ПЛОВДИВСКИ УНИВЕРСИТЕТ „ПАИСИЙ ХИЛЕНДАРСКИ“ – БЪЛГАРИЯ
НАУЧНИ ТРУДОВЕ, ТОМ 63, КН. 1, СБ. Б, 2025 – ФИЛОЛОГИЯ,
PAISII HILENDARSKI UNIVERSITY OF PLOVDIV – BULGARIA
RESEARCH PAPERS, VOL. 63, BOOK 1, PART B, 2025 – LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE

DOI 10.69085/ntf2026b127

FROM *MULTI-NESS* TO *COULD-NESS*: REVISITING THE COMBINATORIAL PROPERTIES OF THE ENGLISH SUFFIX *-NESS*

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This paper seeks to broaden our understanding of the combinatorial properties of the well-studied suffix *-ness* in contemporary English by exploring unusual formations of the types *multi-ness* or *un-ness* as well as *be-ness* or *could-ness*. Drawing on data from the NOW corpus, iWeb and Sketch Engine, the study investigates the semantic nuances and morphological peculiarities of these formations. It further highlights how the high productivity of the native suffix *-ness* has led to creativity in contemporary English word-formation.

Key words: *-ness*, prefixal morphemes, modal verbs, morphological creativity

I. Introduction

The English suffix *-ness* is one of the most productive nominalizers in the language, showing a strong preference for adjectival bases but not confined only to the category of adjectives. As Bauer et al. (2013: 246) indicate, “we would be hard-pressed to find any category with the exception of verbs and bound bases to which *-ness* could not attach; *-ness* seems in effect to serve as a sort of default way of forming abstract nouns from non-verbal categories in contemporary English”. Our modest dataset, compiled from the News on the Web (NOW) corpus, iWeb and Sketch Engine, reveals that the suffix *-ness* can attach directly to elements that fall within the class of prefixal morphemes, such as *anti-*, *hyper-*, *meta-*, *mini-*, *multi-*, *non-*, *quasi-*, *retro-*, *trans-*, *un-*, etc., and to free verbal bases[1], such as *be*, *could*

[1] The suffixation of *-ness* to verbal bases is exceptional in English: *forgiveness* derives etymologically from the past participle of *forgifan* + *-ness* (Etymonline), while *cherishness* is only attested in Middle English and is now obsolete (OED).

or *should*. This is evidenced by the forms presented later on in the paper. More specifically, the prefixal morphemes are of non-native origin, with the exception of *un-*, while the verbal bases comprise modal auxiliaries, the verb *be* and most of its suppletive forms. We have excluded from our discussion examples like *beingness*, *comingness*, *doingness* or *living-ness*, since the *-ing* base in such derivatives is more appropriately analysed as a deverbal adjectival or nominal lexeme rather than as a present participle form[2]. And, as it will be noted further on, it is not unsual for *-ness* to combine with nominal bases.

We have also decided to set aside forms such as *mid-ness*, *off-ness*, *over-ness* or *out-ness* on the grounds that their left-hand components are native morphemes that can function either as prefixes or as free roots. In addition, following Bauer et al. (2013: 600) (see also Plag 2018: 98), we treat the above-listed items *anti-*, *hyper-*, *meta-*, *mini-*, *multi-*, *non-*, *quasi-*, *retro-*, *trans-*, etc. as 'non-native prefixes', although most of these could well be regarded as neoclassical combining forms. Establishing the boundary between derivational affixes and neoclassical combining forms is beyond the scope of the present study, but for our purposes it is worth noting that "no firm distinction may be drawn" (Bauer et al. 2013: 486). Furthermore, many of the items in question (*anti-*, *mega-*, *meta-*, *mini-*, *retro-*, *super-*, *ultra-*) are not strictly bound morphs, as they can also occur as free adjectival lexemes with senses closely related to those found in prefixal use. Notably, some items, for example *extra-*, *meta-*, *retro-*, have developed more lexicalized meanings when used as adjectives. Such uses are illustrated in the following excerpts from the NOW corpus (boldface added): *In this very **meta** novel, a group of murder mystery authors are invited to a writing retreat*; *Don't want to walk outside in the cold? With this **mini** stepper, you can exercise right at home*; *Guests are encouraged to dress up in **retro** fashion to embrace the spirit of the decade*. Nevertheless, what is relevant for our discussion is that certain prefixal morphemes in English can be used as bases for the suffixation of *-ness*.

Undoubtedly, the direct attachment of *-ness* to a prefix or a verb is a morphological irregularity in the language, or, drawing on Bauer (2001: 93), an instance of rule-changing innovation, which, in his words, "is always creativity" (ibid. 93). Thus, by examining the semantic nuances and morphological properties of coinages like *multi-ness*, *un-ness*, *be-ness* and

[2] This observation rests on the principle that derivational suffixes occur closer to the root and precede inflectional ones. Therefore, *-ing* in *beingness*, *comingness*, *doingness* and similar formations does not function as a present participle inflection but assumes a derivational role.

could-ness, this study seeks to expand our understanding of the combinatorial properties of *-ness* in contemporary English, and to show how the high productivity of this suffix has resulted in the emergence of some creative formations. To pursue this aim, the paper first provides a concise overview of the formal and semantic properties of *-ness* as described in the existing literature, and then analyzes some of the collected items with a view to illustrating the unusual derivational patterns involving *-ness*.

II. What the literature tells us about *-ness*: a brief overview

This suffix has received considerable scholarly attention, frequently studied alongside its rivals *-ity* or *-acy*, as shown by works such as Aronoff (1976), Riddle (1985: 435−461), Cowie (1999), Lindsay (2012: 192−203), Arndt-Lappe (2014: 497−548), Naismith and Kanwit (2021: 115−137), Rodríguez-Puente et al. (2022), Schäfer (2025: 1−46), among others. What we know about *-ness* is that it is of Germanic origin and has been used productively in English since Old English times (Arndt-Lappe 2014: 498). It forms abstract nouns and the vast majority of its bases are adjectives that can be native (*deepness*) or non-native (*bizarreness*), simple (*deadness*, *braveness*), derived (*childishness*, *globalness*) or compound (*airheadedness*, *church-relatedness*) (Bauer et al. 2013: 245−246, 256). Additionally, *-ness* is also found fairly often on simple nouns (*gameness*, *treeness*) and nominal compounds (*couch-potatoness*, *human-beingness*) (Bauer et al. 2013: 246) but it can also take as its base derived nouns as in *friendshipness* or *childhoodness*.

The combinatorial flexibility of this suffix extends to phrases of different types (*all-at-once-ness*, *out-of-control-ness*, *stick-with-it-ness*), adverbs (*alwaysness*, *nowness*), numerals (*five-ness*, *four-ness*, *two-ness*), interjections (*ouchness*, *wow-ness*) and function words including pronouns (*himness*, *mine-ness*, *weness*), prepositions (*between-ness*, *of-ness*, *with-ness*) or conjunctions (*and-ness*, *butness*) (cf. Bauer et al. 2013: 246; Arndt-Lappe 2014: 509−510).

In comparison to its rival *-ity*, *-ness* is qualitatively considered as much more productive (Aronoff and Lindsay 2014: 74) (see also Aronoff 1976: 35−45; Baayen 1992: 116; Alexiadou 2014: 256). Riddle (1985: 437−438) offers a subtle semantic distinction between the two suffixes, arguing that *-ness* "tends to denote an embodied attribute or trait" (*ethnicness*, *hyperactiveness*, *realness*), whereas *-ity* "tends to denote an abstract or concrete entity" (*ethnicity*, *hyperactivity*, *reality*). She is careful to highlight that "the suffixes themselves have different meanings when occurring on many bases, but the distinction is not realized on all bases" (ibid. 437). Indeed, it is not difficult to find *-ness* and *-ity* pairs with no clearly discernible

semantic difference, so that the two members of the pair can be used interchangeably, e.g. *pureness* and *purity*, *exclusiveness* and *exclusivity*, *passiveness* and *passivity* (Bauer et al. 2013: 257−258; Schäfer 2025: 2).

As regards Riddle's distinction, it has generated extensive scholarly commentary (Schäfer 2025: 4). According to Bauer et al. (2013: 257), this distinction is lacking complete clarity but it seems to rest on the degree of reification of the quality denoted by the adjective, i.e. "*-ness* forms abstract nouns with a lower degree of reification than *-ity*". For instance, *hyperactiveness* denotes only a property that a certain individual may display at a particular moment, whereas *hyperactivity* is reified as it denotes a diagnosable condition (cf. also *activeness* ~ *activity*, *formalness* ~ *formality*) (ibid. 257–259). The authors further emphasize that while *-ity* derivatives are more likely to occur as "high-frequency established forms and to have lexicalized meanings", deadjectival *-ness* formations "are only occasionally prone to idiomatization (as in *highness* or *illness*), seemingly always conveying the quality or state reading" (ibid. 258–259).

Bauer (1983: 222) describes *-ness* as one of the most productive suffixes in English, used both in nonce formations and in established words to replace other adjective-to-noun suffixes, adding that "[s]emantically it is the simplest of these suffixes". In a similar vein, Plag (2018: 92) defines *-ness* as "perhaps the most productive suffix of English", pointing out that regarding its potential bases, it is much less restrictive than the semantically related *-ity*.

Works based on historical data highlight different register preferences for *-ness* and *-ity*. For instance, Rodríguez-Puente et al. (2022) find that the greater frequency of *-ity* compared with *-ness* in the Early Modern English period was related to register: this development started in written texts and subsequently extended to speech-related registers (Schäfer 2025: 6). According to Cowie's (1999) research covering 1650–1990, *-ity* is generally preferred in scientific and medical writing, and *-ness* in sermons and fiction, although both suffixes occur across all registers without any clear and unambiguous preference for one suffix over the other (Schäfer 2025: 6).

In his study on the role of meaning in the rivalry between *-ity* and *-ness*, Schäfer (2025: 37) concludes that "the semantic properties of the bases are a major factor in affix selection, while the two affixes themselves are synonyms to the extent that they have relatively similar effects on their bases". The author specifies that bases selecting *-ity* differ in their semantic properties from bases selecting *-ness* (ibid. 36).

In the linguistic literature, *-ity* and *-ness* are also contrasted within the integrated–neutral affix dichotomy, where *-ness* is classified as a neutral

suffix and *-ity* as an integrated one (see Haspelmath and Sims 2010: 224). As indicated by Haspelmath and Sims (2010: 223), the distinction between the two types of affixes is largely based on their behavior in terms of morphophonological alternations. Thus, neutral suffixes like *-ness*, do not lead to a stress shift (*nátural* ~ *náturalness*), do not trigger or undergo morphophonological alternations ([aɪ] *divine* ~ [aɪ] *divineness*, but [ɪ] *divinity*) and generally occur further from the root (*natur-al-ness*), whereas integrated affixes like *-ity* show the opposite behavior (ibid. 223, 225).

By outlining the main morphological, semantic and distributional properties of *-ness*, particularly in relation to its rival *-ity*, the overview presented above provides a basis for the analysis that follows. This analysis examines selected *-ness* formations from our dataset, focusing on how their morphological properties and semantic nuances align with, or diverge from, the patterns involving *-ness* described in previous research.

III. What else our findings reveal about *-ness*

As noted in the introduction, *-ness* can attach not only to elements subsumed under the class of prefixal morphemes such as *anti-*, *multi-*, *non-*, *post-*, *un-*, etc., but also to free verbal bases such as *be*, *could* or *should*. For a more precise analysis, these *-ness* formations have been collected along with the contexts in which they appear in the cited sources. Due to space constraints, however, although all of the extracted *-ness* coinages are presented here, not all of their contextual excerpts are included. The following are selected examples (boldface added):

a) *So to take any sort of position with the idea that it was "anti-feminist" would be not only the sort of reactionary move that rightly rolls eyeballs, but also probably just factually wrong; that is, that position could probably be found within feminist theorizing somewhere. Otherness may be this sort of* ***anti-ness****, an opposition we use to define ourselves*. (iWeb)

b) ***Bi-ness*** *is still defined mostly as an in-between state, which can't help but frustrate those who find themselves perennially in-between*. (Sketch Engine)

c) *I've chosen to use that platform to speak openly about my* ***bi-ness****, because of other people who may feel invisible and unsure of whether or not to come out as bisexual*. (NOW)

d) *And there she was, in her lowest of moments, suggesting the question that has always been the source of Veep's narrative momentum: Could Selina Meyer, yet again, stage a comeback? Season 6 premieres with a definitive answer: nope. Not for now, anyway. "Omaha" is set exactly one year after Selina's presidential loss, and it finds President Meyer, who is*

now more specifically ex-President Meyer, dealing with the assorted vagaries of her ***ex-ness***. (NOW)

e) *Met Gala commentary is the absolute pinnacle of red carpet fashion criticism. The regularly scorching critiques are only exceeded in their* ***extra-ness*** *by the audacious clothes on display*. (NOW)

f) *Residents exhibit symptoms of "psychic numbing" (loss of feelings, interest, concentration, faith, hope), depression,* ***hyper-ness****, sleeplessness, and anxiety triggered by recollections of the trauma*. (NOW)

g) *The* ***mega-ness*** *of Michael Jackson in 1985 is hard to overstate. On his way to being crowned the King of Pop, Jackson was much more than just a pop star; he was America's kindler and gentler, moonwalking ambassador to the world, a secular religious figure in the making*. (NOW)

h) *We enjoyed the* ***meta-ness*** *the scripts allowed, having marvelous actors telling a story set in the world of movie-making, leading to shooting our own brief film segment and projecting it live in widescreen at a critical story point*. (NOW)

i) *To promote Coke's new mini bottle in Israel, Gefen Team came up with a mini-me themed promotion that nicely encapsulated the* ***mini-ness*** *of the new bottle*. (Sketch Engine)

j) *But Lagos does have a quality for which "energy" is the most honest description. A dynamism. An absence of pallor. You can feel it in the uncomfortable humid air — the talent, the ingenuity, the bursting* ***multi-ness*** *of everything, the self-confidence of a city that knows it matters*. (NOW)

k) *I'd seen the term 'ethical non-monogamy' in a newspaper; I thought it sounded pompous and silly at first – almost a joke. We laughed. But we also immediately liked the '****non-ness****' of it – which is to say it doesn't quite announce what it is, but it announces what it is not*. (NOW)

l) *My understanding of this enduring ending is not the one to be found in the kind of writing and thinking which argues that South Africa is post-apartheid (and therefore history has become irrelevant, the "post-" erasing the responsibilities and formations of the past). […] There is also another kind of talk about endings with which I do not want to agree, which says that apartheid may have ended but nothing has changed, that the "****post-ness****" is somehow fake*. (NOW)

m) *Even though the Indian leadership is busy in a damage-control exercise, it has already exposed the* ***pseudo-ness*** *of its capacities to become a self-perceived regional power through the support of the US and other like-minded states*. (NOW)

n) *Holyrood is a quasi-federal parliament which exercises sovereignty, but only to the extent that Westminster allows it. That was Donald Dewar's*

*solution to the conundrum of how to allocate limited sovereignty to the Scottish parliament in a unitary state. This **quasi-ness** was supposed to have been addressed after the independence referendum….* (NOW)

o) *If you're looking for the ultimate in **retro-ness**, and wish to see what gaming was like back in the golden era, then make sure you hop on over to the Xbox Games Store and nab both World Heroes and Turf Masters immediately*. (iWeb)

p) *Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No, it's SuperDock! But what makes Sonnet's latest Thunderbolt 4 laptop docking station so super? The **super-ness** is not the 19 top-end ports, although these are certainly impressive. What makes the Sonnet Echo 20 Thunderbolt 4 SuperDock so super is its built-in M.2 NVMe SSD slot which means you can add up to 8TB of SSD storage to your system without connecting an external storage device to the dock or computer*. (NOW)

q) *For so long I'd remained silent. I was grappling with a lot of internalized shame. I chose not to lead with my **trans-ness** early on because I didn't see examples of a young trans woman out in the world accomplishing her dreams*. (iWeb)

r) *But in taking nearly every aspect of the phone to the extreme, Motorola lost one of the most important parts of recent Razrs: the amazing value. The catch for all this **ultra-ness**: the Motorola Razr Ultra costs $1,300*. (NOW)

s) *I had hoped, as a young man, I was in that tiny minority of my countrymen who weren't unAustralian. But now I know I am not. I am out of the closet and I feel a great freedom, as if a stone has been lifted from my chest. No more will I deny the **un-ness** that dare not speak its name. I'm an unAustralian*. (NOW)

t) *Stop seeking, stop searching, just be. And you will be surprised: the last stop is the self. It is a kind of feeling of **am-ness**, **is-ness** – but it too is just a last stop, not yet a home*. (Sketch Engine)

u) *For these people "somewhere else" does not exist. They don't even recognize their presence, their presence here and now mainly because they do not have a concept of there or a concept of then. They are just "are". They will always be "are". And it is their "**are-ness**" which does not allow them to have any will*. (NOW)

v) *The state in union with God is called Thuriya or Para-Avasta, and in this condition, though the conscious perception of the world and soul may not be possible, their **be-ness** (existence) is not gone*. (Sketch Engine)

w) *Our sense of "**could-ness**", as in "I could have not rescued the child from the burning orphanage", comes from our own decision-making algorithms labeling some end states as "reachable". If we wanted to achieve the world-state of the child being burned, there is a series of actions that would lead to that state*. (Sketch Engine)

x) *Baron von Hügel once said that religion is "an **is-ness** and not an **ought-ness**"*. (Sketch Engine)

y) *Let us concede that Dennis cannot validly persuade us, on any level, that it is fair for him to dictate terms and give himself the whole pie; but perhaps he could argue whether we should be fair? The hidden agenda of the whole discussion of fairness, of course, is that good-ness and right-ness and **should-ness**, ground out similarly to fairness*. (iWeb)

z) *Consequently, the function of doctrinal preaching is to ferry the truths of the "**was-ness**" of the Word from the shore of the ancient text to the shore of the "**is-ness**" of our contemporary world*. (Sketch Engine)

A broader look at these *-ness* formations reveals that while they are formally transparent (two easily identifiable morphs are combined into a single unit), many of them can be described as morphologically irregular since their initial morphs fall outside the established domains of bases with which *-ness* has been observed to combine. Despite their unusual and creative nature, these coinages are generally easy to interpret in context, which aligns with the semantic simplicity of *-ness* as a familiar and readily available means of forming abstract nouns in English.

A closer look at the provided examples reveals, on the one hand, the semantic diversity of the prefixal morphemes to which *-ness* attaches. Most of these cluster into a semantic class expressing quantity or degree, often with an evaluative attitude (*bi-*, *extra-*, *hyper-*, *mega-*, *mini-*, *multi-*, *super-*, *ultra-*). Another class comprises prefixes conveying temporal or spatial orientation (*ex-*, *meta-*, *post-*, *retro-*, *trans-*), with *meta-* also denoting change and, in modern usage, extending to transcendence or self-referentiality. A third group includes prefixes indicating opposition or negation (*anti-*, *non-*, *un-*) and a smaller set encodes the notions of falsehood (*pseudo-*) and partial resemblance (*quasi-*). On the other hand, as noted earlier, many of these morphemes can function as semantically related adjectives, which may help explain their use as bases for *-ness* suffixation. For instance, in sentence (h) above, *meta-ness* denotes the quality of being self-referential, that is, being *meta*, and can thus be interpreted as the result of attaching *-ness* to the adjective *meta* rather than to the corresponding prefix. Similarly, *anti-ness*, as used in sentence (a), denotes the quality of being opposed, a meaning also conveyed by the adjective *anti* (e.g. "the *anti*

group" (Merriam-Webster)), and can therefore be regarded as an 'adjective + *-ness*' derivative. Likewise, *mega-ness* in sentence (g) refers to the state of being great or impressive in scale, i.e. being *mega* (e.g. "a number one hit made her *mega*" (Merriam-Webster)), and hence can be described as a deadjectival *-ness* nominalization.

While such an interpretation is valid for many of the non-verb-containing *-ness* formations in our dataset, there are also some distinct examples. In this paper, special attention will be given to selected forms, including *post-ness* and *un-ness*. Their left-hand elements, *post-* and *un-*, respectively, cannot occur as independent lexemes with meanings similar to those they have as prefixal morphemes. These two coinages clearly illustrate the direct suffixation of *-ness* to a non-native (*post-*) and a native (*un-*) prefix.

The meaning of *post-ness* can be explained as the condition of being situated after or of having moved beyond a particular event or period, which in sentence (l) is apartheid. In this specific context, *post-* as a constituent of *post-ness* seems to have inherited the semantic content of the established prefixal derivative *post-apartheid*. Accordingly, *post-ness* can be regarded as contextually equivalent to *post-apartheidness*, while differing from it in foregrounding the meaning of *post-* and in its critical, evaluative tone.

The form *un-ness* can generally be glossed as the state or condition of being 'not X' or lacking a given property. As used in sentence (s), it refers specifically to the socially or culturally defined condition of being contrary to what represents Australian values or identity. Put differently, *un-ness* in this context denotes the condition of being *unAustralian*, where *Australian* is used in a qualitative sense, not as a geographic term (see Plag 2018: 34 on the use of *un-* with nationality adjectives). Thus, similarly to *post-* discussed above, *un-* in *un-ness*, as used here, appears to have acquired the semantic content of the prefixal derivative *unAustralian*, so that *un-ness* becomes contextually equivalent to *unAustralianness* but differs from it in placing greater emphasis on negation itself.

The analysis of *post-ness* and *un-ness* suggests that when *-ness* attaches to a prefix that cannot occur as an adjective with a closely related meaning, the prefix inherits the semantic content of a corresponding established prefixal derivative, supplied by context (*post-ness* = *post-apartheidness* in sentence (l), *un-ness* = *unAustralianness* in sentence (s)). It also suggests that such 'prefix + *-ness*' formations are highly abstract and underspecified out of context. By contrast, derivatives that can readily be analyzed as 'adjective + *-ness*' nominalizations, like *mega-ness*, *mini-ness*, *quasi-ness*, *retro-ness* or *super-ness*, tend to be less context-sensitive, particularly those whose first component encodes a quantitative property.

Another derivative that merits closer attention is *multi-ness*, used in sentence (j). It is formed by attaching *-ness* to the non-native prefix *multi-*, which, despite its substantial semantic load, is not attested as functioning also independently with a meaning directly related to its prefixal sense[3]. *Multi-ness* can generally be defined as the quality or state of having many components, aspects or dimensions, and in sentence (j) in particular, it conveys a sense of abundance and variety. Here, it is worth comparing *multi-ness* with *multitude* in terms of structure. The latter is morphologically analyzable into the elements *multi-* and *-tude*. Described as the equivalent of the native *-ness* (Etymonline), the non-native suffix *-tude* occurs primarily in loanwords from Latin or French (*altitude*, *exactitude*), which are typically deadjectival abstract nouns (The Free Dictionary) with lexicalized meanings. Thus, according to the morphological analysis of *multitude*, the element *multi-* emerges as a bound root. *Multi-ness*, therefore, can be regarded as the result of attaching *-ness* to a synchronically bound morpheme in English, whether analyzed as a prefix or as a bound root.

Two other forms that stand out from the rest are *bi-ness* and *trans-ness*. While *bi-* and *trans-* occur as non-native prefixes in English, they also function as clipped forms (*bi* and *trans*) of *bisexual* and *transgender*, respectively. Thus, as sentences (b), (c) and (q) illustrate, *bi-ness* is used to denote the state of being *bi*, i.e. *bisexual*, and *trans-ness* denotes the state of being *trans*, i.e. *transgender*. In sentence (b), *bi-ness* is described as "an in-between state", so that the meaning of bisexual identity is implied, but in sentence (c), this meaning is fully explicit. In brief, it appears that *bi-ness* and *trans-ness* have resulted from the suffixation of *-ness* to a clipping. Yet, in our view, these two coinages can also be used in much broader senses, beyond the sexual and gender domains, reflecting the meanings of the prefixes *bi-* and *trans-*. Consequently, their accurate interpretation relies on knowledge of the relevant clippings and on contextual cues. Similarly, *hyper-ness* may be derived from *hyper* as a shortening of the adjective *hyperactive* but the meaning of this *-ness* derivative also extends more broadly to denote excess or intensity – meanings associated with the prefix *hyper-*.

In our dataset, the verbal bases used for *-ness* suffixation are restricted to the verb *be*, most of its suppletive forms and a small set of modal auxiliaries in their historically past forms. Taken together, the resulting *-ness* formations nominalize states or domains associated with the meanings of the verbal bases. Thus, these coinages can be divided into two groups. The larger

[3] The form *multi* does occur independently in English but as a shortening of nouns or adjectives containing the prefix *multi-*, such as *multimillionaire*, *multivitamin*, *multinational* and others (OED).

group includes the items that denote existential states and are based on the verb *be* or one of its suppletive forms (*be-ness*, *am-ness*, *is-ness*, *are-ness*, *was-ness*). The smaller group comprises the forms that nominalize domains of modality, such as possibility or obligation, and are derived from modal verbs (*could-ness*, *ought-ness*, *should-ness*).

A closer semantic analysis reveals that while *be-ness* (sentence (v)), tends to denote existence in the most abstract and timeless sense, the use of a suppletive base (*am-ness*, *is-ness*, *are-ness*, *was-ness*) contributes more specific temporal or perspectival nuances to the existential meaning of the resulting *-ness* derivative. For instance, *am-ness* (sentence (t)) evokes an individual, first-person state of being; *are-ness* (sentence (u)) highlights collective existence; *is-ness* (sentences (x) and (z)) foregrounds an objective, third-person state of being; and *was-ness* (sentence (z)) encodes past existence.

Regarding the forms where *-ness* is directly attached to a modal verb (*could-ness*, *ought-ness*, *should-ness*), they could be hypothesized to reflect the ability of *-ness* to combine, albeit marginally, with function words – a class to which modal verbs belong.

As noted above, *-ness* is a neutral suffix in that its attachment does not trigger a stress shift or a morphophonological alternation within the base. This property largely accounts for the wide range of elements to which *-ness* can attach and the resulting formal transparency significantly contributes to the high productivity of the suffix. Owing to this productivity, *-ness* is readily involved in the formation of creative and expressive coinages, combining with unusual elements such as prefixes and verbal bases. In other words, *-ness* illustrates how a productive process extends into a creative one when a regular derivational operation is applied to an unusual base (see Mattiello 2013: 48). Additionally, the use of inverted commas around some of the *-ness* formations in our dataset is another indication that authors themselves perceive these items as innovative and diverging from the established patterns.

IV. Concluding remarks

This study has attempted to expand our knowledge of the combinatorial properties of the suffix *-ness* in contemporary English, highlighting its ability to attach directly to elements that fall outside the categories traditionally associated with this nominalizer. The paper has presented authentic examples along with their contextual excerpts, taken from large English corpora. Specifically, the analysis has shown that certain

prefixal morphemes and a limited number of verbs can be used as bases for the suffixation of *-ness*.

Although many of the collected *-ness* derivatives are creative formations, they are formally transparent and relatively easy to interpret in context, which reflects the semantic simplicity of *-ness* as a productive and accessible tool for abstract noun formation in English.

Forms such as *post-ness* and *un-ness*, where *-ness* combines with a prefix that cannot occur as an adjective with a similar sense, are underspecified and rely on context for their precise interpretation. By contrast, formations whose left-hand constituent can function both as a prefix and as a semantically related adjective (*mega-ness*, *mini-ness*, *retro-ness*, *super-ness*) tend to be less context-sensitive, especially those where the first element expresses quantity.

The attachment of *-ness* to the verb *be*, most of its suppletive forms and certain modal auxiliaries further illustrates the extended combinatorial potential of this suffix, allowing it to nominalize highly abstract concepts such as existence (*be-ness*) and modality (*should-ness*), the former often intertwined with temporal, perspectival or collective nuances (*is-ness* ~ *was-ness*, *am-ness*, *are-ness*).

Overall, the *-ness* formations presented in this paper serve as another illustration of how morphological productivity can give rise to creativity when a regular derivational process operates on an unusual base.

Finally, the findings of this study contribute to ongoing discussions of the combinatorial potential of derivational suffixes in present-day English.

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