# Negative Prefix Words in English

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This paper aims at presenting how different negative affixes have been used for producing a new word since the Middle English period. In order to investigate the frequency of occurrence of the targeted derivatives, some corpora will be of great importance. In addition to the corpora, dictionaries will be used for the definitions of the words not only in Present-day English but also in the past.

## 1. Introduction

This paper is only a part of my ongoing projects on English negative prefixed words. The main purpose of this paper is to investigate negative affixed words from the viewpoint of the history of English and also morphology.

As most native speakers of English are already aware, it is well-known that English has some different negative affixes such as *in-, un-, non-* and *-less* in Present-day English. These affixes have existed since the Middle English period regardless of their origins. It is true that both *un-* and *-less* originate in Germanic, and they have produced a great number of derivatives. However, it is important to show not only their similarities but also their differences in order to grasp the linguistic features of *un-* and *-less*. For both of them, their existence is possibly due to the fact that they can be attached extensively not only to the Germanic words but also to words of foreign origins. In addition, a part of speech or syntactic category to which *un-* is attached is usually an adjective and the derivatives are also adjectives, whereas *-less* is attached to nouns or verbs and the derivatives are always adjectives.

Through this study, we will focus on the following two research questions.

(1) Because of the fact that the prefix *un-* and the suffixes *-ful* and *-less* have Germanic origin, their base words "X" may be a Germanic word as well.
(2) Which is more productive formation and which is more usual than the other, [*un-* + *X* + *-ful*] or [*X* + *-less*]?

In order to know some tips for the solution of the above research questions, methodology and definitions will be shown in the next section.

## 2. Methodology and Definitions

Here are the methodology and the definitions shown. First, methodology will be explained. The British National Corpus (BNC) will be used for the investigation of the frequency of occurrence of our targeted-word type, [*un-* + *X* + *-ful*] in Present-day English. Next, both the prefix *un-* and the suffix *-ful* are removed and, instead, the adjectival negative suffix *-less* is attached to the base word "X", followed by the investigation of the BNC frequency research of "X-*less*" adjectives. In order to investigate of the past frequency of

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occurrence of both [*un-* + *X* + *-ful*] and [*X* + *-less*] derivatives, the *Oxford English Dictionary 2nd edition* (*OED*) will be mainly used.

For the definitions, as this study is conducted extensively from the viewpoints of etymology and morphology, other linguistic viewpoints such as semantics, literatures, and so on are not considered here. Other definitions are as follows; (1) reversal *un-* is not investigated in this study, (2) not nominal *-ful* as in *bagful* or *cupful* but adjectival *-ful* is only taken into consideration, (3) [- Latinate] means Germanic while [+ Latinate] Latinate words, (4) Type frequency only is considered in this study.

## 3. Results of Research

In this section, let me show the results of research of the two types of derivatives concerned here. Table 1 below shows us the frequency of occurrence of [*un-* + *X* + *-ful*] and [*X* + *-less*] derivatives found in BNC.

Table 1. Frequency of occurrence of [*un-* + *X* + *-ful*] and [*X* + *-less*] in BNC

| | Base | *un- X -ful* | *X -less* | Origin |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | *success* | 953 | 0 | L |
| 2 | *law* | 902 | 102 | G |
| 3 | *help* | 248 | 791 | G |
| 4 | *grate* | 138 | 0 | L |
| 5 | *faith* | 119 | 47 | L |
| 6 | *event* | 118 | 2 | L |
| 7 | *fruit* | 16 | 218 | L |
| 8 | *truth* | 10 | 0 | G |
| 9 | *skill* | 8 | 0 | ON |
| 10 | *mind* | 6 | 241 | G |
| 11 | *mercy* | 4 | 122 | L |
| 12 | *peace* | 3 | 0 | L |
| 13 | *stress* | 3 | 0 | L |
| 14 | *beauty* | 2 | 0 | L |
| 15 | *duty* | 2 | 0 | OF |
| 16 | *grace* | 2 | 25 | L |
| 17 | *health* | 2 | 0 | G |
| 18 | *hope* | 2 | 708 | G |
| 19 | *resource* | 2 | 3 | L |
| 20 | *rest* | 2 | 612 | L / G |
| 21 | *fancy* | 1 | 0 | OF |
| 22 | *harm* | 1 | 636 | G |
| 23 | *purpose* | 1 | 31 | L |
| 24 | *remorse* | 1 | 75 | L |
| 25 | *respect* | 1 | 0 | L |
| 26 | *thank* | 1 | 36 | G |
| 27 | *use* | 1 | 1253 | OF |
| 28 | *youth* | 1 | 0 | G |

*G: German, L: Latin, OF: Old French, ON: Old North, L / G: uncertain

We can see that Table 1 has not only the frequency of occurrence but the origins of base words as well. As you can see, BNC gives the total of 28 [*un-* + *X* + *-ful*] adjectives to us. Based on the results shown in Table 1, we will analyze these derivatives in the next section.

## 4. Analyses

Let me begin the analyses of origin, [±Latinate] features. Considering the origin of the derivatives, the two points below can be confirmed. First, the number of [+ Latinate] is eighteen, while [- Latinate] nine and there is one word the origin of which we cannot know. In fact, the three affixes concerned in this study are all Germanic elements, and the base words are usually also Germanic words. However, the detailed examination will show us unexpected results, which means that the three elements occur at extensively [+ Latinate] words. This is possibly because *un-* and *-less* have the enough productivity to attach to foreign words, even though *-ful* is less frequent than the other two.

To tell the truth, it is hard to tell whether these three elements are productive for foreign words or the foreign words are well-established in Present-day English enough for the three elements to be attached to. In order to obtain the solution, we can obtain some tips for it to

investigate which type appeared first in English, [*un-* + *X* + *-ful*] or [*X* + *-less*]. Table 2 below shows the first appearances of all the foreign base words.

Table 2. Period of first appearance of base words and the derivatives

|  |  | Base | *un-X-ful* | *X-less* | *X-ful* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | *success* | 1537 | 1617 | 1584 | 1592 |
| 2 | *grate* | 1400 | 1553 | 1577 | 1552 |
| 3 | *faith* | 1300 | 1384 | 1300 | 1300 |
| 4 | *event* | 15.. | 1800 | 1815 | 1616 |
| 5 | *fruit* | 1175 | 1400 | 1340 | 1300 |
| 6 | *skill* | 1175 | 1370 | 1200 | 1300 |
| 7 | *mercy* | 1225 | 1481 | 1400 | 1340 |
| 8 | *peace* | 1160 | 1611 | 1522 | 1400 |
| 9 | *stress* | 1300 | - | 1885 | 1853 |
| 10 | *beauty* | 1325 | 1495 | 1600 | 1526 |
| 11 | *duty* | 1297 | 1582 | 1592 | 1552 |
| 12 | *grace* | 1175 | 1667 | 1374 | 1420 |
| 13 | *resource* | 1596 | - | 1787 | 1808 |
| 14 | *fancy* | 1465 | 1814 | 1753 | 1627 |
| 15 | *purpose* | 1300 | - | 1552 | 1853 |
| 16 | *remorse* | 1387 | 1611 | 1593 | 1590 |
| 17 | *respect* | 1398 | 1611 | 1542 | 1585 |
| 18 | *use* | 1225 | 1598 | 1592 | 1596 |

*"-" means uncertainty of the period in the *OED*.
*The base word "*event*" is uncertain for its period.

We can see the ten base words out of eighteen which have over a 30-year discrepancy between [*un-* + *X* + *-ful*] and [*X* + *-less*]. Let us focus on *unbeautiful* out of the eighteen words. Only *unbeautiful* among [*un-* + *X* + *-ful*] adjectives appeared earlier than [*X* + *-less*] adjectives. It means that *-less* suffixation to foreign words probably occurred frequently in the Middle English period. How was *unbeautiful* created in the past? The *OED* gives some tips for it. According to the *OED*, the root word "*beauty*" occurred in 1325, followed by the appearances of *unbeautiful* in 1495 and *beautiful* in 1526,

while *beautiless*, which is not used in Present-day English, appeared in 1600. It is natural that, because *un-* is mainly used to adjectives, the appearance of *unbeautiful* should be preceded by *beautiful*. However, as long as the *OED* research is concerned, *beautiful* was probably created through a back-formation. How about the creation of *unbeautiful* from *beauty*? In order to grasp some keys to the solution, some past sentences below extracted from the *OED* will be of use.

(1) *c*1325 in G. L. Brook *Harley Lyrics* (1968) 50 Heo is cristal of clannesse, ant baner of *bealte*.
(2) 1495 *Trevisa's Barth. De P.R.* (W. de W.) xvii. lxxv. U iv b/2 The floure· ·defoyleth nother *vnbewtieth* the rodde: but makyth it· ·perfyte & fayr.
(3) 1495 *Trevisa's Barth. De P.R.* (W. de W.) xix. viii. hh vij b/2 Euery mannes face is moste made bewtefull or *vnbewtefull* with colour.
(4) 1526 W. Bonde *Pylgrimage of Perfection* i. sig. Biᵛ, Whose swete visage· ·was most *beautefull*, and more pleasaunt to beholde.
(5) c1600 Lyrics for Lutenists (Collier) 20 (title) Beauty when *beautiless*.
(6) 1398 J. Trevisa tr. Bartholomew de Glanville *De Proprietatibus Rerum* (1495) xvii. lxxiii. 647 Floures· ·defoyleth not the yerde: but *bewtyeth* it.

Let us focus on (2) and (3) in each of which *unbeauty* and *unbeautiful* are used respectively. These two sentences are written by the same author, and *unbeauty* in (2) is used as a verb not a noun, while unbeautiful in (3) is an adjectival use. That is to say, it is possible that *unbeautiful* was produced from the verbal *unbeauty*.

Considering this formation, we can speculate that English used to have the verbal usage for *beauty*. The sample sentence (6) has the verbal usage of *beauty*, which appeared in 1398.

## 5. Conclusion

So far, we have seen the two types of negative affixed adjectives, [*un-* + *X* + *-ful*] and [*X* + *-less*]. As a conclusion, we can obtain the following two points through this study.

(1) Although *un-, -ful* and *-less* are the Germanic elements, both types of [*un-* + *X* + *-ful*] and [*X* + *-less*] can be seen more frequently in [+ Latinate] than [- Latinate] feature.

(2) The [*X* + *-less*] type is more productive than the [*un-* + *X* + *-ful*] type.

This study is just a part of my projects about negative affixed words. We still have some problems about the word-formation of negative affixes, especially *in-, un-, non-* and *-less*. It is interesting to investigate the frequency of occurrence from the viewpoints of etymology, and it is necessary to know how new words will be created in the future. In order to solve the problems, we need to keep investigating the negative prefixed words.

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