

1.2. Morphological Common Points

In- and *un-* tend to specialize in words containing certain suffixes. The most common suffix with these negative prefixes is probably *-able*, with its variant *-ible*: *unacceptable*, *intolerable*, *unapproachable*, *unattainable*, *unachievable*, *unbeatable*, *unchallengeable*, *unconquerable*, *unfathomable*, *unavailable*, *unobtainable*, *unbelievable*, *unimaginable*, *uncountable*, *undetectable*, *unidentifiable*, *unforeseeable*, *unpredictable*, *unknowable*, *incomprehensible*, *impenetrable*, *imperceptible*, *inaudible*, *invisible*, *impassable*, *impenetrable*, *inaccessible*, *impregnable*, *inexplicable*, *inconceivable*, *incredible*, etc.

A lot of adjectives suffixed by *-ent* and *-ant* also easily admit *un-* or *in-*: *unrepentant*, *unpleasant*, *irrelevant*, *improvident*, *inconstant*, etc.

Other such suffixes include *-ic* (*unapologetic*, *impolitic*), *-ous* (*unselfconscious*, *incautious*), *-ive* (*uncompetitive*, *impassive*), *-al* (*unprofessional*, *immemorial*), etc.

By contrast, not many adjectives featuring *in-* or *un-* are “simple” from a morphological point of view. Here we find words such as *unclean*, *impure*, *unsafe*, *untrue*, *insane* and only a few others.

1.3. Couples of Adjectives Formed With *In-* and *Un-*

Given the above information, it should come as no surprise that *un-* and *in-* form couples of adjectives that are generally seen as synonymous, such as *unbearable/intolerable*, *unavoidable/inevitable*, *unlikely/implausible*, *unlawful/illegal*, *interminable/unceasing*, etc.

These remarks suggest that *in-* and *un-* are so similar that the differences between them are negligible, or even that they operate in parallel. Hence, why do they both endure? Their evolution throughout history raises this question. The *Oxford English Dictionary* entry on *in-* reads:

In Eng. *in-* (*il-*, *im-*, *ir-*) is a living negative suffix [sic] for words of Latin or Romanic origin, freely used, even when no corresponding formation appears in Latin; in this use it interchanges to some extent with the OE. negative *un-*, which is used in native or thoroughly naturalized words, e.g. *incautious*, *uncautious*, *in-*, *un-ceremonious*, *in-*, *un-certain*, *in-*, *un-communicative*, *in-*, *un-devout*, *in-*, *un-distinguishable*. In such cases the practise in the 16th and 17th c. was to prefer the form with *in-*, e.g. *inaidable*, *inarguable*, *inavailable*, but the modern tendency is to restrict *in-* to words obviously answering to Latin types, and to prefer *un-* in other cases, as in *unavailing*, *uncertain*, *undevout*.

Concerning *un-*, the *OED* gives a great many indications. What matters here is that the frequency of *un-* has evolved throughout the history of English:

In OE the number of recorded forms in *un-* is very large, the prefix being freely applied with a purely negative force to several parts of speech. A prominent feature of the OE examples is the prevalence of long derivative or compound formations, usually based upon or corresponding to Latin

formations with *in-*, *im-*, or *il-*. Examples of this are words like *unaberendlic* (intolerable), *unaberendlice* (intolerably), *unbegrípendlic* (incomprehensible), *unbescéawodlice* (inconsiderately), *unforhæfedness* (incontinence).

Moreover,

During the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries the use of *un-* steadily increased, a large number of words being thus formed which have permanently established themselves in the language, besides many more which occur only incidentally or rarely. The freedom with which the prefix could be used in new formations appears clearly in the dictionaries of Florio and Cotgrave, who constantly employ it in rendering Italian and French negative terms in *in-*, etc. As the use of *un-* or *in-* ... was still largely a matter of choice, and many of the older formations were still current, the vocabulary of the 17th century exhibits many types in common use which are now rare or obsolete, and in general is extremely rich in words beginning with *un-*.

H.-S. Kwon makes it clear that,

The figures suggest that, while large numbers of loan words were borrowed from other source languages, a significant number of words were coined by the use of prefixes like *in-* and *un-* in the Early Modern English Period. There was also a general tendency to use the negative prefix *un-* instead of the foreign negative prefix *in-* in the derivational processes of word-formation, especially in the 16th century.

Consequently,

from the 15th century onwards, there was considerable variation between *in-* and *un-*. Many doublets, such as *in-/unaccessible*, *in-/uncapable*, *in-/unconstant*, *in-/uncurable*, *ig-/un noble*, *im-/perfect*, *im-/unpossible*, and *in-/unsatiable*, provide evidence of the increase in the use of *un-* forms in the 16th century when compared to the 15th and 17th centuries (eg the proportion of *unperfect* to *imperfect* is 16 percent in the 15th cent, 58 percent in the 16th cent, 26 percent in the 17th cent).

Then,

From the 17th cent onwards, patterns emerged which showed the dominant form for each pair of doublets. In most of these cases *in-* forms established themselves in the language, although some doublets, such as *in-/uncapable* and *in-/unexpect*, show a preference for *un-* forms still in the 17th cent.³

Thus, until the 17th century, *in-* and *un-* were “in competition”, and both could occur in a number of lexical items. Nowadays, *in-* is less frequent in adjectives than *un-* but remains a common prefix. It is often assumed that *in-* was maintained in words of Latin or Romance origin while *un-* was perpetuated with words having other types of roots (cf. the opposition between *unbearable* and *intolerable*).

To be fair, it is not certain whether this account of the distribution of *un-* and *in-* is sufficient, satisfactory, or even accurate. First, many words such as *unfortunate*, *unjust*, *ungracious*, *unacceptable*, *unapologetic*, etc. are from direct or indirect Latin origin, and yet they contain the prefix *un-*. Furthermore, some items such as *impermanent* and *inharmonious*, for instance, are English creations despite the use of *in-*.

The productivity of *un-* is such that the survival of *in-* is somewhat surprising. This is why it is arguable that *un-* and *in-* have a different meaning or correspond to various cognitive processes. In other words, they may conceptualize two different approaches to the extra-linguistic world.

2. The Specificities of the Prefixes

If *un-* and *in-* are comparable, there are several points on which they diverge strikingly.

2.1. *Un-*

2.1.1. Morphologically, *un-* often appears with forms resembling “participles”, i.e. lexemes ending with *-ing* or ones akin to past participles. Some of them are clearly adjectives, e.g. *uninteresting*, *unflattering*, *uneducated*, or *uncivilized*. This morphological compatibility is not merely a superficial characteristic, as some of these items are very close to verbs. *Uncomprehending* is a case in point. In the following utterance, it behaves like a full-fledged adjective:

(1) *When Li Peng, the Prime Minister, tried to share a toast with his adoptive mother, the venerable widow of Chou En-lai, he was met with an uncomprehending stare.* (British National Corpus)

This phrase could be paraphrased as “a stare showing that she did not understand what he was saying/what was happening”. In this example, the *stare* in question is described or characterized.

The following case is quite similar. This time, however, *uncomprehending* is used predicatively: “Allen looked uncomprehending; if Marian understood he did not.” (BNC)

In both examples, “not comprehending” cannot substitute for *uncomprehending*. This derives from the fact that *not* cannot precede an adjective when it is used attributively (as in the first example) or when the predicative adjective is introduced by a verb other than *be*: i.e. neither *he was met with a not comprehending stare* nor *Allen looked not comprehending* are acceptable.

On the other hand, in this sentence, “The art dealer opened his mouth, uncomprehending” (British National Corpus), “not comprehending” would be possible without creating a major semantic difference. This is true even though *uncomprehending* seems to be “self-sufficient” while there may be an ellipsis with “not comprehending”: i.e. a complement such as “what was going on” is apparently implied. Now, the very possibility of this complement shows that *comprehending* is a verb, not an adjective, and that a strong link between the participle, *not comprehending*, and the adjective *uncomprehending*, is perceptible.

2.1.2. “Past Participles”

The same observations hold for lexical items reminiscent of past participles. Some designate stable properties, like *unacquainted*, for instance.

With others, however, the connection between the adjective and a verb is more obvious:

(2) *He raised the hat in a gesture that took in the entire neighbourhood, the ghetto with its shantytown porches, unpaved streets, and disconsolate laundry.* (J. Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 187.)

The phrase “unpaved streets” means “without cobblestones”, and its meaning is definitely static. However, it is not inconceivable that it “stems” from a passive form (“its streets that had not been paved”).

Finally, certain adjectives have a definite dynamic reading:

(3) *In this gesture I see the emotional sympathy I've always felt with Tessie, the two of us never happier than when unobserved.* (Middlesex, 254)

Here *unobserved* is a sort of contraction of “when no one observes us”.

In the last two examples, as often happens with past participles turned into adjectives, the verbal meaning remains tangible; i.e. *un-* does not transform a process or an event into a canonical adjective.

2.2. *in-*

With *in-* too many adjectives “derive from” a participle (such as those ending in *-ant*, *-ent*, or *-ate*), but synchronically there is nothing self-evident about this origin. For example, *illegitimate*, *insufficient*, or *inappropriate* do not have much in common with verbs.

Another important characteristic of *in-* is that, morphologically, it is more labile than *un-*. Unlike the latter, it has several variants (*il-*, *im-*, *ir-*, and *ig-* in words like *ignoble*). Furthermore, the word emphasis can be such that it “hides” the fact that *in-* is a prefix, as in *impious*: in one of its two possible realizations, the first syllable bears stress.

These structural disparities point to a gap between the way *un-* and *in-* “work”, so much so that the apparent synonymy of lexical items containing *in-* and those containing *un-* is doubtful.

3. Synonyms

3.1. Same formation

First of all, couples like *intangible* and *untouchable* are noteworthy. Although they correspond to the assemblage of similar morphemes (*in-/un-* + a root meaning *touch* + *-able/-ible*), their meanings are barely comparable. The term *intangible* relates to the very essence of an object or entity, while *untouchable*, which is generally used metaphorically and has to do with an object and the action an outer agent cannot have on it.

3.2. Specialization

Although *in-* and *un-* can combine with comparable roots so that the resulting adjectives belong to the same lexical fields, the “*un-*roots” are often more specific than the “*in-*roots” and correspond to more “concrete” and everyday actions. This can be observed in lexemes like *unplayable*, *unsaleable*, *unworkable*, etc. and may be why some of the “*in-*adjectives” convey more intensity than their counterparts prefixed by *un-*. For example, *unbreakable* and *indestructible* are more or less synonymous, but characterizing glass as *unbreakable* is probably more neutral than saying it is *indestructible*, which would be more hyperbolic.

3.3. Two Ways of Meaning

Here are a few couples that should help us determine more precisely how *in-* and *un-* differ semantically. The members of these pairs have very similar meaning, yet in all of them, there seems to be a systematic opposition between *un-* and *in-*.

3.3.1. *inedible/uneatable*

inedible : “that you cannot eat because it is of poor quality or poisonous”

uneatable: “(of food) not good enough to be eaten”⁴

One of the points of this example is that it is paralleled by the couple *immangeable*/**incomestible* in French, dealt with by J.C. Anscombe. The latter explains that *immangeable* is acceptable because it corresponds to the judgement of an observer, while *comestible* is an intrinsic property and cannot be negated by *in-* in French.⁵ According to Anscombe, the negation of an intrinsic quality is not compatible with *in-*. However, *inedible* covers the meaning of both *non comestible* and *immangeable* while *uneatable* covers only that of *immangeable*. This calls into question the validity of the application of Anscombe’s rule to English.

Nevertheless, what this doublet suggests is that *un-* reflects the speaker’s or the “tasting subject’s” judgement, while the occurrence of *in-* is the sign of an external rule, i.e. an “objective” landmark.

3.3.2. *illegible/unreadable*

Unreadable/illegible is another such example. The *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* does not give precisely the same definition for them:

unreadable: ... **1** (of a book, etc.) too dull or difficult to be worth reading. **2** = illegible. **3** if sb’s face or expression is unreadable, you cannot tell what they are thinking or feeling. **3** (computing) (of a computer file, disk, etc.) containing information that your computer is not able to read.

illegible: ... difficult or impossible to read: *an illegible signature*⁶

A few examples from the *British National Corpus* show the kind of usages these definitions account for. Such utterances generally insist on the materiality and the concrete aspect of the ‘text’ described as *illegible*:

(4) *In those days newspapers were filthy, grubby things, often virtually illegible, with smudgy pictures and layers of black ink which got all over your hands.*

The emphasis is not quite the same with *unreadable*:

(5) *So in his late anthology, *Confucius to Cummings* (New York, 1964, with Marcella Spann), he explicitly preferred George Chapman’s *Homer to Pope’s*, even though he had admitted that Chapman is unreadable, except for a few pages at a time.*

The utterance deals with the reader’s inability to interpret an obscure text: *unreadable* is about the observer and his or her capacity, whereas *illegible* unambiguously characterizes the object of the observation.

3.3.3. *improbable* and *unlikely*:

My final example is *implausible/unlikely*, as studied by Anna Wierzbicka.⁷ These two lexemes do not share their syntactic characteristics, and Wierzbicka deftly points out that the following oppositions can be noticed:

- (7) *She is likely (unlikely) to do it.*
**She is probable (improbable) to do it.*
The chair is likely (unlikely) to break.
**The chair is probable (improbable) to break.*

She infers from them that:

What these contrasts suggest is that *likely* can be seen as referring to a person's propensity to behave in a certain way or to an object's invisible individual characteristic (and reflecting the speaker's conjecture based on personal experience), whereas *probable* always refers to a fact or a state of affairs ("it's probable *that*"), never to person or an object. To put it differently, *probable* is more factual than *likely*, as it were, more objective, whereas *likely* is more subjective, more impressionistic, and more applicable to possible events that are unpredictable and unknowable.

To summarize, *likely* "often refers to things that are not knowable or not verifiable", whereas *probably* "implies that what is being said is, in principle, verifiable (if not by me, then by someone else, and if not now, then at some other time, and if not verifiable, then at least justifiable)."

With these doublets, *in-* is apparently on the 'objective' side, while *un-* originates from the opinion of the speaker or observer.

3. Explanation

4.1. *Un-*, *In-*, and *Not*

The comparison between *un-* and *in-* may have to include *not*. As some *un-*adjectives are close to gerunds, which are negated by *not*, one could assume that *un-* and *not* function in comparable ways.

C. Delmas underlines that *un-* has scope over a *relation*.⁸ This is why, although there is no verb *unmake*, *unmade* is acceptable. Similarly, while *unask* is not a lexeme, the adjective *unasked* is fine. He explains that this is so because *ask*+ *-ed* can be the target of the negation. This can be represented by the following schema:

UN- / ASK RELATION VB ED/'
└───────────▲

Likewise, the adjective *unfaithful* does not derive from the substantive *unfaith*, but the suffix *-ful* establishes a connection between *faith* and what is described as *faithful*.

It is therefore possible to draw a parallel between *un-* and *not*, since, as C. Delmas explains⁹, negating DO is tantamount to negating the relation or link between the subject and the predicate.

Now, *in-* does not enter the composition of lexemes that have to do with the validation of a predicative relation. Therefore, it does not work like *not*.

The attraction of *un-* by predicative links could explain its various sense effects. I have noted in part III that the opposition between *un-* and *in-* seems to be that *in-* points to a definite criterion whereas *un-* has to do with a particular situation and reflects the speaker's judgement. Here, the meaning on *in-* is pre-constituted, as it were. Conversely, *un-* appears at the same time the utterance does.

The strong link between *un-* and verbal meaning as well as the similarity between *un-* and *not*, a similarity that is alien to *in-*, may have to do with the fact that the roots of *un-* adjectives are often intelligible whereas the meaning of *in-* adjectives is more opaque (cf. *incredible* vs. *unbelievable*, *undefatigable* vs. *untiring*). Consequently, the relation to a verb, a situation and, hence, a subject is encoded by *un-* adjectives but not by lexemes formed with *in-*.

4.2. Other Word Categories

4.2.1 Adjectives and Nouns

The hypothesis presented here is supported by the alternation between *un-* and *in-* with words sharing the same roots: *uncivil/incivility*, *unequal/inequality*, *ungrateful/ingratitude*, *unjust/injustice*, etc. One can observe that the adjectives are formed with *un-*, and the substantives are formed with *in-*. Nouns, as a rule, designate a "substance" seen as independent or autonomous, while adjectives designate qualities in so far as they are embodied or take shape in a substance. That *un-* prefix adjectives and *in-* nouns is in keeping with the idea that *in-* is the sign of absolute criteria, whereas *un-* has to do with specific situations.

4.2.2. Verbs

This paper concerns *in-* and *un-* in adjectives, but *un-* also figures in a number of verbs such as *undress*, *unlock*, *untie*, etc. It is unclear whether verbal *un-* and adjectival *un-* are one and the same affix or not. At one time they used to differ, and German still differentiates between *ent-* and *un-*. However, the fact that they take the same form in English nowadays questions the validity of this distinction. Be that as it may, it is noteworthy that *un-* in verbs does not mean 'not'. Its meaning is not privative, it is reversative (presupposing a particular state that is 'cancelled'). As such, *undoing* something is, precisely, doing something. This could be the common factor between *un-* in adjectives and verbs. In the latter, *un-* denotes an activity in the same way as *un-* in adjectives is a negation that derives from the speaker and, therefore, is inseparable from enunciation. In short, it reflects the work done in and by the utterance.

4. Conclusion

The similarity observed between *un-* and *not* makes for a better understanding of the difference between *un-* and *in-*, as well as the way *un-* works. However, this similitude may be nothing more than an artefact. In other words, it does not mean that the lexemes prefixed by *un-* "come from" an utterance containing *not*. In many cases, they cannot be paraphrased by "not". Similarly, most utterances containing "not" could hardly be rephrased with an item formed thanks to *un-*.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that the coincidence between lexical and grammatical negation is quite remarkable, highlighting how elaborated and varied negation is.

Since there are many lexical gaps in English, several questions remain unanswered, such as the factors that trigger the use of *un-* and *in-*. Comparatively few adjectives accept negation by one of them.

Finally, if there is indeed continuity between *un-* in adjectives and *un-* in verbs, should it be assumed that it is also possible to find a unity between the many meanings of *in-* (negation, but also inclusion, intensification, or change of states)?

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¹ A.S. Hornby (2005)

² In *The Meaning of Syntax*, D.C. Ferris explains that adjectives such as *meteorological*, *foreign*, *nuclear*, and *royal* in 'a meteorological expert', 'a romantic novelists', 'foreign policy', 'a nuclear scientist', 'the royal hatmaker' are associative adjectives, Paraphrasing them as 'the expert is meteorological' or 'the novelist is romantic' would produce an entirely different meaning, if any. Associative or relational adjectives differ from ascriptive adjectives in that they are "used only to aid identification and do[es] not actually apply to the entity of the phrase" (C. Ferris (1993: 26).

³ H.S. Kwon (1997)

⁴ A.S. Hornby (2005: 793, 1669)

⁵ J.C. Anscombe (1994: 307)

⁶ A. S. Hornby (2005 : 1679, 772)

⁷ A. Wierzbicka (2006: 268-269)

⁸ Delmas, C., « Négation et sensibilité à la structuration » in CIEREC, *La Négation : Domaine anglais*, Saint-Etienne: 1988.

⁹ 'Ainsi, réfuter DO, ce n'est plus réfuter directement du sémique, c'est congédier le lien de mise en relation d'un sujet et d'un prédicat. Ce sont des LIENS GRAMMATICAUX et non plus des PARTICULES ou des CONTENUS SEMANTIQUES qui se trouvent verrouillés.' (Delmas, *op. cit.*