

**Lexical semantics vs. lexical pragmatics:  
Aspects of a theory of un-verbs**

Laurence R. Horn  
Yale University

Since Whorf (1936), many linguists have tried their hand at corralling the restrictions on the formation of “reversative” *un*-verbs; cf. e.g. Marchand (1969), Dowty (1979), Horn (1988), Clark et al. (1995). Why can you *unwrap* a sandwich but not *unrecognize* its contents or *unremember* to toss it in the trash? Why can a snake *uncoil* while a painting can’t *unhang*? If *unfreeze* is the opposite of *freeze*, why is *unthaw* a synonym of *thaw*? The standard approach to the constraints on *un*-verb formation invokes Whorf’s CRYPTOTYPE—a covert category encompassing transitive verbs of covering and enclosing that rules out a wide range of possible bases and outputs of the relevant rule. Pullum (1999), for example, reckons that there are “about a dozen verbs” that allow *un*-prefixation, citing *undo* (*a good deed*) and *unknow* as examples of formations we know “intuitively” are impossible; Kemmerer & Wright (2002) similarly cast out *unboil* and *undecorate*. Yet many of the verbs ruled out in the literature as impossible, non-occurring, or—as in Whorf’s label for *unsay* and *unmake*—“semi-archaic” are readily attested, even when the actions they denote may be physically irreversible. One such irreversible *un*-verb figures in the courtroom meme alluding to the difficulty of ignoring inadmissible evidence once introduced, “to *unring* the bell.” What these hundreds of “impossible” but occurring examples have in common is that they satisfy the real lexical semantic requirement on *un*-verb formation, which is aspectual in nature: all *un*-verbs are change-of-state accomplishments. *Un*-formation is even licensed by stative bases, but yielding accomplishments; to *unlove* is neither a stative (=‘to not-love’) nor a true antonym of its base (= ‘to hate’), but a telic accomplishment with internal negation applying to an embedded state ( $\approx$  ‘to come to no longer love’).

While the consensus (neo-Whorfian) view may be extended to predict the non-occurrence of source-oriented reversatives except as pleonastic formations in Swedish, French, and English (*unloosen*, *unthaw*), it incorrectly limits the productivity of *un*-verbs by conflating the SEMANTIC (aspectual) restrictions with the PRAGMATIC conditions on the way the world (normally) works; verbs like *unsay*, *unknow*, *unboil*, and *unhappen* are motivated precisely by the need to describe those (typically counterfactual) situations in which the tape of reality is set to Rewind. The pragmatic nature of the restrictions on *un*-verb formation is supported by a survey of contexts that favor the relaxation of those constraints and the creation of innovative *un*-verbs: advances in science and technology (as in the *unerase* and *undelele* software commands or the *unfuck* program to reverse software protection), science fiction (as in time-travel scenarios or the *Unner* device of Etchemendy 2000), advertising copy (cf. KFC’s current *unthink* campaign), and versifiers from Shakespeare (whose “*un-king’d*” Richard II is the unchallenged monarch of this realm) to country music (“*How can I unlove you?*”, “*Un-break my heart*”, “*Un-suffer me*”). Whether the implausibility of a given reversal is overridden, conceded, or mourned, it is an *un*-verb that is employed to get the job done.

## References

- Clark, Eve, Kathie Carpenter, and Werner Deutsch. Reference states and reversals: undoing actions with verbs. *J. of Child Language* 22: 633-662.
- Dowty, David. 1979. *Word Meaning and Montague Grammar*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel.
- Etchemendy, Nancy. 2000. *The Power of Un*. New York: Scholastic.
- Horn, Laurence. 1988. Morphology, pragmatics, and the *un*-verb. *ESCOL '88: Proceedings of the Fifth Eastern States Conference on Linguistics*, 210-233.
- Kemmerer, David and Sandra K. Wright. 2002. Selective impairment of knowledge underlying *un*- prefixation: further evidence for the autonomy of grammatical semantics. *J. of Neurolinguistics* 15: 403-432.
- Marchand, Hans. 1969. *The Categories and Types of Present-Day English Word Formation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. München: Beck.
- Pullum, Geoffrey K. 1999. Why you can't unhear this talk. *Lingua Franca*, Radio National, Australia. <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/ling/stories/s51011.htm>
- Whorf, Benjamin Lee. 1936. A linguistic consideration of thinking in primitive communities. In J. B. Carroll (ed.), *Language, Thought & Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, 65-86.