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Un-American: a history of Americanism in words

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8/ Un-American: a history of Americanism in words

Giovanni Battista BRONZINI, Federico PIERSIGILLI

ABSTRACT: *The term “un-American” has been a rhetorical tool in U.S. political and cultural discourse, used to define the boundaries of acceptable behavior, thought, and identity. This paper examines its historical and linguistic evolution, analyzing how it has enforced ideological conformity within the sociopolitical framework of “American-ness”. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach that combines archival research and linguistic methodologies, the study examines how “un-American” emerged as a term built on international comparison but rooted in internal critique, employed to stigmatize dissent and enforce ideological orthodoxy. From its early nineteenth century usage to its weaponization during McCarthyism and beyond, “un-American” has served as both an exclusionary mechanism and a tool for asserting national identity. Through case studies spanning from 19th century to the Cold War, the paper unpacks the term’s ideological underpinnings and rhetorical strategies, illustrating its role in shaping allegiances and contesting national belonging. On linguistic grounds, the analysis highlights the morphological and semantic properties of un-American, demonstrating how its structure supports political messaging and rhetorical impact in public discourse. By examining the intersection of language, identity, and politics, this research offers insights into the historical significance and enduring influence of un-American, contributing to broader debates on U.S. history.*

ABSTRACT: *Il termine un-American ha costituito uno strumento retorico centrale nel discorso politico e culturale statunitense, impiegato per definire i confini del comportamento, del pensiero e dell’identità ritenuti accettabili. Il saggio ne ricostruisce l’evoluzione storica e linguistica, analizzando in che modo esso abbia contribuito a rafforzare la conformità ideologica all’interno della cornice sociopolitica dell’“americanità”. Adottando un approccio interdisciplinare che combina ricerca d’archivio e metodologie linguistiche, lo studio mostra come un-American emerga fin dall’Ottocento come un termine costruito sul confronto internazionale ma radicato in una critica interna, utilizzato per stigmatizzare il dissenso e imporre un’ortodossia ideologica. Dalle prime occorrenze nel XIX secolo alla sua ascesa durante il maccartismo e oltre, un-American ha funzionato tanto come meccanismo di esclusione quanto come dispositivo per affermare un’identità nazionale. Attraverso una serie di casi di studio che vanno dall’Ottocento alla Guerra fredda, l’articolo mette a fuoco le premesse ideologiche e le strategie retoriche associate al termine, illustrandone il ruolo nel plasmare le alleanze politiche e nel contestare i confini dell’appartenenza nazionale. Sul piano linguistico, l’analisi evidenzia le proprietà morfologiche e semantiche di un-American, mostrando come la sua struttura sostenga il messaggio politico e ne potenzi l’efficacia retorica nel discorso pubblico. Esaminando l’intersezione tra linguaggio, identità e politica, questo contributo offre nuovi elementi per comprendere il significato storico e l’influenza durevole di un-American, inserendosi nei più ampi dibattiti sulla storia degli Stati Uniti e sulle forme dell’americanismo e dell’antiamericanismo.*

Over the last two decades, scholarship on Americanism and anti-Americanism has expanded, especially in international relations and comparative politics, where survey research has distinguished disagreement with U.S. policies from deeper, identity-based antipathy toward

“America” as such¹. Yet the literature that takes “un-American” itself as an object remains comparatively small, despite its unusual rhetorical force². Recent works have likewise traced the role of accusations of being “un-American” in debates over liberalism, as in the case of Strauss’s allegedly «un-American» relationship to liberal democracy³. This article re-centers “un-American” as a historical and linguistic artifact that helps explain how Americans have policed the boundaries of legitimate belief and belonging – and why that boundary-policing has mattered most when it has collided with decisions about foreign policy.

The article’s starting point is a tension long recognized in scholarship on U.S. identity: the country’s self-understanding oscillates between a universalistic “Creed” (liberty, equality, democracy, constitutionalism) and ethnocultural or ascriptive conceptions of membership rooted in origin, race, religion, and “character”⁴. Myrdal described this as the “American dilemma”⁵; Huntington’s account of the “American Creed” identifies the liberal cluster that often functions as its normative core⁶; Gerstle and Rogers Smith show how civic ideals have been repeatedly braided together with racialized and ascriptive hierarchies⁷. O’Leary’s work on the political culture of patriotism further demonstrates that the rituals and symbols of loyalty became salient in moments of war⁸.

¹ KATZENSTEIN, Peter J., KEOHANE, Robert O., *Anti-Americanisms in World Politics*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2007; CHIOZZA, Giacomo, *Anti-Americanism and the American World Order*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009; MEUNIER, Sophie, «The dog that did not bark: Anti-Americanism and the 2008 financial crisis in Europe», in *Review of International Political Economy*, 20, 1/2013, pp. 1-25; DATTA, Monti Narayan, *Anti-Americanism and the Rise of World Opinion: Consequences for the US National Interest*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014.

² A selection of scholarship on the deployment of “un-American” in US political discourse includes: DONNER, Frank J., *The Un-Americans*, New York, Ballantine Books, 1961; KRUTNIK, Frank, NEALE, Steve, NEVE, Brian, STANFIELD, Peter (edited by), *“Un-American” Hollywood: Politics and Film in the Blacklist Era*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2007; SAFIRE, William, *Safire’s Political Dictionary*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 763-764; WRONSKI, Julie, «The “Un-American” Citizen: Reimagining American Identity in a Polarized Nation», *APSA Preprints*, 2024, URL: < <https://preprints.apsanet.org/engage/apsa/article-details/66d381bca4e53c4876455881> > [accessed August 29, 2025]; LEWIS, George, «The Un-American», in *Journal of American Studies*, 47, 4/2013.

³ GIGLIOTTI, Jacopo, «Leo Strauss e il liberalismo: un rapporto ‘un-American’», in *Storia del pensiero politico, Rivista quadrimestrale*, 2/2025, pp. 297-317.

⁴ The “American Creed” has been defined as a cluster of liberal principles – «liberty, equality, democracy, constitutionalism, liberalism, limited government, private enterprise» – that define the core values of U.S. political culture: HUNTINGTON, Samuel P., «The Erosion of American National Interests», in *Foreign Affairs*, 76, 5/1997, pp. 28-49, p. 29. On the salience of ethnicity (beyond Huntington’s own discussion), see also SCHLESINGER Jr., Arthur M., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society*, New York, W.W. Norton, 1992.

⁵ MYRDAL, Gunnar, STERNER Richard, ROSE Arnold M., *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1944.

⁶ HUNTINGTON, Samuel P., *op. cit.*

⁷ SMITH, Rogers M., *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1997; GERSTLE, Gary, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001.

⁸ O’LEARY, Cecilia Elizabeth, *To Die For: The Flag, the National Anthem, and the Politics of American Patriotism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999.

Within this larger historiography, “un-American” is both a symptom and a mechanism. Its power lies precisely in its negativity, since it can condemn without defining and presupposes a “true America” that has always been contested⁹. The central hypothesis advanced here is that domestic uses of “un-American” have been most consequential when they have intersected with foreign-policy debates. In the historical episodes examined here, the accusation repeatedly transforms policy disagreement into moral deviance, links internal dissent to an external enemy, and in doing so shapes the term’s linguistic uses.

Methodologically, the article combines qualitative historical reconstruction with selective lexicometric triangulation through Google Books Ngram Viewer¹⁰. The Ngram component searches for “un-American”/ “Un-Americanism” and major spelling variants (such as “unamerican/ism”, “un-american/ism”; “Un American/ism”¹¹) across 1818-2022, first using ten-year smoothing and then exploring year by year episodes. Because Ngram is vulnerable to OCR noise, metadata inconsistencies, and orthographic variation, it is used only as a heuristic instrument to locate conjunctures of heightened salience that are then tested through close reading¹². The article proceeds in two movements. The first reconstructs the term’s history across major political conjunctures. The second explains how the word’s morphological and semantic properties, especially the affordances of “un-” in English, help account for its durability and its capacity to do political work.

1. Origins: Nation-Building and the First Uses of Un-American

From the outset, citizenship was frequently framed not only as legal status but as moral-political commitment. In Thomas Jefferson’s reflections on the “American experiment”, citizenship required adherence to principles that the Revolution claimed to present to the world in 1776¹³. That original moment inaugurated, albeit in latent form, the category of “un-American”¹⁴.

⁹ LEWIS, George, «An Un-American Introduction», in *Journal of American Studies* 47, 4/2013, pp. 871-879, p. 872.

¹⁰ On potentials and limits of text databases for intellectual history, see PROIETTI, Fausto, «Digital Humanities, database testuali e storia del pensiero politico: potenzialità, limiti e nuovi scenari epistemologici», in *Politics*, 22/2024. The Google Books Ngram Viewer can be accessed at URL: < <https://books.google.com/ngrams> > [accessed August 29, 2025].

¹¹ The comparison was conducted on a case-insensitive basis, and occurrences at the main peaks were manually checked in the linked Google Books interface.

¹² MICHEL, Jean-Baptiste, SHEN Yuan Kui, AIDEN Aviva Presser, et al., «Quantitative analysis of culture using millions of digitized books», in *Science*, 331, 6014/2011, pp. 176-182.

¹³ JEFFERSON, Thomas, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, PEDEN, William (ed.), Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1954, p. 155.

¹⁴ STEELE, Brian, «Inventing Un-American», in *Journal of American Studies* 47, 4/2013, pp. 881-902, p. 882.

The earliest explicit occurrences of the term date from 1818, at the beginning of James Monroe's presidency¹⁵, when a more assertive American nationalism overlapped with mounting tensions over slavery and the balance between North and South¹⁶. When Jefferson wrote to Madison that it was «a heavenly comfort to see that these principles are yet so strongly felt», the contrast implied that betrayals of the revolutionary mission could be named un-American, exceeding mere policy disagreement¹⁷. Already at this stage, foreign alignment served as an internal dividing line. Federalists were stigmatized as «Anglomen», while Jefferson himself could be accused of Francophile sympathies¹⁸. Yet these labels did not carry equal delegitimizing force. To be called *un-American* suggested not a problematic diplomatic orientation but an existential deviation from the nation's authentic path. In 1839, John P. Tarbell, a member of the Republican-Democratic Party, defined the Federalist Party as «unamerican,» accusing it of defeatism and pro-British sympathies¹⁹.

During the 1830s, conflicts between the federal government under Andrew Jackson and individual states widened the word's circulation. The renewed appearance of “un-American” signaled the centrality of debates about national unity. In Congress, Jacksonian representatives denounced threats to the Union – from livestock dealers exploiting food shortages to tariff opponents undermining domestic production – as «unpatriotic and un-American»²⁰. At the same time, religious minorities (notably early Mormons) turned the adjective against local ordinances that barred them from settling in certain counties, framing such restrictions as violations of their status as Americans²¹. Education became another arena in which foreign models were either stigmatized or defended: European-inspired pedagogies could be criticized for producing “un-Americanized” citizens, allegedly unfit for a democratic labor market²². Others, like Samuel Eells in his 1836 address to the Alpha Delta Phi Society, mobilized the term in reverse: they defended classical studies, accused of being «un-American»²³, by insisting that the republic could not simply close its eyes to universal forms of knowledge without betraying its own intellectual ambitions²⁴.

¹⁵ Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “un-American”, URL: < <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/un-American> > [accessed December 11, 2025].

¹⁶ DANGERFIELD, George, *The Awakening of American Nationalism: 1815–1828*, New York, Harper and Row, 1965; POSTON, Brook, *James Monroe: A Republican Champion*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2019.

¹⁷ «Jefferson to James Madison, 30 August 1823», in SMITH, James Morton (ed.), *The Republic of Letters: The Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, 1776–1826*, vol. III, New York, Norton, 1995, p. 1877.

¹⁸ «Jefferson to James Madison, 30 May 1812» in FORD, Paul Leicester (ed.), *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. XI, New York, The Knickerbocker Press, 1905, p. 249.

¹⁹ TARBELL, John P., *An oration delivered before the democratic citizens of the North part of Middlesex county at Groton*, Lowell, Abijah Watson Publisher, 1839, p. 24.

²⁰ Debates in Congress, part. III of vol. III, June 12, 1832, p. 3481.

²¹ PHELPS, W. W., WHITMER, David, WHITMER, John, PARTRIDGE, Edward, CORRILL, John, MORLEY, Isaac, PRATT, Parley P., WIGHT, Lyman, KNIGHT, Newel, MARSH, Thomas B., CARTER, Simeon, BEEBE, Galvin, «An Appeal», in *The Evening and the Morning Star*, 2, 23/1834, pp. 7–8, p. 7.

²² BUSHNELL, Horace, «Democratic Character of Common Schools», in *District School Journal of the State of New York*, 4, 1/1843, pp. 10–11, p. 10.

²³ EELLS, Samuel, *Address before the Alpha Delta Phi Society of Miami University*, Cincinnati, Smith, Day and co., 1836.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

The boundaries of Americanism were thus drawn and redrawn «altar against altar»²⁵, to borrow Metternich's expression, with no consensus yet on the direction that national development should take. "Un-American" became a polemical weapon used both to denounce alleged "European" attitudes and to claim the freedom to follow whatever model one deemed most appropriate, according to the axiom that «anything that endangers our liberty is Un-American and unconstitutional»²⁶.

By mid-century, nativist movements such as the Know-Nothing intensified the term's ethnocultural uses, directing it against Catholic and Jewish immigration and against "foreign influence" more generally²⁷. Yet the accusation did not remain their monopoly. Anti-nativist pamphleteers described self-styled "Native Americans" as «misguided men assuming the title Native American, but un-American at heart, breathing destruction on those not born here, denouncing a whole religious community and all professing a particular faith, have been joined by the Whigs»²⁸. Abolitionists likewise denounced slavery and racially restricted suffrage as «altogether unnatural, un-American», repositioning the Creed against ascriptive hierarchy²⁹. The foreign-policy dimension surfaces most clearly in disputes about expansion and diplomacy. William H. Seward, a central figure in nineteenth-century statecraft, could have his initiatives branded «un-American»³⁰. In Adam von Gurowski's diary, Seward's posture was mocked as «untrue ... un-American policy», demonstrating that foreign-policy choices (including empire-making concerning the Alaska purchase) were already becoming sites where the label could stigmatize a strategic direction as a national betrayal³¹.

The term's early history already reveals the coupling that later becomes decisive: "un-American" is a domestic boundary-marker whose targets often include foreign-alignment positions and external strategies. It is from this early matrix – nation-building plus a contested relationship to Europe and to expansion – that the term acquired a later emphasis on suppressing minorities in order to protect the nation's character from alleged outside contamination. In *How to Build a Nation*,

²⁵ PERKINS, Dexter, *Hands off: A History of the Monroe Doctrine*, Boston, Little, Brown and co., 1948 [trad. it. *Storia della dottrina Monroe*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1960], p. 58.

²⁶ HILL, S. M., «Church Schools and State Schools», in *The Alumnus* 1, 4/1892, pp. 107-108, p. 108.

²⁷ On the Know Nothing Party (known as Native American Party until 1855), see: LEVINE, Bruce, «Conservatism, Nativism, and Slavery: Thomas R. Whitney and the Origins of the Know-Nothing Party», in *The Journal of American History*, 88, 2/2001, pp. 455-488; RITTER, Luke, «The Order of Know-Nothings and Secret Democracy», in *Inventing America's First Immigration Crisis: Political Nativism in the Antebellum West*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2021, pp. 82-104.

²⁸ GEARY, Sister Theophane, *A History of Third Parties in Pennsylvania, 1840-1860*, Washington D.C., The Catholic University of America, 1938, pp. 96-97.

²⁹ AYDELOTT, Benjamin Parham, *Our country's evils and their remedies*, Cincinnati, George L. Weed, 1843, p. 29; WOODBURY, Augustus, *Plain words to young men*, Concord, Edson C. Eastman, 1858, pp. 177-178.

³⁰ Uses of the term are also traceable by Seward himself, as in: SEWARD, Frederick William, *William H. Seward: An Autobiography from 1801 to 1834. With a Memoir of His Life, and Selections from His Letters*, New York, Derby and Miller, 1891, p. 234.

³¹ GUROWSKI, Adam, *Diary: 1863-'64-'65*, Washington D.C., W. H. and O. H. Morrison, 1866, pp. 254-255.

this concern translated into the claim that the country should «suffer in this land no element of political power that is not thoroughly Americanized»³².

2. Populism, Labor, and Empire: A Polysemic Label in the Gilded Age

The last decades of the nineteenth century saw “un-American” acquire greater frequency and even greater semantic plasticity. Industrialization, mass immigration, and social conflict multiplied opportunities to accuse adversaries of deviating from the national norm. Political and economic elites began to use the term systematically to discredit the labor movement³³. Trade unions and socialist organizations were portrayed as vehicles for imported ideologies, accused of cowardice for exploiting moments of entrepreneurial weakness³⁴. The echo of this rhetoric reached Europe in 1887 when the Catholic periodical «La Rassegna Nazionale» published Cardinal James Gibbons’s warning to the Vatican that if the American Church failed to support workers, it would face the charge of being “un-American” an accusation he considered «the most powerful weapon» in the hands of the Church’s enemies³⁵.

“Un-American” proved adaptable to conflicting positions. In Nebraska’s Democratic Party platform of 1893, the adjective was used both to criticize the populist excesses of other parties and to delineate a minimal framework of acceptable public policies in a democratic society³⁶. Senator William Bourke Cockran invoked «un-American» to justify progressive taxation and state intervention, arguing that the measures which increased prosperity and social mobility were authentically American, while alternatives were «undemocratic and un-American»³⁷. Conversely, fiscal conservatives like the General Consul in London John C. New described redistributive policies as «the most thoroughly unamerican of any speeches ever delivered on this floor» and complained that «the atmosphere of this Congress from the beginning has been unamerican. Class legislation, favoritism to corporate power and arbitrary and unamerican methods have controlled from the beginning»³⁸.

³² THOMPSON, Joseph P., «How to build a Nation», in *The New Englander*, 106/1869, pp. 19-46, p. 29.

³³ For instance, uses of “un-American” can be found in: WICKERSHAM, J. P., *Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of the Commonwealth Pennsylvania for the year ending June 1, 1877*, Harrisburg, Lane S. Hart, 1878, p. XIV; HENDERSON, John R. (ed.), «Thoughts on compulsory education», in *The Lafayette Monthly* 5, 6/1875, pp. 191-195; NORTHROP, Birdsey Grant, «Compulsory National System of Education impracticable and Unamerican», in *The Illinois Teacher devoted to Education, Science, and Free Schools* 17, 1/1871, p. 254.

³⁴ YOUNG, Jefferson Jr., «Fort Dearborn Council», in *The American Engineer* 20, 14/1890, p. 148.

³⁵ «Letter of Cardinal Gibbons, Archbishop of Baltimore, to Cardinal Simeoni», *op. cit.* and tr. in COPPI, Ettore, «I cavalieri del lavoro negli Stati Uniti d’America», in *La Rassegna Nazionale*, 37/1887, pp. 621-669, p. 656.

³⁶ «Party Platform on National issues in 1893», in *The World Almanac and Encyclopedia*, New York, The Press Publishing Co., 1894, pp. 87-94, p. 90.

³⁷ Congressional Record: The Proceedings and Debates of the Fifty-First Congress, vol. XXVII, Washington D.C., Government Printing Office, 1895, p. 263.

³⁸ NEW, John C., Consular reports on Steamship Subsidies (January 1900), *cit.* in Congressional Records: The

The same polysemy characterized debates over imperial expansion. Presidents William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt were both branded «un-American» by critics who saw in their colonial ventures an imitation of European imperial models that contradicted the anti-imperialist origins of the United States. Activists associated with the Anti-Imperialist League invoked Washington's Farewell Address and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address as normative limits: the republic, they argued, should guide other nations by example rather than by conquest³⁹. For them, it was precisely overseas annexations that constituted an «un-American» policy. The case of Theodore Roosevelt was even more emblematic because, unlike his predecessor, he was branded «un-American» for reasons that did not concern his political positions alone. His impetuous temperament, brusque manners, and at times sexist attitudes earned him the label «un-American» from several women's groups, who also denounced his contempt for pacifist movements⁴⁰. At the same time, Roosevelt himself, who attached the highest importance to Americanism⁴¹, used the term to brand «Know-nothingism» as «utterly un-American as foreignism»⁴², and to criticize Catholics and Jews who resisted assimilation into a distinctively American culture⁴³. «To use the term «un-American» was Roosevelt at his most disapproving, an expletive in his political vocabulary»⁴⁴.

Writers and intellectuals captured this malleability in literary form. In *The Sea Lions*, James Fenimore Cooper mocked the vacuous overuse of the term through the character of Deacon Seth Daggett, whose reflexive recourse to «un-American» revealed his inability to distinguish moral principle from local prejudice, preferring to be American rather than right, as if «being American» were itself a moral principle.

Daggett reflected; and it is probable that, as he cooled off from the excitement created by his late exertions, he fully recognized the justice of the other's remarks, and the injustice of his

Proceedings and Debates of the Fifty-First Congress, Second session, vol. XXII, Washington D.C., Government Printing Office, 1891, p. 238.

³⁹ On the Anti-Imperialist League, see: BOUTWELL, George S., «Declaration of the Anti-Imperialist League, Aug. 15, 1899», *The Anti-Imperialist*, 1-2/1899, pp. 30-31, where the text refers to the «un-American policy of the Administration».

⁴⁰ NIELSEN, Kim E., *Un-American Womanhood. Antiradicalism, Antifeminism, and the First Red Scare*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2001, p. 134; «Right Back at Roosevelt: Un-American, Unpatriotic and a Barbarian, Women Say», in *Kansas City Star*, April 17, 1915, p. 7, URL: < <https://newspaperarchive.com/kansas-city-times-apr-17-1915-p-7/> > [accessed August 29, 2025].

⁴¹ ROOSEVELT, Theodore, «What 'Americanism' means», in *Forum*, 17/1894, pp. 196-206.

⁴² ROOSEVELT, Theodore, «True Americanism», in ROOSEVELT, Theodore (ed.), *True Americanism: being four essays selected from the collection entitled American ideals*, New York-London, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1897, pp. 25-59.

⁴³ BURTON, David Henry, *Theodore Roosevelt, American Politician. An Assessment*, London, Associated University Press, 1997, p. 19.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

own claims. Still, it seemed to him un-American, un-Vineyard, if the reader please, to “give up”; and he clung to his error with as much pertinacity as if he had been right⁴⁵.

Mark Twain's *The American Claimant* staged the opposition between European affectation and American pragmatism, having the character Gwendolen Sellers condemn as «un-American» the empty pretensions of Anglophile elites, who used to «don't learn a blessed thing [...] but showy rubbish and un-American pretentiousness»⁴⁶. In both cases, the charge of un-Americanism exposes the tension between republican ideals and the social hierarchies of the Gilded Age.

3. “100 Per Cent Americanism”, Nativism, and the *Un-American Dream*

The First World War marked a structural shift. Between 1914 and 1920, the frequency of the term rose year after year, reflecting a climate in which the threshold of acceptable behavior was renegotiated in the name of patriotism. Scholarship on national identity demonstrates how flags, anthems, and commemorative rituals consolidated a mass politics of patriotism. In wartime, this repertoire also intersected with a moralized national duty to establish a rule of law among civilized nations⁴⁷.

World War I demonstrates the article's central hypothesis in a particularly clear form. War policy generated demands for domestic orthodoxy, which in turn constrained what could be said about the war. President Woodrow Wilson's call for “100 per cent Americanism” implied that insufficient enthusiasm for the war effort indexed insufficient Americanness⁴⁸. German Americans bore the brunt of this new suspicion. Thousands were interned or otherwise excluded from civic life, while figures such as socialist leader Eugene V. Debs were imprisoned under the Espionage Act for anti-war speeches portrayed as radical and «un-American»⁴⁹. The impulse to police Americanism culminated in the Palmer Raids of 1919-20, which targeted socialists, anarchists, and

⁴⁵ COOPER, James Fenimore, *The Sea Lions, or the Lost Sealers*, New York, W. A. Townsend and Co., 1860, p. 187.

⁴⁶ TWAIN, Mark, *The American Claimant*, New York, Charles L. Webster, 1892, p. 54.

⁴⁷ CHATFIELD, Charles, ILUKHINA, RUZANNA, *Peace/Mir: An Anthology of Historic Alternatives to War*, New York, Syracuse University Press, 1994, pp. 22-23.

⁴⁸ On the “100 percent Americanism” policy, see for instance: BRAKEBILL, Tina Stewart, «From ‘German Days’ to ‘100 Percent Americanism’: McLean County, Illinois 1913-1918: German Americans, World War One, and One Community's Reaction», in *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 95, 2/2002, pp. 148-171. Wilson even described Thomas Jefferson as un-American for his dependence on French philosophy, see: WILSON, Woodrow, *Mere Literature and Other Essays*, Boston, The Riverside Press, 1896, pp. 207-208.

⁴⁹ CONSTANTINE, Robert J., «Eugene V. Debs: An American Paradox», in *Monthly Labor Review* 114, 8/1991, pp. 30-33.

trade unionists. The same political climate also contributed to the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan reimagined as the guardian of a racially pure American identity⁵⁰.

Here the link between foreign policy and domestic boundary-making is direct, as criticism of intervention, internationalism, or wartime repression could be rendered “un-American”, thereby delegitimizing an entire policy stance (negotiation, restraint, or non-intervention). Preston’s classic study of federal suppression of radicals helps contextualize how “foreignness” and “radicalism” were fused into a single suspect figure in these decades, and why repression could be justified as protection of the nation⁵¹.

The National Origins Act of 1924 translated this atmosphere into law, imposing restrictive quotas on immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe and effectively excluding those from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East⁵². In this context, nativist preachers like Alma White warned of conspiracies to «un-Americanize and destroy our Nation»⁵³ fusing antisemitism, anti-Catholicism, and anti-radicalism into a single narrative. Veterans’ organizations and hereditary societies denounced school textbooks “contaminated” by foreign ideas – atheism, socialism, internationalism – as “treasonous” and “un-American”, while teachers and professors critical of intervention in the Great War were accused of disloyalty and dismissed.

Yet this powerful nationalist wind also provoked resistance. Alfred Hornung has described how, in the 1920s, an *Un-American Dream* emerged from the margins: an alternative vision of American identity then articulated by intellectuals such as Horace Kallen, Alain Locke, Upton Sinclair, and Anzia Yezierska⁵⁴. Their projects – cultural pluralism, Black Zionism, socialist critiques of capitalism, feminist and immigrant narratives – were frequently denounced as “un-American”, but they turned the stigma into a vehicle for counter-narratives. By insisting that pluralism, social justice, and emancipation were rooted in the founding principles of the republic, they claimed a different Americanism and exposed the exclusivist use of “un-American” as itself a betrayal of those principles.

⁵⁰ BRAEMAN, John, «World War One and the Crisis of American Liberty», in *American Quarterly* 16, 1/1964, pp. 104-112.

⁵¹ PRESTON, William Jr., *Aliens and Dissenters: Federal Suppression of Radicals, 1903-1933*, II ed., Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1995 [orig. ed. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1963].

⁵² ALLERFELDT, Kristofer, «“And We Got Here First”: Albert Johnson, National Origins and Self-Interest in the Immigration Debate of the 1920s», in *Journal of Contemporary History*, 45, 1/2010, pp. 7-26. On the immigration issue and the American National identity, see also: MORRIS, Levy, WRIGHT, Matthew, *Immigration and the American Ethos*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020.

⁵³ WHITE, Alma Bridwell, *The Ku Klux Klan in Prophecy*, Zarephath, The Good Citizen, 1925, p. 26.

⁵⁴ HORNUNG, Alfred, «The Un-American Dream», in *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, 44, 4/1999, pp. 545-553.

4. War, Law, and the Institutionalization of Un-American

The Second World War, often viewed as a founding moment of modern American exceptionalism, further intensified these dynamics⁵⁵. Legally and institutionally, “un-American” entered a new phase. A telling case is *McAuliffe v. Local Union No. 3* (New York, 1941), in which an employer sued a union leaflet for defamation after it labeled him «Hitlerian» and «un-American». The court rejected the claim, holding that calling someone “un-American” did not injure commercial reputation but constituted a general political judgment⁵⁶. What Theodore Roosevelt considered the harshest invective in his vocabulary was juridically drained of specific meaning.

At the same time, the rhetorical exercise of branding entire urban areas as *un-American* became widespread. Journalists described Washington or St. Louis as «un-American» cities, often on the basis of racial composition and architecture⁵⁷. The Ku Klux Klan violence was portrayed as an extreme incarnation of un-Americanism and Democrats denounced aviator Charles Lindbergh’s flirtations with Nazism as deeply “un-American”⁵⁸.

Alongside this repressive usage, however, an inverted deployment of the term gained traction. Organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union condemned as «un-American» the curtailment of rights under the Wartime Sedition Act, internment policies, and other emergency measures⁵⁹. Liberal and progressive voices applied the label not to subversive groups but to racist violence and state overreach, reclaiming the Constitution as the benchmark of what counted as truly American.

After the war, these tendencies converged in the institutional consolidation of “un-American” with the creation of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1938. Originally established to monitor fascist and Nazi infiltration, HUAC quickly redirected its focus towards communism, becoming a central actor in Cold War politics⁶⁰. Beyond espionage, it policed ideas deemed incompatible with American civil religion. During the McCarthy era (1947-54), “un-American” reached peak notoriety across hearings, newspapers, and popular culture. Quantitative

⁵⁵ GLEASON, Philip, «World War Two and the Development of American Studies», in *American Quarterly*, 36, 1986, pp. 343-358.

⁵⁶ *McAuliffe v. Local Union 3*, IBEW, 29 N. Y. S. 2d 963 (Sup. Ct., Queens Co., 1941).

⁵⁷ Washington, D.C. was first described as «un-American» in BROOKS, Sydney, «Our Most Un-American City», in *Springfield Republican*, June 18, 1909. Afterwards, the press labeled Cleveland, Milwaukee and St. Louis as «un-American cities».

⁵⁸ RUBINSTEIN, William D., *The Myth of Rescue. Why the Democracies Could Not Have Saved More Jews from the Nazis*, London-New York, Taylor and Francis, 1997, p. 52.

⁵⁹ WALKER, Samuel, *In Defense of American Liberties: A History of the ACLU*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 51-71.

⁶⁰ BUCKLEY, William F., *The Committee and Its Critics - A Calm Review of the House Committee on Un-American Activities*, New York, Putnam Books, 1962; BENTLEY, Eric (ed.), *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings Before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938-1968*, New York, Viking Press, 1971; CABALLERO, Raymond, *McCarthyism vs. Clinton Jencks*, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 2019.

evidence suggests that roughly one-third of all recorded occurrences of the term in printed sources between 1818 and 2022 cluster between 1947 and 1963.

Criticism of this inflation came from multiple quarters. Public opinion surveys recorded significant divisions over HUAC's legitimacy, with a substantial minority judging the committee's actions themselves «un-American»⁶¹. The Hollywood blacklist, the coercive tactics employed against witnesses, and the conflation of dissent with treason fueled a growing perception that the hunt for “un-American” activities risked betraying the very liberties it claimed to defend⁶². Harry Truman famously described HUAC as «the most un-American thing in America»⁶³, while an editorial in «The New Yorker» mocked the word as «a foolish, bad word, hardly worth the little hyphen it needs to hold it together», arguing that nothing that happens within the country could be said to be «not American»⁶⁴.

One questionable thing about the House Committee on un-American Activities is its name... The word “un-American”, besides beginning with a small letter and gradually working up to a capital, is essentially a foolish, bad word, hardly worth the little hyphen it needs to hold it together. Literally, nothing in this country can be said to be un-American. “Un” means “not”, and anything that happens within our borders is American, no matter what its nature, no matter how far off the beam it may be⁶⁵.

In the Cold War context, “un-American” acquired a renewed external dimension. It was increasingly attached to foreign policies and diplomatic postures deemed overly accommodating toward the Soviet Union. In foreign-policy debates, critics branded as “un-American” proposals for coexistence, compromise, or arms control that deviated from militant anti-communism. In this way, the term became part of the symbolic arsenal of the emerging national security state. As later work on varieties of anti-Americanism has shown, external hostility to the United States is often shaped by images of what America is as much as by reactions to what America does⁶⁶.

⁶¹ REINHART, R. J., «Gallup Vault: Celebrity Witnesses Before Congress in 1947», in *Gallup*, 2018, URL: < <https://news.gallup.com/vault/232430/gallup-vault-celebrity-witnesses-congress-1947.aspx> > [accessed December 11, 2025].

⁶² KRUTNIK, Frank, NEALE, Steve, NEVE, Brian, STANFIELD, Peter (ed.), *op. cit.*

⁶³ KUMARAVADIVELU, Bala, *American Identity: Myth and Reality*, Lanham, Hamilton Books, 2024, p. 32.

⁶⁴ «Never underestimate the power of a woman», in *The New Counterattack. Facts to combat Communism*, 8, 47, 1954, pp. 1-2, p. 2.

⁶⁵ COREY, Mary F., *The World Through a Monocle. “The New Yorker” at Midcentury*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 45.

⁶⁶ KATZENSTEIN, Peter J., KEOHANE, Robert O., *op. cit.*, pp. 9-38.

5. Polarization and Persistence

Despite periodic denunciations of its vagueness, “un-American” did not disappear with the waning of McCarthyism. It remained available to both major parties and to social movements, though with divergent meanings. For many Republicans, it continued to be associated with communism, radicalism, and moral disorder, while Democrats and liberals used it as a stigma to be attached to repressive policies, racial segregation, and aggressive military interventions.

The civil-rights era offers a paradigmatic example. Segregationists portrayed racial equality as an “un-American” project imported from foreign ideologies, whereas civil-rights activists cast segregation itself as a constitutional violation and thus “un-American”⁶⁷. Martin Luther King Jr., for instance, described U.S. support for colonialism in Vietnam as «un-American», invoking founding ideals of liberty and self-determination⁶⁸. King had already linked international posture and domestic legitimacy in 1959, condemning «Un-American outrages» as U.S. officials met in Geneva to discuss democratic principles abroad⁶⁹. The Vietnam War amplified this dynamic: supporters of intervention denounced student protests and pacifist mobilizations as “un-American” attacks on the nation in wartime, while protesters labelled the war and its atrocities as “un-American” distortions of America’s professed identity.

Crucially, the long turn from Barry Goldwater to Ronald Reagan helps explain why these polar meanings hardened, reaffirming a new identification of Americanism⁷⁰. Historians of modern conservatism have shown how the post-1964 conservative mobilization – and its consolidation in the Reagan coalition – redefined “real America” around anti-statism, law-and-order, religious traditionalism, and a nationalist idiom forged in reaction to civil rights and the perceived crisis of the liberal state⁷¹. Political science research documents a steep rise in partisan polarization, a

⁶⁷ An overview of how segregationists appropriated this concept in an effort to curb the expansion of civil rights is provided in: MACLEAN, Nancy, *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right’s Stealth Plan for America*, New York, Viking Press, 2017.

⁶⁸ As cited in LEVY, Peter B., *Blacks and the Vietnam War*, in KRENN, Michael L. (ed.), *The Impact of Race on U.S. Foreign Policy: A Reader*, New York, Routledge, 1999, pp. 309-332: p. 329, Martin Luther King Jr. characterized US support for colonialism in Vietnam as “un-American”.

⁶⁹ KING, Martin Luther, Jr., *Statement Adopted at Spring Session of SCLC in Tallahassee, Florida*, May 15, 1959, available on the Stanford Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, URL: < <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/statement-adopted-spring-session-sclc-tallahassee-florida> > [accessed March 2, 2026].

⁷⁰ RENTSCHLER, William H., *Goldwater: A Tribute to a Twentieth-Century Political Icon*, Lincolnwood, Contemporary Books, 2000, p. 77.

⁷¹ On the evolution of the Republican Party in the twentieth century, see NASH, George H., *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, Wilmington, ISI Books, 2014 (orig. ed. New York, Basic Books, 1976); EDWARDS, Lee, *The Conservative Revolution: The Movement That Remade America*, New York, Free Press, 1999; CONTINETTI, Matthew, *The Right: The Hundred Year War for American Conservatism*, New York, Basic Books, 2022.

context in which labels like “un-American” function as shortcuts for turning political disagreement into identity deviance⁷².

In the post-bipolar era, the term has resurfaced in moments of crisis. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, the George W. Bush administration framed opposition to the war on terror and to the Patriot Act as «un-American», using the label to conflate criticism of specific policies with lack of loyalty, while civil-liberties organizations and critical commentators denounced indefinite detention, torture, and mass surveillance as “un-American” practices inconsistent with constitutional guarantees⁷³.

Donald Trump’s rise and the ensuing escalation of public discourse once again brought “un-American” into mainstream media and elite rhetoric. Under Trump I, the label circulated mainly as a reciprocal weapon in culture-war disputes⁷⁴; under Trump II, it has been increasingly entangled with governance controversies in which “internal enemies” and exceptional security measures are invoked more explicitly⁷⁵. First, during the 2024 hurricane season, Joe Biden condemned misinformation about federal disaster relief as «(so damn) un-American», linking national belonging to administrative trust in a moment of emergency⁷⁶. Second, Democrats branded as “un-American” Trump’s suggestion that the military might be used against the «enemy from within,» and, in Trump II, domestic deployments of National Guard and Marines – most controversially in

⁷² BONICA, Adama, MCCARY, Nolan, POOLE, Keith T., ROSENTHAL, Howard, *Congressional Polarization and Its Connection to Income Inequality: An Update*, in THURBER James A., YOSHINAKA, Antoine (ed.), *American Gridlock: The Sources, Character, and Impact of Political Polarization*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 357-377.

⁷³ MURPHY, Laura W., «ACLU Appalled by Ashcroft Statement on Dissent; Calls Free Speech “Main Engine of Justice”», in *American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)*, December 10, 2001, URL: < <https://www.aclu.org/press-releases/aclu-appalled-ashcroft-statement-dissent-calls-free-speech-main-engine-justice> > [accessed March 2, 2026]; KHAKI, Ateqah, «Indefinite Detention Is Un-American», in *ACLU*, June 6, 2012, URL: < <https://www.aclu.org/news/national-security/indefinite-detention-un-american> > [accessed March 2, 2026].

⁷⁴ KUMARAVADIVELU, Bala, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-33; LANDERS, Elizabeth, DIAMOND, Jeremy, «Trump Labels Some Democrats “Treasonous” for Their State of the Union Reaction», in *CNN Politics*, February 5, 2018, URL: < <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/02/05/politics/donald-trump-democrats-treasonous> > [accessed December 11, 2025]; ALTERS, Kimberly, «Jake Tapper calls the White House’s press ban ‘un-American’», in *The Week*, February 24, 2017, URL: < <https://theweek.com/speedreads/682421/jake-tapper-calls-white-houses-press-ban-unamerican> > [accessed March 2, 2026].

⁷⁵ As evidence of a more institutionalized and security-oriented deployment of identity rhetoric, see invocations of an “internal enemy” and the ensuing controversies over domestic troop: BABB, Carla, «Trump suggests using US cities as ‘training grounds’ for military», in *Defense News*, September 30, 2025, URL: < <https://www.defensenews.com/news/pentagon-congress/2025/09/30/trump-suggests-using-us-cities-as-training-grounds-for-military/> > [accessed March 2, 2026]; KNAUTH, Dietrich, «US appeals court pauses restrictions on Trump’s use of troops in Los Angeles», in *Reuters*, September 4, 2025, URL: < <https://www.reuters.com/legal/government/us-appeals-court-pauses-restrictions-trumps-use-troops-los-angeles-2025-09-04/> > [accessed March 2, 2026].

⁷⁶ KANNO YOUNGS, Zolan, «Biden Again Criticizes Trump Over Hurricane Misinformation», in *The New York Times*, October 10, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/10/us/politics/biden-trump-hurricane-misinformation.html> > [accessed August 27, 2025]; SARIC, Ivana, «Walz slams Trump as “un-American” for saying he’d use military against U.S. foes», in *Axios*, October 15, 2024, URL: < <https://www.axios.com/2024/10/15/walz-trump-military-enemy> > [accessed December 11, 2025].

Los Angeles and Minneapolis – were described by critics and even in judicial language as «profoundly un-American»⁷⁷.

Taken together, these episodes suggest that the power of “un-American” lies not only in context but also in the linguistic resources that make it adaptable. Its negative prefix, its semantically open base adjective, and its place within a family of doublets (such as non-American and anti-American) allow it to be reactivated in new conflicts without losing rhetorical force.

6. Naming the difference

A classic problem in historical linguistics is how words acquire durability through repetition, entrenchment, and semantic change. In terms of historical semantics and lexicalization, “un-American” has undergone a process of entrenchment in which a negative evaluative meaning becomes conventionalized and thus easily portable across contexts – especially when political actors seek to recode disagreement as disloyalty⁷⁸.

From a linguistic point of view, “un-American” belongs to a wider family of labels that mark perceived outsiders, both within and beyond Western traditions. In what follows, “un-American” is first situated in relation to these broader patterns before we turn to its specific morphological structure in English. Concerning the Western world, such a tradition goes back to Classical Greece, where the term *bárbaros* (barbarian) referred to non-Hellenic peoples, mostly in a highly negative way. The term had not only a broad cultural meaning but in a stricter sense it signaled unintelligible speech; in the Greek world, that was tantamount to not speaking Greek at all. Other societies developed lexical items capable of excluding peoples whose «evil habits rather than [their] race»⁷⁹ were perceived as distant⁸⁰. One major example is that of classical Sanskrit, where the word *mleccha* was used to refer to groups of people not conforming to the «traditional value system»⁸¹.

When we look at the term un-American, its use and historic development, it does not seem to parallel the classical Western model epitomized by *bárbaros*. In some respects, it resembles the use of Sanskrit *mleccha*, in referring to habits outside the background traditional value system.

⁷⁷ MASON, Jeff, BORTER, Gabriella, «Harris blasts Trump’s ‘enemy from within’ comments at Pennsylvania rally», in *Reuters*, October 15, 2024, < <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/harris-targets-black-men-with-new-economic-proposals-2024-10-14/> > [accessed March 2, 2026].

⁷⁸ On entrenchment, conventionalization, and semantic change in historical semantics, see TRAUGOTT, Elizabeth C., DASHER, Richard B., *Regularity in Semantic Change*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002; BLANK, Andreas; KOCH, Peter (eds.), *Historical Semantics and Cognition*, Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter, 1999.

⁷⁹ BASHAM, Arthur Llewellyn, *Aryan and Non Aryan in South Asia*, in DESHPANDE, Madhav, HOOK, Peter Edwin (ed.), *Aryan and Non Aryan in India*, Ann Arbor, Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, 1979, pp. 1–10, p. 5.

⁸⁰ PARASHER, Alok, A study of attitudes towards mlecchas and other outsiders in Northern India (c. A.D. 600), PhD thesis, SOAS University of London, London, 1978; BASHAM, Arthur Llewellyn, *op. cit.*

⁸¹ PARASHER, Alok, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

However, the parallelism with this other tradition is rather limited. According to Parasher, the distinction between *mleccha* and non-*mleccha* was held on three factors: speech, area of habitation, and cultural behavior⁸². Differently, “un-American” does not refer necessarily to a geographically external entity, nor does it have a specific linguistic connotation. Still, it carries a considerable dose of stigma, in characterizing the other as not fully aligned with American values and, as such, potentially treasonable. Since the term “un-American” targets what is deemed extraneous to authentic American values, it presupposes an agreement on the set of values and principles. However, the different and sometimes incompatible uses of the word “un-American” clearly show that there has never been such an agreement on what being American should exactly mean. Unlike *bárbaros*, which primarily names the outside, “un-American” stigmatizes deviation and implies an idealized “America” – precisely the feature that makes it politically reusable across contexts.

7. Morphological decomposition

The linguistic analysis of the word “un-American” begins with its morphemes. A minimal account of how morphemes combine is sufficient to clarify the term’s semantic affordances in political discourse.

To approach the morphological decomposition of “un-American”, a useful distinction to bear in mind is that between free and bound morphemes. Free morphemes can stand alone (e.g., “American”). Bound morphemes require a morphological host (e.g., the plural “-s” or the prefix “un-” in “un-American”).

“Un-American” is then a clear example of derivation, the morphological operation consisting of combining a free and a bound morpheme. In its main uses, the prefix “un-” expresses negation. As such, this prefix has clear cognates in other Indo-European languages. For example, Romance languages such as Italian have an “in-” prefix which can be used much in the same way as its English counterpart, besides its different overall productivity⁸³. English has both a privative “un-” (as in “un-American”) and a reversative “un-” (as in “un-tie” or “un-lock”), more or less confused in their actual usage. Here the focus is on the privative prefix, which yields evaluative negation.

Of course, the “un-” prefix coexists with other negative prefixes in English, such as “in-” (“inadequate”, “inevitable”)⁸⁴, “non-” (“non-scientific”, “non-toxic”), “dis-” (“disadvantageous”,

⁸² *Ibidem*.

⁸³ English disposes of a Latin-derived *in-* prefix coexisting with *un-*. More details about the *in-/un-* alternation are provided below in this section.

⁸⁴ On allomorphy and assimilation in negative prefixation, see: ARONOFF, Mark, *Morphology by Itself: Stems and Inflectional Classes*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1994; GUSSENHOVEN, Carlos, JACOBS, Haike, *Understanding Phonology*, V ed., Oxon-New York, Routledge, 2025.

“disagreeable”). The coexistence of “un-” and the Latin-derived cognate “in-” leads to the existence of doublets such as “unalienable”/“inalienable”, “undigestible”/“indigestible”⁸⁵. Here, rather than surveying prefix selection in English as a whole, we focus on how negative prefixation bears on the emergence and circulation of “un-American” in political debate, offering a semantic account of negative prefixes and their combinability with “American”.

8. Semantic analysis

For the purposes of the semantic analysis, two semantic dimensions contributed to the success of “un-American” in the political discourse from the early decades of the nineteenth century. The first dimension regards negative orientation, which refers to the property of prefixes to have a negative connotation. It has been claimed that most adjectives with “un-” or “in-” have a deprecatory sense in English⁸⁶. This generalization fits “un-American” well. As noted above, the term was first introduced, and it is still used, to describe habits and behaviors alien to U.S. customs, mostly in a derogatory way. This first dimension clearly separates “un-American” from other constructions such as non-American. Kjellmer’s study on negated adjectives mentions the very distinction between “un-American”/“non-American”, among other examples⁸⁷. There, he labels “un-American” as evaluative and deprecatory, and non-American as neutral. This is not to say that “non-American” cannot appear in contexts where it can have a derogatory interpretation. However, this depends on the overall context and not on the prefix *per se*. Un-American and non-American differ also in the other relevant semantic dimension concerning the distinction between classifying and characterizing adjectives⁸⁸. This distinction has been long discussed in the literature about adjectives and adjectival functions, being referred to also as the distinction between «contradictory» and «contrary» terms, in other works⁸⁹. Classifying terms express binary contrasts, while characterizing terms «represent areas at the opposite poles of a given dimension and leave

⁸⁵ «[t]he culminating period of the double forms lies in the 17th century; since that time the tendency has been to differentiate, and to discard one or other of the doublets, the forms with in-, etc., being very commonly preferred when the whole word has a distinctively Latin character, as inadequate, inadvertence, inarticulate, etc. Even with such forms there is no absolute rule, and doublets are still numerous [...]» cit. in *Oxford English Dictionary*, “un- (prefix)”, URL: < <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7729542446> > [accessed December 11, 2025].

⁸⁶ ZIMMER, Karl Ernst, «Affixal Negation in English and Other Languages: An Investigation of Restricted Productivity», in *Word* 20, 2/1964, monograph 5; KJELLMER, Göran, «Negated adjectives in modern English», in *Studia Neophilologica*, 77, 2/2005, pp. 156-170.

⁸⁷ KJELLMER, Göran, *op. cit.*, p. 164.; also inspiring about the usage is: «We might say that in such cases [non-American vs. un-American, non-grammatical vs. un-grammatical] *non-* selects the descriptive aspect of the stem of the negation while *un-* selects the evaluative one», cit. in ZIMMER, Karl Ernst, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

⁸⁸ WARREN, Beatrice, *Classifying adjectives*, Göteborg, Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1984; KJELLMER, Göran, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

⁸⁹ ZIMMER, Karl Ernst, *op. cit.*, p. 29 et seq.; FUNK, Wolf-Peter, «Adjectives with Negative Affixes in Modern English and the Problem of Synonymy», in *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, 19, 1971, pp. 364-386.

some room for other possibilities between them»⁹⁰. A clear example for this distinction is the difference between “inanimate” and “unhappy,” where the first is classifying (or contradictory) and the second is characterizing (or contrary). As for un-American, it surely behaves as a characterizing adjective, unlike non-American, and reflects the different functions of “non-” and “un-” prefixes in general: «“[n]on-” differs from “un-” in frequently expressing a binary contrast (without gradability) rather than the opposite end of a scale: e.g.: non-scientific [...] as distinct from [...] unscientific; non-American beside un-American»⁹¹. The presence of the “un-” prefix has the following effects on the semantic function of the overall expression “un-American”: I) it has a negative orientation, and II) it is a characterizing adjective; thus it leaves space for intermediate possibilities among two opposite poles.

9. Lexicalization

Regarding the problem of lexicalization, this term has been interpreted in several ways⁹². The present essay adopts the interpretation according to which lexicalization is the process by which «a certain information content is associated with a lexical form»⁹³. What information does “un-American” lexicalize? Having described un-American as associated with something or someone foreign or not characteristic of the U.S. customs, the information content of “un-American” must be more complex and nuanced. As a matter of fact, “un-American” has been used in a derogative manner and expresses a certain gradability. The morphological process by which “un-American” emerged exploited the lexical material in a focused and natural way, since the term arose from the combination of the adjective American with a prefix with a (potential) intrinsic derogatory function. In doing so, it involved a widely productive combination in English, namely the derivation of the kind “un-” + adjective. Because the “un-” prefix is widely associated with an evaluative or deprecatory function in English, it made the usage of “un-American” distinct from other terms like “non-American.” Both “un-American” and “non-American” can convey the idea of something foreign to, or not characteristic of, U.S. customs. However, “non-American” has an intrinsic neutral connotation, differently from “un-American”, which has been described as evaluative and deprecatory⁹⁴. The gradability function of the “un-” prefix made “un-American” even more

⁹⁰ ZIMMER, Karl Ernest, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

⁹¹ QUIRK, Randolph, GREENBAUM, Sydney, LEECH, Geoffrey, SVARTVIK, Jan (edited by), *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, London-New York, Longman, 1985.

⁹² For a discussion on various ways lexicalization has been interpreted, we refer to JEŽEK, Elisabetta, *The Lexicon. An Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 5-13.

⁹³ JEŽEK, Elisabetta, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁹⁴ Although un-American and non-American have been confused sometimes, as shown in the fourth paragraph of this paper, both its general use and semantic analysis clearly indicate the two terms are not synonymous.

distinctive. The term is flexible enough to refer to various kinds and degrees of un-Americanism. Potentially, it refers to groups of people who identified themselves as American but did not (completely) display true American behaviours. This is enough to distinguish the information content lexicalized by “un-American” from that of other words, such as “anti-American”. “Anti-American” can be, and surely it has been, used to refer to activities contrasting American ambitions and purposes. However, it works mainly as classifying adjective, namely expresses a binary contrast. Thus, it is unable to capture the nuances and degrees of “un-American” tendencies within the American nation, something which proved to be essential throughout the overall political debate on Americanism.

10. Conclusion

Despite the existence of analogous labels in other national contexts – “un-British”⁹⁵, “*undeutsch*”⁹⁶ in Nazi Germany, or “un-Australian”⁹⁷ in the rhetoric of the One Nation Party – none of these expressions has matched the prominence or longevity of “un-American”.

Lexicometric data underscore this exceptionalism: after an initial spike around the First World War, the term’s frequency declined in the 1930s only to surge again during the early Cold War. As the preceding linguistic analysis suggests, this durability is partly explained by the properties of the negative prefix “un-” and the semantic openness of the base adjective. Morphologically simple yet semantically elastic, “un-American” travels easily across contexts without requiring a stable, positive definition of what “American” means.

Crucially, “un-American” is not merely an insult but a rhetorical device that repeatedly links internal belonging with external conflict. Its most consequential effects emerge when domestic boundary-policing intersects with foreign-policy debates – moments when “what America does” abroad can be reframed as a struggle over “what America is”, and when dissent can be recoded as existential disloyalty. Tracing this history therefore contributes to broader debates about American identity not only because the term mirrors contested visions of Americanism, but because it helps produce the conditions under which certain foreign-policy choices become politically acceptable.

⁹⁵ YOUNG, Edward Lee, «Letter IV: The Dignity of Man», in *The Works of the Reverend Edward Young*, vol. IV, London, P. Brown, H. Hill, and S. Payne, 1765, pp. 154-194, p. 159.

⁹⁶ See RASH, Felicity J., *The Language of Violence: Adolf Hitler’s Mein Kampf*, New York, Peter Lang, 2006, p. 178.

⁹⁷ MACKAY, Hugh, «Just Who Is Un-Australian?», in *The Age*, June 20, 2005, URL: < <https://www.theage.com.au/opinion/just-who-is-un-australian-20050620-ge0dib.html> > [accessed December 11, 2025].

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