Squib : *unalive, -un, very possible*

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What exactly does the word *unalive* mean?

unalive is a very interesting word in online culture. The earliest definition on Urban Dictionary in the modern sense appears around 2015; the usage of the word has grown rapidly since early 2021. Although it derives from the word "alive", it is not a noun but a verb. It shares some properties with "kill", and perhaps with "die", but which exactly?

In class, we noted that from a compositional viewpoint, the word *dead* does not mean *not alive*. Rather, it can only apply to individuals who have been alive, e.g.

t_{-}: e [[alive]]
t_0: e not [[alive]]

In this way, Abe Lincoln is dead, but not the Eiffel Tower. Here, we will also assume we have die and kill as composed of one another:

die: become [[dead]]
kill: cause [[become [[dead]]]]

Depending on the context, *unalive* seems to mean *die*, *kill*, or *kill myself*. Here are representative examples for each (source: reddit)

1. (die) "Has anyone gone to the ER wanting to *unalive* due to insomnia?"
2. (kill) "... started growing on a tree where my aunt *unalives* chickens"
3. (kill myself) "I wish I had *unalive* pills right now".

It **cannot** be used as an adjective: while there may be marginal uses for describing nonliving objects, this usage is semantically unrelated.

unalive is a "complete" *kill*

My hypothesis is that *unalive* is a more complete version of the word *kill*: it has the regular transitive usage, and the reflexive use in the intransitive.

A compositional definition for *unalive* must involve *alive*, not in the sense of an opposite (*unemployed*), but in the sense of reversal, as with *undo*, *unpack*, or *unzip*. Someone can be unemployed without ever having been employed, but you cannot undo something that has not been done. In the same way, you must be alive to unalive. [1]

Yet the word "kill" lacks an intransitive version that means "to kill oneself". For the purposes of online communication, this use of kill appears much more frequently than its true intransitive, that is "they/he/she kill". However, "they/he/she unalived" has that exact meaning, that is "they/he/she killed herself". [2]

unalive vs. *kill*

I contend that "unalive" means "kill", but with the same structure as transitive-intransitive words like "wash". In the base case, it can be thought of as an transitive verb with a subject and object. In the intransitive case, null complement anaphora fills in the object.

"I wash him"
"I wash" → "I wash myself"

"I unalive him"
"I unalive" → "I unalive myself"

Importantly, "kill" does not have this usage:
"I kill him"
"I kill" → ?

The most common form we see *unalive* is "I want to unalive" or "I want to unalive myself". Although in traditional usage we might find "I want to die" and "I want to kill myself" as parallel, it is much more useful to compare against "I want to wash" and "I want to wash myself".

It is clear they have equivalent meaning. That is, "I want to unalive" does not mean "I want to die". It means "I want to kill" in the reflexive intransitive sense, or "I want to kill myself". In the intransitive application, *unalive* is an economical way to say "kill myself", that avoids the negative connotations of "commit suicide" and the passivity of "die". [3]

[1] This is not a great comparison to make (adj. and verb), but I will elaborate further down. Hopefully it helps gain intuition.
[2] See intr. slay vs. kill further down
[3] This squib does not condone suicide or self-harm

intransitive *slay* vs. *kill*

It's worth noting that roughly analogous in formal meaning to "kill", there is an informal term "slay" with positive connotations. For example, if a friend gives a presentation in class, it is common for someone to say that they "slayed" or just the exclamative/imperative "slay!". This can be traced to the informal expression "they/he/she killed it", meaning someone has done something particularly well. However, the intransitive "they/he/she killed" has never had a positive informal connotation.

One possible reason for the informal "slay" replacing the informal "kill" in the intransitive is that the conventional use of intransitive "slay" is slightly more appropriate than the intransitive form of "kill". Compare:

"With orcs coming across the bridge all night, they slayed till dawn".
"With orcs coming across the bridge all night, they killed till dawn".

The first feels more plausible than the second. This is a partial explanation for why intransitive *slay* is used informally, the others being phonological niceness and the esoteric feel of the word.

the *un-* prefix

Very loosely: a thing is *flugged*. What does it mean to *unflug*?
A basic definition would be

t_{-}: e [[flug]]
t_0: e not [[flug]]

A classic example of this is *undo*. In order to *undo* a thing, it must be *done* at a previous time. But consider *unemployed* or *unmarried*. These adjectives do not require we have *employed/married* at t_{-}. But as verbs, they are consistent with the above. We notice that *unemploy* requires employment, and *unmarry* requires marriage.

We see that *un-* must apply differently as a adjective and verb.

When we have an *un-* and an adjective, we must have a reverse in terms of a property; that is, an opposite. This doesn't put any requirements on having a state describable by the positive form. When we have someone *unemployed*, we have someone who is not employed; but it isn't necessary that they were ever employed.

Verbs work differently. When we have *un-* and a verb, we must have a reverse in terms of time, which does require an initial state describable by the

positive form. When a company *unemploys* someone, they must have been employed right before.

This provides some intuition about why *unalive* is more practical as a verb and not a adjective, and its subsequent popularity. The potential adjective *unalive* would not require the thing being modified to be alive beforehand: it could describe a rock or a deceased person just as well, and it is universally held that these are different things. On the other hand, the verb form requires the change in state and is more useful.

very possible

Here is another area of interest with adjectives. Assuming that degree modification recurs on the adjective, a thing is said to be *very* probable if it is probable, compared to probable things. In a similar way, we should be able to say a thing is *very possible* if it is possible, compared to possible things.

But we have a paradox here. The phrase *very possible* enjoys widespread usage, so it must have a well-defined meaning. But how can something be possible compared to possible things? By possible worlds semantics, the handout on March 21st seems to suggest that the interpretation is clear: very possible denotes worlds closer than the possible ones. But this is not recursive on the possible.

More importantly, this reading feels *wrong*. When I say "It's very possible that O-rings led to the Challenger disaster", it doesn't seem I am saying this possibility is more likely than others, rather that I place some other special significance on this one.

There is more evidence for why the gradability of possible is not so simple. While *very possible* feels right, the comparative *more possible* and superlative *most possible* does not make sense; my intuition about the world leads me to say *more probable* and *most probable*. An event that is *very possible* seems to instead be the endgoal of a phrase like *as much as possible*; both emphasise an event's possibility, not the likelihood of it occurring.

possible possible worlds

Here is one theory, following directly from the *very* definition but in possible world terms. There are worlds which are possible from each possible world. Some of those worlds are possible in more possible worlds, and those are the *very possible* worlds to our own. This satisfies monotonicity of degrees, and also provides intuition for why we cannot say something is *most possible*: the infinite multiset of possible possible worlds may be uncountable.

That is, when a world is closer in possible worlds, it is *more probably* the case. However, out of possible possible worlds, the worlds that appear the most are *very possibly* the case. In discrete experiments, like flipping a coin three times, *very possible* does have the intuition of *more probable*:

It is possible we get all tails.
It is very possible/more probable we get tails first.

The intuition is that the second possibility is more likely. We have 1 and 4 possible possible worlds and outcomes respectively. In the first, it is true if we get TTT, and false otherwise. In the second, it is true if we get TTT, THT, TTH, or THH, and false otherwise.

But in more complex experiments with continuous outcomes, this intuition falls apart:

It's possible the dinosaurs died out because of an asteroid.
It's very possible/~~more probable~~ the cause was volcanic ash.
(We still don't know!)

Here, the link between infinite possible possible worlds and the outcomes is less clear, so *very possible* does not mean *more probable.*[4]. In this way, we can reconcile our compositional and possible worlds interpretations.

[4]We tend to value the first thing people say more than the second. So here, the "very possible" feels more like a way to say that the probabilities of the possibilities are irrespective of the order in which they are given