Antisymmetry and morphology: Prefixes vs. suffixes

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Themenheft 11-11-17. Festschrift für Martin Prinzhorn
Hg. v. Clemens Mayr und Edwin Williams

Universität Wien · Institut für Sprachwissenschaft · 2017
Eigentümer, Herausgeber und Verleger:
Universität Wien, Institut für Sprachwissenschaft
Sensengasse 3a
1090 Wien
Österreich

Redaktion: Christian Bendl, Mi-Cha Flubacher (Angewandte Sprachwissenschaft), Stefan Schumacher (Allgemeine und Historische Sprachwissenschaft)

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Homepage: http://wlg.univie.ac.at

ISSN: 2224-1876
NBN: BI.078,1063

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1.
The antisymmetry proposal of Kayne (1994) took the Linear Correspondence Axiom (LCA) to see sub-word-level structure as well as phrasal structure. This integration of morphology and syntax, as far as the LCA is concerned, recalls Greenberg’s (1966) Universal 27:

1. If a language is exclusively suffixing, it is postpositional; if it is exclusively prefixing, it is prepositional.

To the extent that (1) is correct, it, too, supports the idea that morphology is similar to and interacts strongly with phrasal syntax, at least as far as affixes (prefixes/suffixes) and adpositions (prepositions/postpositions) are concerned.

A specific example of the relevance of the LCA to morphology comes up if we look at the prefix vs. suffix question:

2. prefix - stem
3. stem - suffix
The LCA has the immediate consequence that the structural relation between prefix and stem cannot be the same as the structural relation between suffix and stem. A prefix must (setting aside remnant movement possibilities) asymmetrically c-command the associated stem,\(^3\) whereas a suffix can never asymmetrically c-command the associated stem, given the LCA.

An antisymmetry-based view of syntax and morphology therefore leads to the expectation that we should find asymmetries between prefixes and suffixes, both language-externally and cross-linguistically. A view of syntax and morphology without antisymmetry would not lead to such an expectation.

The LCA-imposed structural asymmetry between prefix and suffix finds support, I think, in a simple question, to the extent that answers to it are available in at least some cases. Why are prefixes prefixes and not suffixes, and why are suffixes suffixes and not prefixes? This question can be asked either internal to one language, or cross-linguistically.\(^4\)

For example, we can ask why English has *re-* as a prefix rather than as a suffix. If *re-* is a prefix rather than a suffix in all languages, then we can ask why that is so. If counterparts of *re-* are prefixes in some languages and suffixes in others, we might be looking at a case of irreducible parametric variation unrelated to any other property of the two sets of languages. Alternatively, it might be that prefixal *re-* vs. suffixal *-re* correlates with other properties, in which case the underlying parameter(s) in question would have broader reach.\(^5\) These kinds of questions about *re-* can and should be asked about any other prefix or suffix.

2.

In this paper, I will focus on negative prefixes such as English *un-* (and *in-*), as in *unintelligent* (and *ineffective*),\(^6\) where the negative prefix precedes and is associated with an adjective. As far as I can see, English has no corresponding negative suffix that would follow an adjective and have exactly the same interpretive effect as prefixal *un-*.

The following conjecture seems plausible:

\[(4)\] That English negative *un-* is prefixed, rather than suffixed, to the associated adjective is not accidental.

If (4) is correct, we need to ask why exactly *un-* could not have been a suffix.

In evaluating (4), we have to take into consideration English *n’t*, which might be called suffixal, in sentences like:

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\(^3\)As noted by Di Sciullo (2005, 78), prefixes may differ from one another in how high above the stem they are.

\(^4\)As in Di Sciullo 2005, sect. 8.2.

\(^5\)This might be the case for the *un-* of *unpack*, which seems to have a close suffixal counterpart in (some) Bantu languages; cf. Givon 1971, 151.

\(^6\)The proposal to be developed will in all likelihood carry over to negative *a-* and to *non-*; for discussion of these and of the differences between *un-* and *in-* (which will not play a role in this paper), see Horn 1989, sect. 5.1. In what follows I will drop explicit reference to *in-*.
(5) John can’t solve the problem.

(6) This product isn’t effective.

In (5) it seems clear that ’t scopes over can, despite following it. But if so, then why could there not be a suffixal *-un, as in *intelligentun, that would scope over intelligent in the way that prefixal un- happily does? Part of the answer to this question about ’t vs. un- must lie in the fact that English ’t is an instance of sentential negation, as opposed to un-. As Edwin Williams (p.c.) has pointed out to me, this distinction between sentential negation with ’t and non-sentential negation with un- can be seen clearly with regard to following adjunct phrases. Consider the following contrast:

(7) He wasn’t happy because of anything you said.

(8) *He was happy because of anything you said.

Example (7) is natural, with stress on you, whereas (8) is not. In other words, anything in (7) is acting as a negative polarity item licensed by ’t. Williams’s point is now seen by comparing (7) with:

(9) *He was unhappy because of anything you said.

Unlike ’t in (7), un- cannot license a negative polarity item within a following adjunct. Similarly, as Williams points out:

(10) He wasn’t happy because of that, but because of this.

(11) *He was unhappy because of that but because of this.

Unlike ’t, un- cannot license a contrastive adjunct pair with but. This difference between (10) and (11) holds, too, for adjectival complements paired with but (only):

\[ \text{As is well-known, sentential negation can be ‘prefixal’ in many languages, e.g. in Italian. On this and on other types of sentential negation in Italian dialects, see Zanuttini 1997. Cf. also Cinque 1999, 223, note 52.} \]

\[ \text{As Klima (1964) had noted, it is possible to have sentences like} \]

(i) They were unable to give anything much of their time.

in which a polarity item is within a complement. As Chris Collins notes (p.c.), this is also possible with strong NPIs, as in:

(ii) He is unlikely to get here until midnight.

From the perspective of Collins and Postal (2014), this suggests that un- has raised up from within the polarity phrase.
They weren’t able to do this, but only to do that.

*They were unable to do this, but only to do that.

3.

Let us now return to (4) and assume that (4) is correct, i.e. that it is not accidental that un- is prefixal and not suffixal. If so, we can wonder why exactly (4) would be correct, given that no comparable restriction holds for sentential n’t.

On the standard assumption that the scope of negation must be represented syntactically, there is nothing surprising, from the perspective of antisymmetry, about the fact that un- precedes the adjective it has scope over. If un- is a head, this is a special case of heads always preceding their complement. If un- is a Spec, then it’s a special case of Specs always preceding their associated phrase.

If the scope of negation must be represented syntactically via asymmetric c-command, then at some point in the derivation n’t, too, must precede the (entire) phrase that it scopes over. Yet in (5), n’t does not precede can, despite can being part of the phrase that is in the scope of n’t. A solution widely adopted for n’t is that can in (5) starts out below n’t and then moves up past it. Prior to the movement of can past n’t, n’t does asymmetrically c-command the entire phrase that it scopes over.

The question that remains for un-, however, is why it cannot mimic n’t and participate in a derivation in which a following adjective would move up past un-:

They’re unhappy.

*They’re happyun.

Starting from ‘un happy’, why could happy not raise, incorrectly yielding (15)? A proposal that comes to mind is as follows. Even though (14) is interpretively close to:

They’re not happy.

the phrase minimally containing un- in (14) is ‘smaller’ than the phrase minimally containing not in (16). Let us informally call the phrase minimally containing un- a

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11And similarly for movement across French pas et al.; cf. Pollock 1989 and references cited there.

12Cf. also, with a verb stem:

(i) That table is unliftable.

(ii) *That table is liftunable.

13Though see Horn 1989 on the distinction between contradictory and contrary readings.

‘very small phrase’ and let us assume that it contains no subject position capable of remaining filled (or perhaps no subject position at all), as suggested by.\(^\text{15}\)

(17) What made them unhappy?

(18) *What made un them happy?

Assume further that such very small phrases allow for few or no movement operations (i.e. have few or no possible landing sites) within them. Assume more specifically that such very small phrases do not have enough ‘space’ for any adjective movement. If so, then the very small phrase reflected in unhappy will not allow any instance of adjective movement within it to produce *happyun.\(^\text{16}\)

Without antisymmetry, on the other hand, *happyun (and *intelligentun, etc.) could undesirably have had a suffixal -un asymmetrically c-commanding the adjective without any movement needing to take place.

It is also necessary to exclude the possibility that *happyun could be derived by raising happy out of the minimal phrase containing un-. This exclusion might be attributable to some form of locality and/or (again only if antisymmetry holds) it might be understood in reference to an adjective-specific fact, namely to the fact that Italian adjectives cannot be followed by an object clitic, in contrast to (past or) present participles, as noted by Benincà and Cinque (1991, 609) and Kayne (1991, note 35). A relevant minimal pair provided by Guglielmo Cinque (p.c.) is:

(19) un apprezzamento espressoci da tempo (‘an appreciation expressed to-us from time’)

(20) *un apprezzamento inespressoci da tempo

The past participle espresso in (19) can be followed by the object clitic ci, but the adjectivalized past participle inespresso in (20) cannot be.\(^\text{17}\) On the assumption that verb-clitic order is due to verb raising,\(^\text{18}\) (20) highlights the point that adjectives (here, even one based on a verb) are immune to a certain kind of movement.

That adjectives are limited in their movement possibilities is also seen in English, under the widely shared assumption that English partial VP-deletion of the sort seen in:

(21) They didn’t talk to Susan, but they did to Mary.

\(^{15}\) Whether an un-initial very small phrase is smaller than a classical small clause (cf. Williams 1975) will depend on whether or not in, say

(i) You don’t want them unhappy, do you?

\(^{16}\) For the impossibility of such adjective movement to be due to a Negative Island effect (cf. Rizzi 1990), *happyun would need to be distinguishable from can’t.

\(^{17}\) For discussion relevant to the question of what ‘adjectivalization’ amounts to, see Bruening 2014.

\(^{18}\) Cf. Kayne 1991 for general discussion. For a Romance language/dialect in which object clitics systematically follow even finite verbs, see Tortora 2015.
They didn’t invite Susan, but they did Mary.\footnote{There are speakers who reject the direct object case while accepting to a greater degree the PP one – cf. Williams 1977, 130.}

involves prior movement out of the VP of the phrase stranded by VP-deletion.\footnote{The movement idea goes back to Jayaseelan (1990); for different interpretations of what sort of movement is involved, see Kayne 1994, 76, Lasnik 1995.} If so, then the non-strandability of AP noted by Baltin (2006, 763)

*They didn’t become happy, but they did famous.

can be interpreted as reflecting the more limited possibilities of AP-movement as compared with PP- or DP-movement. In conclusion, then, antisymmetry, combined with limitations on AP-movement and with the requirement that scope of negation must be represented syntactically in terms of asymmetric c-command, is capable of providing an account of the fact that English \textit{un-} is a prefix and not a suffix.

4.

Somewhat closer to \textit{un-} than \textit{n’t}, though still not close enough to \textit{un-} to bear directly or indirectly on (4), I think, is the English suffix \textit{-less} in sentences like:

\begin{enumerate}
  \item John is clueless about phonology.
  \item This \textit{-less} certainly has something to do with negation, and it behaves like \textit{un-} with respect to (9), (11) and (13), as seen in:
  \item *They were clueless because of anything you said.
  \item *They are clueless because of this but because of that.
  \item *John is clueless about phonology, but only about syntax.
\end{enumerate}

It is again uncontroversial to conclude that \textit{-less} in (24), like \textit{un-}, does not convey sentential negation.

The affixes \textit{-less} and \textit{un-} thus have in common their non-sentential character. For (4) to be correct, it must then be the case that \textit{-less} is not an exact suffixal counterpart of prefixal \textit{un-}, as seems plausible from the interpretation. The suffix \textit{-less} also differs from the prefix \textit{un-} with respect to the category of the stem in question. \textit{Un-} is typically prefixed to an adjective,\footnote{Though not quite always - see Horn 1989, 284.} while \textit{-less} is suffixal, not to adjectives, but to nouns:

\begin{enumerate}
  \item John says he feels strengthless today.
  \item You’ve been moneyless for years now.
\end{enumerate}
vs.

(30) *John says he feels strongless today.

(31) *You’ve been richless for years now.

Let us agree, then, that -less is not an exact suffixal counterpart of un-, and therefore that the suffixal character of -less is in fact compatible with (4), repeated here:

(32) That English negative un- is prefixed, rather than suffixed, to the associated adjective is not accidental.

5.

A subsidiary question is the following. If it is true that -less has to do with negation and if the scope of negation must be represented syntactically, which suggests that what ends up as suffixal -less must (at some point in the derivation) asymmetrically c-command its associated noun (and therefore, by antisymmetry, precede it), how does this -less come to be a suffix, relative to that noun? In the spirit of the earlier discussion of n’t and the references mentioned there, the obvious proposal is that the noun in question (obligatorily) moves past -less:

(33) -less clue --clue–less

The next question is, why is movement of this sort past an affix allowed with -less, but not with un-? Probably relevant is the close relation that holds between -less and non-affixal without, which is illustrated in:

(34) John is without a clue about phonology.

(35) ?John says he feels without any strength today.

(36) You’ve been without money for years now.

These are very close in interpretation to (24), (28) and (29), with -less. Un-, on the other hand, is not directly paralleled by without:

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22That this movement is obligatory, as shown by *lessclue, may follow from ‘anti-optionality’ of the sort considered by Chomsky (1986); and similarly for writer vs. *erwrite and other cases mentioned by Di Sciullo (2005, 13).

23Thinking of German -los, it seems unlikely that English suffixal -less is closely related to English non-affixal comparative less, from which it differs in pronunciation (at least in my English, where the vowel of suffixal -less must be reduced and the vowel of comparative less must not be).

24In addition, Chris Collins (p.c.) points out the following, which is surprisingly close to acceptable,

(i) ?He has been neither money- nor power-less for years.

recalling, as he notes:
(37) John is unhappy.

(38) *John is without happy.

The close relation between -less and without means that the negative character of -less is now indirectly reflected in the NPI-licensing property that without has:25

(39) We know that you left without any money.

(40) We would have been better off without any of you on our side.

English without is readily taken to be a preposition whose counterpart in many languages is a postposition. Now English is itself decidedly more prepositional than postpositional, but there is reason to think that English actually does have some postpositions. Examples are:26

(41) the -ce of once, twice

(42) the by of whereby; the -fore of therefore; the with of wherewithal

(43) the about of whereabouts

(44) in a more complex way, the a- of two months ago

The proposal now is that English -less is an affixal postposition, whose complement (for example, clue in clueless) comes to precede it in the general manner of complements of postpositions.

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(ii) He has been neither without money nor power for years.

25The locus of negativity in without may be out (assuming that without = with+out; cf. within), whose negative character is arguably reflected in

(i) out of; off of

vs.

(ii) *in of; *on of

with the of of (i) in turn related to that of

(iii) They emptied the glass of its water.

vs.

(iv) They filled the glass with/*of water.

26On these, cf. Kayne 2014; on wherewithal, cf. also Kayne to appear d.
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It is to be noted that since -less arguably scopes over clue, and since by earlier assumption, (negative) scope must be represented in terms of asymmetric c-command, it must be the case that at some point in the derivation -less asymmetrically c-commands clue. Given antisymmetry, -less must therefore precede clue at that point in the derivation. Consequently the derivation-final order whereby clue in fact precedes -less must come about via leftward movement.

This leftward movement of clue past -less is, however, not necessarily local complement-to-Spec movement, and might in fact be phrasal movement. (Whether or not there are languages with a prefixal counterpart of -less is a question that needs to be looked into.)

That -less can be an affixal postposition, in effect a suffix, is made plausible, as just discussed, by the close link between -less and the non-affixal adposition without. The postpositional status of -less might appear to clash with the adjectival character of clueless, etc., as in:

(45) a clueless person; a hopeless proposal; an endless discussion

This apparent clash, will dissolve, though, if Amritavalli and Jayaseelan (2003) are correct in taking adjectives in general not to be a primitive syntactic category, but rather to be instances of nouns incorporating into Case. (Either -less then realizes some Case, or their proposal should be revised to replace Case with adposition.) If Amritavalli and Jayaseelan (2003) are on the right track, there is no need, as far as (45) is concerned, to think in terms of any notion of category change. Rather, English, like some other languages, has the property that certain noun+postposition combinations can act as prenominal modifiers; there is in fact no primitive category ‘adjective’ that ‘clue+less’ could ‘change into’.

One final point about -less and without. There is a difference between them that has to do with the size of the nominal they are associated with, in that without is compatible with various determiners, as seen in

(46) They were left without any hope.
(47) They found themselves without a (single) friend.
(48) Don’t leave without the wallet.

while -less is not:

(49) They were left (*any) hopeless.

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29Cf. Kayne’s (2008b) proposal that there is a basic noun-vs.-verb-like distinction in the syntax, with no real room for any other basic category.
They found themselves (*a (*single)) friendless.

Don’t leave (*the) walletless.

In this respect, -less behaves on a par with what we informally call OV compounds.30

John is an avid (*the/*a/*any) newspaper reader.

This parallelism extends to ordinary plural -s, which in my English at least is excluded from such deverbal OV compounds, as illustrated by

John is an avid newspaper(*s) reader.

and similarly for -less:

*hopesless; *friendsless; *walletsless

The parallelism extends further to non-s plurals,31 which are fairly good both in OV compounds and with -less:

Mary is a real children lover.

Their marriage is childrenless.

Why exactly compounds and -less share these properties remains to be fully understood. Of relevance is the fact that the plural restriction is also sometimes found phrasally, as in the well-known32

something(*s) else

as well as in cases brought to light in Collins (2007), such as

Go to bed(*s)!

30Cf. also a modifier-containing example due to Chris Collins (p.c.)

(i) a chocolate cake-less party.

which recalls:

(ii) a real chocolate cake lover


They went home(*s) yesterday.

and in a similar vein

That poor guy is in the hospital again.

Those poor people are in the hospital(*s) again.

even in the presence of the definite article. (Example (61) is possible to some degree with -s if read with a fully referential use of the hospitals.)

Moreover, the restriction concerning determiners seen in (49)-(52) itself recalls one having to do with determiners inside PPs, as arguably illustrated in French by:

*le prix de les maisons (‘the price of the houses’)

le prix des maisons (‘the price of e houses’)

In this particular case (and in some others in French), the l- of the definite article is obligatorily not pronounced. (For a wide range of comparable examples from many languages, see Himmelmann (1998).)

Deverbal compounds of the newspaper reader sort have certain properties in common with -less, as just seen; at the same time, their word order arguably interacts with ordinary syntax, in particular (but not only) if the following conjectures are (largely) correct:

Deverbal OV compounds are never found in strict V-initial languages.

Deverbal VO compounds are never found in strict head-final languages.

(As (should be) usual, the terms ‘V-initial’ and ‘head-final’ are informal, very approximate characterizations of certain derivation-final properties.) These conjectures are akin to Greenberg’s Universal 27, mentioned early on in (1), and like his proposed Universal point to the existence of a single ‘merge engine’ that spans both syntax and what we conventionally think of as morphology.33

If we now move back from the link between -less and compounds to the link between -less and without, we can note the following discrepancy:

Yours is not a hopeless proposal.

*Yours is not a without hope proposal.

Plausibly, this is a side effect of the difference in word order between postposition-like -less and preposition without; more specifically, (67) is likely to fall under Biberauer et al.’s (2014) FOFC or whatever the FOFC itself derives from.

33 And perhaps also phonology – cf. Kayne to appear c.
6.

If (32) is correct, then English cannot, for the reasons given, have a suffixal counterpart of un-. The question now arises as to whether other languages could have a suffixal counterpart of un-. One consideration has to do with Koptjevskaja, Tamm and Miestamo’s (2015) saying, if I read them correctly, that even prefixal counterparts of un- are relatively rare cross-linguistically. Possibly, this might be related to Davison’s (1978) point about negative phrases like no book being (relatively) rarer cross-linguistically than one might have expected. Why these might be (relatively) rare needs to be looked into. But let me take the position that there remains an important distinction between ‘(relatively) rare’ and non-existent. This distinction will be of importance to the present paper if the following conjecture is correct:

(68) No language has an exact counterpart of un- that is suffixal.

If (68) is correct, then I would take the earlier account proposed for English to carry over to all languages. In which case, the language faculty would have the following properties:

(69)  a. Antisymmetry holds.
     b. The scope of negation is represented syntactically, in terms of asymmetric c-command.
     c. An adjective cannot move past un- or any counterpart of un-.

7.

I note in passing that the notion of affixal postposition found in the discussion of -less is matched by the notion of affixal preposition (a-, in this case) arguably called for in:

(70) They were standing atop the mountain.

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34 Here as elsewhere, I abstract away from the possibility that un- is bimorphemic, such that -n- is the negative morpheme proposed for the general case in English by Leu (2012, sect. 4.3).
35 Cf. the fact that the index of Horn 1989 has an entry for ‘prefixes, negative’, but none for ‘suffixes, negative’.
36 Horn (1989) mentions in other contexts the possibility of a ‘Neg-First’ principle that seems, though, to have little plausibility cross-linguistically, in particular given the numerous languages in which the negative element is sentence-final or near to that; cf. for example Amritavalli and Jayaseelan 2005 on Dravidian languages, Shibata 2014 on Japanese, Simpson and Syed 2014 on Bangla (in finite clauses), and Dryer 2009 on Central African languages. From the text perspective, such (near)-final negation must have been moved across, in all likelihood by phrasal movement, on which, cf. Nkemnji 1995 and Biberauer 2008, sect. 3.3.
37 Cf. Collins and Postal (2014).
38 If the conjecture in question were to turn out to be incorrect, then at least one of (a-c) here would have to be incorrect, presumably (c).
40 In both cases, the formal status of affixal vs. non-affixal needs to be elucidated.
(71) They went aboard the ship.

with non-affixal counterparts

(72) They were standing on top of the mountain.

(73) They went on board the ship.

as well as in Appalachian English:

(74) I knew he was a-tellin’ the truth...

Wolfram and Christian (1975, 100ff.), from which this example is taken, note in particular (p. 102), that “A-prefixing does not typically occur following a preposition” and suggest that “This restriction is due to the fact that a-prefixing originally derives from the preposition on or at, prepositions which would be in conflict with other prepositions such as for, from, by, etc.” This seems basically right, especially if we take the (affixal) prepositional status of this a to hold in contemporary Appalachian English, too.

8.

In conclusion, a combination of antisymmetry plus reduced movement options for adjectives in the context of very small phrases is capable of providing an account of the fact that English has prefixal *un-,* rather than suffixal *un-.* If English is in this respect typical, then the proposed account will have universal validity.

A key component of this account is that antisymmetry extends to what we think of as morphology, leading to a necessary asymmetry between prefixes and suffixes,41 with the latter unable to asymmetrically c-command an associated stem.

References


41Cf. Newell et al. 2017, 17. Prefix vs. suffix differences imposed by antisymmetry are paralleled by antisymmetry-imposed differences between preverbal and postverbal pronominal clitics; cf. Benincà and Cinque 1990. (The Itelmen prefixes discussed in Bobaljik and Wurmbrand 2001 may be akin to Romance pronominal subject clitics.)


Kayne, Richard S. to appear a. The unicity of there and the definiteness effect,” in Brazil.


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