

MEDICAL TERMINOLOGY

Synonymy of negative prefixes concerns also medical English

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Abstract: Human interest in negation dates back to thousands of years ago and concerns not only Linguistics, Logic, Psychology, and Mathematics. A lot of everyday words have negative meaning expressed by means of negative prefixes. Such type of negation is called word, or affixal negation. Affixal negation is a process of word-formation, by which a new word is built from a word stem, usually through the addition of an affix, either at the beginning (prefix) or end of the stem (suffix). Sometimes the same word can be negated by means of more than just one negative prefix. Such pairs of words become synonymous (Ref. 12). Full Text (Free, PDF) www.bmj.sk.

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A negative affix is an affix that opposes or negates a word. Some words disregarding their origin can bind more than one negative prefix, e.g. *politic(al)* – *impolitic* *x* *apolitical* *x* *anti-political* *x* *non-political* to distinguish different meanings of the word. This is connected with synonymy and inter-exchangeability of some negative prefixes. “As for the semantic function of the prefix *a-*, it is either negative (apparently generally contradictory) or privative, more or less equivalent to the suffix *-less*, as for instance in *aplacental*” (Zimmer, 1964:27).

Another interesting set of forms is constituted by *amoral*, *immoral*, *nonmoral*, and *unmoral*, where *immoral* is the contrary opposite of *moral* on the dimension of morality, but where the precise differences, if any, between *amoral*, *nonmoral*, and *unmoral* are not very clear (Zimmer, 1964).

“In productivity the prefix *dis-* cannot compete with *un-* which is far more common with words of general currency. Though adjectives like *discomfortable*, *dissatisfactory*, *dissocial* exist, the commonly used words are *uncomfortable*, *unsatisfactory*, *unsocial*” (Marchand, 1960).

Sometimes it is necessary to distinguish subtle differences in meaning of two or more negative prefixes used with the same word stem, e.g. *arm* – *disarm* (remove weapons from), *disarmed* (having had one’s weapons taken away) vs. *unarmed* (not carrying a weapon); *infect* – *disinfect* (remove possible sources of infection), *disinfected* (having had possible sources of infection removed) vs. *uninfected* (not having infection); *qualify* – *disqualify* (remove from competition), *disqualified* (judged to be unqualified) vs. *unqualified* (not having the proper qualification).

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The negative prefix *in-* has several affixed synonyms as *un-*, *a-*, *non-*, and *-less*. Some contrasts between forms in *in-* and *un-* are frequently cited. One of these is *immoral* vs. *unmoral*. Another one, *inhuman* vs. *unhuman*. Karl Zimmer (1964) explains the difference between *in-* and *un-* prefixed words by means of a definition written in an older *Oxford English Dictionary*: “In some cases a new formation with *un-* has been introduced when that with *in-* has acquired a connotation which it is desirable to avoid. The form with *un-* is then purely negative (i.e. contradictory), while the other may have almost a positive sense (presumably more than simply the denial of the underlying base, i.e. roughly equivalent to a contrary term.” Further on he reasons that forms with *in-* have to restrict the domain of *un-*. Sometimes existence of two synonymous adjectives *inactive* vs. *unactive* is caused by mere lexical clash of word-formation rules that cannot prevent a new formation (Zimmer, 1964). In none of our five large dictionaries published after 1990, we have found the adjective *unactive*. Obviously, it has already become obsolete. This does not mean that new ad hoc formations with *in-* do not appear from time to time. Zimmer (1964) gives an example with the word *immanageable*, which President Kennedy used in his speech to Premier Khrushchov in October 29, 1962. “The coining of this form is perhaps most reasonably explained in stylistic terms as a striving after “officialese” hypercorrectness”.

Sometimes prefix *non-* is used to form a neutral negative sense when a form in *in-* or *un-* has a special sense or usually unfavourable connotation e.g. *non-controversial* *x* *uncontroversial*; *non-effective* *x* *ineffective*; *non-human* *x* *unhuman* *x* *inhuman*. As for the semantic function of *non-*, the definition of it given by the *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* and cited by Zimmer (1965) seems quite satisfactory: “A prefix in common use in the sense of *not*, *un-*, *in-*. *Non-* is generally less emphatic than *in-* or *un-*, being merely negative, while *in-* and *un-* are positive, often implying an opposite thing or quality. Cf. *nonreligious*, *irreligious*;

nonmoral, immoral; non-Christian, unchristian.” In our terms, *non-* generally expresses contradictory opposition, while *in-* and *un-* often express contrary opposition. The fact that most derivatives in *non-* are not compared and are not modified by *very*, etc., also supports the interpretation of *non-* as a contradictory negative. Thus the contrast *Christian vs non-Christian* appears to be primarily one between “related to, pertaining to certain religious doctrines” and “not related to, not pertaining to religious doctrines”, while that between *Christian* and *unchristian* rather involves an opposition to certain norms. The difference between *un-* and *non-* becomes clear if we compare *non-American* (a nationality which is not American) with *un-American activities* (being disloyal to America). *Nonmilitary* personnel are not members of the military, while an enlisted soldier can appear *unmilitary* by failing to meet expectations for attire or conduct. Comparable contrasts are quite frequent, e.g. *non-grammatical vs ungrammatical, non-Cartesian vs. un-Cartesian*. We might say in general that in such cases *non-* selects the descriptive aspect of the stem for negation, while *un-* select the evaluative aspect (Zimmer, 1964, Jespersen, 1960).

The use of *un-* with adjectival present participles also poses some interesting problems. It is clear that new *un-*derivatives are not created with the same freedom from present participles as from past participles, but it is difficult to formulate any clear-cut restrictions. It may simply be that most forms of the type *un + present participle* are learned as wholes, and that the oddness of many new formations – compare for instance *an unsmiling face* with *an unlaughing face* – is due to the fact that this derivational process is not really productive (caused sometimes by the linguistic behavior of the individual). In many cases *non-* seems more acceptable with present participles than *un-*; compare e.g. *a nonstruggling artist* and *an unstruggling artist*. In fact neither *non-* nor *un-* is an appropriate means of negation of a noun phrase. In this case *nonadmiring* is used in spite of what we would consider the relative familiarity of *unadmiring*, which is listed in Webster’s Dictionary. But the main factor here may well have been a stylistic one; *non-* is probably better journalese than *un-* (Zimmer, 1964).

Some words that take the *un-*prefix in their adjectival form may have a noun form that uses the negative prefix *in-*. Such combinations include:

- *unable/inability*, e.g. *He was unable to use a computer, and his inability to use it was a serious disadvantage when he was applying for a job.*
- *uncivil* (ill-mannered, rude)/*incivility* (lack of politeness);
- *unequal/inequality*, e.g. *The twins are unequal in height. Inequalities in wealth cause social unrest.*
- *unjust/injustice*, e.g. *It was an unjust decision to expel him from school. People in South Africa were aware of the injustice of the apartheid system.*
- *unstable/instability*, e.g. *A person might be described as unstable if he/she suffers from sudden and extreme changes in his/her mental and emotional state. Political instability of our state frustrates many people.*

Jespersen (1960) sees the reason why to use *un-* with these adjectives and *in-* with the nouns in the length of the words. “*Un-* is often preferred before the shorter word, and *in-* before the longer word derived from it, which is generally also of a more learned nature.” *Un-* is preferred where the word has a distinctly native ending, as in *ungrateful vs ingratitude*. Sometimes the choice of prefix is influenced by morphological qualities of the word roots. Past participles seem to prefer negation by means of *un-* and the adjectives in *-able* prefer *in-*negation, as in the following examples: *unnumbered vs innumerable; undistinguished vs indistinguishable; uncompleted vs incomplete; unmitigated vs immitigable; unexplained vs inexplicable*, etc. There is no rule without exceptions, why should be this one. So we can find *irresponsible* and *unresponsive*; *unavoidable* formed from the existing verb *avoid*, but *inevitable*.

In other instances we find *un-* altering with some other prefix in related words: *unfortunate* “having bad fortune, unlucky” vs *misfortune* “bad luck”; *unsatisfactory* “not satisfactory; poor, unacceptable” vs *dissatisfaction* “failure to satisfy”; *uncomfortable* “not comfortable” vs *discomfort* “lack of ease; slight pain”.

Many words belonging to the same grammar category may often be paired with two or more negative prefixes becoming thus slightly or fully different meanings, e.g. *disinterested/uninterested*. While the word *disinterested* means that the described person is not interested, is not involved, and probably never was involved in a situation and therefore does not stand to benefit from it, as in the following sentence: *Gary would make a fine arbitrator for this case; he is completely impartial and disinterested*. A *disinterested* party used to be a neutral party, often used as a mediator or referee. *When did a disinterested party become one who had no interest in a subject or activity?* Another example: *I am disinterested in studying a foreign language*. The word *uninterested*, on the other hand, means that the person is indifferent, bored or even apathetic with the situation at hand: *The conversation with Monica got boring very quickly – she’s completely uninterested in what we’re planning*. Jespersen (1960) feels more egoism in the word *disinterested*, and attributes more ideal motives to *uninterested*.

Another pair of words with the same kind of distinction as *disinterested/uninterested* is *dissatisfied* and *unsatisfied*. *Dissatisfied* carries the meaning that a person is discontented, as in the sentence: *Harold is dissatisfied with his job*. *Unsatisfied* means that something is lacking, unfulfilled, or is yet to happen, as in *The child’s hunger went unsatisfied for day*.

The noun *disbelief* is a refusal or reluctance to believe when we are very surprised by something. *People’s unusual reaction to bad news is shock and disbelief. He listened in disbelief to this extraordinary story. Unbelief* means lack of belief or state of not believing, esp. in God, religion, etc. and a person who does not have any religious beliefs is an *unbeliever* or *nonbeliever*. *Misbelief* is a faulty or unorthodox belief. Similarly behave also other forms derived from the verb *believe*. *This summer holidays were unbelievably short*.

He has got married? – It’s unbelievable. She stared at him with unbelieving eyes. She disbelieved every word he said.

Similarly the opposite of *religious* is *irreligious*, and the contrast *unreligious* and *antireligious*.

While *immoral* means the opposite of *moral*, i.e. what is contrary to morality; the necessity is sometimes felt of a term implying “having nothing to do with morality, standing outside the sphere of morality; this is sometimes expressed by *amoral*, sometimes by *unmoral*. “There is a vast deal in life and letters both, which is not *immoral*, but simply *a-moral*. Children are naturally neither *moral* nor *immoral*, but merely *unmoral*” (Jespersen, 1960).

While some prefixes give the words distinct meanings, other combinations are interchangeable. For example, *disfrock* is a synonym for *unfrock*, and *defrock* – with the meaning to dismiss (a priest guilty of bad conduct) from the priesthood.

In some specific cases, such as the words *social*, *septic*, *sepsis* are, there exist several possibilities of prefixed negation with slight differences in the meaning. *Asocial* means *not social*, *antisocial*, *even hostile to social order*; and its synonymic variety *antisocial* means causing harm to the way in which people live together peacefully, e.g. *Playing music so loud that it annoys everyone else in the street is antisocial*. *Unsocial* means *not suitable for combining with family and social life* (damaging to social life), e.g. *As a policeman you often have to work unsocial hours*.

Aseptic means “free from contamination caused by harmful micro-organisms” and *asepsis* is “absence of harmful bacteria”. *Antiseptic* means “counteracting sepsis”, esp. by preventing the growth of disease-causing micro-organisms and *antiseptics* is a process of using antiseptics to eliminate these micro-organisms.

According to František Šimon (1999) the negative prefix *a-* has in medical Latin one synonymic prefix *in-* but in English (general or medical) we have not found any example of possible synonymous pair *a-/in-* as was the above-mentioned example of *a-/anti*.

The only negative suffix *-less* can form its positive forms by means of *-ful* and vice versa, e.g. *faithful* – *faithless*. Sometimes there can be more ways to form negatives forms, e.g. *fruitful* – *unfruitful* (unprofitable; not producing fruit or corps)/*fruitless* (not bearing fruit; useless, unprofitable); *graceful* – *ungraceful* (not graceful)/*graceless* (lacking grace or elegance or charm); *helpful* – *unhelpful* (not helpful)/*helpless* (lacking help or protection; defenceless), *lawful* – *unlawful* (not lawful; illegal, not

permissible)/*lawless* (having no laws). The difference of meaning of the negative pairs is obvious from the mentioned examples – *un-* means first of all negation of the positive word and *-less* expresses lack of some quality involved in the basic word.

Conclusion

Although some of these 5 different negative prefixes and one negative suffix have distinct connotations, few of them share identical meanings. But knowing which prefix to choose for any given word is tricky because the rules governing their use are inconsistent. The only good advice for users unsure in using negative prefixes is to keep a dictionary within reach and consult it when needed.

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