

“Unmoreable unlessable unworseable evermost almost void”
Word-(re)formation in Samuel Beckett’s *Worstward Ho*.

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1 Introduction

A word is a meaningful combination of minimal linguistic units (Harley, 2006, p. 3), known as morphemes (Booij, 2005, p. 8). These morphemes make up the internal structure of words, the study of which is referred to as morphology (*ibid*, p. 24). The branch of morphology which deals with new words, or neologisms, is called word-formation, thus termed since complex words are not – cases of word manufacturing excepted – created out of thin air, but are *formed* through the concatenation of distinct elements (often an affix and a base), and ideally on the pattern of already existing words. If the aim of morphology is to describe linguistic rules as accurately as possible (Booij, 2005, p. 24) – thereby describing language itself –, then the aim of word-formation is to account for new words by checking them against those rules (*ibid*).

The Irish writer Samuel Beckett is well-known for his pessimism, but he was also a highly idiosyncratic language user, and a keen coiner of neologisms. This linguistic playfulness, which shines through in all of Beckett's otherwise bleak work, culminates in *Worstward Ho* (1983). In this dense novella (Cohn, 2001, p. 375), Beckett seems to have reached the end of his life-long endeavour to cut to the core of the human being, to an ideal self as hidden beneath a layer of false selves. The self is acknowledged to be impenetrable, and words, the writer's instrument, can never do more than create fictions which circle around it. But however mindless, and however inept at translating the inner experience, the words do not cease. Even as the writer himself collapses, their treacherous 'dialectics' will continue. *Worst* alliterates with *words*, and in some sense language is the real protagonist of *Worstward Ho*: so as to expose the words for the counterfeits they really are, Beckett exploits the polysemy of nearly every word, twists idioms, juxtaposes contradictory superlatives and double negatives, converts seemingly inconvertible words, mingles current forms with archaic ones, and even has the words 'ring' (not true, alas) with rhymes and off-rhymes, alliterations and what not. Paradoxically, the noted misologist also turns out to be a master neologist: his "joyful verbiage", as Cohn (2001) rightly calls it (p. 376), abounds in derivational mirth, and a number of ingenious formations are introduced throughout, e.g., *leastmost*.

The aim of this paper is to account for the coinages in *Worstward Ho*, thereby providing a kind of 'taxonomy' of the morphological patterns which occur in that text. While the account will not be exhaustive by any means (that would have been a truly Sisyphean

task), it aims at least to determine which words have been coined in a rule-governed way, that is productively, and which words have been coined in a rule-changing way, that is creatively. Some of the questions I have asked myself throughout are: Is the pattern currently available or not? Do the restrictions on a specific base-affix combination outweigh the productivity of the pattern? Is the derivative transparent, i.e., is it the semantic sum of its parts? Also, as figurative extension is one type of creativity according to Bauer (2001), I have collected and analysed some uncoinages as well.

In terms of previous work, an immense amount of literary studies have been done on Beckett – e.g., Robert Harvey’s *Witnessness* from 2010, and *Beckett’s Words* by David Kleinberg-Levin from 2015, to name two of the most recent ones –, but there seems to be a dearth of analyses which focus on the linguistic aspects of his work. Here, the focus will not be on Beckett the author but on Beckett the coiner. By describing Beckett’s morphological output, the paper seeks to say something about the writerly behaviour of this master neologist. The initial suspicion, or hypothesis, is that Beckett adopts a timeless approach to language, one which suits his ‘this world is Purgatory-outlook’, and allows him to exploit those patterns which the language community has deemed unprofitable, but which must appeal to a writer bent on oxymoronicity.

In terms of layout, key concepts in word-formation will be introduced briefly in the background-section below, whereupon *Worstward Ho* will be summarised, or unsummarised rather. In section 3 I describe the way in which I have collected, categorised and analysed the words. The findings are then discussed in section 4, as ordered according to the methodology presented in section 3. In the concluding section, the results of the accounting are presented briefly, together with a ‘sketch’ of Beckett’s linguistic behaviour.

2 Background

2.1.1 A brief outline of word-formation

For ease of exposition, the notoriously vague term **word** will be used hence to cover both **lexeme**, i.e., the abstract morphological entity to be found in a dictionary, and **word-form**, i.e., the citation form of a lexeme as found in a given context, and ideally italicized when referred to (Bauer, 1983, p. 11-13). When it is vital to distinguish between the two, those

respective terms will be used instead. Also, throughout this background-section, key concepts will be highlighted in bold (as above).

According to Bauer (1983), word-formation can be seen as one of the two main branches of morphology, the other being inflectional morphology (p. 33). If inflectional morphology deals with the structure of already existing words, **word-formation** deals with the production, or **coining**, of new *complex* words (Bauer, 1983, p. 30). A **complex** word is a word which is made up of more than one **morpheme**, i.e., the minimal unit of grammatical importance, e.g., the *s* in *untouchables* (*ibid*, p. 14; Plag, 2018, p. 10), as realised by a **morph**. Monomorphemic words, **simplexes**, are thus excluded from the study of word-formation, and should be considered cases of **word-manufacture** instead (at least so long as they are created *ex nihilo* and not derived) (Bauer, 1983, p. 239; Bauer, 2001, p. 206).

A morpheme which can occur on its own is a **free** morpheme, a morpheme which cannot be **bound** (Bauer, 1983, p. 17-18). When the bound morpheme *un-* attaches itself to *inane*, we say that an **affix** attaches itself to a base. Those affixes which are attached to the front of the base are referred to as **prefixes**, and those attached to the back are referred to as **suffixes**. Borderline cases are the so-called **affixoids**, i.e., affix-like morphemes which nonetheless correspond to existing lexemes, such as *most* (Booij, 2005, p. 86). Following Bauer (1983), the **base** will be understood as any word-form to which an affix can attach (p. 21), and may be contrasted with the **root**, which cannot be analysed further – it is **unanalysable** –, but represents the indivisible part of the word (Bauer, 1983, 2001).

The process whereby, in Johansson & Manninen's words (2011), an affix is attached to a base so as to create a new word with a new meaning, is known as **affixation** (p. 41), and the words derived from that process are called **derivatives** (Plag, 2018, p. 10). In the case of a relatively simple formation like *uninane*, it is easy for the reader to decompose, or **parse**, the word into its constituent morphemes, and so interpret the derivative on the basis of those: [un[inane]_A]_A means "not inane". This relationship between a word's form and a word's meaning is known as the **compositionality principle** (Booij, 2005, p. 207), and may be extended to more complex words. A word the meaning of which can be gathered from its form is **transparent**, as opposed to an **opaque** word, like *thitherless*, which poses difficulties of interpretation even in context (Bauer, 1983, p. 19; Booij, 2005, p. 34; Plag, 2018, p. 46). In

terms of meaning alone, the degree to which a word is comprehensible is determined by its **semantic coherence** (Bauer, 2001, p. 52-53).

Some morphologists, such as Durkin (2009), seem to equate affixation with **derivation** (p. 46), but there are non-affixational processes which are subsumed under that latter heading as well. Since these do not involve the lumping together of two or more distinct elements, Plag (2018) refers to them as **non-concatenative** (p. 11). The most productive non-concatenative morphological process is **conversion**, i.e., the process by which a given word is transposed, or converted, from one part of speech to another, all the while retaining its initial outward shape (Bauer, 1983, p. 226-230). Other non-concatenative processes of relevance to this study are back-formation and clipping. **Back-formation** refers to the formation of a new word through the deletion of one constituent of an already existing word, or, put in another way, the reversal of a derivational process (hence its name) (Bauer, 1983, p. 230). Finally, a clear-cut case of **clipping** in *Worstward Ho* is *fore*, which must have been shortened, or clipped, from *foreskull*, which itself constitutes a coinage. As is the case of all clippings, the end product is of the same part of speech as the original word (Bauer, 1983, p. 233).

Derivation is by far Beckett's preferred method of coining, but an equally legitimate way of forming new words is compounding (Booij, 2005, p. 5). Since affixation is base-affix combination, at least one of the morphemes involved in that process is bound. If instead two free morphemes are linked together, we are dealing with **compounding**, the products of which are called **compounds**, duly defined by Booij (2005) as "consist[ing] of the combination of *lexemes* into larger words" (p. 74). Compounds are classified according to the part of speech of the compound as a whole, as well as that of its constituents (Bauer, 1983, p. 201-202). Thus, *beehive* is a compound noun made up of two nouns. A further subdivision can be made on the basis of semantic criteria, more specifically the headedness of the compound (Bauer, 1983, p. 30). To illustrate, since the head of *beehive* is included in the word itself, it is termed an **endocentric compound**, as opposed to an **exocentric compound**, such as *highbrow*, whose head (person) is situated outside the visible word (*ibid*). For now, those two terms will suffice.

Of course, the above account is far from exhaustive, and additional concepts will be referred to 'on line' as the analysis is conducted.

2.1.2 Productivity, creativity, analogy

In the previous subsection the various methods for coining new words were considered, but not much was said about the formations themselves: how should those be assessed? Every speaker intuitively knows that a given affix cannot attach itself to just any base. For example, most speakers would be fine with a formation such as *unblacken* – even if they have never come across it before –, but would raise their eyebrows when confronted with **ungreen*. This suggests that word-formation must be governed by a set of underlying principles, or rules, the knowledge of which would allow one to account for the well-formedness of one word, and the ill-formedness of another. Plag (2018) refers to the principle which allows *un-* to attach itself to *blacken*, i.e., a reversative transitive verbal base, as a **word-formation rule** (p. 31). In the case of **ungreen*, there is no word-formation rule which allows *un-* prefixation to yield complementary relations (if it is this it is not that and if it is not this it has to be that), so that any colour adjectives are ruled out as potential bases beforehand – the word is thus an ill-formed **nonce** (i.e., “a new complex word coined on the spur of the moment” (Bauer, 1983, p. 42)), and cannot be expected to catch on.

Of a word which has been formed according to the current rules, i.e., through the exploitation of a **synchronically available** morphological process, it is said that it has been coined **productively** (Bauer, 1983, p. 18). Bauer (2001) defines **productivity** as the *potential* of a morphological process, or indeed an individual affix, for “repetitive non-creative morphological coining” (p. 98-99), where ‘non-creative’ should be understood as **rule-governed**, and may be tied to Booij’s (2005) notion of **rule-governed creativity** (p. 67). Since, as Bauer (2001) stresses, productivity is all about potential (p. 41), the number of new words produced through the exploitation of a given affix, i.e., the **type frequency** of that affix, is irrelevant to its **availability**: a morphological process is either available or unavailable, and this is determined by the language system as such (Bauer, 2001, p. 211). Instead, the *extent* to which an available process is actually exploited by language users is referred to as its **profitability**, as it reflects the usefulness of a process in filling real or imagined lexical gaps. Also, as Bauer (1983) remarks, there is a correlation between profitability and semantic coherence, so that the more productive a process is, the more transparent its products (and vice versa) (p. 95).

While productivity is usually taken to refer to **societal productivity**, an individual writer has the **poetic licence** not to abide by prevailing word-formation rules, and may thus coin words which were hitherto thought to be uncoinable. If a morphological pattern can only be found in the output of a single individual, we are dealing with **individual productivity** (Bauer, 2001, p. 57). In contrast to societal productivity – which is spontaneous – individual productivity is characterised by a conscious effort on the part of the coiner. Whenever a coiner knowingly breaks the current word-formation rules, the resulting words are said to be coined **creatively** (when unwittingly so, the **incompetent formations** which arise are likely to end up as nonces (Bauer, 1983, p. 266). According to Bauer (1983), **creativity** is “the native speaker’s ability to extend the language system in a motivated, but unpredictable (non-rule-governed) way” (p. 63). In other words, while the productive coiner merely *exploits* the language system by forming new words on the pattern of already existing ones, the creative one ideally *changes* it. Three ways of changing the language system are acknowledged: **non-productive creativity**, or the ‘resurrection’ of dead morphological processes; **figurative extension**, or the extension of old forms to new meanings; and finally the creation of simplexes through word manufacture or other means (Bauer, 1983, p. 63-64; Bauer, 2001, p. 62-64).

Finally, there are some formations which cannot be accounted for in terms of rules, nor with reference to the types of creativity outlined above. Those are the so-called **analogical formations**, i.e., words which appear to have been coined on the pattern of very few existing words (Bauer, 1983, p. 95-96). An example of such a word is *seascape*, which was modelled on the borrowed word *landscape*, and then gave rise to a whole new series of related productive coinages, i.e., a new **paradigm**: *cloudscape*, *dreamscape* etc (*ibid*). Also, since analogical relations frequently hold even for words which are coined on the basis of rules (Plag, 2018, p. 38), the term **analogy** may be applied more broadly, as a means of describing the way in which speakers/writers actually go about when forming new words (Bauer, 1983, p. 292-296). In an analogical approach, the difficulty lies in discerning the analogical base, i.e. the **model**, and to predict the properties of the newly coined word (Plag, 2018, p. 186).

2.1.3 Some constraints on word-formation

As was stated in the previous subsection, available morphological processes are *more or less* productive. The degree to which a given morphological process is exploited depends on a number of restraining factors, which are called **restrictions**, or **constraints**, where the implication of the latter is that the rules are far from absolute, and may be broken under certain conditions (Bauer, 2001, p. 126).

Before any formal constraints come into play, there has to be a need for the coinage in question. Plag (2018) recognises three major uses of word-formation: **labelling**, i.e., the creation of a new word to designate a newly perceived entity, or a newly thought-out concept; **syntactic recategorisation**, i.e., the condensation of information through the use of a new word instead of an entire phrase (especially common in writing); and finally **attitudinal expression** (p. 59-60). Thus **playful formations**, i.e., words which are coined without any obvious regard for their semantic import (Bauer, 2001, p. 57-58), cannot be expected to be institutionalised.

Sometimes the usefulness of a coinage exists only in the eye of the coiner, but *intended* usefulness is enough for nonces to appear. However, as the non-existence of many useful words shows, usefulness alone, be it ever so intended, does not make a word coinable. In fact, there are **structural restrictions** at work already at the stage of coining (Plag, 2018, p. 60-61). These ‘systemic factors’, as Bauer (2001) calls them (p. 42-43), are both too numerous and too specific to be listed here, but one example of a *general* restriction is the **repeated morph constraint**, which says that the same affix cannot occur twice in succession (Bauer, 2001, p. 132). Structural restrictions pertaining to a particular morphological process will be brought up ‘on line’ together with the relevant pattern.

The ‘extra-systemic’ factors which work to restrain the *usage* of a coinage rather than prevent the manufacturing thereof, are termed **pragmatic restrictions** (Plag, 2018, p. 60). Some of these are somewhat ill-defined, such as Plag’s (2018) ‘fashion’ (p. 60) or Bauer’s (2001) ‘accidents of cultural history’ (p. 43). **Aesthetics**, too, is a tricky term: as individuals do not share the same set of aesthetic values, an individual might coin words which will be considered off-putting or ill-sounding by others, or conversely might scoff at words which are widely used. Of greater relevance are those restrictions which are tied to the act of labelling, such as **hypostatisation**, i.e., the demand that the entity or concept referred to by the coinage

should actually exist; and **nameability**: it must denote something which is nameable (Bauer, 1983, p. 85-86).

Finally, a very prevalent type of restriction is **blocking**, which Aronoff, as quoted by Bauer (2001), defines as “the non-occurrence of one form due to the simple existence of another” (p. 42). Just like the pragmatic constraints above, blocking does not obtain at the time of coining, but functions as a constraint on a word’s institutionalisation process (Bauer, 1983, p. 88). Innumerable nonces may thus appear alongside an established word with a similar meaning, but albeit potential they must remain **improbable** (Bauer, 2001, p. 42), since that which they denote is already satisfactorily denoted by an existing word.

2.2 *Worstward Ho* unsummarised

Since this paper is not mainly concerned with the literary aspects of *Worstward Ho* – its interest lies in the coinages themselves –, the summary will naturally be brief.

Worstward Ho (1983) constitutes the final part of a trilogy known as *Nohow On*, the other two being *Company* (1979) and *Ill Seen Ill Said* (1980). In contrast to *Ill Seen Ill Said*, *Worstward Ho* was written in English and not translated from French. Structurally, it is made up of some 4500 words divided into 97 fragmentary paragraphs, some of which contain only one word. The language is ‘reduced’ in the sense that the syntax is stripped away, and some phrases are only just comprehensible in context.

In terms of subject matter, *Worstward Ho* is a continuation on Beckett’s life-long endeavour to cut to the core of the human being, to an ideal self as hidden beneath a layer of false selves. The ideal core cannot be situated in external reality, contingent as it is, but must be sought at the bottom of our own consciousness. The writer’s task is thus to dig down to, and unearth, that which exists underneath the ordinary conscious experience, something which Beckett has referred to as his ‘excavatory’ method (Worth, 1975, p. 41). The problem, of course, is that such a core cannot be described in words or even imagined: our perceptions are faulty, and language itself is tainted with, and reflects, the deceptions of its users. Ironically, therefore, every attempt at excavation must be undertaken with the certainty of failure, and as the original title *Better worse* (Cohn, 1975, p. 375) suggests, *Worstward Ho* is an avowedly failed attempt at excavation: “Fail better.” (4). Beckett’s mouthpiece, a death-driven phlegmatic narrator on the verge of collapse, who has to remain unknowing at all costs,

admits from the very beginning that there is nothing to express – that his creations are mere shades in the dim void –, and yet he is under the obligation to go on. Gnawed as he is by a vain longing to be relieved of his duty as creator, his predicament is that of a living damned, and the timeless ‘place’ in which he dwells – a projection of his barren consciousness: “Seat of all. Germ of all.” (10) – is highly evocative of Purgatory. There is no more digging to be done, but so long as words remain, there is no end in sight to the narrator’s toils.

According to Cohn, Beckett’s inspiration for *Worstward Ho* lies in a speech by Edgar in *King Lear*: “The worst is not / so long as we can say / ‘This is the worst’” (p. 375). Throughout the narrative, the worst, i.e., the zero level, is equated with the mathematical 0, nothingness, so that to travel worstward means to negate in ever more sophisticated ways. For the sake of worsening, the narrator makes use of his illusory dominion over matter in order to summon bodies, which he then transforms at will. The creations are mere shades, and yet they linger on, ‘unnullable’. Nothingness is unattainable, since any language, however purified and however much it approximates to mathematical exactitude, must retain even the tiniest scrap of human meaning, and thus ‘dim’ our perceptions slightly, preventing us from seeing the infinite void of existence. Thus the narrator can only hope to reach his dreamed-up ‘neither’ – an ‘unspeakable home’ which represents a formless state of quietude beyond the worst (cf. Beckett’s very short story *Neither*, and *Ill Seen Ill Said*: “Void. Nothing else. Contemplate that. Not another word. Home at last.” (*Selected Works*, 2010, p. 460) – once the words have been so worsened that they fail to bring even the lowliest ‘signified’ into existence, and are thus incapable of driving the narrative further worstward: “As worst they may fail ever worse to say” (57).

Gradually, a link is being forged between the narrator’s dissolution into the timeless void and the cessation of his own consciousness, so that the story’s ending must coincide with the death of the narrator. The narrator is thus continuously depersonalised, until finally reduced to a ‘head’ referred to in the third-person neuter: “It. No words for it whose words. Better worse so.” (36). When the narrator loses his hold on language, the instrument of excavation, he himself becomes its object, and is exposed as no more than a narrated projection of the words themselves: “Nothing save what they say.” (57) Here, Beckett has taken excavation to its grotesque extremes, as he literally strips the narrator to the bone: “Skull and lidless stare.” (55). The core of the self, which was once held to be ideal, is

identified as a dim black hole ‘mid-foreskull’, which in itself contains the hell it seeks to escape: “Into the hell of all. Out from the hell of all”. (89). As the treacherous words ooze forth from the hollow round of the narrator’s skull, free reins are given to language itself, resulting in an ingenious display of derivational inventiveness which lays bare the absurdities inherent in the language system: the “joyful verbiage”, as Cohn (2001) puts it (p. 376), of one heading for eternal oblivion.

3 Materials & Method

The task of this essay is to account for word-formation in *Worstward Ho*, and so I naturally began by collecting all of the coinages that I could find in that novella. However, I soon found that a number of the words I initially thought to be Beckett’s coinages have actually been coined before, but have either never caught on or have become obsolete, as attested by the *OED*. Beckett’s linguistic roots go deep, and since *Worstward Ho* takes place in a realm seemingly out of time, the timelessness of the language has a symbolic value. It should therefore come as no surprise that the text is littered with archaisms; but to account for all of those would have been outside the scope of this paper.

To rule out potential coinages simply because they have occurred once in a marginal text would clearly be wrong, but given that rehashed archaisms are not strictly coinages, I had to draw the line somewhere. The distinction between the collectible once-noted nonce and the synchronically ill-formed but attested archaism is admittedly arbitrary. The guiding principle has been that if a word is listed in the *OED* with a meaning similar to that in *Worstward Ho*, it should be collected only if it is infrequent enough to be absent from the mental lexicon of a contemporary reader.

On the topic of weeded out materials, I should also mention that I at first planned to include phrasal verbs in the analysis, since those are listed as lexical units in the lexicon; but as Booij (2005) argues, phrasal verbs are combinations of two words rather than words as such, so that although they are ‘listemes’ they are not lexemes (p. 22-23). For the record, some of the uncollected phrasal verbs include *nohow on*, *ooze on* and *gnaw on*. Furthermore, since simplexes are not coinages in the strict sense, I decided not to account for any of those except in passing. Of the secondary simplexes, one may note the clipping *fore* (from *foreskull*), as well as the ellipsis *soft* (from *soft of mind*). A genuine simplex is *vertex*, a

technical latinate which through a figurative extension is rendered synonymous with *nape* (typical of the narrator's 'alienating' way of describing his creations). Also, even though conversions in themselves are not that interesting – conversion is such a productive process in English (Bauer, 1983, p. 226) that they are all well-formed and transparent anyway –, their sheer number in *Worstward Ho* does say something about Beckett's writerly behaviour, i.e., his disregard for the traditional boundaries between parts of speech, and for linguistic restrictions in general. In fact, some of the simplexes even seem to be converted more than once, such as the ubiquitous *on*, which is in turns a preposition, an adverb, a noun and even a verb, and would require a paper of its own if its polysemy were to be accounted for satisfactorily.

Given that word-formation does not deal with coinages alone, but also with such types of creativity (in Bauer's sense) as figurative extension, I have collected some words – current or archaic – which might be listed in the *OED* already, but with a different meaning. Here it should be acknowledged that some of the words collected on these grounds actually retain their conventional sense in *Worstward Ho* (but that is a post-analysis verdict). Conversely, there are a few enticing oddities which would certainly have merited a closer look, but which have been omitted for fear one would get lost in too intricate an argument.

Finally, to be precise, in plucking forms from their respective contexts I have not been collecting lexemes but word-forms. Still, while some coinages occur in different guises throughout the text, I have not collected 'doubles' unless I have suspected that the change in form may have an impact on the analysis.

When I was finished collecting, I found myself with some 40+ complex words ranging from more or less transparent compounds to highly elaborate *un-* formations, as well as the occasional playful formation. Of course, to systematise so motley a crew of words is no easy matter, but I eventually settled for a formal categorisation, so that the first distinction I made was that between derivatives and compounds. The derivatives I then initially categorised according to the affixes involved, but it soon became clear that some affixes are 'related' in that they attach themselves to certain recurring bases, or else they share a common theme, such as signalling movement. In view of such 'thematic' affinities, I decided to lump some affixes together into respective bundles, without excluding the possibility of going through them 'affix-wise' within the running text. Also, while the *un-* formations clearly have the

prefix in common, some of them involve *-able* suffixation (which raises compositional difficulties), while others have participial bases which call for their being treated apart. I therefore created three subgroups of *un-* formations. Finally, some coinages did not fit neatly into any of the given categories, or else provided the only example of a certain affix, and such miscellaneous items will be accounted for *en masse* near the end of the analysis.

Ultimately, I was in possession of 17 *un-* formations, 5 *-less* formations, 2 *mis-* formations, 3 *so-* formations, 2 *-ward* formations, 3 *a-* formations, 4 *-most* formations, 4 miscellaneous items and 3 clear-cut compounds, or a total of 43 words. Below is a simplified table in which the derivatives are categorised according to the method described at length above.

Derivatives										
<i>un-</i>			lessness	before the word			from Limbo to nothingness			Misc.
+ base	+ participle	+ <i>-able</i>	<i>-less</i>	<i>mis-</i> ,	<i>so-</i>	<i>un- + un-</i>	<i>-ward</i>	<i>a-</i>	<i>-most</i>	
<i>unknow</i>	<i>unsunk</i>	<i>unnullable</i>	<i>beyondless</i>	<i>misseen</i>	<i>so-said</i>	<i>ununsaid</i>	<i>worstward</i>	<i>astand</i>	<i>mere-most</i>	<i>leasten</i>
<i>unsay</i>	<i>unchanging</i>	<i>unlessenable</i>	<i>thenceless</i>	<i>missay</i>	<i>so-missaid</i>		<i>leastward</i>	<i>atwain</i>	<i>dimmost</i>	<i>foreskull</i>
<i>unclench</i>	<i>unasking</i>	<i>unworsenable</i>	<i>thitherless</i>		<i>so-missay</i>			<i>atween</i>	<i>leastmost</i>	<i>mid-foreskull</i>
<i>uninane</i>	<i>undimmed</i>	<i>unstillable</i>	<i>lidless</i>						<i>evermost</i>	<i>outstared</i>
<i>unutter</i>		<i>unmoreable</i>	<i>onceless</i>							
		<i>unlessable</i>								
		<i>unworseable</i>								

Table 1. A simplified table with all the derivatives collected.

So as not to numb the reader with an endless stream of ratiocinations, and to allow for an overview of the findings, I found it fitting to create tables for each category of derivatives, and these may be consulted by the reader for a quick glance of the results arrived at in the running text. Since there is no room in the tables to provide a (proposed) definition of each coinage, the reader who is curious about the meaning of a word lacking in transparency is advised to read the relevant passage in the running text. To facilitate such skimming, the semantic coherence of a complex word is stated in the tables, ranging from transparent to opaque.

As a final note on materials, the *OED* will be referred to throughout the analysis, and the electronic version of that dictionary is indeed the main source apart from those cited in the background-section. However, due to the mass of individual items checked against the *OED*,

there will be no references to single pages. For the same reason I have not listed any separate *Google Ngram Viewer* graphs, even though I have fed most of the items into that search engine for more detailed rates of their frequency.

In terms of methodology, the analysis will proceed group-wise with general remarks about the morphological pattern in question, where the focus will be on whether the coinages are likely to have been productively coined or not (or in case of attested forms: if they have actually undergone a figurative extension). With the aim of providing a ‘taxonomy’ of the collected items, I have tried to determine the part(s) of speech of each coinage, its semantic coherence, the nature of its constituents and the morphological process(es) through which it came about. In cases where analogy has been suspected, I have given a hypothetical model. Only a small number of individual coinages will be treated at any length in the running text, but hopefully the tables will fill in some gaps.

Page numbers refer to *The Selected Works of Samuel Beckett: Volume IV*, published by Grove Press in 2010. If no page number is indicated by ‘p.’, the number within parentheses refers to the paragraph.

4 Results & Discussion

4.1 *Via negativa*: *un-* + unanalysable base

Word-form	Paragraph	Part of speech	Affix(es)	Morphological process(es)	Semantic coherence	Hypothetical model(s)
<i>unknow</i>	14	verb	<i>un-</i> 1b or pejorative <i>un-</i>	back-formation, possibly figurative extension	opaque	
<i>unsay</i>	33	verb	<i>un-</i>	affixation, possibly figurative extension	opaque, scope of <i>un-</i> ?	
<i>unclench</i>	54	verb	<i>un-</i>	affixation, possibly figurative extension (forceful <i>un-</i>)	transparent (opaque if 'staring open')	
<i>uninane</i>	66	adjective	<i>un-</i>	affixation	polysemous	
<i>unutter</i>	66	adjective/ adverb/verb	<i>un-</i> and prefix	affixation or back-formation	homonymous	<i>unsay</i> or <i>no farther</i>

Table 2. A more comprehensive table with the *un-* + regular base formations.

The *un-* is either negative or privative-reversative, and listed as such in separate entries in the *OED*, with the labels prefix¹ and prefix² respectively (labels which have been retained in the tables). The negative *un-* generally attaches to adjectival bases, and the privative-reversative *un-* to verbal ones (Jespersen, 1917, p. 139-146). This holds true for the items here collected, except in the case of *unknow*, where the presence of a negative *un-* can be explained by reference to *unknow*'s being a back-formation from the adjectival *unknown* (*unknown* predates *unknow*).

When it comes to the *un-* + verbal base formations, none are coinages in the strict sense, as they are all attested by the *OED*. I collected them because in each case I suspected a slight deviation in meaning of the *un-* itself, something which, if proven, would indicate creativity. Upon closer scrutiny, however, and in the cold light of day, the three items merely exemplify Beckett's curious use of words once held to be transparent. That is, Beckett's *unknow* is likely to be identical to the one listed in the *OED* with the meaning 'to be or remain ignorant', but its ironic appearance in the twisted proverb *unknow better now*, as well as its presumed redundancy in a place like *Limbo*, invites a speculation about a so-called pejorative *un-*, possibly formed on analogy with *mis-* (Mazzon, 2004, p. 112) or a certain use of *non-* ('possessing the superficial form but not the values of' (Bauer, 1983, p. 280)). This is not all that far-fetched, as Plag (2018) observes the same phenomenon in certain *un-* nouns, namely a possible "meaning extension similar to the one observed with *anti-* or *non-* (p. 100). However, it would be wrong to classify *unknow* as a case of figurative extension with such meagre evidence, and the potential newness of this *un-* could be explained by a general tendency of *un-* towards polysemy (and a varying degree of evaluative force).

The same goes for the reversative *un-* in *unsay*, which due to the narrator's illusory power to utter things into being through phrasal qualifications takes on a concrete sense: *un*'s conventionally metaphorical reversativity in relation to *say* ('take things back') is literalised to denote an act of unsaying which reverses that which had been said. Similarly, in *unclench* (which by analogy with lids is applied to the eyelids of one shade) the reversative *un-* at first seems to be of greater negational force than usual, in that it is used interchangeably with 'staring open', while the unmarked *unclench* denotes the mere relaxation of an object.

However, even here the context is nebulous at best, and it is equally possible that this ‘anti-like’ *un-* is used conventionally and then intensified by a subsequent ‘staring open’.

Finally, *unutter* and *uninane* possess an individuality which defies worthwhile generalisations. The former is a quasi-imponderable pair of homonyms which cannot be accounted for exhaustively here. Suffice it to say that, just like its base, it is both a comparative adverb related to *utmost* (the *ut* is of similar origin as *utter*), and a verb *unutter* which could have been formed on analogy with *unsay*. The first reading, in which *unutter* modifies *leastmost all*, is supported by the nearby presence of the directional-locational *-ward* and *-most*, as well as the preposition *to*. The exact meaning of such an *unutter* is clarified in the penultimate paragraph, in which the narrator has reached a point “whence no farther” (96), where *no farther* constitutes a ‘morph-for-morph’ translation of the adverb. If ‘least’ is the destination, then this adverbial *unutter* refers to the impossibility of travelling further leastward.

Since *leastmost* itself does not necessarily contain a suffix *-most*, but could instead be a perfectly oxymoronic compound formed on the combining form *most*, the second reading must be considered as well. Contextually, it is supported by the narrator’s continuous struggle to lessen his creations as much as possible, thereby hoping to utter them back into non-existence. The phrase “All least.” from paragraph 96, in which *all* refers back to ‘dim, void, shades’, supports this reading.

Although in some readings the semantic import of its *un-* remains unclear, *unutter* is an ingenious form which neatly encapsulates two main themes of *Worstward Ho*: the movement worstward, and the treachery of words. Indeed, if one were asked by a minimalist to sum *Worstward Ho* up in one word, then surely it would be this.

Finally, there is not likely to have been a model for the dreaded *uninane*, as it would have to be an *un-* formation with a latinate base of depreciatory sense, and few such formations, if any, are institutionalised. Even if one were to reject Van Marle’s claim, as cited by Bauer (2001), that no formation on a non-native base could have been productively coined since such coining suggests a conscious effort on the part of the coiner (p. 22-23; p. 68-70) (individual productivity is obviously conscious), the very clumsiness of the formation is a nuisance. Clearly not for *un-* the latinate bases, but since a scale is implied by “all but uninane” (66), *non-* could not have taken its place, and the best suited *in-* seems to have been

inhibited by the initial *in* in *inane*. Presumably, *un-* has been preferred by Beckett for its nativeness (there are no latinate affixes in *Worstward Ho*), and for the vowel harmony it provides in “all but **uninane**” (it also echoes “On in.” from paragraph 3).

Equally problematic is the so-called neg-restriction, which, in holding that negative prefixes do not attach to adjectival bases with a negative value on a good-bad scale (Bauer, 1983, p. 94), would appear to render *uninane* automatically ill-formed. In light of the anchor ‘wanting in inanity’ from paragraph 39, one could argue for a strangely positive *inane* (synonymous with the palpable void rather than *senseless*), but within the narrow frame of this paper it seems more circumspect to write *uninane* off as a case of creativity.

4.2 The curious positivity of *un-*: *un-* + participial base

Word-form	Paragraph	Part of speech	Affix(es)	Morphological process(es)	Semantic coherence	Hypothetical model(s)
<i>unchanging</i>	28	verb if coinage	<i>un- -ing</i>	affixation, inflection, figurative extension	ultra-opaque if verb	
<i>unasking</i>	35	verb if coinage	<i>un- or un- prefix pejorative un-, -ing</i>	affixation, inflection, figurative extension	opaque	
<i>undimmed</i>	65	verb if coinage	<i>un- 1e, -ed</i>	affixation, inflection	opaque	<i>unthaw</i>
<i>unsunk</i>	68	adjective or verb	<i>un- 2b or un- prefix</i>	affixation	unclear	

Table 3. A more comprehensive table with the *un-* + participle formations.

When *un-* attaches itself to a participial base, the derivative becomes ambiguous between verb and adjective, and the words in this section – *unsunk* excepted – are variations on that theme. The words are all attested as adjectives by the *OED*, although the bulk are listed as rare and mainly poetic. In each case, however, the context allows for an alternative reading in which the given word loses its perfect transparency. Even the seemingly innocuous *unchanging*, which because of its imponderable nature will not be considered at length, is actually twisted by Beckett so as to attain a curiously positive character:

“The dim. Far and wide the same. High and low. Unchanging. Say now unchanging. Whence no knowing. No saying. Say only such dim light as never. On all.” (28)

What is at stake here, it seems, is the possibility of a verbal bracket-reversed *unchange* which would mean ‘changing for the *un-*’, i.e., ‘worsening’. In this particular case, the skeptic could argue convincingly that one can always ‘play this game’ with certain verbs in conjunction with the negative *un-*, and then point at such terms of endearment as *selfsame dim* from paragraph 48, to show that the dim is actually unchanging. However, when it comes to *undimmed*, in which the *un-* should ideally be reversative, it is clear that an unexpected meaning is intended:

“So leastward on. So long as dim still. Dim undimmed. Or dimmed to dimmer still. To dimmost dim. Leastmost in dimmost dim. Utmost dim. Leastmost in utmost dim. Unworsenable worst.” (65)

The *un-* is of no effect here, as it can do nothing but exacerbate the process of dimming. In other words, while the *un-* is reversative, the base already covers its semantic import by intrinsically signifying a process of reversal: more dim less light. This type of *un-*, which can be found in such attested forms as *unloose* and *unthaw*, is listed by the *OED* as a redundant-intensifying *un-* (in a subentry to the reversative *un-*, which means that the verbal *undimmed* is opaque).

Similarly, Beckett’s *unasking* is ambiguous between the predicted meaning ‘not asking’ and a contextually anchored ‘ask in vain’: “Ask not. No. Ask in vain. Better worse so.” (34). The derivative is listed by the *OED* as an undefined nonce in two separate subentries to prefix¹: **4** and **7b**. Naturally, no verbal *unask* denoting a vain act of asking is listed. Since the pejorative *un-* is a variety of the negative *un-* (and *ask* is hardly reversible anyway), *unask* could be reanalysed as a back-formation from *unasking*, which should render it unproductively coined (back-formation is a type of analogy).

Finally, in being a kind of ‘echo-word-formation’ in Booij’s (2005) sense (p. 22), *unsunk* is different from the rest. Its base *sunk* occurs in paragraph 10, but is later worsened to *sunken*, a converted form which implies no deliberate human agency. Unless this nuance has escaped Beckett – which is unlikely –, *unsunk* should refer back to the narrator’s bowing down the one (as opposed to the twain), as the head itself would not be able to lower its actual head deliberately. Most importantly, *unsunk* now harmonises with *hindtrunk*, which under the

guise of a nominal compound is hiding an *un* in plain view. Indeed, there could even be sound symbolism at work, as if the traditionally bound morpheme *un-* were transformed into a ‘negation-redolent’ phonaestheme, appearing throughout in seemingly innocuous words.

Since *un sunk* has been coined mainly for vowel harmony’s sake (and its semantic import remains somewhat unclear anyway), it is a partly playful formation, which just happens to be attested as an archaic nonce.

4.3 Nohow on: *un-* + *-able*

Word-form	Paragraph	Part of speech	Affix(es)	Morphological process(es)	Semantic coherence	Hypothetical model(s)
<i>unnullable</i>	62	adjective	<i>un-</i> , <i>-able</i>	affixation	transparent	
<i>unlesenable</i>	62	adjective	<i>un-</i> , <i>-en</i> , <i>-able</i>	affixation	transparent	
<i>unworsenable</i>	65	adjective	<i>un-</i> , <i>-en</i> , <i>-able</i>	affixation	transparent	
<i>unstillable</i>	72	adjective	<i>un-</i> , <i>-able</i>	affixation	transparent	
<i>unmoreable</i>	87	adjective	<i>un-</i> , <i>-able</i>	affixation, conversion	transparent	
<i>unlesable</i>	87	adjective	<i>un-</i> , <i>-able</i>	affixation, conversion	transparent	<i>unmoreable</i>
<i>unworseable</i>	87	adjective	<i>un-</i> , <i>able</i>	affixation, conversion	transparent	<i>unmoreable</i>

Table 4. A more comprehensive table with the *un-* + *-able* formations

-able + transitive verb is a derivational paradigm in which there are virtually no lexical gaps in the system (Bauer, 1983, p. 28). Thus although a word like *worsenable* is not attested by the *OED*, it is potential in the sense that it could be part of the lexicon without obviously violating any restrictions. In conjunction with *un-*, these formations display an immense productivity, and since productivity and transparency go hand in hand, it must come as no surprise that a characteristic of the *un-* + *-able* formations is their perfect transparency. For that reason, context is not as crucial as before, and these words do not demand the same arduous close reading-style accounting as did some of the pure *un-* formations.

Bauer (1983) notes that there are cases in which the *un-* + *-able* formation predates the *-able* formation, e.g., *unflappable* (p. 224). This means that the non-existence of a derived base (only *nullable* is attested by the *OED*) should in principle do nothing to hinder *un-*

prefixation. Also, owing to the compositionality principle, any ‘nonsense’ with *-able* being attached to **unworsen* (for example) can be cut out. Rather, the words in this section have been coined through the simultaneous attachment of two affixes, a type of coining referred to as ‘parasyntesis’ (Plag, 2018, p. 41). Given that none of the end products are attested by the *OED* (although I had half-expected *unstillable*), we are dealing with productive coinages in the strict sense.

Of particular interest are the *un-* + *-able* formations which have been formed on initially non-verbal bases. These all occur in a coinage-ridden sentence near the end – when the more palatable *un-* + *able* formations have been digested by the reader: “Enough. A pox on void. Unmoreable unlessable unworseable evermost almost void.” (87). In terms of meaning, one might ask oneself what the difference is between *unlessable* and *unlessenable*. Is this not a case of playfulness similar to that of *unsunk* above, where the discordant *-en* is omitted for ‘sonic purposes’? Indeed, that is one hypothesis, but since *unmoreable* is the first to be coined, this is more likely a case of paradigm pressure: *unmoreable* forces *unlessable* to be coined on its pattern, as it would otherwise look out of place alongside two formations with *-en* derivatives as their base (for a discussion of paradigm pressure, see Bauer, 2001, p. 71-74). Once *unlessable* has been coined, *unworseable* seems more natural than *unworsenable*, and a new paradigm has emerged.

The converted bases do exist as archaic verbs, and since the convertedness of the base in principle does nothing to compromise the well-formedness of the derivative, the coinages should pose no problem in that regard. Still, due to synchronic infrequency of their bases, as well as their having been pressurised into existence by *unmoreable*, these coinages bear the stamp of creativity.

4.4 Lessness: *-less*

Word-form	Paragraph	Part of speech	Affix(es)	Morphological process(es)	Semantic coherence	Hypothetical model(s)
<i>beyondless</i>	15	adjective	<i>-less</i>	affixation, conversion	opaque	formally <i>boundless</i> , semantically <i>thenceless</i> and <i>thitherless</i>
<i>thenceless</i>	15	adjective	<i>-less</i>	affixation, conversion	opaque	e.g., <i>resistless</i>

Word-form	Paragraph	Part of speech	Affix(es)	Morphological process(es)	Semantic coherence	Hypothetical model(s)
<i>thitherless</i>	15	adjective	redundant - <i>less</i>	affixation, conversion	absurd	
<i>lidless</i>	55	adjective	<i>-less</i>	affixation, ironic reversal of figurative extension	all-too- transparent	
<i>onceless</i>	77	adjective	<i>-less</i>	affixation, conversion	transparent	<i>pastless</i> , <i>onceness</i>

Table 5. A more comprehensive table with the *-less* formations

Mazon (2004) lists *-less* as the only negative suffix (p. 111), and Bauer (1983) indeed accounts for its immense productivity by reference to its having “no other affix which competes with it” (p. 224). *-less* traditionally formed adjectives from common nouns and verbs, but Bauer (1983) deems it to be no longer productive when attached to verbs, although a few such formations are still current, e.g., *countless* and *tireless* (p. 224). Upon glancing through the table with that in mind, the reader might be struck by the fact that most of the bases are neither verbs nor common nouns. This means that conversion must have occurred beforehand, and in many cases, such as that of *onceless*, the base is indeed introduced as a converted noun before the derivative is coined: “No once.” (77).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, only *lidless* is attested by the *OED*. It differs from the other words in that it was collected on the grounds of a suspected figurative extension. The conventional *lidless* is used chiefly as a poetic means of denoting the ‘ever-watchfulness’ of a person’s eyes, but Beckett’s *lidless*, introduced in the grotesque sentence “Skull and lidless stare.” from paragraph 55, is a bit more concrete than that, as the eyes have formerly been described as “All pupil. Dim black holes. Unwavering gaping.” (54). In want of a better term, this could be seen as an ironic reversal of a figurative extension.

The time-related *onceless* is coined together with the attested *pastless*, and presumably on analogy with that word. In the same way that the converted *past* signals ‘a time, or all the time, before the present’, Beckett’s *once* should mean ‘a moment before (or in) the present’. Once this meaning has been processed by the reader, the sentence “No once in pastless now.” is perfectly transparent, referring as it does to the inslicability of the everlasting present. *Onceless* itself is coined a few sentences later, and denotes the timelessness of the void, i.e., its quality of not being made up of ‘onces’.

The place-related *beyondless*, *thenceless* and *thitherless* are highly opaque in a synchronic reading. Since *-less* attaches most happily to nouns, the knee-jerk reaction would be to assume that their bases are converted nouns. However, such a reading would not be supported by the text, since *thitherless* does not refer to the place's having no 'thither': its 'thereness' could be seen as its thither. Instead, reference must be made to the archaic *resistless* (or any similar verbal base + *-less* formation), which does not only mean 'without resistance' but also 'irresistible'. Thus, if *thence* is taken to be a verbal base, and *thenceless* to be semantically related to *resistless*, then the derivative rightly denotes the inescapability of the place. Likewise, with *boundless* ruled out as a suitable model, *beyondless* must mean 'impassable' (in two senses: impossible to pass by and pass through) rather than 'illimitable', and this conforms with the boundedness of the 'place': "How if not boundless bounded." (14).

Strangely, *thitherless* is not as easily defined, as the sentences "Whither once whence no return." (15) and "Into only. [...] Somehow in." (14;15) clearly show that the place can be 'thithered'. In fact, the *-less* in *thitherless* strikes one as an oddly redundant *-less*, which seems to do nothing but echo the *-less* in *thenceless*: "Thenceless thitherless there." (15). In itself it carries no semantic import, but it cancels out an invisible *-ed* which must nevertheless be assumed if the sentence is to remain at all comprehensible. Anyhow, it is wisest to write it off as a playful formation, so as not to risk dwelling eternally.

4.5 What is the wrong word? *mis-*, *so-* and *un-* + *un-*

Word-form	Paragraph	Part of speech	Affix(es)	Morphological process(es)	Semantic coherence	Hypothetical model(s)
<i>misseen</i>	17	adjective	<i>mis-</i>	affixation	transparent	
<i>missay</i>	71	verb	<i>mis-</i>	affixation	transparent	
<i>so-said</i>	46	adjective		combining	opaque (import of <i>so</i> ?)	<i>so-called</i>
<i>so-missaid</i>	49	adjective		combining	opaque	<i>so-said</i>
<i>so-missay</i>	49	verb	<i>so-</i> (?)	combining or affixation	opaque	<i>so-missaid</i>
<i>ununsaid</i>	66	adjective	<i>un-</i> , <i>un-</i>	affixation	opaque	

Table 6. A more comprehensive table with the *mis-*, *so-* and *un-* + *un-* formations.

In order to inculcate in the reader his notion of the faultiness inherent in all expression, Beckett not only makes use of an array of pejorative adjectives, such as *ill*, *worse* and *poor*, but also recycles the derivational refuse which is the subject of this subsection. *foresaid* has been written off as an imponderable, as it seems impossible to determine whether it is a clipped form of *aforesaid* (such a *foresaid* is attested but rare) or an odd and synchronically ill-formed (*fore-* no longer attaches productively to verbs (Bauer, 1983, p. 218)) *fore-*formation in which the prefix has been reanalysed, or misanalysed, as *forth*.

The *mis-* formations, on the other hand, are considerably less taxing, and were in fact collected because I originally thought they were genuine coinages.

mis- is a close relative of the negative prefixes (Plag, 2018, p. 98), and, like *mal-*, it carries a semantic import which approximates to ‘badly’, ‘wrongly’ etc. The prefix as attached to verbs is not quite dead: a few recent nonces are attested by the *OED*. Of the meanings listed for *missay* in the *OED*, **3b.** is probably that which most closely resembles Beckett’s *missay*: ‘[...] to say something wrongly or improperly.’ Interestingly, *missee* (*misseen*) has a forgotten connotation of sin, which fits with the setting and the narrator’s overwhelming sense of guilt at dimming the perfect void of existence with his meaningless words.

Even if the forms are attested (as exceedingly rare) by the *OED*, the case could be made that Beckett has used *mis-* as a variation on the theme of ill seeing-ill saying. In other words, what seems to matter for Beckett is not so much the semantic import of *mis-*, but rather the possibility of adding another prefix to the negational arsenal, thereby sharpening the infamous ‘no’s knife’. In hindsight, thus, the *mis-* formations may not be coinages in the strict sense, but they exemplify Beckett’s way of ‘excavating’ synchronically unavailable forms for new purposes (they are cases of ‘exaptation’; see Bauer, 2001, p. 78).

so- is listed as a combining form by the *OED*, and is absent from Bauer’s (1983) discussion of English affixes, as well as from Plag’s (2018). It attaches mainly to participles, forming adjectives such as *so-called*. Beckett’s *so-* seems closer to affixhood, however, as it also forms verbs on verbal bases: *so-missay*. In each case it is used with reference to some entity which has been uttered forth by the narrator, e.g., “the so-said seat and germ of all” (46), “the so-said void” (49) and so on. Its semantic import seems close to ‘thus’ (the *so-* formations are actually anchored to an unhyphenated phrase *so said* in paragraph 54),

although with the state of the narrator's creations in mind, it could perhaps be linked to the established *so-so* as well, with the meaning 'not quite satisfactorily'.

so-said is the most palatable of the three, conceivably formed on the pattern of *so-called*, and fittingly the first to be coined. *so-missaid* is the mere corrective of *so-said* ("Next the so-said void. The so-missaid." (46)), and *so-missay* is the creative extension of the pattern to verbal derivatives. In fact, since the *so-* itself (which is somewhat moribund synchronically, with few recent attested forms) seems to have undergone an extension, all of the *so-* formations are likely to be cases of creativity (exaptation).

The ponderous *ununsaid* is the last word to be coined on a *say/said* base, and occurs only once, in the following paragraph:

"Crippled hands! They there then the words. Here now held holding. As when first said. Ununsaid when worse said. Away. Held holding hands!" (66)

Although Bauer (2001) considers the 'repeated morph constraint' to be too strong (p. 132), he (1983) does stress that "negative prefixation does not appear to be recursive at all in English" (with rare exceptions such as *undisfigured*) (p. 68). Here, a not too laboured argument could be made for a non-recursive *unun-*, as one *un-* could be negative and one reversative (or both reversative). Indeed, the word would make little sense if both of the *un-*'s were negative: the crippled hands were once said into being – how then retract them without reversing the act of saying? By stopping himself from not saying them, the narrator would accomplish nothing. Instead, the hands should only be worsenable through a failed act of unsaying, in which case the first *un-* is an intensifying would-be reversative (cf. *undimmed*).

In having the semantic import of *unun-* approach that of *worse*, Beckett plays with the expectations of the 'uninitiated' reader, who would naturally have the 'double negatives' cancel one another out. As elsewhere, the morphemes underneath the morphs tell a story of their own, and what appears to be an absurd formation is actually well-formed if Bauer's liberal take on the pertinent constraint is espoused. Finally, given that there is a possibility that the two *un-*'s are pejorative 'non-prefixes' which add nothing to the base, there is an element of playfulness in *ununsaid*, duly accentuated by the echoing *un-*'s.

4.6 From Limbo to nothingness: *-ward*, *a-* and *-most*

Word-form	Paragraph	Part of speech	Affix(es)	Morphological process(es)	Semantic coherence	Hypothetical model(s)
<i>worstward</i>	title	adverb	<i>-ward</i>	affixation	transparent	
<i>leastward</i>	65	adverb	<i>-ward</i>	affixation	transparent	
<i>astand</i>	19	adjective	<i>a-</i> prefix or prefix	affixation	opaque if ‘at rest plodding on’	
<i>atwain</i>	83	adjective	<i>a-?</i>	affixation or compounding		
<i>atween</i>	83	preposition		compounding		
<i>mere-most</i>	8	adjective		compounding	opaque	
<i>dimmost</i>	65	adjective or adverb	<i>-most</i>	affixation or compounding	homonymous	
<i>leastmost</i>	65	adjective or adverb	<i>-most</i>	affixation or compounding	homonymous	<i>leastward</i> and <i>utmost</i>
<i>evermost</i>	87	adverb		compounding	hyper-transparent (non-canonical)	ironically <i>evermore</i>

Table 7. A more comprehensive table with the *-ward*, *a-* and *-most* formations.

That the road to neither is paved with oxymorons is amply illustrated by the *a-* and *-most* formations in this subsection. In contrast, the *-ward* formations are perfectly transparent, but cannot be considered well-formed unless their bases are taken to be converted nouns, as nouns and particles are the sole bases to which *-ward* attaches (Bauer, 1983, p. 225). In fact, there is an argument to be made for a reading of *worst* and *least* not as superlative bases but as nominal entities towards which the narrator strives, and, as it happens, the *OED* lists both of them as attested nouns. Still, as *worst* alliterates with *words*, there is an element of playfulness in such a coinage.

When it comes to the *a-* formations, *astand* is the least questionable case of *a-* prefixation. *a-* attaches to forms which are ambiguous between nouns and verbs (Bauer, 1983, p. 217), which means that *stand* is a viable base. There is an archaic verb *astand* listed by the *OED*, but it seems that Beckett’s *astand* is an adjective: “First back turned the shade astand.” (19), “One astand at rest.” (22). Since *a-* as attached to verbs usually implies motion, the sentence from paragraph 22 is self-contradictory. However, given the narrator’s penchant for oxymoronicity, that should not be a cause for concern. Indeed, a clarifying sentence

confirms that contradiction was the goal: “At rest plodding on.” (22). *astand* is in fact a neat syntactic recategorisation of “at rest plodding on”, and given that Bauer (2001) considers *a-* prefixation to be marginally productive still in English (p. 48), it should be potential.

atwain is attested as a hyphenated archaic adverbial compound by the *OED* – where *a* is a preposition –, but Beckett’s *atwain* is unhyphenated. One possible reading is that of a converted verbal base *twain* onto a prefix *a-*, with the derived meaning of the coinage being ‘two as one plodding on’. Likewise, *atween* could be construed as the archaic prepositional *atween* which is synonymous with *between* – which in this case is the likely reading –, or else the *a-* morph could be reinterpreted as the prefix *a-*, and the derivative as an opaque coinage with an undertone of motion. In any case, the *a-* formations illustrate Beckett’s way of questioning the worn out morphs, seemingly imbuing them with new content while at the same time allowing for more conservative readings.

(-)*most*, too, is ambiguous between suffix and lexeme, and although in most cases there are hints in the text as to which (-)*most* is being used, it is difficult to rule out alternative readings, so that any proposition must be risky.

According to the *OED*, there has historically been a restriction on *-most* which says that it only attaches to bases denoting position in place, time or serial order, and exceptional nonces like *bettermost* only show why such a restriction was implemented in the first place. None of the words here treated have bases which would normally circumvent the above restriction, which suggests that the lexeme-reading is the most correct. While Bauer (1983) claims that the hyphen is “not a trustworthy criterion” (p. 211), *mere-most* indeed appears to be a compound used attributively. Its meaning, however, is not necessarily that of a transparent superlative, as the context suggests that it could be a transcription of ‘at most mere’, in which case it would be an absurd non-canonical compound (Plag, 2018, p. 136) (containing a contracted particle). Similarly, *evermost* at first seems to have been formed on the pattern of *evermore*. While there is surely a nod towards *evermore*, that word is listed with the meaning ‘for all time’, and Beckett’s *evermost* turns out to be a ‘hyper-transparent’ non-canonical compound with the meaning ‘most ever’, i.e., the literal inversion of its constituents.

Leastmost is akin to *mere-most* in that it is made up of two contradictory constituents, but differs in the sense that (-)*most* could also be a suffix. The resulting homonymy was

touched upon above when *unutter* was accounted for. Since *utmost* is attested, the double superlative is potential. *dimmost* does not pose any further problems of analysis: it is ambiguous in the same way (‘most dim’/‘furthest dimward’), but without being oxymoronic.

Because of their opacity, the words in the (-)*most* category are not likely to have been coined productively.

4.7 Clear-cut compounds

Word-form	Paragraph	Part of speech	Morphological process(es)	Semantic coherence	Hypothetical model(s)
<i>hindtrunk</i>	40	noun: A+N	compounding	quasi-transparent	
<i>shade-ridden</i>	49	adjective: N+A	compounding	quasi-transparent	
<i>somewhose</i>	58	preposition: P+P	compounding	transparent	

Table 8. A table with the compounds.

Given that compounding is the most productive type of word-formation process in English (Plag, 2018, p. 131), compounds are remarkably sparse in *Worstward Ho*. Some of the coinages above turned out to be compounds ‘post-analysis’, but the three items in this section were collected as such.

According to the *OED*, the adjective *hind* (‘back of the’) is often hyphenated when attached to nouns. Beckett’s *hindtrunk* is not, but since there is no prefix *hind-*, it is likely to be an adjective + noun compound noun. *Trunk*, in this context, should be construed figuratively as *OED*’s **2. a.**: ‘the human body [...] without the head [...] and limbs’, and the attributes *topless* and *baseless* help to convey that sense. Since the ‘truncated’ shade in paragraph 40 is perceived from behind, it is natural for the narrator to label it *hindtrunk*, but given that the compound does not actually refer to any type of trunk (it is non-headed, or exocentric), it is not transparent in the conventional sense. *Hindtrunk* is also partly a playful formation, as *hind* harmonises neatly with *mind*, and *trunk* with *sunk*. Also, Beckett’s affection for symmetry and opposition makes itself felt in the pair *hindtrunk/foreskull*.

The most frequent type of compound adjective is the noun + adjective pattern (Bauer, 1983, p. 209), and *shade-ridden* falls into that category. Beckett anchors *shade-ridden* to a preceding phrase ‘*rife* with shades’, but there seems to be no etymological relation between

the two. Here, as elsewhere, Beckett plays on the outward similarity of certain forms, thereby rendering the old familiar words slightly alien. *Ridden* usually has the sense of ‘afflicted or beset *with*’, and, according to the *OED*, *rife* can refer to ‘harmful, destructive or undesirable things’. Thus Beckett’s association of the two is not that strange, and given that the void is indeed full of undesirable shades, the compound is most aptly coined.

Finally, *somewhose* is a pronominal compound made up of two pronouns. Such are of “extremely low productivity” if Bauer (1983) is to be trusted (p. 212), and it is highly unlikely that this one has been coined productively. The meaning of *somewhose* seems to be almost identical to that of *someone’s* (by which it would then be blocked), but given that it refers back to the ‘it’ of paragraph 36 – which was indeed worsened from ‘one’ –, there should be some nuance between the two. The coinage is anchored to the archaic and infrequent *whosoever*, with which it appears to be synonymous, and if it is distinct from *someone’s* in any way, it should be in the sense that it less clearly refers to a specific (assumed) person. In any case, the *whose* element is likely to be the product of the pressure exerted by *whosoever*.

4.8 Miscellaneous

Word-form	Paragraph	Part of speech	Affix(es)	Morphological process(es)	Semantic coherence	Hypothetical model(s)
<i>leasten</i>	66	verb	<i>-en</i>	affixation	transparent	<i>lessen, fasten</i>
<i>foreskull</i>	81	noun	<i>fore-</i>	affixation, conversion	transparent	<i>forehead</i>
<i>mid-foreskull</i>	89	noun	<i>fore-</i>	affixation, compounding	transparent	<i>midhigh</i>
<i>outstared</i>	90	verb (participle)		reanalysis of lexicalised item	hyper-transparent	<i>outletting</i>

Table 9. A more comprehensive table with the miscellaneous items.

Of the four disparate items in this section, three are genuine coinages whereas one (*outstared*) is an attested form used idiosyncratically.

leasten provides the only example of actual *-en* suffixation in *Worstward Ho*. There are two important restrictions at work here, namely the phonological restriction which says that the base must be monosyllabic and end in an obstruent – preferably either /t/ or /d/ –, and

the morphological one which says that the base must be unanalysable (Bauer, 2001, p. 140-141). *leasten* passes the first test with flying colours, but its superlative base would seem to pose problems. However, Bauer (2001) stresses that neither of these constraints are absolute, and lists the irregular comparatives *lessen* and *worsen* as attested exceptions (*ibid*). Since *lessen* is in frequent use, *leasten* could, however ill-formed synchronically, be accounted for with reference to that form. Finally, if *leasten* is ‘phonologically modelled’ on such forms as *fasten*, then its /t/ is silent.

The two other genuine coinages are the related *foreskull* and *mid-foreskull*. Bauer (1983) has some doubts as to the synchronic productivity of *fore-*, but it seems to be functioning still when attached to nouns (p. 218). *Foreskull* should therefore have been productively coined, and if a model were needed, then surely *forehead* would work as one. Strangely enough, Bauer (1983) lists *mid-* as a prefix, and comments on its low productivity (p. 219), but there is no such prefix attested by the *OED*. Rather, it seems to be one of those affixoids of which Booij (2005) speaks (p. 86), forming mainly nouns and adjectives from bases of the same categories. If that is the case, *mid-foreskull* is actually a compound, formed on the combining form *mid*, and possibly on analogy with the noun *midthigh* from paragraph 26.

Finally, *outstared*’s listed meaning ‘to stare longer or harder than’ does not fit with the context. Rather, since the ‘stare’ is said to be ‘outstared away’ by the narrator, this could be an unlexicalised *out-* formation, which does not retain the ‘surpassing-sense’ of ‘true’ *out-* verbs such as *outdo*. However, since this *out* is so similar in meaning to the free morpheme *out*, *outstared* should probably be analysed as a non-canonical compound instead (Plag, 2018, p. 225), with *outletting* (a once-attested quasi-nonce which occurs in its vicinity) as a feasible model. Of course, since one does not normally stare the eyes of others, Beckett’s *outstared* remains idiosyncratic, and there is likely to be a wordplay on the phonetic resemblance between *stare* and *steer* (alliterations abound). Also, the prior existence of a formally identical but lexicalised *outstared* should render Beckett’s absurdly transparent formation improbable (Bauer, 1983, p. 97).

5 Conclusion

In hindsight, a more focussed study – for example on the role of negation, or the polysemy of *un-* – would probably have yielded more tangible results, as there does not seem to be a ‘grand scheme’ in relation to which each coinage would make perfect sense (and it would indeed be madness to try and find method in the madness of Beckett’s joyful verbiage). What has been achieved, at least, is a kind of taxonomy of the patterns which do occur in *Worstward Ho*, and, on the basis of that, a tentative description of Beckett’s behaviour as a writer.

The *un-* + unanalysable base formations which were collected on the basis of a suspected meaning extension of the *un-* itself did not provide sufficient evidence for one to speak of an alternative *un-*. Even so, their ambiguity was enough to raise an awareness of its potential polysemy, which Beckett is clearly keen to exploit. A similar pattern can be observed with regard to the *un-* + participial base formations, some of which actually constitute unattested nonces in their verbal readings: *unask*, *undim*. In the above patterns, the seemingly unitary *un-* is by turns redundant (*undimmed*), ironic or pejorative (*unknow*), ‘too-reversative’ (*unsay*), and in some readings it even approaches lexemehood. That such extensions are conscious on the part of Beckett is exemplified in the ‘ask in vain’-anchoring to *unask*, which signals that the *un-* is a morphemic shorthand for ‘in vain’. If not coinages in the strict sense, these words illustrate Beckett’s way of exploiting ‘deficiencies’ in the language system.

Due to the productivity of the pattern, the common *un-* + *-able* formations are likely well-formed. The paradigm which starts with the creatively coined *unmoreable* is of note, as it demonstrates Beckett’s keen awareness of how paradigm pressure functions. The *-less* formations display a similar behaviour, in that a few productively coined words appear alongside a host of analogical formations. In the paradigm which consists of *beyondless* et al., the element of creativity is more evident, as the derivatives take on a meaning similar to that of the archaic *resistless*, and the unusual verbal bases, which would initially seem to be nouns, render the coinages perfectly opaque synchronically.

The *mis-* and *so-* formations have been analysed as cases of exaptation, in the sense that moribund forms are ‘dug up’ for the sake of worsening. *so-missay* is particularly interesting, as it represents Beckett’s creative extension of *so-* onto verbal bases (perhaps an attempt to reanalyse it as a prefix). *ununsaid*, finally, is an example of the neologist’s disregard for morphological restrictions in general, and the repeated morph constraint in

particular. It has been argued, however, that *ununsaid* is justifiably rule-breaking, and that is true of a number of Beckett's coinages: albeit superficially absurd, they are not incompetent.

In the sixth subsection, Beckett characteristically combines affixes of movement with static bases (such as *a-* and *stand*), thereby coining ingeniously self-annihilating formations which mirror the self-destruction of their inventor. Also, the duality of the affixoidal (-)*most* is exploited to satiety.

Finally, the stark *mid-foreskull*, found among the miscellaneous items, could be seen as a tragicomic label of the 'ideal' core of the self which Beckett sought but never found (not so ideal anymore).

Of course, the context is key in all of this, in that some of the 'unsound' readings espoused above become more plausible the more one immerses oneself in Beckett's realm, whereas someone confronted with the coinages 'cold' would likely opt for more conservative readings.

On a general note, Beckett does not restrict himself to exploiting productive processes only, but considers the whole range of word-formation processes to be at his disposal. Even when productive patterns are exploited, the bases are often so unusual, or the combinations so self-contradictory, that the words would be improbable in any case. The profitability of a pattern does not matter to Beckett, as that only testifies to its capacity to fill the needs of the language community. Rather, Beckett's interest lies in the linguistic 'rejectamenta': that which the language community would rather had remained hidden. That said, while many coinages are ill-formed synchronically, very few of them are incomprehensible in their given contexts, as Beckett consistently gives clues as to which meanings are intended, either by anchoring the coinage to an attested word with a related base, or by inserting a clarifying sentence. If a word remains indecipherable, it almost invariably turns out to be playful instead. Semantically rich formations such as *unutter*, *leastmost* or *beyondless* show just how finely attuned Beckett is to the polysemous nature of each morpheme, and what can be accomplished if they are concatenated in new ways. The numerous conversions illustrate Beckett's ability to 'extend' a very limited vocabulary far beyond its usual scope, with the ubiquitous *on* being stretched to serve a myriad of purposes. Finally, there is a preponderance of non-latinate coinages, with the probably ill-formed *uninane* as the exception which proves the rule. This could be a

means for Beckett to mark his transition back from French, and in any case the ‘dry’ Germanic lexicon fits with a minimalist ideal.

In some sense, Beckett’s linguistic method is congruent with his idea of poetical excavation, in that words are treated not as lexicalised units within a time-bound language system, but as timeless morphemes hiding underneath the hackneyed forms. In other words, just as Beckett the author shrinks from the ‘nonsense’ of contingent reality with its ephemeral individuals, seeking instead the ideal core of the self, so Beckett the coiner rejects the diachronically carved out language system, with its arbitrary word-formation rules and the endless ‘spectacle’ of attested forms. Instead, familiar forms are reanalysed as if they had never been in use – restored to their unlexicalised state –, and archaic patterns are revived competently. Yet, this ‘reformation’ is accompanied by a continuous ‘worsening’: in an inward groping language, the morphemes themselves gradually cancel each other out, until every opposite has dissolved into identity, and the words ring hollow, ‘revealed’ at last for the counterfeits they really are. The end product – i.e., the remaining core – is an eerily anonymous language, at once truer and more absurd than ordinary speech (absurd to the ‘synchronic reader’). Purified and ‘fit for endlessness’, it does a remarkable job of conveying the ‘purgatoriness’ of existence.

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