Lexical semantics vs. lexical pragmatics:  
Aspects of a theory of un-verbs  
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Since Whorf (1936), many linguists have tried their hand at corraling the restrictions on the formation of “reversative” un-verbs; cf. e.g. Marchand (1969), Dowty (1979), Horn (1988), Clark et al. (1995). Why can you unwrap a sandwich but not unrecognize its contents or unremember to toss it in the trash? Why can a snake uncoil while a painting can’t unhang? If unfreeze is the opposite of freeze, why is unthaw a synonym of thaw?

The standard approach to the constraints on un-verb formation invokes Whorf’s CRYPTOTYPE—a covert category encompassing transitive verbs of covering and enclosing that rules out a wide range of possible bases and outputs of the relevant rule. Pullum (1999), for example, reckons that there are “about a dozen verbs” that allow un-prefixation, citing undo (a good deed) and unknow as examples of formations we know “intuitively” are impossible; Kemmerer & Wright (2002) similarly cast out unboil and undecorate. Yet many of the verbs ruled out in the literature as impossible, non-occurring, or—as in Whorf’s label for unsay and unmake—“semi-archaic” are readily attested, even when the actions they denote may be physically irreversible. One such irreversible un-verb figures in the courtroom meme alluding to the difficulty of ignoring inadmissible evidence once introduced, “to unring the bell.” What these hundreds of “impossible” but occurring examples have in common is that they satisfy the real lexical semantic requirement on un-verb formation, which is aspectual in nature: all un-verbs are change-of-state accomplishments. Un-formation is even licensed by stative bases, but yielding accomplishments; to unlove is neither a stative (= ‘to not-love’) nor a true antonym of its base (= ‘to hate’), but a telic accomplishment with internal negation applying to an embedded state (= ‘to come to no longer love’).

While the consensus (neo-Whorfian) view may be extended to predict the non-occurrence of source-oriented reversatives except as pleonastic formations in Swedish, French, and English (unloosen, unthaw), it incorrectly limits the productivity of un-verbs by conflating the SEMANTIC (aspectual) restrictions with the PRAGMATIC conditions on the way the world (normally) works; verbs like unsay, unknow, unboil, and unhappen are motivated precisely by the need to describe those (typically counterfactual) situations in which the tape of reality is set to Rewind. The pragmatic nature of the restrictions on un-verb formation is supported by a survey of contexts that favor the relaxation of those constraints and the creation of innovative un-verbs: advances in science and technology (as in the unerase and undelete software commands or the unfuck program to reverse software protection), science fiction (as in time-travel scenarios or the Unner device of Etchemendy 2000), advertising copy (cf. KFC’s current unthink campaign), and versifiers from Shakespeare (whose “un-king’d” Richard II is the unchallenged monarch of this realm) to country music (“How can I unlove you?”, “Un-break my heart”, “Unsuffer me”). Whether the implausibility of a given reversal is overridden, conceded, or mourned, it is an un-verb that is employed to get the job done.
References