

UNSHERLOCKING UNSHERLOCK

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We were seated side by side on a bisellium, Dr. Wombat and I, before a tea wagon bearing an elegant silver tea service and such necessities of life as fresh apricots, sour cream, baklava, Sachertorten, chocolate truffles, and any number of soft and fragrant cheeses. I had just crossed my legs and The Wombat had just leant over to pick up a necessity.

A stricken look suddenly overspread his face and he exclaimed "Wobbegong shoes!"

"Woebegone shoes?" I replied uncomprehendingly. "Why, ..." I had no time to finish, however, before the enigmatic animal snatched the covering from my nearer foot and held it in his paw, gazing at it in the saddest and most pensive manner.

"Alas, poor Warwick! I knew him, Harry; a selachian of infinite zest, of most excellent fancy pattern. Where are the fringes that o'erhung his lips and distinguished him from his fellows? But he has not lost his tongue and has even gained a sole, of which he was aye most fond!" Thus apostrophized the beast the sharkskin shoe he contemplated.

"What is this?" I demanded. "Surely you cannot be acquainted with my shoes?"

"Where did you get this footgear, dear boy?" replied The Wombat. "It is not like you to affect such conspicuous, cruel, and unnecessary pomp. Whoever made these oxfords employed the hide of a noble creature, a former correspondent of WRUG."

"I know nothing of the shoe's connection with rugs, nor what they are made of, nor why you call them woebegone when they are as good as they were twenty years ago when I inherited them from a deceased in-law whose fondness for shoes was scarcely exceeded by Imelda Marcos's. Fortunately we wore the same size, and I have more shoes now than I will be able to wear out if I live to be as old as Moses."

"Ah, the dates jibe. WRUG is the Woolloomooloo Research University Gazette. Shortly after its founding a certain Warwick Wobbegong sent us a letter offering his services as Great Barrier Reef correspondent, saying that as a wobbegong or carpet shark he felt a particular affinity to our enterprise. He used to vacuum up all sorts of things from the sea bottom and was a most successful co-

worker, but suddenly some quarter-century ago his contributions with their familiar Cairns, Queensland, postmark ceased arriving. We never knew what happened to him. I had met him once and was impressed by his distinctive brown, yellow, and grey mottling, from which I instantly recognized him again when I saw him on your feet. Whoever did him in to be made into shoes for your in-law was himself an inlex."

"What is that?"

"Latin for outlaw, sometimes assimilated into illex. I use that sepulchral language to show my respect for Warwick W.," explained my friend.

"Rather than INlex I should expect the word to be EXlex, that is OUTlaw."

"True. Illex and exlex are indeed synonyms, and I might have used the latter, especially as it is reminiscent of a certain proprietary purgative, but inlex or illex somehow suggested itself to me, perhaps as an echo of in-law, perhaps because it could be coupled with another illex and become the diverb illex illex."

"Outlaw outlaw?" was my dubitative query.

"No, enticing outlaw. An outlaw always tries to lure others to break the law, too. Illex -- outlaw -- from in- 'not' and lex 'law'; illex -- enticer, seducer -- from in- 'in, into' and lacio 'entice, allure.' The genitive and other oblique cases differentiate them -- illegis illicis and so on."

"Well, I certainly don't intend to be enticed into wearing Warwick Wobbegong. Rather, I think that the illex illex that killed that remarkable creature should be beaten with a scourge of illex, if not strung up with a knot at his paxwax," said I, removing the handsome shoes and handing them over to the furry savant, who vowed that he would have them disassembled and Warwick's mortal remains cremated and scattered over his haunts along the Great Barrier Reef.

"Strange," I continued, "how even prefixes, like whole words themselves, become homonymous and ambiguous."

"Such is the fate, indeed, of many words; yet often they maintain themselves in their separate meanings, even when very common, like son and sun in English; ist and isst ('is' and 'eats') in German; voie, voix, voit ('way, 'voice, 'sees') in French; svet and svet ('light' and 'world') in Russian and so on. I doubt that there exists a language without homonyms. Sometime we can discuss their crucial role in the genesis of the alphabet," replied the dapper diprotodont.

"Yes," said I, falling in with The Wombat's comment. "Why, there is even homonymy in English, as in Latin, between the prefix meaning 'not,' I am thinking of UN-, and another UN-, witness UNLOOS-EN and UNTIE. And this brings to mind a statement and its rebuttal from the Journal of Recreational Linguistics, Word Ways, so

ably and conscientiously edited for nearly a score of years now by the assiduous A. Ross Eckler.

"On page 243 of the November 1987 issue Mr. David Morice propounds a conundrum and asks 'Can you unSherlock this one?'; and on page 85 of the May 1988 number Mr. George Scheetz reproves Mr. Morice, declaring 'As an avid Sherlockian (or Holmesian, as the British would say), I doth [sic] protest! ... any Sherlockian worth his ... salt would understand unSherlock to mean 'not solve.' Sherlock Holmes, after all, is synonymous with finding solutions.' Then he suggests deep-sixing unSherlock. Would you care to comment on this?"

An indulgent smile spread over the features of the placid pundit only to be eclipsed by an enormous chocolate truffle, which he meditatively munched. Then, after quaffing a demitasse of tea and blotting his rhinarium with a snowy linen napkin, he delivered the following brief.

"It would have been well had Mr. Scheetz been a less impavid Sherlockian. Perhaps no other group of words than that clustered about the concept of UNSHERLOCK shows more clearly the opposition between the two homonymous prefixes UN-:

CIPHER	UNCIPHER
DECIPHER	UNDECIPHER
RIDDLE	UNRIDDLE
SHERLOCK	UNSHERLOCK
SOLVE	UNSOLVE

(not to mention UNPUZZLE and PUZZLE OUT). All these twelve words are synonymous, as you can easily ascertain by looking them up in Webster II, Webster III, and the OED (with the exception of SHERLOCK and UNSHERLOCK, the first of which Mr. Scheetz implicitly acknowledges as meaning 'solve,' and the second of which my further remarks will demonstrate also means 'solve,' just as Mr. Morice intended his coinage to mean).

"But you yourself, dear boy, are not without sin in this matter, for the words that you instanced, UNLOOSEN and UNTIE, both contain the same prefix. The crux of the matter is that there are, as you say, two homonymous prefixes UN-: UN- No. 1 means 'not,' while UN- No. 2 is of uncertain meaning, as you term it. The meaning, however, is not uncertain, but more varied than that of UN- No. 1. UN- No. 2's effect is not to negate an action, but to reverse it, as in UNTIE. A second effect of UN- No. 2 is to intensify an action already negatively tinged, as in UNLOOSEN.

"The fuller form of UN- No. 2 is found in the word ANSWER from Anglo-Saxon andswaru, literally a 'swearing,' i.e., saying, against. This AN- from and- is cognate with Latin ante, Greek anti, and German ANT- in ANTWORT 'answer' and ANTLITZ 'face, countenance.' The weaker form is, of course, simple UN- No. 2, as in UNFETTER. This does not mean 'not fetter,' but 'remove fetters.' The weaker German form is the inseparable prefix ENT-, as in ENTFESSELN 'un-fetter.'

"UN- No. 1 is a negating prefix, as in UNTRUE. The characteristic feature of this UN- No. 1 'not' is that it is so very rarely used with verbs that to all intents and purposes it may be said that if UN- occurs before a verb it is the UN- No. 2 of UNFETTER, denoting a reversal or removal of an action. This non-verbal use of UN- No. 1 is not surprising because when one is actively and consciously not performing an action one is performing an action that is unnegated, perhaps even the same action in inverse order, sense, or effect. This lies at the heart of the famous Tolstoyan predicament of not being able to go into a corner and not think of a white bear, for one must think of a white bear in order consciously not to think of one. You can fail to solve, to think, to do, but you cannot actively not solve, not think, not do anything. Something must always be involved. Let us, however, deal with ascertainable facts and abandon problems that lie in the realm of metaphysics.

"The fact is that UN- No. 1 'not' is prefixed primarily to adverbs and adjectives (including present participles and, preeminently, past participles, which are of course adjectives of state). UN- No. 2, denoting removal or reversal of or release from an action or state, is primarily prefixed to verbs or else makes verbs from nouns, such verbs denoting removal, release, or freeing from the condition or state which such nouns indicate. UN- No. 2 is also an intensifier, and this is its function in UNDECIIPHER, UNSHERLOCK, and UNSOLVE.

"Let me submit the following list of words for your contemplation. What does this list say to you?"

BARK	GUT	RIND
BONE	HAIR	SCALE
BRAIN	HEAD	SHELL
CAP	HIDE	SPOT
CASE	HULL	STEM
COPE	LIMB	STONE
CORE	NAP	STRIN
BEARD	NOSE	TAIL
DUST	PEEL	THREAD
FLESH	PILE	TOP
FUR	PLUME	TRIM
GILL	POLL	

"Well," I ventured, "they are all words of one syllable."

"True," said the Wombat wearily, "but that is trivial. What kind of words are they? Nouns? Verbs? What?"

"They are all nouns," I answered, somewhat piqued at his intonation. "Not only nouns, but nouns that denote the integuments, coverings, and central parts of objects, as well as projecting parts or powderings of some sort on the surfaces thereof." I thought my answer was rather epic in its fullness.

"They are nouns, to be sure," assented the logothere. "But, say, were they verbs what common characteristic would they share?"

"Hmmm. If you BARK a tree you remove the bark, if you BONE a roast you remove the BONE, if you BRAIN an animal you dash its brains out, if you ..." The Wombat raised an admonitory paw.

"That's part of it. They are all essentially causative verbs. Now try prefixing UN- to all those words."

"Why," I exclaimed in enlightenment, "that UN- does not change the meaning at all, but intensifies it by emphasizing the removal action of the simple noun-derived verbs."

"Precisamente," said The Wombat in Iberian. "Here we are dealing with intensifying UN- No. 2. Say, however, we convert all these verbs into past participles, that is, adjectives. What do we have then?" And he proceeded to answer his own question: "We have words describing objects that may (1) never have had any of the parts on the list or (2) may have had them removed. Incidentally, as causatives all these verbs with one exception are weak, so the form is UNHIDED, not UNHIDDEN, but UNSTRUNG, although by analogy to HANGED I suppose you could say UNSTRINGED. Here BARKED and UNBARKED are synonymous, FLESHED and UNFLESHED, PEELED and UNPEELED, and so on. For the intensifier UN- we may in most cases substitute the prefixes DE- or DIS-. This shows us that in this group of English words we are dealing with the boundary along which UN- No. 1 and UN- No. 2 may be confused. Reversal is not necessarily negation. This engenders the sort of confusion that reigned in Mr. Scheetz's mind when he asserted that Mr. Morice's intuitively quite correct neologism 'unSherlock' was wrong."

"He who says UN-, then, says a lot. I am reminded of other UN- words," I added. "There's LIGHTEN and UNLIGHTEN, THAW and UNTHAW, MELT and UNMELT. I myself would even equate CLEAR and UNCLEAR, as 'The heavens uncleared.'"

"Yes, and GIVE and UNGIVE both mean thaw. UNGIVE also means to take back a gift; under exceptional circumstances it might mean not to give. The context would be decisive. UNREPENTANT may suggest UNREPENT, which could be an intensified REPENT, or 'to reverse a repentance,' or 'to think again again,' or 'to cause to think again' -- as in 'I will unrepent you.'"

The Wombat paused in thought. "You see the world of UN- is a strange and complicated one. UN- verbs partake of the causative, denote completion of action (perfectivize), border on the negative, and reinforce. When intensifiers they reinforce a verb already negatively tinged. I say verb because there is at least one instance where it is a noun that is intensified -- UNBEAST, like the German Untier 'monster.'"

"And beast is already negatively tinged," I added.

The Wombat eyed me narrowly. "I prefer to think of UN- No. 1 and UN- No. 2 as fused or conflated here: first, UNBEAST 'not a beast' and, second, UNBEAST 'monster,' both simultaneously referring to that creature who proudly vaunts himself not to be a beast, but is actually a monster."

I said nothing, although I could not but agree, as my silence indicated, for my friend was referring to man who in his vainglorious apophthegm says 'Homo homini lupus,' whereas it should be 'Homo homini homo,' because man is far more cruel to his kind, and indeed to every kind, than is the wolf.

I could see that The Wombat was not insensible of the effect his words had had on me. He smiled an inscrutable marsupial smile and went on, "Nor should I unbethink me of the verb UNBETHINK, which is a true doublet. One reflexive UNBETHINK means 'to forget' and is compounded with negative UN- No. 1, while another reflexive UNBETHINK meaning 'to recollect, consider, bethink oneself' is compounded with..."

Here, like an overeager schoolchild, I interrupted the savant and completed his sentence with the words "the intensifying UN- No. 2!"

The inscrutable marsupial smile transformed itself into a very scrutable smile of superiority like that of the Egyptians who used to say that the Greeks were, after all, eternal children. "No, here we have a true confusion of three prefixes: UN- No. 2 plus BE-, both intensifying prefixes to verbs, and UMBE, a preposition and prefix lost to the contemporary language, cognate with the German um and, like it, meaning 'around, about'; UMBE-THINK has been changed into UN-BE-THINK. Offhand I can think of only one other English word that employs that ancient English preposition-prefix, EMBER, as in Ember days, which I will leave to you to look up for yourself in Webster II or III.

"Here is another list of verbs synonymous in both their simple and their UN- forms.

DRAW (curtains)	PICK (OUT)	SPRING (cause to operate)
EMPTY, EMPT	RAVEL	SPOIL (despoil)
FREE	REAVE	STEEP (in a liquid)
PARCEL	ROOT (UP)	TEEM (steel, crucible)
PART	SEPARATE	

"From these verbs we can see that UN- No. 2 is a living prefix. In truth, despite the space devoted to it in the OED and Websters II and III, those authorities do not cover all its ramifications or indicate the vitality that it displays in words like unSherlock. There is a phrase 'unparted gold,' which means gold alloyed with silver before being refined. We can either SEPARATE or UNSEPARATE this gold, PART it or UNPART it. We could say 'He unparted the unparted gold,' 'He unseparated the unseparated sand and ant eggs.' Note the difference in meaning between the homonymous past tenses and past participles." The Wombat paused to bite into an apricot and refresh his palate.

"I never knew UN- was so complicated," I confessed.

"There is much more to it, but I do not want to weary you, although I will instance a few more UN- words. UNLAX, a jocular transmogrification of RELAX, can be equated with the verb LAX.

(This is, quite incidentally, but equally appropriately, the abbreviation for the international airport at laid-back Los Angeles.) The verbs LIMBER and UNLIMBER, RAKE (UP, OUT) and UNRAKE are synonymous (note how UN- No. 2 renders the idea of completed action expressed by an adverb in the uncompounded verb). I also consider SMOOTHEN and UNSMOOTHEN to be synonymous, although the latter in that sense is found in no dictionary. Nevertheless, who could fail to understand 'He unsmoothened the unsmoothened (i.e., crumpled) paper'? To discuss the durationally distinct, but otherwise synonymous meaning of pairs like UNSTINTING and UNSTINTED would make my remarks far too long. Finally, since this discussion began with the word ILLEX, let me draw your attention to an obsolete English word for outlaw in Webster II, UNLEDE, from UN- No. 1 'not' and Anglo-Saxon LEOD 'people, country, man.' That is your English equivalent of the German UNMENSCH 'monster, brute.' LEOD is cognate with German LEUTE 'people,' Russian LYUDI 'people,' Latin LIBER 'free; child,' and Greek ELEÜTHEROS 'free.'"

The Wombat seemed to feel this a fit place to terminate his remarks, but I asked him if he had a favorite UN- word. With typical perversity he replied, "Perhaps it should be UNSCARB, found below the line in Webster II without meaning given or as yet ascertainable by me; or perhaps it should be UNDOER, the word that Wycliffe uses for 'interpreter,' so many interpreters or translators undo the authors they translate, and it's a change from the 'traduttore, tradittore' ('translator, traitor') which is getting pretty hackneyed nowadays; but it actually is UNT, the European mole. I never met a mole I didn't like."

Shortly thereafter I drove home in my stocking feet, leaving Warwick's remains with his friend.