

Zeki Hamawand, *The Semantics of English Negative Prefixes*

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Introduction

The Semantics of English Negative Prefixes attempts a detailed synchronic analysis of English complex words with affixes expressing negative meanings in the framework of Cognitive Semantics and Usage-based Semantics. Zeki Hamawand defines morphology as the study of meaning and employs pivotal conceptions and mechanisms of cognitive approaches to language. Specifically, extending his previous analyses of adjective formation and noun formation (Hamawand 2007, 2008), he identifies three dimensions in the meanings of individual suffixes and applies different cognitive conceptions to each dimension: categorization and semantic networks to define and associate multiple meanings of each suffix; cognitive domains to describe the semantic similarity of different suffixes; and construal to differentiate the nuances of synonymous suffixes.

This ambitious attempt should be highly acclaimed for its carefully worked-out theoretical compatibility between cognitive mechanisms and phenomena they are applied to, and for demonstrating the effectiveness of a cognitive approach to morphology. Unfortunately, however, the analyses seem to have problems in the treatment of data and ascription of semantic properties.

In the following, after briefly sketching each chapter, I will make an evaluation of the book.

Chapter 1 Negation

This chapter presents an outline of the issues of prefixal negation. Hamawand claims the semantic description of negative prefixation has to address three issues mentioned above: polysemy, synonymy, and semantic differentiation between synonyms. After a brief critical review of previous research, he introduces his new system which incorporates mechanisms of Cognitive Semantics and Usage-based Semantics, which is detailed in Chapters 3 to 5.

Chapter 2 Derivation

This chapter displays the theoretical background of his research. Against the “building-

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block” conception assumed in a formal approach to morphology, the author views component structures as motivating conceptual patterns—schemas—through actual language use, which enables profiling an overall composite structure as a unified whole as well as its distinct component building blocks.

Also over full compositionality assumed in a formal view, the author opts for partial compositionality, which integrates pragmatic knowledge as well as semantic content of the components in understanding a composite word.

Thus, couched in cognitive semantic terms, morphology is about identifying semantic “principles that allow the speaker to associate the linguistic elements and enable him/her to choose the appropriate morpheme to match with a given situation” (p. 32). This view is shared by other cognitive linguists such as Taylor (2002: 282), who regards morphological analysis as “a matter of whether a given form shares commonalities [...] with other forms in the language” and “creating a complex form” as a question “of creating a form in accordance with existing constructional schemas.”

Chapter 3 Category

The next three chapters present in-depth semantic analyses of negative prefixation and each chapter focuses on a separate distinct pivotal axis: categorization, domain, and construal.

Categorization pertains to the syntagmatic relationships in the complex word. After indicating the problems of previous studies in providing a principled account of such issues as polysemy and difference in saliency among multiple meanings, the author divides negative prefixes into primary and secondary, employing prototype theory. Primary negative prefixes are comprised of *a(n)-*, *de-*, *dis-*, *in-*, *non-*, and *un-*, whereas secondary negative prefixes, which connote, rather than express, negation, consist of *ab-*, *anti-*, *contra-*, *counter-*, *mal-*, *mis-*, *pseudo-*, *quasi-*, *semi-*, *sub-*, and *under-*. The meanings of each of these prefixes are further divided into prototypical and peripheral meanings.

The description of each item begins with brief information on its origin, productivity, and class-changing ability, followed by a detailed semantic explanation, and concludes with its lexical network.

As an example of this analysis, *un-* is prototypically attached to adjectival bases and means “distinction,” which comprises three semantic variants. First, it describes humans, referring to the antithesis of the meaning of the base, as in *unfair*, *unkind*, and *unlucky*. Second, it describes non-humans, meaning “distinct from what is specified by adjectival base,” as in *unsafe*, *unclear*, and *unclean*. Third, attached to participles ending with *-ing* and *-ed*, it means “not subjected to what is specified by adjectival base,” as in *undressed*, *uneducated*, and *unfinished*.

By contrast, peripherally, *un-* expresses the following meanings. First, when tied to action verbs, it means “inverting what is specified by the verbal base [*sic*],” as in *unclose*,

unsettle, and *undo*. Second, when attached to concrete nouns, it means “taking away what is specified by the nominal base,” as in *unchain*, *unload*, and *unhook*. Third, when used with abstract nouns, it means “bereft of what is specified by the nominal base,” as in *unrest*, *untruth*, and *unsuccess*.

The lexical meanings of each affix which have been discussed unsystematically in the literature are presented in a well-organized fashion, as illustrated above.

Chapter 4 Domain

The second axis is concerned with the paradigmatic relation of the negatively affixed words. In view of the insufficiencies of previous semantic theories that refer to “purely” linguistic meaning in differentiating precise lexical meanings, Hamawand opts for an encyclopedic theory of meaning involving cognitive domains. Domains are knowledge structure of mental experiences against which lexemes are used and understood. In addition to DEGRADATION and INADEQUACY, which are explained as an illustration of the analysis earlier in Chapters 1 and 2, respectively, and not discussed in this chapter, he identifies six domains of negation: DISTINCTION, OPPOSITION, PRIVATION, REMOVAL, REVERSAL, and TREATMENT. Each domain is further divided into subdomains, called facets, encoded by different negative prefixes. The following defines each domain and displays its facets (in boldface), prefixes, and their examples (in the parentheses) that represent the domain:

DISTINCTION: contrast or dissimilarity between two entities or their properties: **plans**, *non-* (*non-appearance*, *non-essential*); **features**, *a-* (*aseptic*, *atypical*); **attitudes**, *dis-* (*dishonest*, *disloyal*); **properties**, *un-* (*unclean*, *unusual*); **situations**, *in-* (*inappropriate*, *irregular*).

OPPOSITION: opposing something verbally or physically: **attitude**, *anti-* (*anti-immigration*, *anti-body*, *anti-missile*); **action**, *counter-* (*counter-attack*, *counter-offensive*); **comparison**, *contra-* (*contradistinction*, *contraposition*).

PRIVATION: the relation between two entities in which one suffers from the absence of something, usually not positive: **things**, *de-* (*debase*, *deform*); **people**, *dis-* (*dishonour*, *disfavour*); **situations**, *un-* (*unhealth*, *unwisdom*).

REMOVAL: taking away of something, getting rid of something, or changing the position of someone: **things**, *de-* (*degrease*, *defrost*); **people**, *dis-* (*disarm*, *disrobe*); **objects**, *un-* (*uncurl*, *unload*).

REVERSAL: the relationship between two entities which witness a change from one state to its opposite: **things**, *de-* (*decipher*, *deforest*); **people**, *dis-* (*discredit*, *disinherit*); **objects**, *un-* (*unlock*, *unscrew*).

TREATMENT: a way of behaving towards or dealing with a person or thing: **non-intention**, *mis-* (*misconstrue*, *mishit*, *misbehaviour*); **intention**, *mal-* (*malpractice*, *malnourished*).

As an example, *un-* is analyzed as being used to designate multiple domains of DISTINCTION (*unclean, untidy, unusual*), referring to “properties,” PRIVATION (*unhealth, unpeace, unwisdom*), referring to “situations,” REMOVAL (*uncurl, unload*), referring to “objects,” and REVERSAL (*unlock, unscrew, uncurl*), referring to “objects.”

As illustrated above, while semantic oppositions of negative prefixes have been discussed in the literature as dichotomy, such as between *un-* and *non-*, or as ternary, such as among *un-*, *non-*, and *in-*, the author takes a different view, focusing on how an identical domain can be expressed by different prefixes.

Chapter 5 Construal

Hamawand claims that the difference between items sharing the same base involves the speaker’s communicative intent and has to do with different ways of construal.

Construal is explained as functioning both within and across cognitive domains. The difference in construal is demonstrated by a pair of example sentences considered to highlight it and bear support from collocational patterns.

As an example from intra-domain opposites, let us look at differences between *un-* and other prefixes that designate DISTINCTION and observe what minute semantic nuances emerge through a comparison with them.

Non- is considered to envisage an entity as being quite different from others, thus having an objective meaning. Compared with *non-*, *un-* expresses antithesis and involves a comparison of an entity as related to another, thus conveying an evaluative meaning. The contrast can be seen in *non-professional* and *unprofessional*.

A- is regarded as meaning divergence and profiling irregularity of the thing designated by the base, thus implying that it is bad but normal. In comparison, *un-* that expresses antithesis profiles deviant properties of the process described by the base, thus implying that it is both bad and odd. The difference is claimed to be observed in the contrast between *atypical times* vs. *untypical female crime*.

Dis- is defined as meaning “the converse of the quality signified by the adjectival base” and as “show[ing] distinction in medial degree” in this case, drawing “attention to only the necessary information in the contrast.” In this connection, *un-* that refers to antithesis is argued to highlight the distinction above the medial area and to “shed light on some of the information in the contrast.” The difference in construal is claimed to reside in the contrast between *disinterested*, meaning “impartial,” and *uninterested*, signifying “showing no interest.”

In- “underscores contrast that lies at the end of the scale,” and is used to convey the message that the designated action profiled is impossible to do. By comparison, *un-* arguably does not profile the middle degree on the scale and “concentrates on less detail in highlighting the contrast. It carries the message that the action profiled is in a state that is possible but difficult to do.” The difference is illustrated by the contrast between

immeasurable, which means “too vast to measure” and *unmeasurable*, which means “cannot be calculated by any known measure or scale.”

Next, as an example of inter-domain opposition, in which suffixes representing different domains are attached to the same base, let us consider, first, the contrast between *ungraded degree* and *degraded people*. *Un-*, which represents DISTINCTION and expresses antithesis, is used with nouns referring to positions. On the other hand, *de-*, which evokes REVERSAL, is viewed as meaning “reversing the action described by the nominal base” and as being used to refer to people or their performances.

Lastly, observe the pair *unqualified* and *disqualified*. In this case, *un-* represents PRIVATION and *dis-* evokes REVERSAL. *Un-* is reported as profiling people or their deeds, while *dis-* is regarded as envisaging external force in a reversing action, illustrated in the following example (p. 147):

- (1) a. He was totally unqualified for his job as a senior manager.
- b. He was disqualified from the competition for using drugs.

As illustrated above, minute semantic differences are treated systematically as emerging from the differences in (the facets of) domains evoked by individual affixes.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

This chapter summarizes the discussion of the preceding chapters with useful tables that neatly bring together the information and properties presented there.

Evaluation

Theoretically, identifying three dimensions in meanings and applying different cognitive conceptions and mechanisms to each dimension seems to work well for demonstrating the validity of a cognitive approach to the morphological study. Descriptively, categorizing and organizing lexical meanings of affixes are plausible. In addition, domains are identified in a fine-grained manner than previous classification, for instance, by Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1689–90), who speak of “negation,” “reversal,” “removal,” and “opposition.”

However, examining the analyses in each axis exhibits some insufficiencies and problems. The most serious theoretical drawback is that although he advocates a usage-based approach and emphasizes the importance of frequency and context in the actual use, Hamawand does not provide any statistics and contextual information. This drawback undermines the credibility of his proposal in many respects. First, it is concerned with identifying a prototype. He exhibits factors that contribute to defining a central sense (p. 58) among multiple meanings of individual negative suffixes. However, how he actually distinguishes the prototype from peripheral meanings remains totally unclear. Providing

data-based evidence could have substantiated his analysis.

Lack of statistical evidence also impairs the validity of domain identification and construal oppositions. Sense identification is claimed to receive support from actual usage in context, which is argued to be reflected in collocational patterns. However, the author merely enumerates words that co-occur with the item in question without offering any frequency data, which would provide crucial support on the issue. For example, he maintains that *non-* “describe[s] non-technical features of things,” and that *non-essential* expresses this sense when collocating with words like *goods, items, products, services, workers*, etc. (p. 101). However, it is not clear, even by looking at the collocates, in what sense *non-* refers to the facets claimed by the author. Just for reference, a search of the Corpus of Contemporary American English (<<http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>> accessed August 31, 2011) shows *non-essential* most frequently collocates with *personnel*, which is not listed in the book and whose relation with “non-technical feature of things” is obscure.

In addition, example sentences, which have no source information, are not presented as they occur in the text, but are rendered “user-friendly” and some of them “are made more concise” (p. 12). I understand the author’s intention but I am not certain if this kind of modification really suits a usage-based analysis.

To briefly mention insufficiencies and problems in specific analyses, in relation to prototype, the author does not provide motivations for the semantic extensions between the prototype and extensions, as well as fails to explain motivations between extensions.

As for domains, one finds arbitrary definitions in identifying facets in a domain. For example, as shown above, the domains of REMOVAL and REVERSAL are claimed to involve facets concerned with “things” and “objects,” but the difference is not elaborated, thus the validity of the facet identification remains unconvincing.

Regarding construal, some characterizations do not seem to exhibit sufficient precision. For instance, *atypical times* we observed earlier should be an example of *atypical* that means “bad but normal,” but here it seems to mean “abnormal.” Likewise, *dis-* is claimed to “show distinction in medial degrees” and “draw attention to only the necessary information in the context.” By contrast, *un-* is argued to “highlight the distinction above the medial area” and “shed light on some of the information in the contrast.” However, how the specific construals are brought about from their lexical meanings is not elaborated.

Some further points that may be errata: the words *dishearten* and *uncurl* are classified as designating REMOVAL (p. 112) and REVERSAL (p. 115): *devalue* in the example (17) (p. 142) has to be compared not with *disvalue* but with *unvalue*.

Another type of drawback is overlapping explanation observed in the text. This book presents an extremely lucid argument, partly owing to the basically parallel organization of each chapter and its (sub-)sections. On the other hand, a drawback in the organization of this book resides in frequent repetition of description. For example, the application of pivotal tenets, before being detailed in Chapters 3 to 5, is repeatedly discussed and illustrated in 1.3.3, 1.4.1, and 2.3.2.1. Further, the explanations are summarized at the end of

Chapters 1 and 2. This may reflect the author's emphasis on providing the reader with a clear picture of his approach, but it seems to have gone too far.

Lastly, I have to mention the author's contradictory attitudes toward some previous work. While he criticizes dictionaries in their limitation to the explication of the meanings of negative prefixes (pp. 4–5), he states that he used them in defining the difference in construals in Chapter 5 (p. 12), as well as that he used previous work for giving paraphrases to the meanings of prefixes in Chapters 3 to 5.

In conclusion, this is an ambitious enterprise to present a comprehensive cognitive analysis of negative prefixes, and although theoretical application of cognitive conceptions and mechanisms are carefully worked out, it could be more substantiated by presenting statistical data and elaborating on the above-mentioned insufficiencies.

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