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Some Notes on Negative Prefixation and Derived Adjectives in English

Abstract

The contribution focusses on some properties of negative prefixation that can be observed in English derived adjectives. Taking Davis and Klınar's (1996) list of pairs/sets of derived adjectives that either share the same base (e.g. *inhuman/non-human*) or involve semantically related bases (e.g. *illegible/unreadable*) as a starting point, the paper analyses these items in terms of their meanings, frequencies and collocational candidates. The analysis is based on the data retrieved from two British English referential corpora: the British National Corpus and the Web Corpus ukWaC. The results show that in a given pair/set of adjectives there is one item that is more frequently used, and it is this item that frequently takes over the use/meaning of the other. Meaningwise, in some cases there is a clear-cut distinction between the items of the same pair/set (e.g. *non-moral* vs. *immoral*), whereas in other cases there is a partial overlap in meaning (e.g. *illegible* vs. *unreadable* and *incomplete* vs. *uncompleted*).

Nikalna predpanska obrazila in pridevniške tvorjenke v angleškem jeziku

Prispevek obravnava nekatere lastnosti pridevniških tvorjenk v angleščini, ki so tvorjene s t.im. nikalnimi predpanskimi obrazili. V raziskavo so vključeni pari/skupine pridevniških tvorjenk, ki jih obravnavata Davis in Klınar (1996) in pri katerih gre bodisi za tvorjenke z isto osnovo vendar drugačnim nikalnim predpanskim obrazilom (npr. *inhuman/non-human*), bodisi za tvorjenke s semantično primerljivimi osnovami, ki pa so etimološko nepovezane (npr. *illegible/unreadable*). Analiza tvorjenih pridevnikov se osredinja na njihov pomen, pogostnost rabe in kolokacijske kandidate, pri čemer razčlemba temelji na korpusnih podatkih iz dveh angleških korpusov (British National Corpus in Web Corpus ukWaC). Rezultati kažejo, da je pri vseh parih/skupinah obravnavanih tvorjenk en pridevnik dominantnejši in

izkazuje večjo pogostost pri rabi. Za tak pridevnik je tudi značilno, da prevzema rabo in pomen drugega pridevnika iz para/skupine. Z vidika pomena analiza pokaže, da je pri nekaterih parih/skupinah tvorjenih pridevnikov pomenska ločnica med obema pridevnikoma jasna (npr. *non-moral* proti *immoral*), medtem ko pri drugih prihaja do delnih pomenskih prekrivanj (npr. *illegible* proti *unreadable* in *incomplete* proti *uncompleted*).

1 INTRODUCTION

In their pioneering work on English derivation for Slovenian speakers of English, Davis and Klinar (1977 et subsq.) among other things address the question of negative prefixation in English. The authors draw special attention to two potential problems that a non-native speaker of English may encounter when using English negative prefixes. The first involves the cases in which different negative prefixes are added to the same base, for example, pairs and sets of derivatives such as *non-human/inhuman*, *disinterested/uninterested*, *unused/misused/disused/abused*, *amoral/immoral/non-moral*, which give rise to various semantic dimensions – from completely distinct meanings to minor semantic nuances, collocational preferences, and different pragmatic implications. The second problematic category comprises pairs in which negative prefixes are added to etymologically unrelated yet semantically related bases. Such pairs typically include bases of Germanic and Latinate/Romance origin, for instance, the pair *unreadable/illegible*, where both the negative prefix and the root are of the same origin (i.e. Germanic *un-* and *readable* vs. Latinate *il-* and *legible*). This difference, however, is not solely restricted to Germanic vs. Latinate/Romance bases, as there are cases where the two different bases come from the same language family, for instance *unreasonable* vs. *irrational*.

The aim of the present paper is to shed some light on these two categories with the main focus on the analysis of the data retrieved from two British English referential corpora: the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Web Corpus ukWaC. In particular, with regard to the corpus data, special attention is paid to semantic differences, the frequency and collocational preferences. Due to space limitation, the analysis presented in this contribution is limited to the negative adjectives that are listed and discussed in Davis and Klinar (1996, 63–67, and 104–106).

2 NEGATIVE PREFIXES IN ENGLISH

To start with, it is necessary to address the properties of (English) negative prefixes briefly. The term “negative” itself can turn out to be problematic, since adding a negative prefix to a stem rarely renders the newly formed derivative

syntactically negative: while the sentence *Peter is not polite* is negative, i.e. the subject *Peter* is denied of the predicate *be polite*, the sentence *Peter is impolite* is affirmative, i.e. the subject *Peter* is affirmed of the predicate *be impolite*. The distinction between *polite* and *impolite* should thus not be seen as the opposition between affirmation and negation, but as the relation of an opposite or antonymic nature. Following the analyses of negative prefixes by Bauer (1983, 151ff), Quirk et al. (1999, 1540), Plag (2003, 34), and Kjellmer (2005) a.o., we can hence claim that the so-called negative prefixes function as identifying devices for classifying and specifying adjectives. The former consist of non-gradable pairs (e.g. *Muslim/non-Muslim*), and the latter of gradable pairs (e.g. *polite/impolite*).

As soon as the semantic criterion of oppositeness is used for determining the status of negative prefixes, a plethora of possibilities opens up. For instance, although there are prefixes which directly encode the meaning of oppositeness (henceforth: central negative prefixes) as *un-* and *non-* in *unhappy* and *non-committing* or the reversative *dis-* in *disconnect*, there are several prefixes (henceforth: marginal negative prefixes) which encode the negative meaning indirectly, through implicature. Belonging to this category are the prefixes *mal-* and *mis-* (e.g. *malnutrition* and *miscalculate*), which carry the meanings “wrong(ly), inaccurate(ly), defective(ly), improper(ly)”.

Quirk et al. (1999, 1540) and Huddleston and Pullum (2002, 1687) list and discuss five different negative prefixes in English, which directly carry the meaning of oppositeness and thus fall into the category of central negative prefixes.¹ Their list includes the prefixes *a-*, *dis-*, *in-* (and its variations *im-*, *ir-*, *il-*),² *non-*, and *un-*.

Of these five prefixes, the prefixes *non-* and *un-* are the most productive. Meaningwise, the prefix *non-* is closest to the meaning of real (i.e. syntactic) negation, as it typically carries the meaning of contradiction, giving rise to the meanings such as “not X, not having/possessing X, lacking X”. The prefix *non-* is mostly found with adjectives, and Plag (2003, 100) argues that *non-* “primarily forms contradictory and complementary opposites”, which means that there is no possible gradation between the two opposites: something can either be rational or non-rational but cannot be both or neither.

Non- can also prefix a noun, in which case it adds the meaning “the absence of/ the lack of the characteristics” as in *non-fiction*, *non-payment* and *non-adherence*. The morphologists (cf.: Marchand, 1969; Plag, 2003; Kjellmer, 2005, a.o.)

1 For a detailed discussion on the central and marginal negative prefixes in English, see Ilc (in press) a.o.

2 Henceforth *IN-* stands for all different realisations of the negative prefix *in-* (i.e. *in-*, *im-*, *ir-*, and *il-*).

to some extent agree that the prefix *non-* is neutral with regard to the evaluative force, however, Algeo (1971, 92ff) and Quirk et al. (1999, 1541) show that in some cases the prefix *non-* is no longer neutral and can carry (negative) evaluative force as in *non-architecture*, meaning “bad architecture” (see also the comparison between *non-* and *un-* below).

The adjectival prefix *un-* is of Germanic origin, and used to be added to English bases (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1688). In present-day English, however, it is one of the most productive negative prefixes (Marchand, 1969; Huddleston and Pullum, 2002), and can be added to bases of different origins. As argued by Plag (2003, 30ff), the prefix *un-* typically selects gradable adjectives,³ so the addition of the prefix results in the contrary and not contradictory meaning. Hence, the gradable adjective *happy*, for example, has a corresponding *un-* derivative, whereas *artificial*, a non-gradable adjective, does not.⁴ This gradable vs. non-gradable distinction can perhaps be best observed in pairs such as *unchristian* and *non-Christian*. The adjective *unchristian* represents a gradable property, i.e. something can be considered more or less Christian or even not Christian, whereas *non-Christian* is used as a classifying device for dividing subject into two categories with no intermediate stages (i.e. either Christian or non-Christian). In addition, the prefix *un-* in *unchristian* carries additional evaluative force: unchristian behaviour can be attributed to both Christians and non-Christians if they do not adhere to Christian values, expectations or standards. The same evaluative force is unavailable for the *non-* derivative.

When added to nouns, the *un-* carries the meaning “absence of X” (Plag 2003, 101) as in *unease*, *unemployment*, etc. Horn (2005) discusses two specialised meanings of the prefix *un-* in the nominal derivatives. In the first, the *un-*NOUN combination describes an entity that “is not structurally a member of the category X, but it shares a significant functional status with Xs” (Horn, 2005, 341). To exemplify, *the unbeef stew* is a stew that looks like beef stew, but contains a beef substitute such as tofu. In this sense, the prefix *un-* is very similar in meaning

3 This claim has to be understood for what it is: a generalisation. Plag (2003, 34) points out that this “restriction seems to hold only for *un-* adjectives that are based on simple bases.” However, the adjective *true* is a simple base and non-gradable, yet allows the *un-* prefixation (*true* vs. *untrue*). It is noteworthy that in everyday usage speakers understand and use some non-gradable adjectives as gradable, resulting in the so-called gradable complementaries (cf. Horn, 2001; Murphy, 2010), as is the pair *honest/dishonest*. Even though *honest* and *dishonest* are, strictly speaking, non-gradable (i.e. with no intermediate stages), the use of litotes in *she is not dishonest* demonstrates that there is an intermediate stage between the two endpoints to which the litotes refers. The same can be observed with *untrue* in *it is not untrue to say ...*. Therefore, *true* and *untrue* should be classified as gradable complementaries. In sum, Plag’s (ibid.) generalisation holds as long as the adjective can be interpreted as gradable.

4 There are no results for *unartificial/inartificial* in the BNC, and only three results for *inartificial* in the ukWaC, two of which are from the same source.

to the prefix *non-*, as *unbeef* and *non-beef* both mean “without beef”. The other meaning of the *un*-NOUN combination pertains to the notion of a bad, untypical or peripheral member of a category. For instance, *an unstate* is a failed, bad state, and *an unevent* is an event that lacks characteristics of a proper event. In this case, again there seems to be a (partial) overlap in the meaning between the *un*-NOUN and the *non*-NOUN combinations (e.g. *unevent* vs. *non-event*, and *unperson* vs. *non-person*). In this latter case, both the *un-* and the *non-* combinations carry negative evaluative force.

The prefix *un-* can also be added to verbs, in which case the reversative interpretation is triggered, for example *undress*, *undo*, and *untie*.⁵

The adjectival prefix *a-* is of Greek origin, and adds the meaning “without, devoid of, not X” to the adjective (Marchand 1969, 140; Plag 2003, 99). Most of the *a*-derivatives are limited to specialised vocabulary (e.g. *atelic*, *acellular*, *asplenic*); however, some of them can be found in semi-specialised and general use (e.g. *aseptic*, *asymmetric*, *abiotic*, *asexual*, *atypical*, *amoral*, *apolitical*).

The negative prefix *IN-*, by and large, selects Latinate bases, and is no longer productive (Marchand 1969, 168ff; Huddleston and Pullum, 2002, 1688). The adjectival *IN-* derivatives are frequently subject to nominalisation, as in *inactivity*, *illegibility*, *impoliteness*, etc. Since both adjectival prefixes *un-* and *IN-* carry the meaning of “not having/possessing X, lacking X”, there is a noticeable competition between the two forms, leading to two distinct classes of parallel forms. The first involves cases in which the same base selects both prefixes with no or little differences in meaning,⁶ for example, *impractical/unpractical*, *inadvisable/unadvisable*, *indescribable/undescribable*, *irreplaceable/unreplaceable*, *unjust/injust*, and *unequal/inequal*.⁷ This dual system has also led to inconsistencies, whereby the derived adjective and its nominalisation have different negative prefixes, as in *unjust/injustice*, *unable/inability*, *unstable/instability* (cf.: Marchand 1969, 168ff; Huddleston and Pullum, 2002, 1688). The other class includes parallel forms of English and Latinate origins as in *unreadable/illegible*, and *uneatable/inedible*, which display some semantic differences (see section 4.2 below).

5 In English, the reversative meaning can also be expressed with the prefixes *dis-* (*disconnect*, *disqualify*, *disarm*) and *de-* (*decentralise*, *deforest*, *defrost*). The latter can also be used in cases where there is no original event, cf.: *decaffeinate* vs. **caffeinate* (Plag 2003, 99).

6 Quirk et al. (1999, 1540) observe that “[w]ith adjectives, *un-* can usually replace *in-* or *dis-* for ad hoc use, but with semantic consequences”. The authors claim that in such cases the *un-* derivative is more closely associated with the literal meaning of the base than the other two negative prefixes.

7 The first item listed in the pair is the most frequent item according to the BNC and ukWaC corpora. The forms *undescribable*, *unreplaceable*, *injust* and *inequal* are not attested in the BNC, but are attested in the ukWaC.

The prefix *dis-* combines with Romance bases only (Marchand 1969, 158ff). When joined with the adjectival bases, it adds the meaning of “not having/possessing X, lacking X” as in *dishonest*, *dissimilar* and *disloyal*. When added to nominal bases, it carries the meaning of “lack/absence of X” (Marchand 1969, 161) as in *discredit*, *disregard*, *disbelief*, etc. The prefix *dis-* is associated with two distinct meanings when combined with a verbal base. In the first, it means “refuse to, fail to, not to X” (Marchand 1969, 159), for example, *disallow*, *disagree*, *dislike*, which can also be extended to the meaning of “stop to X” (e.g. *discontinue*, *disuse*). The other meaning involves the reversative interpretation as in *disassemble*, *disappear*, and *disengage*.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 DATA

For the purposes of investigation, the pairs/sets of adjectives with negative prefixes were extracted from Davis and Klınar (1996, 63–67, and 104–106), and further classified into two categories. Category A comprises derived adjectives that have the same base and take different negative prefixes. These pairs/sets include:

- *disinterested/uninterested*,
- *disqualified/unqualified*,
- *dissatisfied/unsatisfied*,
- *incomplete/uncompleted*,
- *inhuman/non-human*,
- *irreligious/non-religious*,
- *unprofessional/non-professional*,
- *ineffective/non-effective*,
- *immoral/amoral/unmoral/non-moral*.

The second category, category B, consists of pairs of adjectives that share semantically related bases which are of different origins (i.e. Latinate/Romance vs. Germanic/English). Three such pairs/sets are discussed in Davis and Klınar (1996):

- *irrational/unreasonable*,
- *illegible/unreadable*,
- *illegal/illicit/unlawful*.

The meanings of individual adjectives were determined with the help of the online Cambridge dictionary (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>), and the frequencies as well as the collocational candidates were determined with the help of the

Sketch engine interface, using the BNC and ukWaC corpora. To identify potential nominal collocation candidates in the range from -5 to 5 words, the logDice measurement was taken as a point of reference. As observed by Gablasova et al. (2017, 169), the logDice values are insensitive to corpus size, and its results are easily interpretable: the logDice values range from 0 to 14, with the value of 7 and above highly indicative of strong collocational association (Rychlý 2008).

3.2 RESULTS

Table 1 presents the frequencies of the analysed adjectives. Due to different corpus sizes the raw frequencies look different; however, the distribution of lexical items is comparable, especially when examining the items of the same pair/set, as the same item has a higher frequency value in both corpora: only for *irreligious/non-religious* and *unmoral/non-moral* can we observe different preferences. The item *non-effective* is non-existent in the BNC, and has low values in the ukWaC, so the pair *ineffective/non-effective* is excluded from further discussion. The same can be claimed for the adjective *unmoral* with only two occurrences in the BNC and six occurrences in the ukWaC.

Table 1: The distribution of the analysed derived adjectives in the BNC and the ukWaC

| | BNC | | ukWaC | |
|--------------------|-----------|----------|-----------|----------|
| | raw freq. | per mil. | raw freq. | per mil. |
| CATEGORY A | | | | |
| disinterested | 172 | 1.53 | 1,377 | 0.89 |
| uninterested | 139 | 1.24 | 836 | 0.54 |
| disqualified | 367 | 3.27 | 2,975 | 1.92 |
| unqualified | 293 | 2.61 | 2,687 | 1.74 |
| dissatisfied | 450 | 4.01 | 4,884 | 3.16 |
| unsatisfied | 92 | 0.82 | 895 | 0.58 |
| incomplete | 703 | 6.26 | 11,108 | 7.18 |
| uncompleted | 39 | 0.35 | 348 | 0.22 |
| inhuman | 186 | 1.66 | 1,907 | 1.23 |
| non(-)human | 118 | 1.05 | 1,897 | 1.22 |
| irreligious | 29 | 0.26 | 233 | 0.15 |
| non(-)religious | 29 | 0.26 | 1,428 | 0.92 |
| unprofessional | 65 | 0.58 | 1,003 | 0.65 |
| non(-)professional | 62 | 0.55 | 935 | 0.60 |
| ineffective | 664 | 5.91 | 6,791 | 4.39 |
| non(-)effective | 0 | 0 | 31 | 0.02 |
| immoral | 313 | 2.79 | 3,025 | 1.95 |
| amoral | 60 | 0.53 | 667 | 0.43 |
| unmoral | 2 | 0.02 | 6 | 0.00 |
| non(-)moral | 2 | 0.02 | 130 | 0.08 |

| | BNC | | ukWaC | |
|-------------------|-----------|----------|-----------|----------|
| | raw freq. | per mil. | raw freq. | per mil. |
| CATEGORY B | | | | |
| irrational | 497 | 4.42 | 4,731 | 3.06 |
| unreasonable | 984 | 8.76 | 7,672 | 4.96 |
| illegible | 81 | 0.76 | 1,072 | 0.67 |
| unreadable | 133 | 1.18 | 1,089 | 0.70 |
| illegal | 2,397 | 21.34 | 40,725 | 26.30 |
| illicit | 261 | 2.32 | 5,148 | 3.33 |
| unlawful | 902 | 8.03 | 8,483 | 5.48 |

4 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 CATEGORY A: DIS- VS. UN-

disinterested/uninterested

To start with, it is worth mentioning that the two forms result from different morphological/etymological processes. In its present form, the adjective *disinterested* is the fully adjectivised past participial form of the verb *to disinterest*, which was coined in the 17th century, and meant “deprive of interest” (Marchand 1969: 160), whereas the adjective *uninterested* is derived by adding the negative prefix *un-* to the adjectivised participle *interested*. The morphological analysis of both adjectives is shown in (1):

- (1) a) [[dis-interest]-ed]
 b) [un-[interest-ed]]

In modern-day usage, the original meaning of *disinterested* (e.g. “be deprived of interest”), has been partly bleached, resulting in the meaning “free from any bias”. This shift in the meaning can be attributed to the analogy with the meanings associated with the adjectival prefix *dis-*: “not having/possessing X, lacking X”; therefore, *disinterested* has come to mean “lacking/having no personal interest”. The prefix *un-* in *uninterested* is added to the gradable participial adjective *interested*, adding the meaning “not X”. In terms of collocational preferences, *disinterested* frequently co-occurs with nominals such as *altruism*, *pursuit*, *friendship*, *observer*, *contemplation*, and *benevolence*, whereas *uninterested* is typically followed by the preposition *in* as in *uninterested in politics*.

disqualified/unqualified

The difference in the meaning between the two adjectives can again be attributed to different derivational steps: *disqualified* is the participial adjective from the

verb *to disqualify*, whereas *unqualified* is derived from the participial adjective *qualified* (2):

- (2) a) [[dis-qualify]-ed]
 b) [un-[qualify-ed]]

For this reason, *disqualified* is linked to the meaning of verbal prefix *dis-* “stop to X”, and *unqualified* with the antonymic, gradable relation *qualified* vs. *unqualified*. This difference is also mirrored in the collocational preferences: *disqualified* typically collocates with activities, for example, *driving* and *acting* (*disqualified from driving/acting*), and agents of events (e.g. *drivers*, *directors*, *trustees*), while *unqualified* is frequently found with agents and professions (e.g. *assistants*, *auditors*, *practitioners*).

dissatisfied/unsatisfied

As is the case with the pair *disqualified/unqualified*, the derivational processes of *dissatisfied/unsatisfied* differ: *dissatisfied* is derived from the verb *to dissatisfy* “fail to satisfy”, and *unsatisfied* from the participial adjective *satisfied*, which results in the semantic differences between the two adjectives. The adjective *unsatisfied* collocates with emotions (e.g. *yearnings*, *longings*, *desires*, *feelings*) and acts (e.g. *demands*, *requests*), and the adjective *dissatisfied* is typically found in the combination *dissatisfied with X*, for instance, 252 out of 450 occurrences of *dissatisfied* in the BNC involve the preposition *with*.

4.2 CATEGORY A: *IN-* VS. *UN-*

incomplete/uncompleted

This is the only pair in Davis and Klinar (1996) that involves the prefixes *un-* and *in-* and no other prefix. The authors (1996, 105) state that *incomplete* “means ‘having gaps’, and [*uncompleted*] means ‘unfinished’”. This conclusion seems reasonable, taking into consideration that *incomplete* is derived from the adjective *complete*, and *uncompleted* from the participle *completed*: it is only the verbal elements that can pertain to events, as is the case with *finished* and *completed*. According to the dictionary entry for *incomplete*, however, it appears that the two meanings have fused, so the adjective *incomplete* can be used in both senses. The corpus data (Table 1) show that there is a strong preference for *incomplete*, and the examples of *uncompleted* are limited, making a conclusive judgement on the differences/similarities between the two adjectives difficult. Corpus examples from the BNC suggest that there is indeed an overlap in meaning between the two adjectives (3a-d); however, the semantic nuances seem to be still preserved (3e).

- (3) a) *What people say to each other when they are trying very hard to communicate is always sloppy and unsatisfying and full of uncompleted sentences and thought.*
- b) *[...] in formal situations we are more likely to use Standard English forms, whereas in informal situations we will probably use such forms as contractions (can't, innit), incomplete sentences, and dialect structures.*
- c) *The road now turns inland past an uncompleted building shell.*
- d) *On hearing the news of the king's imprisonment, the workmen packed up tools and left the site, leaving an incomplete building, with some parts open to the elements.*
- e) *For example, the students could be given incomplete sentences such as the following: "The overall message in the story is that..."*

4.3 CATEGORY A: *IN-/UN-/A-* VS. *NON-*

inhuman/non-human, irreligious/non-religious, unprofessional/non-professional

The distinction between the prefixes *un-/IN-* and *non-* has already been discussed in section 2. What all of these pairs have in common is that the *un-/IN-* prefixes are added to gradable adjectives to mark the opposite end of the continuum. For instance, X may be human, more or less human or inhuman, depending on whether X displays properties associated with values shared by humans. Collocational preferences for *inhuman* clearly reflect this meaning as they involve nouns such as *torture, rampage, punishment, barbarity, prohibition* and *treatment*. The prefix *non-*, on the other hand, is attached to non-gradable bases, creating contradictory pairs, such as *human/non-human* (i.e. (not) belonging to the human race). The collocational candidates for *non-human* include *primate(s), ape(s), animal(s), intelligence, creatures*. The same gradable/non-gradable difference can be observed in the case of the pairs *irreligious/non-religious, unprofessional/non-professional*.

immoral/amoral/non-moral

Moral is the only adjectival base discussed in Davis and Klınar (1996) that allows multiple prefixation. The authors (1996, 105) claim that *non-moral, unmoral* and *amoral* are synonyms, whereas the adjective *immoral* is pejorative (i.e. with negative evaluative force). There indeed seems to be a clear-cut distinction between *non-moral* "not moral" and *immoral* "violating moral principles" (4a-b). The adjectives *amoral* and *unmoral* tend to be used in more neutral contexts, although some specialised uses can be observed: the former describes an entity that is indifferent to questions of morality, and the latter pertains to an entity that cannot make moral judgements (4c-d). It is worth mentioning that examples can be found that

indicate an overlap in meaning between some of these adjectives (4e-f).

- (4) a) *Why should we not clearly demarcate the behaviour which is appropriate to moral and to non-moral beings?*
 b) *Their plans for Nuworld's current inhabitants are hideous and immoral.*
 c) *The Internet is not immoral but amoral.*
 d) *After the first blush of sin comes its indifference; and from immoral it becomes, as it were, unmoral.*
 e) *I really find all that abhorrent and amoral.* → cf.: immoral
 f) *Starbucks is a nasty, greedy and unmoral brand who think nothing of bullying people to get their way.* → cf.: immoral

4.2 CATEGORY B

irrational/unreasonable

The difference between the two adjectives lies in the fact that *unreasonable* describes something that is not reasonable, acceptable or fair according to some (social) norm or expectation, whereas *irrational* has a narrower meaning, pertaining to something that is logically unfounded or nonsensical. The notion of fairness and acceptability in the case of *unreasonable* can be observed in its nominal collocates which include *refusal*, *demands*, *behaviour*, *burden*, and *workloads*, whereas *irrational* collocates with nouns that are beyond logical explanation, for example *phobias*, *fears* and *beliefs*. It has to be pointed out, nonetheless, that there is again a partial overlap in the use (5).

- (5) a) *The mother may be in a state of intense anxiety, obsessed with often quite unreasonable fears about the health of the baby or herself or partner.*
 b) *It has got progressively worse over the months and I am now having irrational fears, that bad things will happen to my children, etc.*

illegible/unreadable

The adjective *illegible* describes a text that is difficult to read, due to untidy/unclear handwriting or print, so its top nominal collocates include *handwriting*, *scrawl*, *inscription*, *scribble*, *signature* and *lettering*. The adjective *unreadable* is an antonym of *readable* “worth reading or enjoyable to read”; therefore, we talk about *unreadable prose/book*. It seems, however, that the adjective *unreadable* is the more dominant of the two, taking over the meanings of *illegible* as well. For example, high on the collocation list for *unreadable* are nouns such as *fonts*, *inscriptions* and *subtitles*, which all indicate difficulty of reading (6):

- (6) a) *Formulae which use symbol fonts may be unreadable.*

- b) *Gravestone inscriptions become unreadable over time.*

illegal/illicit/unlawful

According to the dictionary definitions, these three adjectives are largely synonymous, with an additional meaning for *illicit* which may pertain to something that is legal, but is not accepted or is disapproved of by society. The similarities and differences in their meaning can be easily observed when examining their nominal collocates in (7).

- (7) a) *illegal: immigrants, drugs, logging, abortion, trafficking, possessions, smuggling, acts, activities, gambling, payments, arms, substances, weapons, trade*
 b) *illicit: drugs, dealings, dumping, financing, trade, export, lover, sex, pleasure, love, alcohol, affair*
 c) *unlawful: intercourse, manslaughter, discrimination, eviction, violence, act, killing, conspiracy, verdict, discrimination, conduct, sex, arson*

5 CONCLUSION

The present contribution is an attempt at discussing some of the properties that can be observed in English negatively prefixed adjectives. After providing an insight into the properties of negative prefixation in general, the paper focusses on pairs/sets of derived adjectives that are listed and discussed in Davis and Klınar (1996). These adjectives have been divided into two categories: category A includes pairs/sets of derived adjectives that share the same base (e.g. *inhuman/non-human, non-moral/immoral/amoral*), whereas category B includes pairs/sets of derived adjectives that involve semantically related bases (e.g. *illegible/unreadable*). The main objective of the investigation has been to analyse these derived adjectives in terms of their meanings, frequencies and collocational candidates by using the data retrieved from two British English referential corpora: the British National Corpus and the Web Corpus ukWaC. The results have revealed that in a given pair/set of adjectives there is one adjective that is more frequently used, and it is this adjective that frequently takes over the use/meaning of the other. Even though there is in some cases a clear-cut semantic distinction between the adjectives of the same pair/set (e.g. *non-moral* vs. *immoral*), which is also reflected in their collocational preferences, in other cases there is a partial overlap in meaning (e.g. *illegible* vs. *unreadable* and *incomplete* vs. *uncompleted*), which can be directly observed when examining collocational candidates (e.g. *illegible/unreadable inscriptions*).

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CORPORA

BNC = The British National corpus. 2010. <<https://the.sketchengine.co.uk/>>

UkWaC = British English corpus from the .uk domain 2007. <<https://the.sketchengine.co.uk/>>