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A morphopragmatic analysis of English and Italian negative prefixes

1. Introduction

The semantic analysis of English negative prefixes (*dis-*, *in-*, *non-*, *un-*), and of their Italian counterparts (*dis-*, *in-*, *non-*, *s-*) has been of interest to philosophers, logicians and linguists alike for years (Zimmer, 1964; Marchand, 1969; Algeo, 1971; Maynor, 1979; Andrews, 1986; Horn, 1989; Iacobini, 2004; Lieber, 2004, 2005). According to Lieber (2004) negative affixes overlap in meaning, as they all confer the semantic feature [-Location] on their base. But they also differ in the kinds of bases they attach to and in the readings that emerge with different classes of bases. In particular:

- (a) a negative meaning occurs when the verbal base expresses a state, as in *dislike*, *distrust*, or a simple activity, as in *disagree*, *disobey*;
- (b) a reversative meaning occurs when the verbal base implies a result which is mutable, as in *disrobe*, *unbutton*;
- (c) a contrary meaning appears when the adjectival/nominal base has a scalar interpretation, as in *discourteous*, *unhappy*, *discomfort*, *inexperience*;
- (d) a contradictory meaning arises from adjectival/nominal bases that are nongradable, as in *infinite*, *untrue*, *infidelity*, *nonsmoker* (Lieber, 2004: 111-125).

The same holds for Italian: i.e., the result of the action *sbottonare* is not permanent (reversative reading), but the result of *disubbidire* is more stable (negative reading). Or, someone may be neither *cortese* nor *scortese* (contrary reading), but he is necessarily either *fumatore* or *non fumatore* (contradictory reading).

This paper explores affixal negation from a new perspective, i.e., morphopragmatics. Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi (1994: 55) define morphopragmatics as «the area of the general pragmatic meanings of morphological rules, that is, of the regular pragmatic effects produced when moving from the input to the output of a morphological rule». According to this definition, morphopragmatics is to be distinguished from: (a) morphosemantics, i.e., the regular semantic meanings of morphological rules; (b) lexical semantics of morphology, i.e., the denotational and connotational semantics of morphologically complex words; and (c) lexical pragmatics of morphology, i.e., idiosyncratic pragmatic mean-

ings/effects of individual, morphologically complex words.

In order to establish whether or not negative affixation belongs to the area of morphopragmatics, we should proceed as follows:

- first, we should ascertain that we are dealing with a productive morphological rule (vs. extra-grammatical morphological operation, see Zwicky and Pullum, 1987; Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi, 1994; Doleschal and Thornton, 2000, eds.);
- second, we should analyse the semantics of negative affixation and see what semantic generalizations can be made without making recourse to pragmatic factors;
- third, we should analyse the pragmatics of negative affixation and see what pragmatic generalizations can be made concerning the morphological rule, rather than individual lexical items (Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi, 1994: 56).

In this paper I claim that negative prefixes have not only morphosemantic but also morphopragmatic relevance. That is, they often contain pragmatic variables which cannot be suppressed in the description of their meaning, and which are autonomous from their semantics. Indeed, some important pragmatic functions/effects of negative prefixation cannot be entirely derived from its semantic features [negative], [reversative], [contrary] or [contradictory], but are also based on pragmatic features that we will call [cautious] and [detached]. This is the reason why negative derived forms are often preferred to comparable simple forms in formal situations, or in any case there is an attempt to avoid conflict, offensiveness, rudeness and the like. For instance, the derived words *dissimilar*, *disingenuous* and *inexact*, all forms of litotes (see Caffi, 1989), are generally felt to be less direct or less rude than their partial synonyms *different*, *false* and *wrong*. In fact, the negation of the contrary does not refer to a binary opposition, but rather leaves the opposite range open to whatever degree is appropriate, so that the hearer is invited to consider the degree to which the facts point.

The present analysis is not an attempt to show that negative derived words are deprived of their semantic (negative, contrary, contradictory, etc.) denotative meaning in order to develop a purely morphopragmatic function. This does not happen with Italian diminutives either. For instance, when one says *Maria è grass-ina* ('Mary is rather plump'), the diminutive suffix conveys both a semantic feature [small], in that *grass-ina* means 'less fat than' *grassa* ('fat'), but also a pragmatic feature [non-serious], mostly based on the fictive evaluation provided by the speaker (see Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi, 1994: 154-157).

As far as negative prefixation is concerned, I can anticipate that the deno-

tative and connotative meanings of negative derived words are enriched by extra pragmatic features, namely [cautious] and [detached]. These features pertain to the speaker's strategy for lowering his/her commitment to the negative meaning of his/her evaluative speech act. As said above, this is made possible by the fact that the negative meanings of such prefixed words, as compared to their lexical synonyms, appear less standardized and still allow a level of personal judgement and interpersonal negotiation.

Before moving to the English and Italian paradigms of negative prefixes and to their pragmatic effects, a preliminary micro-level analysis seems to be in order.

2. *Micro-level analysis*

In line with Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi's (1994) pragmatic model, we can relate a productive and regular morphological phenomenon such as negative affixation to either static or dynamic aspects of an interaction.

As far as the static dimension is concerned, particularly pertinent is the degree of formality of the speech situation. Specifically, negative derivatives occur more in formal contexts than in familiar speech situations¹. Thus, in British and Italian newspapers we may find statements such as:

- (1) Something not *dissimilar* applies to the economy. (*Daily Telegraph*, 04/05/1992, from the BNC)
 - (1') Persino nella politica economica l'isola presenta una situazione *dissimile* a quella di tutti gli altri paesi del Golfo Persico. (*Peace Reporter*, online, 27/07/2005)
- 'Even as far as its economic policy is concerned, the island presents a situation which is unlike that of all the other countries of the Persian Gulf.'

As far as the dynamic dimension is concerned, negative affixes may obtain a modification of the illocutionary forces of speech acts (see Bazzanella, Caffi and Sbisà, 1991). For instance, they may function as downgraders in assertives. This is the case with E. *disingenuous* and It. *insincera* (vs. *false* / *falsa*) in (2)-(2')²:

¹ Negative affixes are frequently used in legal, political or scientific terminology (ALGEO, 1971), in the jargon of medicine (DŽUGANOVÁ, 2006), in officialese as well as in academic language (CAFFI, 1989).

² Abbreviations: Adj. = Adjective, Am.E. = American English, BNC = British National Corpus, Br.E. = British English, E. = English, Gr. = Greek, IE = Indo-European, It. = Italian, ItWaC = Italian Web as a Corpus, Lat. = Latin, ME = Middle English,

- (2) This is a somewhat *disingenuous* letter. (BNC)
 (2') L'opinione di Sanguineti era intrigante, ma anche ideologicamente conformata e pertanto un po' *insincera*. (*ALET Edizioni*, online, 10/2007)
 'Sanguineti's opinion was intriguing, albeit based on an ideology, and therefore rather insincere.'

Similarly, the expression of inner states and attitudes is modified via negative affixes, as in the expressives below:

- (3) Slight *unease* on my part. (BNC)
 (3') La mia sensazione, percepita tra l'altro dal linguaggio corporeo, è che anche lui provasse un leggero *disagio*. (*Blog on Stella del Mattino*, 03/07/2008)
 'He gave me the impression, which was confirmed by his body language, that he felt slightly uneasy.'

Modulation is amply confirmed in (3)-(3') by the E. adjective *slight* and the It. *leggero*, which respectively mitigate the strength of E. *unease* and It. *disagio* (cf. *anxiety* / *ansia*), whereas in (2)-(2') the negative derivatives are accompanied by the downgrading hedges *somewhat* and *un po'* (see Hübler, 1983).

Furthermore, negation in general is often used for euphemistic reasons, i.e., to «disguise unpleasant subjects by referring to them by means of apparently inoffensive expressions» (Leech, 1983: 147). Think of the numerous expressions which are used in Italian for people showing some physical disability or deficiency: e.g., *disabile* ('handicapped (person)'), *disadattato* ('maladjusted'), *disagiato* ('needy (person)'), *non abbiente* ('not well-off (person)'), *non deambulante* ('(person) with impaired mobility'), *non udente* ('deaf (person)'), *non vedente* ('blind (person)'), etc.³.

Negative derivatives may also produce understatement (cf. litotes in Caffi, 1989), which is a typical strategy of British polite contexts:

- (4) That was not a lie, perhaps, but it was terminologically *inexact*. (BNC)

Here there is a clear effort on the speaker's part to say less than (s)he intends (i.e., 'wrong').

N = Noun, NDF(s) = Negative Derived Form(s), OED = Oxford English Dictionary Online, Sc. = Scottish, V = Verb.

³ Cf. such Italian compounds as *nullatenente* and *senzatto*, which have a privative meaning and euphemistic function. See ALGEO (1971) for English euphemisms beginning with *non*.

On the other hand, negative derivatives seem not to be useful as upgraders:

- (5) I'm really *unhappy*. I can't remember being so *unhappy* – not ever. (BNC)

Here the upgrading role is enhanced by the adverbs *really* and *so*, while the negative prefix *un-* does not contribute to upgrade the illocutionary force of the expressive act *I'm unhappy* (cf. the more explicit form *I'm sad* or the periphrastic litotes *I'm not happy*, see Caffi, 1989).

In hyperbolic contexts, negative derivatives may produce overstatement of propositional content, but, again, their function is downgrading. An Italian example is:

- (6) Posso chiederti di farmi un favore *infinito*? (fabricated by a native speaker of Italian)
'May I ask you an enormous favour?'

where the illocutionary strength of the request appears downgraded in terms of speaker's commitment and requestee's obligations at the same time. Indeed, the exaggeration of the adjective *infinito* (i.e., whose value cannot be measured) makes the request not completely reliable.

English and Italian negative prefixes seem to behave similarly from a morphopragmatic point of view. That is, they commonly imply formality, decorum, reticence, politeness of the speech situation and tend to downgrade the force of the illocutionary act at issue. This explains why they do not normally attach to bases which have negative connotations (*unattractive* vs. **unugly*, *unhappy* vs. **unsad*, *untrue* vs. **unfalse*), with the exception of a few adjectives (e.g. *incorrupt*, *unhostile*, *unvulgar*, Lieber, 2005: 393), and of periphrastic litotes (*not ugly*, *not sad*, *not true*), which is a syntactic rather than morphological phenomenon, and therefore excluded from the present investigation.

However, we cannot take it for granted that the forms used in English and Italian do correspond, nor can we affirm that the pragmatic functions involved and the effects produced by negative derivatives are the same in the two languages. What follows is a fine-grained description of the English and Italian paradigms of negative prefixes. Their (morpho-)pragmatic functions/effects will be explored in section 4.

3. Negative prefixes in English and Italian

Negative prefixes have been discussed quite extensively in the literature. They are normally included in descriptive studies on English morphology or

word-formation (from Jespersen, 1942 and Marchand, 1969 to Plag, 2003; Lieber, 2004, and Štekauer and Lieber, 2005, eds.). As for Italian, studies including this topic are less frequent: the most complete is certainly Iacobini (in Grossmann and Rainer, 2004, eds.), in which the author provides a detailed account of negation expressed by Italian prefixes. Overall, what we can realize from pertinent literature is that the paradigms of English and Italian negative prefixes are comparable from many points of view. First, the two languages use similar prefixes to express negation, except for English *un-* and Italian *s-*, and, second, these prefixes can express various different denotative meanings – negative, reversative, contrary, contradictory (cf. privative) – depending on the bases to which they attach.

It is interesting to note that most of the above-mentioned studies investigate the connotative meaning of negative prefixes as well. For instance, Jespersen (1942), Marchand (1969), Horn (1989) and Lieber (2004, 2005) observe that different English negative prefixes may convey different nuances of meaning when they are attached to the same base. In particular, the prefix *non-* targets a non-emotive or non-affective sense of the base, while *un-* or *in-* select a more emotion-loaded sense. Accordingly, *nonbeliever*, *nonmoral*, *nonsane* and *nonscientific* are more neutral than their rivals *unbeliever*, *immoral*, *insane*, *unscientific*. Lieber (2004: 122) remarks that neutral or evaluative meaning depends on whether or not the base admits polysemy. Thus, with a polysemous base such as *professional*, *non-* correlates with neutral negation (i.e., a *non-professional* person is ‘someone who does not practise any profession’), whereas *un-* correlates with gradual evaluative negation (i.e., an *unprofessional* person is ‘someone accused of questionable conduct in his/her workplace’). This distinction is less strong in Italian, either because there are no or few competing prefixes with the same base (see *ascientifico* and *non professionale*, which do not admit any other negative prefix, replaced by adverbs, such as *poco* ‘little’ (*professionale*); cf. *immorale* vs. *amorale*, *insano* vs. dated *malsano*, *non credente* vs. *miscredente*), or because there is no semantic distinction between the two forms (*non alcolico* = *analcolico*, *non utilizzato* = *inutilizzato*).

As for American English, Algeo (1971: 90-91) likewise remarks the distinction of *non-* from other negative prefixes: «it is unemotionally privative, whereas *un-*, *in-*, and *dis-* often express contrariety and an unfavourable judgement» (cf. *noninspired/uninspired*, *nonobedient/disobedient*, *nonpermanent/impermanent*, *non-realistic/irrealistic*, *nonreligious/irreligious*, etc.). However, he also distinguishes among the three meanings of *non-*: viz., privative, pejorative and dissimulative. For instance, a *noncandidate* with privative *non-* is ‘one who is not a candidate’, with pejorative *non-* he is ‘one who is a declared candidate but whose selection is unlikely’, whereas with dissimulative *non-* he

is ‘one who is not a declared candidate but who is regarded as such by many newsmen and politicians’.

Moreover, Algeo (1971) observes that the use of *non-* is twofold. On the one hand, it is euphemistic and characterized by kindness and delicacy (cf. *nonadult* (said to a 16-year-old) vs. *child* or *minor*, *noncitizen* vs. *alien*, *nongain* vs. *loss*, *nonreader* vs. *illiterate*, *nonstandard* vs. *substandard*). On the other hand, *non-* involves prestige because of its technical and scientific use. Consider, for instance, *non-* in linguistic terminology (*nondistinctive*, *nongrammatical*, *nonprototypical*, *nonsentence*, *nonsyllabic*, etc.), or the contrast between *non-* forms and their (simpler) partial synonyms (*nonpublic* vs. *private*, *nonprejudicial* vs. *fair*, *nonsalaried* vs. *unpaid*).

As for Italian, Iacobini (2004: 145) remarks the pejorative connotation conveyed by the prefix *s-* in nouns (*sfiducia*, *sfortuna*, *sproporzione*) and adjectives (*scostumato*, *screanzato*, *smisurato*)⁴. In verbs, this prefix may even acquire a more specific depreciatory meaning: *scuocere* does not mean ‘not to cook’, but ‘to overcook’, *sgovernare* means ‘to govern badly’, *sparlare* stands for ‘to speak ill (of somebody)’, *sragionare* is ‘to talk nonsense’, and *svendere* is ‘to sell below cost’. On the other hand, he observes that the prefix *non-* has a euphemistic function in some Italian neo-formations (*non deambulante*, *non uidente*, *non vedente*).

This latter point is also made by Caffi (1989). Exploring the opposite pragmatic functions of Italian litotes (i.e., mitigation vs. reinforcement), the author mentions some current cases in which this trope is close to euphemism: e.g., *personale non docente* instead of *bidelli* or *impiegati* (‘porters, janitors’ or ‘clerical staff’), *non abbienti* for *poveri* (‘poor people’), *non credenti* for *atei* (‘atheists’, itself a negative derived form from privative *a-* + *theós* ‘God’), etc. Furthermore, Caffi (1989) shows how litotes can mitigate the speaker’s commitment and express an attitudinal detachment, or otherwise represent a form of complicity with/sympathy for the addressee. However, except for euphemistic litotes, the examples she analyses are not morphological but syntactic phenomena: i.e., (a) negative periphrasis (*non è brutto* ‘he is not ugly’), (b) negation of a hyperbole (*non è un’aquila* ‘he is no genius’), (c) negation of the contrary (*non è inopportuno* ‘it is not inopportune’) (see Hoffmann’s 1987 *negatio contrarii*; cf. Holmes, 1984).

What I claim in this paper is that morphological negation obtained by the addition of prefixes may trigger meanings which are not in the corresponding

⁴ IACOBINI (2004: 145) suggests that, in parasynthetic formations such as *sfortunato*, the prefix *s-* expresses a privative meaning if referred to the noun (i.e., *privo di fortuna* ‘having no luck’), but a contrary meaning if referred to the suffixed adjective (i.e., *non fortunato* ‘not lucky’); see also § 3.3 below.

simplex forms (cf. *inexact* / *inesatto* vs. *wrong* / *errato*), and the identification of such meanings highly depends on the con-/co-text in which the negative derivative occurs. Thus, in a sentence of the type *What you said was inexact* we can grasp the actual meaning of *inexact* from what follows:

- (7) a. What you said was *inexact* ('not strictly rigorous'), you should have been more precise.
- b. What you said was *inexact* ('wrong'), you made some mistakes. (fabricated by a native speaker of English)

And we can also infer that the term is used to express detachment in (7a), in which the hearer is formally invited to be more careful and accurate, but to moderate a much stronger criticism in (7b), which implies that the speaker is being cautious and polite with his/her addressee.

3.1. English negative prefixes

English has four main prefixes that convey the meaning of negation, or 'nonlocation' (Lieber, 2004: 115), i.e., *un-*, *in-*, *dis-* and *non-*⁵.

Historically, the verbal and the nominal/adjectival prefixes *un-* have different sources (Marchand, 1969: 201-207)⁶. Specifically, the verbal prefix comes from Indo-European **anti* (wherefrom Gr. *anti*, Lat. *ante*), whereas the nominal/adjectival prefix goes back to IE **n-* (wherefrom Gr. *a-/an-*, Lat. *in-*).

Semantically, Lieber (2004) distinguishes between the two prefixes in that the verbal prefix normally belongs to the reversative type (e.g. *untie* 'cause (the object of the verb) to be no longer tied'), whereas the nominal/adjectival prefix can be either contrary or contradictory in meaning. That is, the contrary type admits an intermediate state between the base and the derived form (e.g. between *happy* and *unhappy*, *ease* and *unease*), whereas the contradictory type

⁵ In linguistic literature, the type and number of English negative prefixes varies. JESPERSEN (1942) claims that the most important negative prefixes of English are *a-/an-*, *in-* (with its variants *il-*, *im-*, *ir-*) and *un-*. He also includes *anti-*, *contra-*, *counter-*, *de-*, *dis-*, *n-*, *no-*, *non-*, *mal-*, *mis-* and privative *un-* to the list of related prefixes. ZIMMER (1964) describes five basic negative prefixes: *a-*, *dis-*, *in-*, *non-*, *un-*. MARCH *et al.* (2003, in DŽUGANOVA, 2006) consider the following prefixes to be negative ones: *anti-*, *de-*, *dis-*, *dys-*, *il-*, *im-*, *in-*, *ir-*, *mal-*, *mis-*, *non-* and *un-*. LIEBER (2005) selects only *de-*, *dis-*, *in-*, *non-* and *un-*.

⁶ Although there is a general tendency in the literature to consider *un-* a single morpheme attached to different bases (see MAYNOR, 1979; ANDREWS, 1986; LIEBER, 2004, 2005 *inter alia*), MARCHAND (1969) distinguishes between *un*⁻¹ ('not' as in *unfair*) and *un*⁻² ('opposite' as in *untie*) on the basis of their different origins.

does not (i.e., *breakable* vs. *unbreakable*, *employment* vs. *unemployment*). Lieber (2005: 393) also specifies that *un-* nouns – especially frequent in present-day English – may exhibit different nuances of meaning: e.g., whereas an *uncola* refers to an element outside the category ‘cola’ with whose members it shares a salient function, an *unhotel* refers to a peripheral member of the category ‘hotel’, of which it does not represent a good exemplar.

According to Jespersen (1942: 465–466), some *un-* nouns seem to be derivatives from adjectives: e.g., *unkindness* (← *unkind*), *untruth* (← *untrue*), *unwisdom* (← *unwise*), Sc. *unfriend* (← *friendly*). This suggests that *un-* is likely to be highly productive with adjectival bases, and only marginally productive with nominal bases. Nevertheless, some *un-* adjectives have passed out of use: e.g., *uncredible*, *unexpert*, *unformal*, *unperfect*, *unpossible*, etc. have been replaced by *in-* forms, while *unhonest* has become *dishonest* (Marchand, 1969: 203).

Like *un-*, the English prefix *in-* allows both a contrary reading (*inarticulate*, *incapacity*) and a contradictory reading (*incurable*, *infidelity*), but, unlike *un-* or *dis-*, it is unproductive on verbal bases⁷. In accordance with Latin morphological rules, it is assimilated to *il-* before *l* (*illogical*), to *im-* before *b*, *m*, *p* (*imbalanced*, *immature*, *impatient*), to *ir-* before *r* (*irrelevant*)⁸. Džuganová (2006: 334) also mentions the allomorphic variant *i(g)-* for words of Latin origin, generally beginning with *n*: e.g., *ignoble* (← *i-* + Lat. (*g*)*nobilis* ‘noble’). For reasons of euphony, more precisely by preventive dissimilation, it never occurs with bases beginning with *in-* (*intelligent* → *unintelligent*, *intelligible* → *unintelligible*, *interrupted* → *uninterrupted*; *inclined* → *disinclined*, *ingenuous* → *disingenuous*; *inflammable* → *noninflammable* or *non-flammable*; cf. It. *inintelligente*, *inintelligibile*, *ininterrotto*, rare *ininfiammabile*).

Adjectives with this prefix may have (less common) by-forms with the prefix *un-* (*undescribable*, *unelegant*, *unexact*, *unfirm*, *unfrequent*, *unreplaceable*). More commonly, the two prefixes attached to the same adjectival base determine regional differences (cf. Br.E. *immoral* vs. Am.E. *unmoral*, Br.E. *unpractical* vs. Am.E. *impractical*), or even semantic differences (cf. *inartifi-*

⁷ English verbs such as *illegalize* or *immortalize* and Italian verbs such as *immobilizzare* or *inutilizzare* are obtained from prefixed adjectives (i.e., *illegal*, *immortal*; *immobile*, *inutile*) (see MARCHAND, 1969; IACOBINI, 2004).

⁸ SCALISE (1984: 81–85) identifies the following differences between *in-* (class I prefix) and *un-* (class II prefix): (a) *in-* affects stress, whereas *un-* does not (cf. *finite* → *infinite* vs. *lâwful* → *unlâwful*); (b) *in-* permits nasal assimilation, whereas *un-* does not (cf. *illegal* vs. *unlawful*); (c) *in-* can be attached to stems, whereas *un-* usually cannot (cf. *implacable* vs. **unplacable*, **placable*). On the other hand, in Italian, all prefixes are stress-neutral (*morâle* → *immorâle*) and can be attached to both words (*indecente*) and stems (*insipido*) (SCALISE, 1984: 87–88; see § 3.2 below for the assimilation of Italian *in-*).

cial ‘unskilful, rude’ vs. *unartificial* ‘artless, natural’, *inartistic* ‘outraging the canons of art’ vs. *unartistic* ‘not concerned with art’, *inhuman* ‘brutal’ vs. *unhuman* ‘superhuman’, *insane* ‘not mentally sane’ vs. *unsane* ‘lacking sanity’). These latter examples make us suppose that the prefix *in-* tends to select the negative connotations of the adjective it negates, while the *un-* prefix selects its neutral meaning. However, as anticipated, when *un-* has a *non-* counterpart, the former tends to select the negative sense of the base, whereas the latter selects its neutral one.

Interestingly, the prefix *in-* does not always negate a base, but it may develop a word which is separated in meaning from the original one: e.g., *infamous* means ‘of ill fame or repute’, while the negative of *famous* is *unknown*, *invaluable* means ‘priceless’, while the negative of *valuable* is *worthless* (more in § 3.3 below; see morphosemantic opacity).

In English, the prefix *in-* is especially productive with Latinate vocabulary. For instance, *un-* adjectives may correspond to *in-* nouns with a Latinate base in *-ity*, as in *unable-inability*, *unequal-inequality*, *unstable-instability* (Marchand, 1969: 170). On the other hand, when the adjective has a native (non-Latinate) ending such as *-ed* or *-ing*, *un-* is preferred to *in-* (*unanimated* vs. *inanimate*, *undiscriminating* vs. *indiscriminate*) (Jespersen, 1942: 468-469). Moreover, whereas *un-* adjectives are often obtained from related verbs, comparable *in-* adjectives have no existing verb as their base (cf. *unavoidable* ← *to avoid* vs. *inevitable*, *undestroyable* ← *to destroy* vs. *indestructible*, *unexplainable* ← *to explain* vs. *inexplicable*). This also occurs with *in-* nouns, which, unlike *un-* ones, have no adjectives as their base (cf. *uncertainty* ← *certain* vs. *incertitude*). Generally speaking, new English formations appear to be more important than ME loans from Norman French.

The English prefix *dis-* attaches freely to all base categories and allows all readings. With verbal bases, it attaches to stative verbs (*displease*), simple activity verbs (*disclaim*), change verbs (*disappear*), or causative ones (*disapprove*). When it conveys a reversative meaning, its base may overlap semantically with that of *un-* (e.g. *disrobe* and *undress*; cf. opaque *discover* vs. *uncover* having different meanings). With adjectival bases, it generally expresses opposition or absence (as in *disadvantageous*, *discourteous*, *disharmonious*, *dispassionate*, *disproportionate*, *disreputable*). Yet it cannot compete with *un-* in terms of productivity, and even when the two variants are acceptable, *un-* adjectives are far more common than *dis-* ones (cf. *uncomfortable* vs. *discomfortable*, *unsatisfactory* vs. *dissatisfactory*). With nominal bases, its meaning is again opposition or absence of the notion that the base denotes (as in *disharmony*, *disillusion*, *distaste*, *distrust*, *disuse*). It attaches only to abstract nouns, either simple (*disparity*) or situational (*disadvantage*). Concrete nouns, on the other hand, are generally preceded by *non-* (*nonbeliever*, *nonresident*, etc.).

The prefix *non-*, whose origin is again from Latin, is less common in English. Initially, it was used only for law terms (*non-payment*, *non-power*, *non-user*), but later its use extended to adjectives and participles belonging to philosophy, religion and politics (*non-communicant*, *non-conformist*, *non-obedience*, *non-preaching*) (Algeo, 1971). Today, it can be prefixed to almost any parasyntetic or participial adjective (*non-competent*, *non-efficient*, *non-graduated*, *non-interrupted*), and to either impersonal or personal nouns (*non-adherence*, *non-exercise*, *non-proficiency*, *non-creditor*, *non-member*, *non-sympathizer*), but not to verbs (cf. the nonce-words *to non-act* and *to non-licentiate* recorded in the OED, or the adjunct *non-stop* (*flight/train*) from a verbal stem).

As far as orthography is concerned, the spelling of this prefix varies. In the past, it was strictly written with a hyphen (as in the above examples). Today, it is generally written together with the word it negates (e.g. all *non-* words reported in Lieber, 2004 are spelt as one word), as evidence of its derivational rather than compositional status (see Algeo, 1971; cf. Italian *non-* below).

As for the prefix's semantics, most scholars claim that *non-* often has a slightly more neutral evaluative flavour than *un-*, *in-* or *dis-* (Jespersen, 1942; Horn, 1989; Plag, 2003; Lieber, 2004). Hence, *nonAmerican* negates the objective/descriptive content of the base, i.e., 'having American citizenship', whereas *un-American* negates its emotive sense, i.e., 'displaying the qualities of an American', and, similarly, *non-substantial* means 'lacking substance', whereas *insubstantial* means 'not existing in substance or reality'.

Algeo (1971: 94) however remarks that «The privative *non-* [...] is purely negative in meaning and impartial in tone. The pejorative *non-*, on the other hand, is used to make a highly emotional judgement; it is distinctly polemical in tone»: cf. negative *nonbook* ('anything that is not a book but might be stored in a library, e.g. a microfilm, newspaper, journal, etc.') and pejorative *nonbook* ('a book of no value')⁹.

3.2. Italian negative prefixes

The paradigm of Italian negative prefixes is comparable to the English one, although Italian replaces the Germanic prefix *un-* with its cognate *in-*

⁹ The prefix *de-*—productive on both nouns (e.g. *deice*) and verbs, either simplex (e.g. *deregister*) or complex (e.g. *denationalize*, *decontaminate*)—has not been included in this description because it is typically privative, and, even when it carries reversative meaning (e.g. *deplane*, *detrain* 'get off a plane/train'), it appears to convey no additional pragmatic features. For the same reasons, also the privative suffix *-less* (e.g. *careless*, *hopeless*, *shoeless*) has been excluded from the current investigation. See LIEBER (2004: 109-111) for a morphosemantic description of privative affixes of English.

(cf. E. *unbearable* vs. It. *insopportabile*, E. *unbreakable* vs. It. *indistruttibile*)¹⁰, or with other prefixes: e.g., *dis-* (cf. E. *undo* vs. It. *disfare*, E. *unemployment* vs. It. *disoccupazione*), or *s-* (cf. E. *unfavourable* vs. It. *sfavorevole*, E. *unfortunate* vs. It. *sfortunato*).

Iacobini (2004) includes under the category of Italian negative prefixes also those which express opposition (i.e., *anti-* in *antigelo*, *anticonformista*, and *contro-* in *controriforma*, *controrivoluzionario*, *controbattere*), and those which have a privative meaning (*a-* in *atemporale*, *de-* in *decaffeinare*, *e-* in *evirare* ← *ex-* + Lat. *vir* ‘man’, *s-* in *sgusciare*). Although most of them have an English corresponding form (*a*-¹¹, *anti-*, *counter-*, *de-*), they are not relevant to our morphopragmatic analysis, as they seem to acquire no additional pragmatic feature in contextualized examples. On the other hand, a privative meaning with a pragmatic connotation may be expressed by *dis-* (*disagio*, *disinteresse*), by *s-* (*sfiducia*, *sventura*, *screanzato*, *sfortunato*, *sragionare*), and, rarely, by *in-* (*incultura*, *inesperienza*) (to be expanded in § 4 below).

In Italian, a contradictory reading is especially expressed by *non-*. This prefix is particularly productive on nouns of various types: agentive (*non-do-cente*), abstract (*non-film*, *non-io*, *nonsenso*) or concrete (*non-metallo*, *non-tessuto*). It is less productive than in English on adjectival bases: cf. E. *non-diversified* vs. It. *indifferenziato*, E. *non-effective* vs. It. *inefficace*, E. *non-flammable* vs. It. *ininfiammabile*, E. *non-political* vs. It. *apolitico*, E. *nonrational* vs. It. *irrazionale*, etc. When it occurs before adjectives, it is often found as a separate word, as in *non belligerante*, *non contagioso*, *non marcato*, *non violento*, etc., with the exception of *noncurante* and *nonconformista*.

Non- sometimes obtains nonce-words in Italian. Consider, for instance, the occasionalism *non problema* which has been recently used by a journalist commenting security during the Olympic games (‘*La sicurezza è un non problema*’, *dicono i cinesi* ‘Security is a nonproblem’, say the Chinese’).

The prefix *in-* allows both a contrary and a contradictory reading, depending on the gradability of the base to which it attaches (cf. Iacobini, 2004). It is especially productive on adjectives (*inadeguato*, *inappropriato*, *incomparabile*, *infedele*), but rare on nouns (*insuccesso*, *irrealtà*). Sometimes nouns derive from adjectives (*incompetenza* ← *incompetente*, *insoddisfazione* ← *insoddisfatto*) or have a Latin etymology (*incuria* ← Lat. *incūria*, *inimicizia* ← Lat. *inimicitia*).

¹⁰ As seen in § 3.1, both Latin *in-* and Germanic *un-* come from Proto-Indo-European **h₁*-.

¹¹ See DŽUGANOVA (2006) for the productivity of the prefix *a-* (from Greek *a-*, i.e., *alpha privativum*) in scientific terminology.

Adjectives with this prefix may have by-forms with other prefixes to express different shades of meaning: e.g., *amorale* means ‘lacking morality’, while *immorale* means ‘contrary to (the received ideas of) morality, licentious, corrupt’ (cf. the three E. variants *amoral*, *immoral*, *unmoral*), a *disoccupato* is ‘a jobless person’, while an *inoccupato* is ‘one who is looking for his/her first job’, *maleducato* means ‘ill-mannered, impolite’, whereas *ineducato* means ‘uncultivated’, *scorretto* means both ‘containing errors’ and ‘dishonest’, but *incorretto* means ‘that has undergone no corrections’. On the other hand, *infortunato* (‘injured’) and *sfortunato* (‘unfortunate, unlucky’) have two different sources, i.e., the former is from *infortunio*, while the latter is from *fortuna*.

Some by-forms are merely more common synonyms of *in-* adjectives. For instance, adjectives with *dis-* (*disabitato* = *inabitato*, *disonesto* = *inonesto*, *disubbidiente/disobbediente* = *inobbediente*, *disuguale/diseguale* = *inuguale/ineguale*, *disumano* = *inumano* ‘cruel’, ‘exceptional, superhuman’), *s-* (*scomodo* = *incomodo*, *scoordinazione* = *incoordinazione*), *a-* (*asociale* = *insociale*), or *non-* (*noncurante* = *incurante*).

As in English, the prefix *in-* has three basic allomorphic variants (i.e., *il-*, *im-*, *ir-*), which occur, for instance, in *illecito*, *illogico*, *imbattuto*, *imbevibile*, *immaturo*, *immobile*, *impalpabile*, *impossibile*, *irrilevante*, *irriverente*. The variant with an intrusive *g* [ɲ] may also occur with words beginning with *n* (*ignobile*, *ignoto*).

Dis- is productive on adjectives allowing a contrary interpretation (*disadorno*, *disagevole*) or a contradictory one (*disabitato*, *discontinuo*). Some *dis-* adjectival neo-formations are *disabile* (cf. *inabile* in § 4.1 below), *disadattato*, *disalienante*. It attaches to non-telic verbs (*disapprovare*, *disinteressarsi*, *disobbedire*), but also to resultative ones (*disarmare*, *dissanguare*). It is preferred to *s-* before vowels (cf. *disonesto* vs. **sonesto*) (see Thornton, 2005: 147).

A less productive adjectival prefix suggesting a contrary interpretation is *s-*, coming from Latin *ex-*. It is found in *scomodo*, *scontento*, *scortese*, *sfavorevole*, *sgradevole*, *spiacevole*¹². In *sleale* this prefix rather suggests a contradictory reading, while in *scorretto* it may admit both interpretations. Indeed, as just seen, *scorretto* may refer either to something ‘wrong, containing errors’ (as in *compito/termine scorretto*), and therefore suggest a contradictory interpretation, or to something ‘which does not obey the common principles of hon-

¹² SCALISE (1984: 47–48) shows that this Italian prefix is subjected to phonological restrictions. In particular, it does not attach to words beginning with a vowel (cf. **sabitato* vs. *disabitato*), nor to words beginning with a consonant which, added to *s-*, would create an impossible initial cluster (cf. **scivile* vs. *incivile*, **sgiuusto* vs. *ingiusto*, **ssano* vs. *insano*).

esty, fairness, etc.’ (as in *comportamento/atteggiamento scorretto*), inducing a contrary reading.

This prefix also obtains nouns (*sconforto, sconvenienza, sfavore, sfiducia, sgarbo, svantaggio*) and denominal verbs (*scoraggiare* ← *coraggio*, *scremare* ← *crema*, *svergognare* ← *vergogna*).

3.3. The properties of English and Italian negative prefixes

Let us now compare the properties of English and Italian negative prefixes in a more systematic way:

- Both English and Italian negative prefixes are derivational. Yet Scalise (1984: 117), quoting Allen (1978), claims that in English «*non* is attached [...] not by derivation rules but by rules that are essentially equivalent to compounding rules»¹³. The autonomy of the Italian morpheme *non* may similarly suggest a classification of Italian *non* formations (e.g. *non addetto, non allineato, non cattolico, non intervento, non partecipante*, etc.) as compounds exhibiting a grammatical word as one of their components (Dressler, personal comment; cf. Iacobini, 2004).
- They are generally non-category-changing. The only exception is English *de-*, more privative than negative, which may change nouns into verbs (*fuse* → *to defuse*, *ice* → *to deice*, *louse* → *to delouse*, *plane* → *to deplane*, *train* → *to detrain*). This type of analysis is maintained, e.g., by Corbin (1987) and Lieber (2004). However, other analyses of this type of formations are possible: namely, conversion followed by prefixation, and parasynthesis, i.e., conversion and prefixation simultaneously. As for Italian, Iacobini (2004: 145) claims that, in such derivatives as *decaffeinare, defogliare, dequalificare, detassare*, etc., the prefix *de-* precedes attested or possible denominal verbs.

Other sporadic examples of denominal verbal derivation exist with English *un-* (*to unearth, to unnerve*) and *dis-* (*to disbar, to dismember*). On the other hand, Italian *dis-* and *in-* derive negative adjectives which are also used as nouns, after conversion (e.g. *un disabile, un invalido, un inco-sciente*) (cf. E. *a disabled/an irresponsible person*).

In words which admit two categories, such as *agiato, abbiente, graziato*, etc., which in Italian are used both as nouns and as adjectives, the nominal

¹³ ALLEN (1978: 288) maintains that other items «which may also attach to words by means of a compounding rather than a true affixation process are *extra, super, over, all-*». Cf. Italian *sopra* (*soprabito, sopravvalutare*), *sotto* (*sottoscrivere*), *tutto* (*tuttofare*), etc.

category tends to prevail in the derived form (*i disagiati, i non abbienti, un disgraziato*). But there may be counterexamples in which the adjectival category is more frequent in use (N-Adj. *docente* → Adj. (*personale*) *non docente*).

- Negative prefixes generally maintain the lexical features of the base category (abstract, animate, common, countable, qualifying, etc.).
- Sometimes they do not negate a base, but rather obtain a new morphosemantically opaque word which is semantically independent from the original one. Examples are English *disfigured* ('spoiled') vs. *figured*, *indifferent* ('lacking interest') vs. *different*, *impertinent* ('insolent') vs. *pertinent*, and the Italian counterparts (*sfigurato* vs. *figurato*, *indifferente* vs. *differente*, *impertinente* vs. *pertinente*). The cases of English *infamous* vs. *famous* and *invaluable* vs. *valuable* (see § 3.1) correspond to two different Italian pairs: i.e., *infame/famoso* and *inestimabile/costoso*.
- Regularly, English and Italian negative prefixes have no head properties: that is, they do not determine plurality, nor do they change the base gender or the word class (for exceptions see above).

About the bases to which negative prefixes attach, in the previous sections we have investigated the productivity of each English/Italian prefix on the main syntactic categories (N, Adj., V). Let us now explore the morphological and semantic properties of their bases.

- In English and Italian, the base may be a derivative, esp. from a verb. Some Italian examples are: (*im-*)*bevibile* (← *bere*), (*im-*)*mangiabile* (← *mangiare*), (*in-*)*accettabile* (← *accettare*); (*non*) *fumatore* (← *fumare*), (*non*) *garantito* (← *garantire*), (*non*) *vedente* (← *vedere*); (*dis-*)*armato* (← *armare*), (*dis-*)*interessato* (← *interessare*), etc. Cf. *scapato*, *sfacciato*, *sfrontato*, *slabbrato* from nominal bases (*capo*, *faccia*, *fronte*, *labbro*). English has similar deverbal forms: (*in-*)*conceivable* (← *to conceive*), (*in-*)*curable* (← *to cure*), (*in-*)*divisible* (← *to divide*); (*un-*)*decided* (← *to decide*), (*un-*)*married* (← *to marry*); (*non*)*breakable* (← *to break*), (*non*)*believer* (← *to believe*), (*non*)*smoker* (← *to smoke*); (*dis-*)*engaged* (← *to engage*), (*dis-*)*interested* (← *to interest*), etc.
- In Italian, the base of the derived form may happen to be unattested in dictionaries, but still a possible word (e.g. *immancabile* vs. **mancabile*, *infaticabile* vs. **faticabile*) (Iacobini, 2004: 144). Many English examples of this type are reported in Marchand (1969: 202-203) and Horn (1989: 275-277): e.g., the negative adjectives *unassuming*, *unbending*, *unexamined*, *unmannered*, *unparalleled*, etc. have no positive counterparts as real adjectives.

- Preferentially, English and Italian negative prefixes tend not to attach to bases which already have negative connotations¹⁴. Although there may be counterexamples (E. *incorrupt*, *inoffensive*, *unalcoholized*, *unhostile*, *unmalicious*, *unvicious*, *unvulgar*, *nonviolent*, and the derivatives *inculpable*, *un-beaten/-beatable*, *unbroken*, *undying*; It. *incolpevole*, *incorrotto*; *incontaminato*, *indisturbato*; *inattaccabile*, *incensurabile*, *inconfutabile*, *incontestabile*, etc.), this is a robust tendency motivated by naturalness preferences for negation of unmarked (vs. marked, i.e., positive, desirable, salient) forms within a pair¹⁵.

4. The pragmatics of negative prefixes

The amount of English and Italian negative derived words has so far demonstrated the productivity and regularity of negative affixation. Furthermore, negative prefixes have been hitherto classified according to their morphosemantic denotation (negative, reversative, contrary, contradictory meanings), and their morphosemantic connotation (emotive, affective, evaluative meaning in E. *un-* or *in-*, neutral vs. pejorative or dissimulative meaning in E. *non-*; pejorative meaning in It. *s-*). However, we have also made reference to the euphemistic and prestigious characters of E. *non-* and of its Italian counterpart, and hypothesized that, in both English and Italian, negative prefixes may be used to convey morphopragmatic meanings.

¹⁴ In English, JESPERSEN (1942: 466) notes that not all adjectives admit the prefix *un-*. For instance, as in Italian, adjectives having a depreciatory sense (e.g. *foolish*, *naughty*, *ugly*, *wicked*) are excluded from *un-* derived forms, and so are adjectives denoting large size (e.g. *great*, *huge*, *large*, *vast*) or small size (e.g. *little*, *narrow*, *small*). Similarly, MARCHAND (1969: 203) observes that *un-* is not prefixed to adjectives which denote the absence of something (e.g. *bad*, *bare*, *empty*, *evil*, *naked*, *silly*, etc.) because it would be unnatural and semantically redundant to negate a negative to obtain a positive. Yet there is a type of litotes, i.e., *negatio contrarii* (e.g. *This is not uninteresting*), which is relevant from a pragmatic viewpoint (see HOFFMANN, 1987). Lastly, ZIMMER (1964) and HORN (1989) comment that *in-* and *un-* forms tend not to accept superlative bases. Thus, **undelicious*, **unexcellent*, **unmiserable* are impossible words (see also LIEBER, 2005; cf. the negation of a hyperbole in CAFFI, 1989).

¹⁵ VERSCHUEREN (1999: 3): «Consider the derivational relationship between *grateful* and *ungrateful*, *kind* and *unkind*, *lawful* and *unlawful*. The reason why this relationship is not reversed, with a basic lexeme meaning ‘ungrateful’ from which a word meaning ‘grateful’ would be derived by means of the negative prefix *un-*, has everything to do with a system of social norms which emphasizes the need for gratefulness, kindness, lawfulness and the like».

The theory of morphopragmatics pioneered and developed by Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi (1994, 1997) studies how morphology and pragmatics meet and become mutually pertinent¹⁶. It is conceived to describe the morphological (i.e., derivational or inflectional) phenomena which systematically contribute pragmatic meanings to discourse. It may be therefore used to explain why some prefixes which commonly denote negation or contrary/contradictory opposition appear to downgrade the illocutionary force of speech acts, reducing the participants' obligations (esp. the speaker's commitment) and so furthering the achievement of interactional goals.

From a dynamic perspective of pragmatics, negative prefixes are often used to mitigate one's speech act, i.e., «to smooth interactional management» (Caffi, 1999: 882; see also Caffi, 2001), in that they reduce risks for participants at various levels, e.g., risks of losing one's face, refusal, conflict, contrast and so forth. On the one hand, they help interactional efficiency and the achievement of the speaker's goals, and, on the other hand, they monitor the emotive distances between the interlocutors, implying formality and attitudinal detachment, but also caution and prudence.

As mitigators, negative prefixes may produce various effects on the addressee, who may perceive the downgraded character of the utterance, and interpret it as euphemistic, understated, ironic, etc. Negation generally needs an inferential process of decoding. In particular, the evaluation one makes by using contrary (i.e., scalar) negation appears fuzzy to the hearer, in that its interpretation is no longer in terms of binary opposition, but of gradualness along a variety of options (see *litotes* in Caffi, 1989). Hence, negation leaves many possibilities of interpretation open, and it is the addressee who establishes which reading is the most appropriate for the current situation.

In different situational contexts, negative prefixes seem to serve different pragmatic purposes that range from caution to detachment. By 'caution' I mean the speaker's effort to avoid the addressee's offence and his/her potential conflictual response, whereas by 'detachment' I mean the speaker's will to keep his/her distance either from the addressee or from the propositional content of his/her speech act. Therefore, my assumption is that negative derived words contribute to conveying the impression that the speaker is being cautious or detached in his/her speech act. Indeed, as we will see, negative prefixes may serve different contexts. In particular, they may signal euphemistic purposes as

¹⁶ Morphopragmatic studies have been conducted on many specific phenomena of different languages, such as German and Hungarian excessives (DRESSLER and KIEFER, 1990), Italian ethnics (CROCCO GALÉAS, 1992), the French suffix *-o* (KILANI-SCHOCH and DRESSLER, 1993), the English suffix *-y/ie* (MERLINI BARBARESI, 2001), and also on Spanish phenomena (CANTERO, 2001).

well as an attempt to understate.

What follows is a preliminary study of the issue, which I intend to expand and consolidate in future studies. At the moment, I will adopt the labels [cautious] and [detached] to name the morphopragmatic features assignable to negative derived forms (henceforth, NDFs).

4.1. *The feature [cautious]*

The pragmatic feature [cautious] may be assigned to some NDFs when they are used in illocutionary acts, esp. statements, evaluations, but also orders, requests, suggestions, warnings, etc. In line with Bazzanella, Caffi and Sbisà's (1991) model, cautious NDFs may be used to modulate the illocutionary force of the performed speech act along the following dimensions:

- propositional content: NDFs can be used to make the propositional content vaguer and indeterminate (cf. *un-certain* vs. *doubtful*), and therefore to weaken the performed illocutionary act;
- expressed inner states: NDFs can downgrade the expression of inner states, esp. the speaker's affectively coloured inner states are backgrounded in favour of neutrality and objectivity (cf. neutral *un-success* / It. *in-successo* vs. more subjective *failure* or *flop* / It. *fallimento*, *fiasco*; see esp. the euphemistic flavour of many E. and It. *non-* words);
- modal roles of the participants: NDFs can downgrade the speaker's commitment (i.e., a set of obligations that the speaker assumes through the performance of an illocutionary act). On the other hand, the hearer/addressee's obligations are upgraded, as the task of decoding is ultimately conferred on him/her;
- perlocutionary goals: they aid 'altruistic' mitigation¹⁷, that is they help the speaker to soften or reduce the strength of speech acts whose effects are unwelcome to the hearer (e.g. *in-estetismi* 'imperfections' is less offensive than *difetti* 'flaws', *un-intelligent* less insulting than *stupid*).

Overall, NDFs are especially relevant in cases of face-threatening acts, i.e., acts which are socially risky for the speaker's face, as they impose responsibilities and obligations to either the speaker or the addressee.

Consider the following extracts, all drawn from the BNC:

- (8) His wife has *uncertain* health, could she manage life in London?

¹⁷ See FRASER (1980: 344) for the distinction between 'self-serving' and 'altruistic mitigation'.

- (9) It is also assumed that a bimbo is *unintelligent*, couldn't possibly have an interest in anything other than clothes and make-up.
- (10) Although such women may be registered as *unoccupied*, they were not in fact lone mothers.
- (11) You would be *unwise* to ignore the warning signs.

These excerpts show examples of *un-* derived forms which produce a hedging or mitigating effect. They indeed substitute more precise expressions referring to unpleasant states of affairs with vaguer or more general expressions which exhibit a euphemistic flavour: e.g., *uncertain* is less explicit than *doubtful*, *unoccupied* is less explicit than *jobless* or *out of work* (cf. *unoccupied person* 'unemployed' vs. *unoccupied room, seat*, etc. 'empty'), and *unintelligent* and *unwise* are definitely less offensive than *stupid* and *foolish* respectively.

In each case, the addressee is invited to decode the euphemism by applying a strengthening inference, yielding a more specific – i.e., more negative – understanding. And in each case, the more direct negative expression is avoided precisely for reasons of politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1987), hesitancy and reticence: i.e., to avoid negative face (see Goffman's 1967 'face-work'), and to leave open different options of interpretation.

Politeness and euphemistic reticence can be similarly associated with *in-* and *dis-* derivatives:

- (12) He was *inattentive* ('distracted'), I fear, and my husband had to punish him.
- (13) In spite of apparently *incompatible* ('conflicting') personalities, they have an empathy which is essential to the way they work.
- (14) I was daily intoxicated yet no man could call me *intemperate* ('drunk').
- (15) One of the main priorities therefore was to make the whole building accessible to *disabled* ('handicapped') people.
- (16) In the 1960s this preoccupation gave way to an urgent need to consider domestic problems such as racial *disharmony* ('conflict') and poverty.

The propositional content of the speech acts in (12)–(16), taken again from the BNC, is blurred by negative forms, which diminish the degree of intensity of the simplex forms given into brackets. Moreover, the downgrading obtained by affixal negation is confirmed and supported by other lexical, syntactic and textual strategies: e.g., parenthetical clauses (*I fear*), hedging adverbs (*apparently*), modal verbs (*could*) (Bazzanella, Caffi and Sbisà, 1991).

A polite and euphemistic flavour is likewise identifiable in many *non-* words. For instance, you can say that somebody is *non-academic minded*, *non-college-oriented*, or *non-linguist*, but you could not say he is *dumb* without being offensive. Similarly, *non-intelligence* sounds less harsh than *stupidity*, a *non-success* is less depressing than a *failure*, and *non-utility* is weaker than *futility*.

Moreover, as it has been pointed out in the literature, *non-* words are not only euphemistic in relation to simple forms, but also to their *in-*, *un-* and *dis-* cognates: e.g., a person is said to be *non-literate* rather than *illiterate*. The terms *non-knowledge* and *non-obedience* may be socially preferred to *ignorance* and *disobedience*. To call somebody a *non-Christian* is a neutral statement, but *un-Christian* expresses contrariety and a hostile judgement, as it has a different meaning (see the feature [detached] in § 4.2 below). This implies that the various prefixes are not all on the same level, but some may appear more euphemistic than others in specific contexts.

Italian NDFs seem to exhibit a similar euphemistic flavour and character [cautious] in the following examples, all drawn from the *Italian Web Corpus* (ItWaC):

- (17) È stato dichiarato *inabile* al servizio militare.
'He was declared unsuitable for military service.'
- (18) Questo intervento serve per ritoccare piccoli *inestetismi* ed *imperfezioni* su fianchi, cosce, glutei.
'This operation will touch up some slight flaws and imperfections on the hips, thighs and glutei.'
- (19) Si trattava di pensionati, *inidonei* o anche vedove.
'They were retired people, people who were unfit for work, or even widowers.'
- (20) Manninger, l'altro debuttante della serata, è rimasto *inoperoso* tra i pali.
'That evening Manninger, who was the other beginner, remained impassive between the goal posts.'
- (21) Rimane da scoprire e arrestare chi ha fornito la matrice ideologica a un gruppo di ragazzi *instabili* e dediti alle droghe pesanti.
'The whereabouts of the ideologist of a group of mentally unstable young men who take heavy drugs is still unknown, so he is yet to be arrested.'
- (22) Sei il solito *insubordinato*.
'You're insubordinate, as usual.'
- (23) Dopo l'*insuccesso* del film torna alla pubblicità.
'After the unsuccess of his film, he's going back to advertising.'

- (24) Con 200 mila euro la Provincia ha poi sostenuto l'inserimento lavorativo di *disabili* e categorie *svantaggiate*.
'The Province gave 200,000 Euros to support the employment of disabled people and other disadvantaged categories.'
- (25) Pare che la tua bontà e la tua ingenuità – mi disse – ti rendano *disadatto* agli affari.
'It seems that your goodness and naivety – he said – make you unfit for the world of business.'
- (26) L'osteopata cerca le *disarmonie* interne per risolvere i problemi del paziente.
'The osteopath looks for internal imbalances to solve his patient's problems.'
- (27) Meglio dire, quindi, che simili *disavventure* possono capitare e che bisogna rimanere fiduciosi e tranquilli.
'It's preferable to say therefore that such misadventures may happen and that we should look on the bright side and keep calm.'
- (28) Lo *sgarbo* gli costava 10 mila dollari di multa.
'He was fined 10,000 dollars for his act of incivility.'
- (29) L'elettore *non deambulante* può votare in qualsiasi sezione elettorale del comune.
'Voters with impaired mobility can vote at any polling station in the constituency.'
- (30) La squadra prosegue nel *non gioco* e sembra impaurita... i passaggi sbagliati si sprecano e con loro si acuisce la rabbia dei tifosi.
'The team keeps on playing improperly and seems scared... Numerous miscalculated passes are making supporters angrier and angrier.'
- (31) Per un *non udente*, sarà possibile fornire traccia scritta di quanto detto durante la lezione.
'People with hearing impairments will have a transcription of what was said in class.'

The negative expressions highlighted in (17)–(31) replace corresponding rude, displeasing, offensive words that the speaker deliberately avoids to protect his/her face and, above all, the addressee's one. For instance, an *insuccesso* ('unsuccess') is certainly less discouraging than a *fallimento* ('failure') or a *fiasco* ('flop'), *sgarbo* ('act of incivility') mitigates *offesa* ('offence'), *disavventure* ('misadventures') moderates *incidenti*, *peripezie* ('incidents, vicissitudes'), and a *non gioco* (lit. 'non-game') sounds a cautious way to say that the

football team is not playing well. Moreover, the speaker chooses to downgrade his/her commitment and avoids conflictual sequels by substituting *fermo* ('still') with *inoperoso* ('impassive'), *ribelle* ('rebel') with *insubordinato* ('in-subordinate'), *difetti* ('defects') with *inestetismi* and *imperfezioni* ('slight flaws and imperfections'), and *contrast* ('contrasts') with *disarmonie* ('imbalances'), all examples of what Caffi (1999: 890) calls 'propositional hedges', i.e., mitigating devices which make the propositional content approximate, less precise, fuzzier.

Interestingly, some of the above expressions are less insulting than other comparable negative words: e.g., *disadatto* ('unfit') is a more prudent term than *incapace* ('incapable, incompetent'), *instabile* ('(mentally) unstable') is a kinder term referring to someone who is *squilibrato* (cf. E. *unbalanced*), whereas *inidoneo* ('unfit (for work)') somewhat equals *inadeguato* ('inadequate') or *non conforme* (lit. 'non-consistent'). As in English, two different negative prefixes may determine a difference in meaning when they are attached to the same base, as in *inabile* ('unsuitable') vs. *disabile* ('disabled'; cf. politically-correct *differently-abled*).

Lastly, the afore-mentioned *non*- terms are conventionalized Italian euphemisms which stand for impolite, unpleasant or taboo expressions (*non deambulante* 'with impaired mobility', *non udente*).

Although all the examples reported above are statements, negative terms may also downgrade the illocutionary strength of other speech acts, esp. requests (*Andy non essere sgarbato con lo staff* 'Andy, don't be unkind with the staff') (more in § 2).

4.2. The feature [detached]

The pragmatic feature [detached] is typically applied to affixal negation found in formal language, such as the jargon of law, business, politics, etc. (see examples 34-36, 42 below). Indeed, in formal contexts the speaker is more likely to exhibit an attitudinal detachment from both the propositional content of his/her illocutionary act and from the addressee himself/herself.

When NDFs convey the character [detached], the four dimensions along which the illocutionary force of a speech act may vary (Bazzanella, Caffi and Sbisà, 1991) all come into play:

- the parameter of precision is downgraded in the sense that the NDF specifies what the referent is not, rather than what it is. Thus, when a predicate P has a gradual meaning, as in the case of many formal adjectives (e.g. *adequate*, *appropriate*, *temperate*, etc.), its negation admits different degrees of reading along a scale which ranges from non-P to P's antonym (e.g.

in-adequate → *scarce*, *in-appropriate* → *wrong*, *in-temperate* → *excessive*);

- the expression of inner states is downgraded by NDFs, esp. when they are associated with other distancing techniques (e.g. reported speech, nominalization), as well as with formal register, or when they are used in under-statements;
- the interactional roles of the participants are downgraded, in particular, the speaker's commitment, which appears lessened by his/her unemotional attitude (cf. *un-desirable* vs. *negative*, *bad*, *terrible*, etc.);
- the perlocutionary effects on the addressee are likewise downgraded: NDFs here aid 'self-serving' (egoistic) mitigation (see Fraser, 1980), viz. by reducing the speaker's commitment in the performance of a speech act, they defuse some of the hearer's unwelcome responses (e.g. anger, hurt, hostility). For instance, the use of *im-polite*, *in-elegant*, or It. *s-cortese*, *in-delicato* (vs. E. *rude*, *aggressive*, *nasty*, or It. *villano*, *offensivo*, etc.) may help the speaker to save his/her social face and, simultaneously, to prevent the hearer's negative reaction.

Attitudinal detachment, or the speaker's attempt not to appear involved, is illustrated in the English (32-38) and Italian (39-44) extracts below, respectively from the BNC and the ItWaC:

- (32) Past introductions of new species into a strange environment have sometimes had *unforeseen* and *undesirable* consequences.
- (33) Around 60 per cent accused companies of issuing '*untruthful*' recruitment brochures.
- (34) The judge described it as 'a highly *unusual* circumstance'.
- (35) It was a move which was *discourteous* to the House.
- (36) Research can help to prevent *inappropriate* market entry strategies, such as selecting an advertising campaign that fails to appeal to customers.
- (37) You will forgive my *intemperate* language.
- (38) Why are safety standards in the UK *inadequate*?
- (39) Vorrei sapere, se non sono *indiscreta*, se è tua.
'May I ask you – without being too inquisitive – if this is yours?'
- (40) La preghiamo di smentire le Sue *inesatte* affermazioni tramite gli stessi organi e con incisività pari a quella con cui le ha diffuse.
'We urge you to take back your inexact claims using the same means and incisiveness you used to spread them.'

- (41) Se *inopportuno*, perdoni – anticipatamente – il mio intervento.
 ‘If you find it inopportune, I apologise – in advance – for my remark.’
- (42) L’*inosservanza* dei criteri e delle modalità di cui al comma 1 è causa di *invalidità* dei singoli provvedimenti relativi agli interventi previsti nei programmi.
 ‘The non-observance of the criteria and modality of paragraph 1 has made each of the measures established for the programmed interventions invalid.’
- (43) Ci permettiamo di suggerire di evitare atteggiamenti *scomposti*.
 ‘We take the liberty to suggest that you avoid any unbecoming behaviour.’
- (44) È considerato *scortese* parlare in una lingua che uno dei presenti non conosce.
 ‘Speaking in a language that one of those present does not know is regarded as impolite.’

In some of these examples the speaker’s stance is hidden behind (a) *plurals maiestatis* (*La preghiamo, Ci permettiamo*), i.e., a defocusing device used by the speaker to weaken direct reference to himself/herself (Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi, 1994: 68), (b) reported speech (signalled by inverted commas), which shifts the focus on other people, and (c) nominalization (*introductions of new species, inosservanza, causa di invalidità, parlare in una lingua*), which shifts the focus on abstract entities or actions. These linguistic devices and the formal register suggested by vocabulary and syntax contribute to the mitigating effect of negative affixation.

As anticipated, here negative prefixes appear to aid especially self-serving mitigation. For instance, in (32)–(36) they indicate the speaker’s desire to be excused for performing a critical evaluative act, therefore defusing the hearer’s unwelcome response.

However, self-serving mitigation is best illustrated by directive speech acts that are formulated as polite requests (as in 38–40), or as pieces of advice (as in 43–44). It may be also found in more or less direct expressive acts, such as apologizing in (37) and (41), or in assertions, such as (42).

In implicit speech acts, negative forms are often used to understate, i.e., to say less than one means (see Hübler, 1983). Indeed, as Jespersen (1942: 467) observes, «*unwise* means more than *not wise* and approaches *foolish, unhappy* is not far from *miserable*». The actual meaning of understatement becomes especially manifest when the negative form is contextualized.

Examples of understatements obtained via English/Italian NDFs are taken again from the BNC and the ItWaC:

- (45) It is quite *inaccurate* ('erroneous') to say the publishers panicked.
- (46) This wedding of yours is a bit *inconvenient* ('problematic') for me, actually.
- (47) It's *indelicate* ('rude, bad-mannered') to, *indelicate* to mop your plate with a piece of bread, you know that!
- (48) Non più la passione *incomposta* ('irruente, violenta'), ma il sentimentalismo.
'It is no longer an unbecoming ('violent') passion, but sentimentalism.'
- (49) Quando il giovane Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde, robusto e alto un metro e 90, arrivò a Oxford, posò subito a dandy *indisciplinato* ('ribelle').
'When the young, well-built and 1.90 metre-tall, Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde arrived in Oxford, he immediately posed as an insubordinate ('unruly') dandy.'
- (50) Possibile che il personale di stazione sia costituito interamente da persone *inoperose* ('sfaticate, pigre') ed *inaffidabili* ('irresponsabili')?
'How is it possible that the station staff consists entirely of inactive ('bone-idle') and unreliable ('irresponsible') people?'
- (51) Di nuovo allarme e *inquietudine* ('agitazione'): attacco hacker?
'Alarm and unrest ('anxiety') back again: is it a hacker attack?'
- (52) Il pacifismo è un'ideologia *insincera* ('falsa, bugiarda').
'Pacifism is an insincere ('false') ideology.'
- (53) Il doping rappresenta un evento *diseducativo* ('dannoso, nocivo') sotto il profilo culturale.
'Doping is an educationally harmful ('dangerous, destructive') event from a cultural point of view.'
- (54) Oggi sembra un *disonore* ('vergogna') non andare al liceo.
'Not attending a secondary school is viewed as dishonourable ('shameful') nowadays.'
- (55) Gli storni: milioni di ospiti *scomodi* ('fastidiosi').
'Starlings: millions of unwelcome ('irritating') guests.'
- (56) Quante volte ti ho detto che è *sconveniente* ('brutto, deplorabile') per una signorina giocare con la spada?
'How many times have I said that it is unseemly ('deplorable') for a young lady to play with a sword?'
- (57) Trovo poi veramente *sgradevole* ('odioso, detestabile') che si mascheri tutta questa operazione con il termine solidarietà.
'I'm disconcerted ('appalled') by the fact that the word solidarity has been used to describe the whole operation.'

(58) Per quanto tempo ancora si riterrà che noi crediamo a questo *nonsense* ('assurdità')?

'How much longer should we believe this nonsense ('absurdity')?'

Actually, as Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi (1994: 335-337) specify, in understatement the speaker's commitment is not downgraded, because «understatement does not weaken the degree of strength of the illocutionary point». Rather, it seems to disguise it behind a downgraded expression. And, paradoxically, this is a better way for the speaker to succeed in his/her perlocutionary goal.

The pragmatic feature [detached] which can be attributed to the NDFs in (45)-(58) eliminates the danger of being interpreted as conceited or boastful or exaggerated. However, it also creates a contrast between what is said and what is intended. And this contrast produces greater success in achieving certain pragmatic goals; specifically, condemnation, criticism, disapproval, and protection of the speaker.

A similar strategic linguistic device is irony, a mild or subtle form of expression in which meanings are conveyed obliquely. Muecke (1980: 53) defines irony as «ways of speaking, writing, acting, behaving, painting, etc., in which the real or intended meaning presented or evoked is intentionally quite other than, and incompatible with, the ostensible or pretended meaning». Hence, irony, esp. the overt type, generally entails a contradiction or clash, as in the exchange below, taken from Wesker's (1966) play *The Kitchen*:

(59) Michael: Do you love me?

Gwen: I think you're *irresistible*. Who's on fish?

Gwen's overstatement in (59) is visibly ironic. The negative adjective *irresistible* exaggerates her feelings towards Michael, so that the contrast with reality makes the statement humorous. This is confirmed by her changing the topic of conversation (*Who's on fish?*).

However, irony may also be more implicit, covert, as in (60) and (61) below:

(60) And would it be *impolite* of me to enquire exactly where you and the other officers have been for the last eight hours? (BNC)

(61) Forse potrebbe essere *indelicato* da parte Sua chiedere al suo illustre ospite quanto sarebbe disposto a pagare come risarcimento ai consumatori italiani? (ItWaC)

'It might be inelegant to ask your illustrious guest how much he would be prepared to pay as compensation to Italian consumers.'

The speakers know that the enquiries are *rude*, *bad-mannered*, *aggressive*, *nasty* and so on. So, they opt for a discourse strategy which attenuates the above adjectives and substitutes them with ironic negative forms (*impolite*, *inedelicato* 'inelegant'). Irony is a particularly effective means for obtaining derisive criticism, but also for avoiding aggression and conflict. On the contrary, aggressiveness is a superordinate component in sarcasm.

According to Groeben and Scheele (1984) sarcasm is a direct attack on the victim of sarcasm. Unlike irony, which signals cooperativeness, sarcasm belongs to antagonistic interaction. Its super-goals (i.e., sarcastic derision and polemics) may be obtained via negative forms, which contribute to the debase-ment and ridicule of the victim in (62) and (63), both taken from the ItWaC:

- (62) Non pensate che sia da persona *ineducata* alzare il volume al massimo.
 'Don't you think it would be rather impolite to turn the volume right up?'
 (63) Certe accuse a Parisi sono così *ingenerose* che preferirei non averle udite.
 'Such accusations to Parisi are so dishonourable that I would have preferred not to hear them.'

The speaker in (62) is accusing someone of behaving like a boor and also asking him/her to turn the volume down, but (s)he chooses not to use rude manners. Thus, the [detached] negative expression *persona ineducata* ('impolite person') makes the critic more effective and simultaneously aids the speaker to protect himself/herself.

The feature [detached] is likewise applied to the expression *accuse ingenerose* ('dishonourable, outrageous accusations'), in which the negative increases the distance between the speaker and the accuser.

A sarcastic effect may be likewise produced by *non-* words, both in English and in Italian. Indeed, eighty cases out of the ninety-six reported in Algeo (1971) exhibit a sarcastic tone. The following quotes from Algeo (1971: 100-103) provide a small illustrative sample:

- (64) The *non-hero* is another of those nobodies who do nothing.
 (65) The *nonlanguage* of sociologists and educators.
 (66) A *nonsolution* for a *nonproblem*.
 (67) A *non-subject* being taught by *non-teachers* to *non-students*.

And the corresponding Italian words (i.e., *non eroe*, *non linguaggio*, *non soluzione*, *non problema*, etc.) would produce an equivalent sarcastic effect in similar contexts. This is illustrated in (68)-(69), both from ItWaC:

(68) Willy Loman è di certo un *non eroe*... il suicidio di Willy è il punto massimo della sua assurdità.

‘Willy Loman is certainly a non-hero... Willy’s suicide is the peak of his absurdity.’

(69) Si sta andando a una *non soluzione* del conflitto d’interessi.

‘We are up against a nonsolution of the conflict of interests.’

Sarcastic derision may even become cynicism, as in the following newspaper title:

(70) La cultura costa ma l’*incultura* costa di più. (ItWaC)

where the negative word *incultura* (‘lack of culture’), playing with its contradictory term, ridicules individual ignorance and stresses its negative effects on society at large.

5. Conclusions

Pragmatic investigations of negation have hitherto concentrated on syntactic aspects of the language, such as the negation of predicate expressions (Hübler, 1987), *negatio contrarii* (Hoffmann, 1987) and litotes (Caffi, 1989), including also the negation of a hyperbole. However, there are no morphopragmatic studies on affixal negation previous to the present contribution.

Affixal negation (esp. obtained by prefixes) has here proved to be a morphopragmatically relevant rule. In particular, what emerges from a morphopragmatic investigation on English and Italian negative prefixes is that:

- pragmatic meanings are autonomous from semantic meanings and associated with two specific features that we have called [cautious], when the negative word is functional to politeness and euphemistic reticence (§ 4.1), and [detached], when it is used to create a distance between addresser and addressee, as in the case of understatement, irony, sarcasm and similar discourse strategies (§ 4.2);
- with reference to static aspects of pragmatics, NDFs are commonly used in formal contexts and situations which require decorum, respectability and/or sympathy towards the addressee. This shows that morphological negation differs from mere syntactic negation, which may be found in both formal contexts and everyday speech (see Caffi, 1989: 909), but not from *negatio contrarii*, a specific type of litotes including both syntactic and morphological negation (Hoffmann, 1987);

- as to dynamic aspects, NDFs are used to modify the illocutionary force of speech acts, esp. towards downgrading. On the one hand, they are meant to soften or reduce the strength of a speech act whose effects are unwelcome to the hearer (altruistic mitigation), and, on the other, to protect the speaker's face and to avoid conflictual sequels (self-serving/egoistic mitigation). Sometimes hyperbole or irony obtained via negative words can be ultimately viewed as attenuating the strength of an illocutionary act. Yet overstatements and exaggerations with sarcastic tones generally tend to upgrade the speaker's commitment and the force of his/her speech act;
- against most studies on word-formation and lexical semantics that highlight the neutral evaluative flavour of the English prefix *non-* (Jespersen, 1942; Horn, 1989; Plag, 2003; Lieber, 2004), our findings have demonstrated that, both in English and in Italian, *non-* is a favourite choice in sarcastic contexts (see examples 64-69 here and Algeo, 1971);
- in line with Caffi (1989), Italian *non-* may also produce the pragmatic effect of euphemism (see examples 29, 31), but the same effect can be served equally well by other Italian prefixes, namely *in-* (examples 17-23) and *dis-* (examples 24-27). On the other hand, English *non-* words sound more euphemistic than their *un-*, *in-* and *dis-* cognates (cf. *non-Christian* vs. *un-Christian*, *non-literate* vs. *illiterate*, *non-obedience* vs. *disobedience*);
- moreover, English *in-* or *un-* and Italian *in-* are often connected with such dynamic strategic factors as understatement (examples 45-52) and irony (examples 59-61);
- lastly, the same NDF may assume two different pragmatic meanings depending on the context: e.g., the negative adjective *inexact* expresses the speaker's attitudinal detachment in (7a), but caution and politeness in (7b), and, similarly, the adjective *intemperate* takes on a pragmatic feature [cautious] in (14), but a [detached] flavour in (38).

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