Dissertation Abstract

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Creative prefixations and the prefix un-
– A cognitive linguistic analysis –

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I, The assignment and validity of the topic

The thesis examines several aspects of a sub-branch of English morphology/word-formation. Its main area of research is negative prefixation in English, specifically focusing on the creative aspects of prefixation and the *un*- prefix. Although in recent years there has been an increasing interest in cognitive linguistics in word-formation processes that have been routinely marginalized in traditional morphological literature, prefixation is still a somewhat neglected area. Main areas of research into creativity include e.g. lexical blends (Kemmer 2003), metaphorical and metonymical compounds (Benczes 2006). Such analyses have demonstrated that 1, a cognitive linguistic framework is a valid approach to account for word-formation processes and 2, instead of labelling such processes peripheral, they should be considered as everyday realisations of linguistic creativity. Negative prefixation is also an area displaying surprisingly flexible uses of both the prefixes and the stems. The resulting highly creative derivatives (with prefixation being the terminological variant for both the process and the resulting derivative) cannot be accounted for within a purely compositional framework. A schematic structure-based approach like that of Matthews (1974) is based on the assumption that the derivational process of e.g., happy → unhappy simply follows the schematic structure of \( X \rightarrow un + X \). As far as unhappy is concerned, there is no special interpretative effort required as long as we are aware of the schema (although meaning extensions already begin with unhappy, as well). However, such an approach focuses on the schematic structure of the end result of the derivational process. This means that the affixes are categorised as bound morphemes, representing the first element within a composite structure, exercising a modifying effect on the stem. This view is based on notions of isomorphism and compositionality; nevertheless, as a rule, it does not take into consideration certain semantic aspects concerning the meaning-making potential of prefixes.

This aspect calls for a more accommodating approach for their analysis within a cognitive linguistic framework. The term “creative prefixation” has been coined on the analogy of “creative compound” (Benczes 2006, 2010), used in reference to metaphorical and metonymical compounds (creative associations based on similarity, analogy or contiguity that exist between concepts). Creativity in prefixations is considered to be a cline, a continuum: the introduction of the term “creative” makes it necessary to place creative prefixations among a number of other borderline phenomena which display certain characteristics possibly in common with them. In other characteristics, however, they are different from them. At the same
time, it is also related to the question of to what extent – if at all – creative prefixations can be accounted for within a structuralist/descriptive/generativist framework. Creative examples such as unbook, which, although formed on the basis of the un + X pattern, is not just simply a “non-book”: it can be used to refer to a journal-like book that is used for writing and not for reading, or to content-free textbooks that anyone can edit via a website, whereas a non-book refers to a publication in a bookish format though, yet content-wise not fulfilling the expectations concerning a book. Such meanings would be difficult – if not impossible – to establish by relying on a purely compositional framework.

Cultural implications play a decisive role in the interpretation of creative un-prefixations: some examples reflect on changes in our technological environment, which brings along major cultural changes in our everyday lives, beginning from simple commands to a whole new set of expressions on social networking sites influencing and (especially for the younger generation) even defining interpersonal relationships (unfriend, unlike, unfollow etc.). Some other creative un-prefixations bring long-standing social institutions into play by questioning and extending our prototypical concepts: the use of un- sheds light on different sort of family relations and their connection with the prototype. Forms like unmarriage, unhusband, unmotherhood point out questions of acceptance and tolerance within society by raising issues concerning the prototype itself. Even the playful formations (unpink) might raise serious questions about gender roles. Politics and the workings of democratic institutions also puts forth problems which may be indicated by the use of un-, making us reconsider notions of what a politician, a candidate or an election is (by introducing un-politician, un-candidate and un-election). Un- opens up the possibility of naming a whole range of dietary options as well as police activities. It is most powerful in its potential to create hypothetical conditions and parallel worlds, forming concepts and shaping culture.

The question arises: why do speakers of English create these creative prefixations if the interpretation of these composite expressions requires much more cognitive “effort”, the expressions themselves are not transparent and in many cases one needs an enormous amount of pragmatic and cultural knowledge? The answer to the question is manifold: first of all, creative prefixations are very compactly evoking phenomena which need lengthy explanations and are occasionally sensitive from pragmatic and cultural aspects. E.g. unnuclear or unarrest refer to culturally and socially very deeply rooted phenomena, summarized in just one phrase. After such phrases are conceptualized and formulated, they might be recalled from the mental lexicon through entrenchment. Besides these culturally rooted conceptualizations we can often
attest the coinage of expressions naming concepts which either did not exist previously. Many online constructions (*unfriend, unlike, unfollow*) designate concepts which came into existence with the advent of social networking sites. On the other hand, creative prefixations are also created with the purpose of attention-seeking. In these cases they are meant to capture the attention of the readers/listeners.

In the followings, I introduce the theoretical background and the basic research questions, the material and the method of research. Afterwards the structure of the thesis is outlined.

II. The research questions of the thesis

The theoretical background is supplied by Cognitive Linguistics. In the cognitive view, language is a holistic, non-modular system based on emergent meanings. Cognitive grammar (LANGACKER 1987, 1991) represent language as a continuum: lexicon and grammar are not separated components of a language, its view on word-formation is not narrowed down to derivation. Complex structures are viewed as composite structures, in which the elements are motivating factors for the whole structure. The semantic aspects are crucial; linguistic phenomena are inseparable from social/cultural/cognitive conditions. The research builds on the results and findings of the cognitive view of morphology/word-formation, including certain pragmatic and lexicographic aspects as well.

In the analysis of creative prefixations and their placement among other word-formational processes, the following research questions have been formulated:

1. How do creative prefixations – despite their morphologically deviant character in terms of traditional categories – fill in conceptual gaps (with conceptual structure related to phonetic structure), facilitating a “finer partition of the world” (Horn 2002)?

2. In a network-based interpretational system, which senses of *un-* are featured in creative prefixations? (cf. Hamawand 2009: 72)

3. What is the relation between productivity and creativity in processes of creative prefixation?

4. Where can creative prefixations be placed in terms of lexicalisation?

5. How can the specifically creative aspect of prefixation be identified?
6. What are the cognitive processes involved in the interpretation of creative
prefixations?

7. What are the cultural aspects of creative prefixations, to what extent does
cultural context motivate their meaning?

8. How to place negative prefixation in the context of negation?

9. Are there any patterns and identifiable conceptual processes behind creative
prefixations?

10. To what extent is it possible to place creative prefixations within the wider
context of English word-formation?

III. The corpus and method of research

Our hypotheses that the lexicalised and creative examples represent a cline is supported by a
range of examples from different sources: 1, the already existing compilations of un-prefixation
examples (Horn 2002, 2005; Zimmer-Carson-Horn 2011) 2, examples from dictionaries and 3,
with the view of creativity advocated by this thesis – also reflect upon diachronic aspects, as
creativity does not equal neologisms.

From a methodological point of view, the thesis describes creative prefixations as
composite structures, with the cognitive mechanisms involved. The three most important
processes (frame-internal – frame-external negation, patterns based on prototype theory and
conceptual integration) are the driving force in interpreting the processes behind creative
prefixations, but there are several other cognitive processes involved in creative prefixations:
profiling, metonymy, metaphor and schematicity as well as epistemic and communicative
spaces.

IV. The structure of the thesis

The thesis comprises two main parts. Part I supplies the theoretical background behind creative
prefixations, Part II follows the three main classes of un-prefixations discussed (un-nouns, un-
verbs, un-adjectives) supplying an analytical framework for them.
Part I begins with an introductory chapter that highlights the scope of the thesis. It defines what creative prefixations are and the term “creative prefixation” is explained (1.4.1). The introductory examples are not confined to the prefix un- exclusively; examples with anti-, de- and non- are also mentioned, in fact, even a combining form as euro- is included for its creative potential. As creativity is conceived of here as a cline, and creative prefixations as an umbrella term, they need to be delineated from e.g. nonce formations and neologisms, with which they do share certain characteristics, but they are far from identical categories (1.4.2). To clarify this position, a creativity matrix is introduced with four interrelated categories, each of which might, but not necessarily has to be present in each and every creative prefixation (1.4.3). In a parallel fashion, productivity is also introduced as a matrix notion, as the thesis follows a qualitative view of productivity. Such a qualitative approach is similar to the previous matrix-view in terms of creativity, as the productivity matrix is also built on the interplay of different aspects: frequency (based on the number of attested examples) 2, regularity 3, creativity and 4, analogy. Creative prefixations do not display high frequency levels, but the creativity aspect is present in them to a high extent. Their schema (un + X) validates the aspect of regularity, yet the elements of the schema do not produce regular composite structures. This view of creativity is based on morphological patterns of productivity-regularity-frequency parallel with productivity-creativity-analogy, which two patterns are not exclusive, but rather help the positioning of the different patterns. Creative prefixations also highlight the dynamic aspects of productivity, as both the prefixes and the stems open up a number of possibilities – as floating concepts – introducing more and more interpretational variants (1.4.4). The question naturally arises: what are creative prefixations used for? Why do speakers of English create these creative prefixations is the interpretation of these composite expressions requires much more cognitive “work”, the expressions themselves are not transparent and in many cases one needs an enormous amount of pragmatic and cultural knowledge? The answer to the question is manifold, a number of possible answers are suggested (1.4.5). The last section of the introductory chapter (1.5) introduces some particularly relevant aspects of the cognitive linguistic theoretical framework that are shaping the treatment of word-formation in general, prefixation in particular in cognitive terms, introducing terms highly important for the analytic purposes in creative prefixations (e.g. METTINGER’S (1996) image schema theory or ROSCH’S (1978) prototype theory.

Chapter 2 aims to place the topic in a wider perspective through the discussion of a number of interconnected fields: the different positions within formal morphology (in
connection with the subdivisions in the field of morphology); classification problems pertaining to the notion of prefix; the presence or rather the lack of semantic aspects in the treatment prefixations. As prefixation is a derivational process, this very process and its implications are considered. The main argument of the following treatment of the topic focuses on prefixes fulfilling a much wider and lexically more relevant function than the majority of descriptive approaches suppose. In connection with this, the problematic nature of prefix categorisation is necessarily investigated. From the point of view of creative prefixations, the argumentation aims at a more independent, lexically and not purely grammatically based view of prefixes, as prefixes (with respect to our topic: negative prefixes) in creative prefixations do fulfill such a role. The chapter, therefore, looks at derivation from the point of view of creative prefixations, considering some inconsistencies and possibly borderline phenomena. The introduction of the traditional account of prefixation identifies different positions within formal morphology, reflecting upon classification problems in general and the notion of prefix in particular. In creative prefixation, the prefixes themselves fulfill a lexically more relevant function than it has been suggested by descriptive approaches; consequently prefix categorization is also investigated. Prefixation within formal morphology is discussed first (2.1), leading to the placement of derivation within morphology, as derivation is the framework prefixation is treated in traditionally (2.2). Prefix, however, turns out to be a complex notion, its categories and boundaries are covered (2.3). The problem and the presently prevalent view of prefixation is placed in the context of an interesting problem: the suffixing preference versus a comeback of the prefixes. This is pointedly not treated as a hypothesis here, neither the corpus nor the scope of the thesis would allow for such a proposition, however, it does contribute to multi-layered view of the category of prefix. This reasoning leads to an overview of the definitions, functions and limitations of prefix as a category (2.5) which is put into context by highlighting certain problems of categorization in general: the classical view as opposed to categories in Cognitive Linguistics.

In Chapter 3, some further crucial concepts are clarified. Besides derivation, the notion of compositionality serves as the second axis in the traditional treatment of prefixation. Prefixation as a derivational process is treated as the compositional process par excellence; however, even the semantically relatively transparent cases of prefixation display semantic inconsistencies questioning the full compositionality view. In a continuum-like perspective on prefixations, where creative prefixations show differing levels of semantic complexity, they might serve as examples against the full compositionality view, exemplifying the need for a
cognitively more plausible approach in their treatment. Versions of compositionality are introduced (3.1), referring back to Matthew’s basic schema for prefixation. Compositionality is reflected in some basic metaphors: the CONTAINER, the CONDUIT and the BUILDING BLOCK metaphors. The BUILDING BLOCK metaphor and its impact on how prefixation is still (largely) viewed leads to the discussion of problems concerning analysability and transparency. A notable example is mentioned with unhappy, a supposedly simple case of compositionality. *Unhappy* is more than the sum of *un* + *happy* as even the quoted dictionary examples (1, not happy 2, feeling worried or annoyed because you do not like what is happening in a particular situation 3, something that is not suitable, lucky or desirable e.g. *unhappy coincidence*). A cognitive solution is described (3.2), as the scaffolding metaphor offers a viable alternative. First: a composite word is not viewed as a construction made up of smaller components (as opposed to the starting point of the Building-Block hypothesis). Instead, the motivating function of the component parts is emphasized, highlighting selected facets of their meaning. LANGACKER (1987: 452) actually suggests a two-phase activation process: first the word as a whole is activated, reflecting certain aspects of the composite value. Any prefixation is first activated as a unit; secondarily its component parts are activated. In case of negative prefixations, the prefix highlights opposition while the base highlights action, with the composite structure asserting priority over its component structures. Second: in accordance with the general usage-based, process-oriented base of a cognitive approach, it is the language user who produces the above-mentioned construction. It is in this sense that we might view the component parts of a composite expression as mere scaffolding, meaning is a process, and morphology is seen as a way of conceptual composition. It also has the consequence that a composite word is a coherent structure in its own right, and its meaning is not derivable from the meanings of its components, as the additive view holds. Third: derivation should be viewed in terms of cognitive processes, predominantly in terms of categorisation, configuration and conceptualisation, paving the way for the different levels of creativity.

Chapter 4 introduces some major groups of models in the field of word-formation, proceeding to “unravelling the cognitive in word-formation” (ONYSKO and MICHEL 2010), arriving at specifically cognitive viewpoints in word-formation and prefixation, respectively. Certain aspects of word-formation are dealt with within the cognitive linguistic perspective, by making references and drawing parallels with different word-formation models (including formal approaches), and by exemplifying how general cognitive abilities influence and refine the understanding of the cognitive functions of word-formation processes, with the primary
focus being on prefixation. The treatment of \textit{un}-prefixation in the different models (generative-schema- and exemplar-based) serves as a starting point and context for prefixation in a cognitive approach: the relevance of schemas, part-whole relations and similarity relations are identified as decisive factors. Importantly, formal and cognitive approaches are not treated as incompatible in the field of word-formation. The modifier-head dichotomy is reflected upon by applying the notions of dependence and constituency. Finally, the cognitive/conceptual functions of prefixation are investigated (schemas, types of contrast and steps in the lexicalisation process).

The different word-formation models identified are 1, rule-based models 2, schema-based models 3, exemplar-based models and 4, exemplar-cum-schema models, of which the last model is advocated as fitting creative prefixations (4.1). Concerning the structure/motivatedness of prefixal elements, \textsc{Marchand}'s (1969) thematization with the determinatum-determinant relationship is crucial (4.2). Within this problem, the modifier-head/affix-stem dichotomy is elaborated (4.2.1). Turning to the cognitive view, two concepts are discussed: correspondence (4.2.2) and constituency (4.2.3). The coexistence and interdependence of the cognitive and the structuralist views are treated as “not incompatible” (\textsc{Onysko} and \textsc{Michel} 2010) in terms of word-formation (4.3). Further details of the cognitive viewpoint are treated with respect to the specifically cognitive functions of prefixation (4.4)

Together with \textsc{Schmid} (2010: 160-162) and \textsc{Ungerer} (2002: 554-556) the question has to be asked: what are the cognitive functions behind the existence of prefixation, and what use do speakers of English make of the existence of this word-formation pattern? On the basis of frequency of occurrence – importantly – one basic function of prefixation can be identified by all formal and semantic variants: the profiling of a contrast, namely to express the concept “different from X” (p. 160), with the function of prefixation being “to encode contrasts by lexical, rather than grammatical, means” (p. 160). Scalar contrasts are paraphrased by \textsc{Mettinger} (1994: 21) as “other than X”. Profiling such contrasts expresses a specific interpretation of the basic figure/ground distinction, and the “different from X” notion of contrast takes different forms depending on the semantic specification of the prefix.

Chapter 5 places the prefix \textit{un}- in historical context and investigates it in the light of previous approaches, therefore, the morphological framework of its expected usage, the actual patterns are identified. Creative prefixations are discussed against this horizon of existing morphological patterns and rules. A short historical introduction (5.1) is followed by some basic categorisation attempts, based on the work of \textsc{Marchand} (1969), \textsc{Adams} (2001), \textsc{Katamba}.
(1993) and PLAG (2003), with special emphasis on previous research into the combinatorial possibilities of prefix and base, as well as rule-breaking/rule-bending characteristics of creative composites. The differing viewpoints with respect to combinatorial possibilities have raised the question within the literature whether there is one un- prefix or there are several un- prefixes (5.2) which problem can be convincingly solved within a cognitive linguistic framework: Hamawand’s lexical network of prefix meanings is detailed, as it offers a solution and context in terms of prototypical and peripheral meanings (5.3). The context of negation needs to be reinterpreted with respect to prefixation (5.4). The semantic basis for prefix competition: composite structures with the same base but differing prefixes are explained with the concepts of domain and construal, resulting in further refining of conceptualization processes: non- vs un-: nonbooks/unbooks (5.5.1), de- vs un-: defriend/unfriend (5.5.2)

In Part II (consisting of Chapter 6 and 7) the actual creative prefixations are investigated, analysed and put into context. Chapter 6 is divided into three main parts introducing the three main areas of examples of un-prefixations. The first section gives an overview of the three most important theoretical pillars in the analysis of un-prefixations: frame-external – frame-internal negation, categorisation based on prototype and conceptual blending. Frame-external and frame-internal negation (FILLMORE 1985) is a principle underlying the negation/negativity aspect of un-prefixations; categorisation in terms of prototype is decisive in the classification of un-nouns; conceptual integration serves as the analytical basis for interpreting creative un-prefixations. The first subchapter investigates un-nouns (6.1), which in principle are the most “deviant”, yet – in terms of productivity– the most relevant as well. First their categories and the analytic framework is covered and three subclasses are formulated using prototype considerations: 1, “similar function – different structure” 2, “lack of function – similar structure” 3, “proper function – similar structure”(6.1.1). Un-nouns are explained as “a contradiction in itself”, according to traditional approaches (6.1.2). The following chapters (6.1.3 -6.1.9) cover different semantic variants of the above-mentioned three subclasses. The last subchapter covers aspects of productivity concerning un-nouns.

Un-verbs (6.2) are also analysed in terms of frame-external – frame-internal negation, where the presence of “subjunctive contexts” calls for conceptual integration. The first subchapter covers two main considerations with un-verbs: reversativity and accomplishment, highlighting the conceptual gaps these two aspects leave open (6.2.1) Frame-internal, frame-external and conceptual integration aspects are covered (6.2.2 – 6.2.4). The productivity of these forms in discussed in 6.2.5.
Un-adjectives (6.3) – though the least prominent category in terms of productivity – also point out the relevance of frames in the interpretive processes. Blocked or pre-empted un-adjective formations are mentioned first (6.3.1). The next subchapter covers some interesting examples of un-colour adjectives (6.3.2) as well as scalarity and concept-formation via un-attachment (6.3.3). Pseudo un-nouns are also mentioned in the next section, the last subchapter introducing aspects of productivity.

Chapter 7 is the Conclusions section, in Appendix 1 all the creative examples of the thesis are listed with their sources. Appendix 2 gives the list of possible meanings of the analysed creative examples and – whenever possible – supplies context of usage.

V. The results of the thesis

The thesis delineates and identifies the phenomenon of creative prefixation, which means both the process and the resulting composite structure. It places such formations among categories of traditional morphological descriptions, implying their insufficiency. The identification and analysis of creative prefixations proves 1, the viability of the cognitive approach in areas of word-formation 2, the applicability of cognitive linguistic methodology in the treatment of these composite structures. The analyses rest on three main theoretical pillars, with a number of other cognitive linguistic concepts also involved. Moreover, such an approach allows us to uncover some aspects of the complex relations between language and cultural/pragmatic implications.

References

Publications on the topic:


