

(NON)SENSE AND (IN)SENSIBILITY

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Adjectives often come in positive/negative pairs, or antonyms, such as *well/unwell*, *correct/incorrect* *similar/dissimilar*. But there are some notable gaps in this pattern. Youngsters have fun recreating the terms *couth* (correct but obsolete) and *gruntled* (incorrect: if *grund* ever existed, *disgruntled* would not have been its opposite), There is no lack of other examples in common speech. For instance, why can't some Chinese be *scrutable*, and why can't my appearance (still) be *kempt*? Much the same happens in the case of -ful/-less adjectives where the pattern of pairs like *careful/careless* and *harmful/harmless* is broken by such 'singletons' as *peaceful*, *plentiful* and *priceless*. Also, even where pairs of opposites appear to exist, the words are not always truly opposite in meaning, sometimes because of multiple meanings in one word of the pair (*easy*, *scramble*, *invalid*), and sometimes because of a natural divergence in usage (*im/pertinent*, *infirm*, *infamous*). Again, in cases like *hopeful* and *hopeless* the context plays a part: when applied to situations the words are opposite, but when applied to people they are far from it: if I am hopeful, I have hope, but if I am hopeless then others have no hope for me. Another example is the use of *un/fold* in its intransitive: the unfolding of a story is not the opposite of the folding of a theatre production. Also far from opposites we have the pair *im/passive*. Then there is the possibility of a downright dangerous misunderstanding where an apparent opposite is nothing of the kind – *in/flammable*.

The notion of 'opposite' is itself a bit vague, ranging from logical contradiction to attaching a prefix or suffix to an existing word to denote a significant difference. Just how involved things can get is illustrated by words derived from *sense*. To start with, there are several meanings of the word: we have the physical senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch: then it can mean *meaning*: and in matters of thought and expression it denotes good sense and also awareness and feeling. Take the word *sensible*: its common meaning is having good sense. So - is its antonym *insensible*? No: that usually means rendered unconscious. *Senseless* is more of an antonym, though that too can mean unconscious (even if *senseful* does not exist to pair with it). *Sensible*, as in 'I am sensible of your concerns', leads to *sensibility*, whose opposite is – of course - not *insensibility*, which means unconsciousness. A closer antonym is *insensitivity*: but *sensitive* and *insensitive* as a pair are not perfect, because if I am sensitive I get upset easily, while if I am insensitive I am likely to upset others. At the physical level there is *in/sensate*, which leads to *sensation* and *un/sensational*! Finally (?) there is *nonsense* which is the opposite of good sense and also the opposite of what is meaningful. Is that clear now?

Apart from *nonsense*, the prefix *non* yields *nonentity*, *nonchalant*, *nondescript*, *nonplussed*. When hyphenated, the prefix is readily attached to nouns, adjectives and participles: examples are *non-fiction*, *non-compliant*, *non-aligned*. One more negating prefix is *a-/an-* with words from the Greek: here too there are ill-matched pairs, such as *a/pathetic*, *an/aesthetic*, *a/gnostic*.

With the *-un* words the prefix is predominantly equivalent to just using the word *not*. But there are good reasons, of course, for creating a one-word negative. One is that it would be clumsy to say ‘*I am in a not happy mood*’, or ‘*Such things are not not usual*’. Also, an adjective can be turned into an adverb: could one say ‘not doubtedly’ or ‘not waveringly’? The *-un* prefix generally produces well-behaved pairs, though with a few oddities: *undue* is opposite to one meaning of *due* but only in the sense of being too much, not too little: *unearth* and *unearthly* lack real opposites: and to *unpick* is not the opposite of to pick. Many of the negatives are formed from the past participle passive, such as *unbroken*, *unpaid*, but ambiguity still exists when *un-* is applied to the verb itself: a verb of action when so negated means to reverse the action of the positive verb: we have to *undo*, *unfold*, *unload*, *unlock* and so on. If I am told ‘That door has been unlocked’ I assume someone has come and unlocked it, but if I am told ‘That door has been unlocked for years’ then I think that it has been in a not-locked state for years, or even could have been like that from when the place was built.

Where ‘singleton’ adjectives don’t have an opposite half, there is often good reason: if I am not legless (in either sense of the word), would I describe myself as *legful*? And if an event is not fateful, would one call it *fateless*? The suffix *-less* often means ‘totally without’, but in other cases it just points towards one end of a sliding scale (like we can say ‘not unhappy’ to indicate neither extreme). However, sometimes the missing opposites could in principle exist or be revived, as in the following anecdote: -

As a rather trepid person I have tried to be clueful in matters of home security. But the other day I looked down and saw an intruder coming up the stairs. His expression was fathomable noxious and nocent – here was a man determined to go away full-handed. He grasped my arm and said ‘You are pecunious. Where are the valuables?’ I felt resourceless rather than defenceful, but then something toward happened. My free hand brushed against a slim glass vase on the window ledge. This made a wieldy weapon and I swung it at his head. He fell back down the stairs, still gripping my arm and I collapsed on top of him. On reaching the bottom, he was clearly scathed, whereas I was the hapful victor. I still held a broken piece of glass in my hand and, though too ruthless to do him more damage, I kept it ready in case he became senseful before the police came. The vase was not valueful, and the blood stains on the carpet would be delible, so on the whole it was a woelless experience.