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Evaluative meaning of negative expression: Asymmetry between *readable* and *unreadable*

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to examine the relationship between negative expression and evaluative meaning, making use of the *Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)*. The English antonymous pair formed by *readable* and *unreadable* is in an asymmetrical relationship, though these two adjectives are structurally symmetrical, in that only the latter assumes facial expressions of human beings as the target of reading. What causes such an unexpected difference is evaluative meaning, that is, the speaker's positive or negative feeling or emotion conveyed additionally to the denotative meaning by linguistic expressions. Finally, it is concluded that the contrastive relationship between the two words varies in accordance with a combination of the following three factors (a) the standard of positive evaluation conveyed by the suffix *-able*; (b) the most salient stage in the procedure of reading; (c) the object of reading activity.

1. Introduction

Evaluation refers to the speaker's attitude or the feeling which is conveyed in addition to the denotative meaning of a given linguistic expression (Thompson – Hunston 1999). Evaluative meaning is sometimes inherent to an expression and sometimes gained through a contextual effect.

- (1) He is a genius.
- (2) He is just a student.

In (1), the noun *genius* takes on a positive evaluation. That is, the speaker regards it favorable to be a genius. This is almost always true when this noun

is used. On the other hand, *student* in (2) is not the case; this noun does not innately have a positive or negative evaluation. But when collocated with the adverb *just*, it is conveyed that the speaker finds it not good for him to be a student, comparing the status with more independent ones. Therefore, the utterance in (2) can be said to be evaluatively negative.

This paper sheds light particularly on the evaluative meaning of English negative expressions. English has a negative prefix *un-*. It has been generally argued that the function of *un-* is not limited to logical negation and it can serve as an indicator of negative evaluation. However, little has been examined about what kind of things the evaluative meaning of the prefix works on. The aim of this paper is to show that *readable* and *unreadable*, in spite of their structural symmetry, are asymmetrical in that they evaluate different kinds of things and that the characteristics of the antonymous pair varies in accordance with the combination of the following three factors: 1) the type of evaluative meaning conveyed by the suffix *-able*; 2) the most focused stage in the step of the reading procedure; and 3) the object of reading activity.

2. Previous studies

Un- is one of the most productive English prefixes representing negation; it can take a great number of adjectives as its base, as in *unlucky*, *unreal*, *unkind*. It can also be attached to present and past participles, as in *unfolding* and *unused*. In this section I review some typical attributes of *un-*, mainly from the perspective of evaluative meaning. Firstly, *un-* tends to refuse an adjectival base whose meaning is evaluatively negative (Zimmer 1964):

(3) **unbad*, **unsmall*, **unnarrow*, **unsad*

(4) negative affix + e-pos base → e-neg derived output (Horn 1989)

The prefix exclusively selects positively evaluated adjectives (*unselfish* is an exceptional case). As a result of derivation in which the prefix is attached to the positive base, a negative adjective is formed. In relation to this, it should also be noted that *un-* does not simply denote logical negation; rather it functions to assert that something or someone is in a given state. For example, Sherman (1973: 76) argues that to state “that someone is unhappy is logically to assert a quality, which is quite different from denying a quality

by saying that he is not happy". When we say someone is *unhappy*, what it means is that he or she is in a mental state contrary to being *happy*. Thus affirming someone is *unhappy* will not always be equivalent to denying the person is happy.

In this way, an *un-* adjective (e.g. *unhappy*) and its unprefixated counterpart (e.g. *happy*) together form a contrary pair where the scale cannot simply be divided into two. But there are some unclear cases; Mettinger (1990) argues that when the prefix appears with a base formed by a particle or suffix *-able*, their antonymous relationship is exceptionally interpreted as contradictory, not contrary. *Uneatable*, for example, is supposed to be gained through the process of syntactic re-categorization of *cannot be eaten* and therefore does nothing but deny the state the base adjective represents. In this case, there is no gradience between the positive and negative participants of the antonymous pair. The scale is split into two parts complementarily. Such an idea might also be applied to adjectives with a negative prefix other than *un-*. Lieber (2004) conducts an analysis based on her own judgment of gradability between several negatively prefixed adjectives and their positive counterparts. As a result, she regards it more difficult to assume any intermediate state between *curable* and *incurable* than between *happy* and *unhappy*.

3. Preliminary discussions

Against the traditional idea reviewed above, intuitively it is sometimes hard to believe that *un-V-able* adjectives are only associated with contradiction. Especially fully lexicalized expressions like *uncomfortable* are difficult to assign the contradictory meaning "state of not being *comfortable*". Hamawand (2009: 71), delineating the polysemy network of *un-*, posits one of its senses as "distinct from what is specified by adjectival base" and regards *unbelievable* as having this meaning, which is obviously distinct from mere contradiction (which Hamawand calls "the antithesis of what is specified by the adjectival base"). Such an interpretation of these adjectives is possible in part because of the semantics of the suffix *-able*. For example, *readable*, naturally derived from the verb *read*, is typically associated with interest or worthiness in reading. Such an association cannot of course be predicted from the semantics of *read* itself and thus be replaced with "*can be read*" without any contextual support. What is implied here is that the antonymy between *readable* and *unreadable* cannot be so much contradictory as contrary, where gradience

from one extreme to the other is found. When considering the pair in light of evaluative meaning, it is imperative to grasp what type of evaluation *-able* represents. Additionally, it is also necessary to carefully examine on what aspect in the act of reading is mainly focused. This is because it is assumingly possible to divide the process of reading into several steps. According to the definitions of *to read* in several English dictionaries, reading something is performed in two stages: looking and understanding. As an illustration of this, *Longman English Dictionary (LDCE)* defines the verb as “to look at written words and understand what they mean”.

From the perspective of Frame Semantics, Croft (2009) assumes an EAT frame and then maintains the process of eating includes three steps: intake, processing and ingestion. Croft further classifies some English verbs into the classes of “Chew Verbs” and “Gobble Verbs” which focus specifically on processing and digestion. Ultimately, he regards *eat* and *drink* as comprehensive verbs which can be applied to every step denoted above.

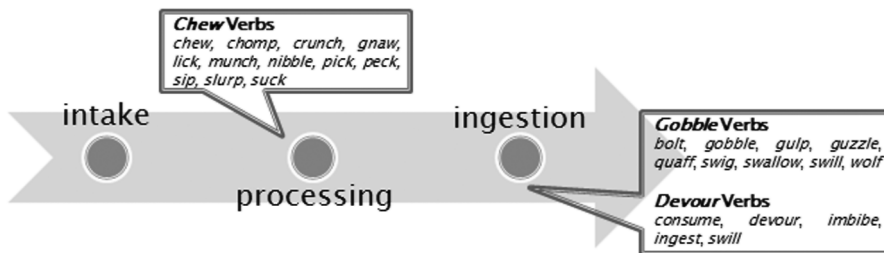


Figure 1. The process of eating in EAT frame (Croft 2009)

The definition of *readable* in dictionaries basically corresponds to the two steps in reading seen above; easiness in having visual contact with written letters or text and in understanding its content. *LDCE* defines it as (a) “interesting and enjoyable to read, and easy to understand” and (b) “writing or print that is readable is clear and easy to read”. Furthermore, the derived adjective also means the quality of being interesting or reading-worthy. Such an additional meaning is not elicited until the verb *read* is combined with *-able*. In this way the suffix does not only mean the possibility something is done but also contains adverbial information like easiness, interest and worthiness, which could be paraphrased into a prepositional phrase such as *with ease* or *with interest*.

Finally, the definition of *unreadable* is somewhat “unreadable”. *LDCE* defines *unreadable* in the following three senses: (a) “if someone’s expression

or face is unreadable, you cannot tell what they are thinking”; (b) “an unreadable book or piece of writing is difficult to read because it is boring or complicated”; (c) “unreadable writing is so untidy that you cannot read it”. Besides the senses corresponding to *readable*, the negative adjective has a figurative one “not being able to read someone’s feeling or thought from his or her face”.

Superficially, they look structurally symmetrical in that they share the same base verb and suffix. Nevertheless, as seen above, they entail the semantic difference with respect to what is represented as the object of reading activity. What makes them so? Indeed, the verb *read* can be used with a direct object like *face*, *eyes*. Thus, it is not so surprising that *unreadable* has a sense inherited from this. But then, why is this not true of *readable*? This study assumes the involvement of evaluative meaning with this difference.

4. Research

In order to reveal the cause of the difference between *readable* and *unreadable*, this study conducted a corpus-based analysis. The *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA), was adopted as its database. COCA was compiled by Mark Davies at Brigham Young University and contains approximately 4.5 billion words of American English of modern times. COCA includes 567 instances of *readable* and 479 instances of *unreadable*, showing that they appear so frequently as to be dealt with equivalently. The procedure of the research is the following. First, for the purpose of finding out what *readable* and *unreadable* respectively take as their object of reading activity and, therefore, of evaluation, what kind of nouns tend to appear within four words before and after each adjective was queried. Then, the way evaluative meaning represented by the adjectives works on the surrounding elements was examined.

Tab. 1 below shows the list of nouns which co-occur with *readable* in decreasing order. Here, only examples found more than four times are presented. For the sake of convenience, their frequency against that of *unreadable* is also displayed; the figures in the columns under the headings “R” and “U” indicate the frequency of each noun within the designated scope appearing together with *readable* and *unreadable*, respectively. The list clearly shows compatibility of *readable* with nouns denoting written materials like *book* and *account*. Furthermore, the adjective also appears together with several expressions referring to the viewing space of computers like *display* and *screen*.

Table 1. Nouns which occur with *readable*

Noun	R	U	Noun	R	U	Noun	R	U	Noun	R	U
book	39	8	narrative	8	1	people	6	1	theory	4	0
text	20	42	format	7	0	information	6	1	study	4	0
account	13	0	letter	7	1	name	5	0	sunlight	4	0
history	13	1	magazine	6	0	prose	5	0	manner	4	0
display	11	2	essay	6	0	way	5	0	font	4	0
form	10	1	article	6	0	sign	5	1	guide	4	0
screen	10	1	volume	6	0	novel	5	1	biography	4	0
writing	10	6	year	6	0	print	5	1	code	4	1
machine	9	3	work	6	1	style	4	0			

Tab. 2 below lists the nouns which were frequently observed with *unreadable*, here again in decreasing order. In contrast to the case of *readable*, its negative adjective is closely associated with nouns denoting the facial expressions of human beings or other animals, such as *expression*, *eye* and *face*. This tendency is clearly consistent with the dictionary definition given in the previous section. This pattern accounts for a large percentage of the overall results; an unnaturally small number of instances of *unreadable* appears with nouns whose referent is written materials or the like. Indeed, we can find a much greater number of co-occurrences of the adjective with the noun *text*, but this can be treated exceptionally because almost all of the examples are special cases where the noun refers technically to the “code” of the programming languages.

Table 2. Nouns which occur with *unreadable*

Noun	R	U	Noun	R	U
expression	62	1	look	4	0
face	49	2	feature	4	0
text	42	20	emotion	4	0
eye	34	2	part	4	0
word	9	3			
book	8	39			
writing	6	10			
mask	5	0			
moment	4	0			

Tabs. 3 and 4, shown below, provide the lists of adjectives which appear relatively frequently within four words before and after *readable* and *unreadable*, respectively. These lists are helpful to reconfirm that the former is positively evaluated and the latter is negatively evaluated, because these co-occurring adjectives can be seen as their synonyms. They can even be the key to the identification of the evaluative meaning of *-able*: easiness or worthiness.

Table 3. Adjectives which appear with *readable*

Readable	R	U
neat	8	0
new	7	1
clear	6	0
short	6	0
large	5	0
informative	4	0
interesting	4	0
accurate	4	0
bright	4	0
sharp	4	0

Table 4. Adjectives which appear with *unreadable*

Unreadable	R	U
dark	11	1
black	5	0
blank	4	0
messy	4	0
other	4	1
small	4	2

Next, we go on to observe in what way evaluative meanings are realized within the passages including *readable* and *unreadable*. The example in (5) is a case where *readable* can be judged to have a positive evaluation associated with easiness, because it is contrasted with a bad condition characterized by visual difficulty.

- (5) The layer must be highly reflective to make the display readable even in low light.

When the target of reading is something written, like a book, it may sometimes not be easy to decide at first which standard *readable* relies on interestingness of the content or stylistic clarity, but contextual support enables us to do this. *Readable* in (6) which clearly refers to style and (7) in the topic of translation can be regarded as denoting understandability.

- (6) James' *A Small Boy and Others* and *Notes a Son and Brother* tell us very little of the man and, couched in his late and most elliptical style, are among his least readable works.

- (7) Sitting in my little study in Salamanca, absorbed in a daily struggle to render Mochulsky's words into readable English [...]

On the other hand, when *readable* is found together with quite positively evaluated elements like *informative* in (8) and *love* in (9), the type of evaluative meaning denoted by *-able* can be treated as worthiness. In such cases, the focus is exclusively on the stage of understanding the content; not one example could be found that conveys the worthiness of looking at something.

- (8) It is a beautiful visual treat, and so readable and informative.
 (9) I love her readable blog with the employee's perspective.

As seen already, surprisingly few instances of *unreadable* are associated with something written such as books or magazines. Below are the rare examples. The focused stage and the type of evaluative meaning can be judged from the context.

- (10) Vandals have written on the statue's base and have begun chipping away at the engravings, making some of the words unreadable.
 (11) Read everything that doesn't bore you so much you're wasting time. (Most business text books are almost as unreadable as the computer books.)

Now we may examine the powerful combination of *unreadable* and facial expression. As in (12), many cases of *unreadable* of this sort follow *but*. What this means is that the adjective is negatively evaluated by the speaker, who intends to read others' expressions but cannot. Furthermore, several impressive examples like (13), where an unreadable face is vividly contrasted with one of someone laughing, in turn take on positive evaluation.

- (12) For a moment she tried reading his thoughts; but as usual his expression was unreadable.
 (13) The woman laughed gently, her expression changing from one unreadable state to another.

As predicted from the dictionary definition, *readable* seldom takes facial expression as its target; even in the rare cases when it does, it appears together with another negative element like *not* or *hardly*. It should also

be noted that *unreadable* frequently appears between two utterances or is embedded within a single one, explaining a contingent situation, that is, the facial expression of a participant in the discourse. This tendency shows that *unreadable* can also function to invigorate the description of written texts developed in a straightforward manner:

- (14) “Thanks, but I don’t think so.” She crossed her arms, her face unreadable. “Why not?”

Most of the examples of *unreadable* related to facial expression can be said to focus on the stage of understanding, but some of them depend on “lookability”:

- (15) Simon’s expression was unreadable because the sun was reflecting off his lenses.
- (16) The Bosnian turned his head slightly, but his expression was unreadable under the mask.

What has been observed thus far can be represented as below (Table 5):

Table 5. Summary chart

Evaluation	Easiness		Worthiness	
	look	understand	look	understand
Readable [written]	◎	◎	×	◎
Unreadable [written]	○	○	×	○
Readable [face]	×	×	×	×
Unreadable [face]	○	◎	×	×

Following Tab. 5 above, three provisional conclusions can be drawn: 1) facial expression can be applied only to *unreadable*, but it cannot be used with the intention of referring to someone’s face which lacks of worthiness or interestingness to read; 2) when the evaluation regards easiness, both *readable* and *unreadable* can be used with the state of looking at or focusing on. In the case of worthiness, on the other hand, not one example focusing on the first stage can be observed; it seems compulsory to be associated with understandability in some way; and 3) The asymmetry between *readable*

and *unreadable* is not restricted to the dictionary definition. The unbalanced relationship of the two can be observed in the expressions used and realized in the form of remarkable disparity in the frequency of specific uses.

5. Asymmetry between *readable* and *unreadable*

The final section deals with what the antonymous relationship between *readable* and *unreadable* is like. It apparently seems that there is potential gradience between them ranging from extreme positivity to extreme negativity. But the dimension where the potential is actually evoked differs in accordance with the object of reading and the focused step in the procedure. There must also be involvement to the extent necessary for evaluation. The worthiness of reading someone's face cannot be linguistically realized because it is not at all something to understand or enjoy or find something meaningful in. This reveals that there is little motivation to judge its readability. On the other hand, books and magazines become more worth reading as they become more interesting. Thus, there is much significance in evaluating their readability. Why then can *readable* not be evaluated in terms of easiness of reading facial expression, while its negative counterpart in this sense appears frequently? This could be because we do not try to read a person's face exposing their feeling or emotion. We can see the feeling easily without any attempt to do so. If there were to be any context in which such a thing can be said, it would not be expected to be positively evaluated. *Unreadable* with this meaning can appear legitimately because it is meaningful to emphasize the marked quality, that is, difficulty in reading something which is usually easy to understand. Facial expressions of human beings or animals are supposed to be readable; thus, it is unlikely that the more readable it is the better it becomes. Necessity for evaluation arises only when the basic premise is not satisfied. In this way, morphemes which are inherently evaluative, like *un-* and *-able*, cannot elicit such meaning in the specific realm in which little motivation for evaluation can be found. Finally, they sometimes go so far as to end up appearing quite rarely.

The antonymous relationship between *readable* and *unreadable* might also be characterized by the observation of co-occurring adverbial modifiers. They are both found appearing together with degree modifiers and thus situated on the gradient scale, but their attributes seem quite different from each other. *Unreadable* is typically modified by adverbs like *virtually*, *nearly* and *completely*, which implies that a lower limit of readability can clearly be drawn.

- (17) Albert Einstein wrote a completely unreadable piece for the SCHOLAR, "On the' Cosmologic Problem", in 1945.
- (18) His flinty eyes were completely unreadable.
- (19) White and gray display is nearly unreadable.

Instead of taking these adverbs as modifiers, *readable* tends to appear with *highly* and *very*,

- (20) Meanwhile, his clean, highly readable signature brought such a bonanza to forgers that the Ted Williams autograph.
- (21) J.J. Norwich, *The Normans in the south* (London, 1967) 303-31, paints a highly readable portrait of the political complexities surrounding Roger's rise to kingship.

This observation in turn indicates that the upper limit is not definitely assumed and that the readability of written materials is worth evaluating with degree especially on a positive scale. It follows that it is possible to visualize the antonymous relationship with regard to the motivation for evaluation as in Figure 2.

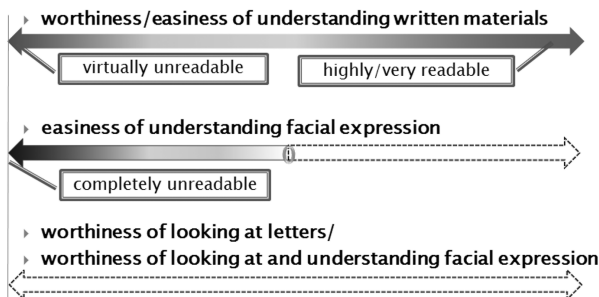


Figure 2. Visualization of the scale where evaluation is at work

In the scale of worthiness and easiness of reading something written, evaluative meaning can be developed bi-directionally. Easiness of understanding facial expressions, however, can be assumed to be developed only in a negative direction with the state of being readable set at zero; as argued above, conveying the understandability of facial expressions does

not lead to putting an emphasis on positive evaluation. Finally, evaluative meaning cannot be elicited in the whole scale of easiness or worthiness of looking at faces, for neither *readable* nor *unreadable* in this sense is found.

6. Conclusion

This paper has attended to the cause of semantic asymmetry between *readable* and *unreadable* which can be observed despite their symmetrical structures. To conclude, it can be stated that it is the way the following three factors are combined that determines the realm of the evaluative meanings of the adjectives that are at work:

- a. which quality *-able* represents, easiness or worthiness
- b. which stage is focused on, looking or understanding
- c. what kind of things are taken as the object of reading and thus evaluating, a book, letter or facial expression.

The results of this survey represent the tip of the iceberg of studying evaluative meanings realized in negative expressions. In order to grasp the whole picture, it is necessary to examine the behavior of other antonymous pairs more comprehensively.

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