

TO BE, OR TO UNBE – THAT IS THE QUESTION:
EXPLORING THE PRAGMATIC NATURE OF THE UN-VERBS
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ABSTRACT

The following contribution is part of an ongoing investigation (Fruttaldo 2017, forthcoming) and will focus on a particular class of verbs, which in the literature has been defined as the class of the *un*-verbs. Nowadays, this class of verbs is in continuous evolution as more and more verbs can be preceded by the prefix *un-* (Cordisco 2011; Zimmer *et al.* 2011). Therefore, through a corpus-based analysis (McEnery *et al.* 2006; McEnery and Hardie 2012), we will try to offer some generalisations on the semantic and pragmatic nature of this class of verbs. In order to achieve this purpose, our investigation focuses on the analysis of a corpus of the main sections of Facebook, Google+ and Myspace's Help Centres. The corpus has been analysed through the online corpus analysis tool Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff *et al.* 2004; Kilgarriff *et al.* 2014), which has allowed us to investigate the specific occurrences of the *un*-verbs found in our corpus and draw given generalisations on their linguistic behaviour.

KEY WORDS: un-verbs, n-verbs, prefix un-, corpus linguistics, social media, pragmatics

Resumen

En el presente trabajo se presenta un estudio preliminar (Fruttaldo 2017, en prensa) de una clase particular de verbos, que en la literatura se ha definido como la clase de los *un-verbs*. Hoy en día, esta clase de verbos está en continua evolución, ya que más y más verbos pueden ser precedidos por el prefijo *un-* (Cordisco 2011; Zimmer *et al.* 2011). Por lo tanto, a través de un análisis cuantitativo de un corpus (McEnery *et al.* 2006; McEnery y Hardie 2012), trataremos de ofrecer algunas generalizaciones cualitativas sobre la naturaleza semántica y pragmática de esta clase de verbos. Para lograr este objetivo, nuestra investigación se centra en el análisis de un corpus de las secciones principales de los centros de ayuda en línea de Facebook, Google+ y Myspace. El corpus ha sido analizado a través del instrumento en línea para el análisis de corpora Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff *et al.* 2004; Kilgarriff *et al.* 2014), que nos ha permitido investigar las ocurrencias específicas de los *un-verbs* encontrados en nuestro corpus y sacar generalizaciones sobre su comportamiento lingüístico.

PALABRAS CLAVE: un-verbs, prefijo un-, lingüística de corpus, medios de comunicación social, pragmática

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE UN-WORLD²⁰

Most dictionaries provide two entries for the prefix *un-*. *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* (Random House 1983), for instance, defines *un*⁻¹ as “a prefix meaning ‘not’, freely used as an English formative, giving negation or opposite force in adjectives and their derivative adverbs and nouns”; and it defines *un*⁻² as “a prefix used in English to form verbs expressing a reversal of some action or state, or removal, deprivation, release, etc.”.

The fact that most English dictionaries provide a double entry for the prefix *un-* (see also Oxford English Dictionary 2012) has an etymological reason. Indeed, according to Skeat’s *Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (1882), the *un-* that precedes adjectives and nouns derives from the German *un-*, cognate with Latin *in-* and Greek *α(ν)-*, while the *un-* that precedes verbs stems from the Old English *on(d)-*, cognate with German *ent-* and Greek *anti-*.

1. THE DYADIC AND UNITARY APPROACH TO THE UN-VERBS

The different etymology of the *un-* preceding adjectives and nouns, and the *un-* preceding verbs leads Jespersen (1917) to distinguish between a negative *un-* (e.g., ‘unfortunate’) and a privative *un-* (e.g., ‘undress’), arguing that “[t]he two prefixes are now different through stress, the negative words having even and the privative end stress” (Jespersen 1917: 148), a difference that is quite undetectable, since prefixes generally do not change the stress of the word they attach to.

Even though in analysing the prefix *un-* Marchand (1969) distinguishes between an “*un-/ʌn/* (type unfair)” and an “*un-/ʌn/* (type unbind)”, he proposes an interesting explanation for the development of the second type of the prefix. Indeed, according to the author, “the [Old English] prefix *on-* had come to be felt connected with the negative prefix *un-* [...] [as the] idea of negativity is common to both” (Marchand 1969: 153). In this sense, “what distinguishes *unbound* ‘not bound’ from *unbound* ‘loosened’ is only the additional idea of an action preceding the state of being loosened, but the state itself is the same” (Marchand 1969: 153). This merger between the two forms, according to Marchand (1969), had begun in the past participles of verbs, which could be either used as an adjective or as the perfective form of verbs. In this fuzzy area of language, due to the idea of negativity common to both prefixes, speakers began to extend the use of the *un-* in the areas specific to *on(d)-*.

Marchand’s theory, however, does not resolve the dichotomy between the two *uns*-. If the two prefixes had merged since they both shared a common negative core, why keep two separate entries for the very same prefix?

²⁰The author would like to express his deepest gratitude to his research supervisor, Professor Giuditta Caliendo (University of Lille), for her patient guidance, enthusiastic encouragement and useful critiques. The author would also like to extend his thanks to Professor Salvatore Musto (University of Naples Federico II) who taught him the most important thing that professors can teach to their students, that is, doubts.

Maynor (1979), on the other hand, offers an answer to this question. According to her, it cannot be denied that 'unlikely' simply means 'not likely', while 'undress' denotes something more than 'not dress'. However, the difference between these two words is not due to phonologically identical but semantically different prefixes: the difference between these two words is due to the semantics of the base. Indeed, Maynor (1979: 311) argues that:

In both of the *uns* a reversal is involved, whether it is the reversal of a condition (*unlikely* as opposed to *likely*) or of an action (*undress* as opposed to *dress*). The morpheme *un* indicates the state of being opposite or contrary to the element to which it is prefixed.

Thus, the morpheme *un-*, according to Maynor (1979), simply indicates oppositeness either with adjectives and nouns or with verbs. Andrews (1986) shares with Maynor the same unitary approach to the phenomenon.

The problem with Andrews (1986) and Maynor's (1979) point of view is that, as stated by Horn (2002: 13), "without a semantics of oppositeness or antonymy that generalizes across verbs, adjectives and nouns, their one-*un* position represents more a promise than an analysis".

1.1. WHORF'S APPROACH TO THE *UN*-VERBS

One of the very first linguists or, better, ethnolinguists, who came across the phenomenon of the *un*-verbs is Whorf (1962). In the various examples of cryptotypes, he includes "[...] transitive verbs of a covering, enclosing, and surface-attaching meaning, the reactance of which is that UN- may be prefixed to denote the opposite" (Whorf 1962: 71).

Horn (1988; 2002), however, does not completely share this view, because according to him "Whorf's characterization of the relevant cryptotype for *un*-verbs [...] is too restrictive to deal with lexicalized and especially novel *un*-verbs" (Horn 2002: 18). In fact, many of the *un*-verbs excluded by Whorf are, indeed, attested, such as the verb 'unbreak' in the song by Toni Braxton, *Unbreak my Heart* (1996).²¹ Another example of a verb excluded by Whorf but which is, indeed, attested in the English language is the verb 'unheat', which was found in the following example:

(1) The system has to stop while it unheats.²²

As for the other *un*-verbs excluded by Whorf and which, nonetheless, are attested, Horn (2002: 18) hypothesises that "the advent of modern technology since 1936 (when Whorf wrote his paper) – in particular the Rewind button and the toggle-erase key on computer

²¹ Another example of the verb 'unbreak' comes from the title of a blog entry, *The cosmic egg unbreaks itself*, by an anonymous Internet user (available online at <http://aflaminghalo.blogspot.de/2005/06/cosmic-egg-unbreaks-itself.html>; last accessed: December 24, 2016).

²² Gookin, D. (2005), *Troubleshooting Your PC For Dummies* (2nd edn.). Indianapolis, Indiana: Wiley Publishing Inc., p. 365.

keyboards – has widened the net of possible *un*-bases for the post-Whorfian generations”.

1.2. DOWTY'S APPROACH TO THE SEMANTICS OF THE *UN*-VERBS

The peculiar behaviour of the *un*-verbs caught the attention of Dowty (1979), who deals for the first time with the specific classes of verbs that can occur with this prefix.

Indeed, Dowty (1979: 257, emphasis in the original) states that “reversative *un*- attaches *only* to (transitive) accomplishment verbs, and *all* instances of verbs with *un*- are accomplishment verbs [...]”. Dowty (1979) draws this distinction on Vendler's (1967) analysis of the categories of verbs, and thus, by accomplishment verbs he refers to Vendler's (1967) definition of this category of verbs.

The problem with this hypothesis is that there are a number of verbs that can be regarded as non-accomplishment but that, nonetheless, combine with the prefix *un*-.

One of the exceptions to Dowty's (1979) hypothesis is, for instance, the verb ‘unknow’, whose “citations typically involve a context in which *unknow* is directly set off against *know*” (Horn 1988: 213):

(2) Unless I might unknow what I have come to know.²³

(3) To awaken the conscious self to the principle of the whole or Tao one needs to forget oneself, so that in knowing one unknows.²⁴

1.3. HORN'S LEXICAL HYPOTHESIS ON THE *UN*-VERBS

While advocating a separate lexical entry for the negative prefix *un*- and the reversative prefix *un*-, Horn (1988) does not simply rely on a diachronic assumption for the distinction between these two forms but offers an interesting motivation for this basic distinction.

Indeed, Horn (1988: 212) states that “[o]nly the ‘internal’, state-reversing reading allows a coherent view of the semantics of *un*-verbs”. Horn (1988), by giving an internal negative structure of the *un*-verbs, is suggesting that the difference between the negative and the reversative *un*- can be found in the internal or external nature of the negation. Both negative and reversative *un*- share a basic meaning of negation. The negative *un*-, however, realizes this negation externally, and so it does not affect the internal structure of the adjective or noun it attaches to: the only consequence is a negative nuance. The reversative *un*-, on the other hand, affects the internal structure of the verb, giving that sense of reversal to the states of affairs it describes, whereas it provides nothing but a negation of the result that has been brought about by the base verb.

²³ Taylor, I. (1859), *Logic in theology and other essays*. New York, NY: William Gowans.

²⁴ Jackson, W.J. (2004), *Heaven's fractal net: Retrieving lost visions in the humanities: Volume 1*. Indiana: Indiana University Press, p. 205.

Horn's analysis, however, may be seen as unsatisfactory. Indeed, even though he offers a series of counter-examples in order to rebut Dowty (1979) and Whorf's (1962) analyses of the *un*-verbs, he does not provide a new aspectual analysis of the predicates that can be preceded by the prefix *un*-. Additionally, Horn does not offer a valid generalisation that can explain the semantic and pragmatic nature of the *un*-verbs.

2. CORPUS COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The Internet most certainly has accelerated the processes of linguistic change of the English language. This is especially so for the lexicon and word-formation processes, and *un*-verbs are the most productive phenomena that have been emerging in the language of the Internet (Cordisco 2011; Zimmer *et al.* 2011).

This particular word-formation process seems to have found its "*locus classicus*" in the "*undo* command in computing systems, presaged by a 1976 research report observing that 'it would be quite useful to permit users to 'take back' at least the immediately preceding command (by issuing some special 'undo' command)'" (Zimmer *et al.* 2011: 356). Time has passed, and the family of the 'undo' commands has been spreading all over computer systems and, in particular, in the world of social media platforms, which offer users the possibility to undo every single action they have performed. Thus, 'friending' on Facebook can be reversed by the 'unfriend' button, and if someone tags a friend in a photo, they can be 'untagged', whereas on Twitter one may 'untweet' a post that has been tweeted or one may 'unsubscribe' from users they have been following, thus 'unfollowing' them (Cordisco 2011).²⁵

Collected in November 2012, our corpus includes the main sections of Facebook, Google+ and Myspace's Help Centres. The corpus was then uploaded on the online corpus analysis tool Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff *et al.* 2004; Kilgarriff *et al.* 2014), which was used as our primary analysis tool for this investigation.

Table 1 below lists all the occurrences of the *un*-verbs retrieved in our corpus:

TABLE 1. Number of total occurrences of *un*-verbs in our corpus.

UN-VERBS	NUMBER OF OCCURRENCES
unsubscribe*	41
uncheck*	31
unfriend*	30
unblock*	27
uninstall*	20
unlike*	15
undo*	12

²⁵ The author of this contribution adopts the use of the singular 'they' when referring to antecedents that are grammatically singular in order to neither reinforce nor perpetuate any form of gender binarism.

UN-VERBS	NUMBER OF OCCURRENCES
untick*	11
unhide*	8
unpublish*	6
unfollow*	5
unlock*	5
untag*	5
unselect*	4
unpin*	3
unmerge*	2
unmute*	2
unpause*	2
unsend*	2
unzip*	2
TOTAL: 233	

As we can see, one of the most frequent *un*-verbs is 'unfriend' (13% of occurrences), while 'undo' seems to rank low (only 5.2%). The low occurrences of the *un*-verb 'undo' can be explained by the simple fact that, due to the increasing number of *un*-verbs, the hypernymic reversal verb 'undo' seems to be put aside in favour of more specific *un*-verbs.

2.1. LEXICAL REPRESENTATION OF AN *UN*-VERB

As the literature on the *un*-verbs has repeatedly underlined, verbs that can be preceded by the prefix *un*- are generally telic predicates or predicates that contextually visualise an end point. Hence, according to this remark, we can argue that, *for the occurrence of a predicate preceded by the prefix un-, the base verb must be a telic predicate, or there must be an end point in the linguistic environment in which it occurs.*

This observation is based on the analysis of the following examples found in our corpus, which are logically deconstructed (Van Valin and LaPolla 1997) in Table 2:

TABLE 2. *Aktionsart* types found in the corpus that can be preceded by the prefix *un*-.

AKTIONSTYPES	EXAMPLES	LOGICAL STRUCTURES
<i>Accomplishments</i>	The lake unfroze. ²⁶	BECOME NOT <i>frozen</i> '(lake)
<i>Causative accomplishments</i>	If you need to escalate the issue, you can unfriend or block the person.	[<i>do</i> '(you, Ø)] CAUSE [BECOME NOT <i>be-in</i> '(friend list, person)]
<i>Causative active accomplishments</i>	If you've never been tagged in a photo on Facebook or have	[<i>do</i> '(you, Ø)] CAUSE [<i>do</i> '(you, [<i>tag</i> '(you)))] & BECOME NOT <i>tagged</i> '(photos, you)

²⁶ An example of non-causative accomplishment was not found in our corpus. This is due to the fact that *un*-verbs seem to have a highly agentive subject (Horn 2002, 2012) and, thus, they are generally found in transitive constructions. This example was, thus, created *ad hoc* in order to show that this class of verbs can be perfectly combined with the prefix *un*-.

AKTIONSARTTYPES	EXAMPLES	LOGICAL STRUCTURES
	untagged yourself in all photos of you on Facebook [...].	
Achievements	[...] you should see Facebook Chat with a tick next to it, just click on it and it will untick. ²⁷	INGR NOT <i>ticked'</i> (Facebook Chat)
Causative achievements	To hide this section on your profile, untick the 'show people in' box.	[<i>do'</i> (you, Ø)] CAUSE [INGR NOT <i>ticked'</i> (box)]

Our observation, however, seems, on the one hand, too inclusive, so to speak, given its potential to encompass all the verbs that belong to the *Aktionsart* types seen in Table 2. On the other hand, it cannot help us understand why some state verbs, for instance, can be preceded by the prefix *un-*, given their atelic nature.

The shortcomings of this remark are due to the fact that semantics alone cannot explain the phenomenon of the *un-*verbs. This is the reason why we must now turn our attention to pragmatics, which will help us better understand the mechanisms that lie at the very basis of the formation of an *un-*verb.

2.2. EXPLORING THE PRAGMATIC NATURE OF THE *UN-*VERBS

The pragmatic value of the *un-*verbs seems to be that it cognitively describes to the recipient a previous state of affairs that is, in turn, negated by the semantics of the prefix *un-*. In general, negation is in itself a deictic reference to something that was already uttered (Eco and Violi 1987; Fairclough 1992). This previously given piece of information is once again offered to the hearer in order for an element of negation to be added.

Generally speaking, verbs convey new information (Van Valin and LaPolla 1997) and are, therefore, usually regarded as focal elements in the information structure of a sentence. However, when dealing with the *un-*verbs, we can hypothesise that they can be regarded as focal elements conveying a topical nuance, given their reference to a previous state of affairs (i.e., the topical reference) that is now negated by the speaker (i.e., the focal information).

It can be argued that this pragmatic aspect of the *un-*verbs may be incompatible with our previous observation, which allows only telic predicates to be preceded by the prefix *un-*. However, we must underline that this is just an apparent incompatibility. Indeed, as Piaget (in McShane and Whittaker 1983: 416) explains, "a symbolic capacity can be inferred when the action and its 'stimulus' are separated in time". Thus, the fact that telic verbs can be perfectly combined with the prefix *un-* is due to the fact that the *télos*, inherent in the predicate or circumstantial (Van Valin and LaPolla 1997), separates the actual

²⁷ As for accomplishments, an example of non-causative achievements was not found either in our corpus. Again, this is due to the fact that *un-*verbs have a highly agentive subject (Horn 2002, 2012) and, thus, they are generally found in transitive constructions. This example was found on the Internet (available online at <http://uk.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20110410105738AAmCxNc>; last accessed: December 24, 2016).

happening of the state of affairs from the time when the proposition is uttered by the speaker. This separation in time provides the prefix *un-* with a previously uttered and/or presupposed piece of information the speaker negates. This is the reason why telicity and the fact that the prefix *un-* conveys given information are perfectly compatible.

However, we have so far discussed what the necessary pragmatic conditions are for the prefix *un-* to occur, although no mention was made to the delicate relationship between speaker and recipient.

In the light of the above observations, no restriction was made on the classes of accomplishments, causative accomplishments, causative active accomplishments, achievements and causative achievements, and no explanation on why state verbs can occur with the prefix *un-* was offered. However, we shall soon see that the key ingredient in this *un-*recipe is the recipient itself.

In order to understand this, we would like to offer a second observation on the nature of the *un-*verbs drawn from the analysis of our corpus on the occurrence of a predicate preceded by the prefix *un-*: *enough knowledge must be shared between the speaker and the recipient for the latter to retrieve from the linguistic environment the inferred information negated by the prefix un-*.

Drawing on Grice's (1975) principle of cooperation, this observation is, additionally, a useful constraint on the occurrence of a predicate preceded by the prefix *un-*. Indeed, only *un-*verbs that are mutually regarded as referring to a previously given piece of information can be accepted by both the speaker and the recipient. Thus, if the previously given piece of information can be either retrieved by the context or by a non-'expensive' process of logical inferencing, the *un-*verb can be regarded as perfectly grammatical by both the speaker and the recipient. However, if the previously given piece of information cannot be either retrieved by the context or by an 'economic' process of logical inferencing, the *un-*verb can be regarded as ungrammatical. This ungrammaticality is due to the fact that the recipient cannot access the piece of information inferred by the speaker and, thus, communication between the speaker and the recipient fails.

Given our previous observations on the nature of the predicates preceded by the prefix *un-*, we can now support a unified approach to this prefix, thus, rebutting the distinction between the *un-* that precedes adjectives and nouns, and the *un-* that precedes verbs. Indeed, in line with Horn (1988), we can now state that the prefix *un-* is, in general, a negative prefix. However, when *un-* precedes an adjective or a noun, their semantic value is negated, while when it precedes a verb, its pragmatic value is negated. In other words, in the case of adjectives and nouns, the negative value of the prefix *un-* is external, due to the fact that their semantics alone offers all the information that is needed for their interpretation, while their pragmatic value is given by other elements (i.e., definite / indefinite articles, pronouns, etc.). In the case of verbs, on the other hand, the information that they convey is negated and, thus, it is their pragmatic, more internal value that is negated by the prefix *un-*.

The only exception to this last remark can be represented by state verbs. However, their incompatibility with our observations is only apparent. In fact, in the case of state verbs, due to the fact that they, in general, do not represent actions, but rather lexicalise a state experienced by the subject, the previous information negated by the prefix *un-* is the state in itself (in this sense, state verbs can be compared to adjectives preceded by the prefix *un-*, due to the fact that both indicate a property that characterises a given subject, which is in turn negated by the prefix *un-*).

We can conclude this section by saying that the prefix *un-*, thus, plays an important role in constructing the information structure of a proposition. Even though this aspect was not openly underlined in the literature, the fact that more and more verbs are inclined to be preceded by this prefix confirms that semantics alone cannot explain the behaviour of the prefix *un-*, and constraints alone on the kind of verbs that can be preceded by this prefix cannot thoroughly explain all the novel occurrences of *un-*verbs.

2.3. THE ELEMENT OF VOLITIONALITY IN *UN-*VERBS

The world of the Internet is a quite peculiar environment, where human beings are capable of performing actions that in the real world would be regarded as impossible. This is especially so in the case of new social networking systems, where each and every kind of action can be restored to its original state. Thus, the prefix *un-* finds in this environment its most appropriate context, and developers exploit the potential of this prefix in order to inform users that a certain action can be reversed and, thus, its effects annulled.

However, we must also acknowledge that, in the real world, people feel and/or are keen to reverse some actions whose effects are generally considered impossible to reverse. This impossibility does not stop language users from employing the prefix *un-*. Clark (1981), however, regards verbs like 'ungrow' or 'undie' as inconceivable, since "[n]o more can one reverse certain other actions once they have been performed", because "certain actions are by nature irreversible" (Clark 1981: 255). However, we do not completely agree with this restriction concerning the *un-*verbs, because human beings are not made only of their actions, but they are also capable of conceiving and conceptualizing certain activities that cannot be performed in reality.

In order to respond to the desire of language users to reverse certain actions, and in order to explain the high productivity of *un-*verbs in the context of new social networking systems, we would like to introduce two-fold observation on the occurrence of a verb preceded by *un-* drawn from the analysis of our corpus: *in the case of un-verbs, (i) the state of affairs must be feasible within its reference framework (be it socio-political, technological, etc.) for the subject to reverse a given predicate and/or (ii) it must be in the capacity of the subject to do so.*

As we can see, the previous observation on the nature of *un-*verbs is divided into two parts. The first and the second part, however, are not mutually exclusive, but they can work together to convey a reversal meaning. This is particularly true in the case of new

technologies. For instance, in the case of social networking systems, firstly, the social network itself must offer to its users the material possibility to reverse a certain action. Secondly, once this possibility is offered, users themselves must decide whether to bring back a certain action or not, thus, referring to their commitment to performing a given action.

The element of volitionality, however, seems to be fundamental in the semantics of the *un*-verbs, especially in those cases (i.e., most of the cases) where an *un*-verb occurs in a transitive context. When found in a transitive context, the subject that is willing to reverse a given state of affairs is a highly agentive one, whose participant role is that of an agent (Van Valin and LaPolla 1997). Thus, the second part of our observation responds to the very nature of an *un*-verb that occurs in a transitive context, and whether there may be enough technological development in order to reverse a given action is an additional element that is satisfied especially in new technologies, but it is not a constraint on the very occurrence of an *un*-verb in itself.

As previously seen, the first part of the previously introduced observation directly refers to the context of new technologies, such as social networking systems, where the prefix *un*- is being more and more productive. This is mainly because one of the most important features of the language of new technologies is that it has to be immediate. Thus, developers seem to resort to *un*- given its capability to convey in a simple prefix a meaning that would otherwise be expressed in a full proposition, which would contrast with their priority to share the higher amount of information in the least number of words.

As for the second part of our generalisation, it can be regarded as a contradiction, since it seems to agree with Clark's (1981) constraint on the occurrence of an *un*-verb. However, we must promptly specify that no contradiction is found in this second part. In fact, the focus here is on the noun 'capacity', which entails a nuance of volition on behalf of the speaker that resorts to the prefix *un*-. Thus, by using an *un*-verb that can either convey an actually reversible action or an irreversible one, speakers commit themselves to perform that action to the best of their capabilities, or speakers may simply state their desire to bring back a certain action. To better understand this, we would like to offer example (4):²⁸

- (4)
Alicia: "You want to keep Jackie in line? Give her something."
Elijah: "What do you mean?"
Alicia: "Something that makes her feel valued, important, useful."
Elijah: "But she is none of those things."
Alicia: "A point you made clear to her. Now... unmake it."

In example (4), it can be argued that, once a point has been made, it cannot be materially 'unmade'. Reality does not offer a rewind button (Horn 2002). However, this impossibility to reverse a given state of affairs does not stop the speaker from creating the verb 'unmake'. This *un*-verb comprises in itself a commitment the speaker lies upon the

²⁸ Example (4) was found in the CBS TV hit-show *The Good Wife*, Episode 4, Season 4 (Aired on October 21, 2012).

recipient for the latter to take back a given state of affairs and restore things as they were. Thus, in this case, the verb 'unmake' represents the recipient's commitment to perform certain actions so as to restore an order that was 'disturbed' by his making a point. Hence, the verb 'unmake' serves this scope and satisfies both our first observation, as the base verb is an accomplishment; our second generalisation, as the prefix *un-* refers to a previously given piece of information; and, finally, our third observation on the *un-*verbs, as it relates to the recipient's capacity to commit himself to the reversal of a given action.

Before concluding our discussion of the *un-*verbs, we must underline an aspect on all three generalisations postulated in this work.

Indeed, the three observations so far introduced seem to capture some of the semantic and pragmatic aspects of the prefix *un-*. However, we must underline that they do not always work together in the realization of an *un-*verb. Only our second generalisation (i.e., reference to a previously given state of affairs) seems to be fundamental in the creation of an *un-*verb, whereas our first and third observations appear to be bound to the context where the *un-*verb is retrieved or created.

We can say that, when all three generalisations are applicable, we are faced with a perfectly lexicalised *un-*verb, which has entered the mental lexicon of speakers (Clark 1993) and whose meaning is entirely clear to language users.

3. FINAL REMARKS

Given this framework on the occurrence of an *un-*verb, we must add that it would be worthwhile to devote future research to a diachronic analysis of the prefix *un-*, in order to understand when and where the reversal meaning conveyed by *on(d)-* and the negative meaning conveyed by *un-* merged to form the prefix *un-*.

Additionally, it would be interesting to study the nature of the object of transitive *un-*verbs. Indeed, given our second observation (i.e., reference to a previously given state of affairs), the object of a transitive *un-*verb should always be determined, because *un-*verbs always seem to presuppose a previously given piece of information. However, the percentages of definite (48.5%) and indefinite (51.5%) direct objects of transitive *un-*verbs in our corpus are inconclusive.

Thus, future research should be devoted to further exploring this fascinating aspect of English morphology, in order to better define the creative processes behind the discursive construction and interpretation of *un-*verbs.

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