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# PREFIXATION IN TERMINOLOGY: EVIDENCE FROM MEDICAL, TECHNICAL AND ECONOMIC TERMS

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**Abstract**

This article examines prefixation as a term-formation device and asks whether it behaves differently inside specialised vocabularies than it does in general language. Three domains supply the data: medicine, engineering and economics. The prefixes attested in each domain are inventoried, classified by origin and by function, and compared across the three fields. Three findings emerge. First, terminological prefixation is dominated by oppositional pairs — hyper- and hypo-, macro- and micro-, over- and under-, brady- and tachy- — which are rare in general vocabulary but serve the terminological requirement that a system of concepts be reflected in a system of designations. Second, the domains differ systematically in the resources they draw on: medicine relies on bound Greek and Latin formatives, engineering on quantitative and relational prefixes including the standardised SI series, and economics on process prefixes such as de-, re- and dis- that encode the direction of a change of state. Third, the category-preserving character of prefixation, usually treated as a peculiarity of the process, turns out to be its principal advantage in terminology: because the prefix leaves the head intact, a prefixed term maps directly onto the genus-differentia structure of a terminological definition. The article closes with the consequences of these findings for the standardisation of specialised vocabulary and for the treatment of borrowed prefixed terms in Uzbek, where such terms are normally adopted whole rather than calqued.

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**Keywords:** prefixation, terminology, term formation, medical terminology, technical terminology, economic terminology, neoclassical formatives, oppositional pairs, genus-differentia definition, standardisation.

## 1. Introduction

Terminology is the part of a language that carries the least redundancy. A term is expected to designate one concept, to do so unambiguously, and to display in its form the place that the concept occupies in a conceptual system. These requirements were formulated in the earliest systematic account of the field (Wüster, 1979) and they remain the working assumptions of most terminological practice today.

Word-formation is the mechanism through which these requirements are met. When a new concept has to be named, a language can borrow, it can extend the meaning of an existing word, or it can build a new lexeme from material it already has. The third route dominates in scientific and technical vocabularies, and within it affixation is the most frequent single device (Sager, 1990).

Prefixation occupies an unusual position within affixation. In general English it is the less prominent of the two affixal processes: prefixes rarely change word class, rarely shift stress, and rarely disturb the phonological shape of the stem, so their contribution is semantic rather than structural (Marchand, 1969; Bauer, 1983). In specialised vocabularies, however, prefixation is extremely visible. A page of a cardiology textbook, a datasheet for a microcontroller and a central bank report all contain a high density of prefixed terms, and in each case the prefixes appear to be doing something more systematic than modifying meaning at random.

This observation raises the questions the present article addresses. (i) Which prefixes are actually productive in specialised vocabularies, and do the three domains draw on the same inventory? (ii) What functions does prefixation perform in term formation that it does not perform, or performs less often, in

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general language? (iii) Does the well-known category-preserving character of prefixation help or hinder the construction of terminological systems?

The choice of three domains is deliberate. Medical terminology is the oldest of the three and the most thoroughly classical in its resources. Technical terminology is the most standardised, since part of its prefix inventory is fixed by international agreement. Economic terminology is the youngest and the closest to general vocabulary, since its terms circulate outside the specialist community. Comparing three fields that differ along these axes makes it possible to separate what belongs to prefixation in terminology as such from what belongs to the history of a particular discipline.

The article is organised as follows. Section 2 sets out the theoretical background. Section 3 describes the data and the procedure. Sections 4 to 6 present the prefix inventory of each domain in turn. Section 7 compares the three inventories. Section 8 discusses the findings, including their consequences for Uzbek terminological practice, and Section 9 concludes.

## 2. Theoretical background

Two research traditions meet in the subject of this article, and they have developed largely apart from each other.

The first is the morphological tradition. Marchand (1969) established the descriptive framework that later work assumes, treating word-formation as the study of syntagmas whose members stand in a determinant-determinatum relation. On that criterion a prefixed word patterns with expansions rather than with suffixed derivatives, because the base remains the head: rewrite is a kind of writing, whereas writer is not. Bauer (1983) supplied the classification of processes still in use and drew attention to neoclassical formations, in which both elements are bound and neither compounding nor affixation applies cleanly — a category of central importance for medical vocabulary. Plag (2003) added a quantitative dimension by measuring productivity through corpus evidence, and

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Lieber (2004) modelled the semantics of affixation through a small set of features shared by lexical items and affixes alike, which predicts a short semantic distance between a preposition and the corresponding prefix.

The second is the terminological tradition. Wüster (1979) treated the term as the designation of a position in a concept system and derived from that premise the requirements of monosemy, transparency and systematicity. Sager (1990) reframed these requirements as guidelines for term formation and showed that a well-formed term should permit the user to infer the concept from the form. Cabré (1999) qualified the prescriptive character of the classical approach by insisting that terms are linguistic units before they are anything else, and therefore obey the word-formation rules of the language rather than a separate terminological grammar. Temmerman (2000) went further, arguing from the sociocognitive position that terminological units are frequently polysemous and metaphorical, and that the classical requirements describe an ideal rather than an observed state.

The point at which the two traditions meet is the question of motivation. Morphology asks what a complex word can mean; terminology asks what it should mean. Prefixation is a good test case, because the semantic contribution of a prefix is usually narrow and stable, which is precisely what a terminological system requires. Ten Hacken (2015) makes the connection explicit, noting that the boundary between a term and a general-language word is not formal but depends on whether the item is used with reference to a delimited concept system. What neither tradition has examined in detail is whether the profile of prefixation changes when it is put to terminological use. That is the gap the present article addresses.

## 3. Data and procedure

The study is qualitative and inventory-based. For each of the three domains a list of prefixed terms was compiled from standard reference sources: for medicine, the vocabulary of internal medicine and clinical diagnosis; for engineering, the

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vocabulary of electronics, mechanics and computing, including the international system of unit prefixes; for economics, the vocabulary of macroeconomic policy, finance and international trade.

Three inclusion criteria were applied. First, the element in question had to be bound, which excludes first members of compounds such as data in data processing. Second, it had to attach to more than one base within the domain, which excludes elements that occur in a single lexicalised item. Third, the resulting term had to be current in professional use rather than historical.

Two classifications were then applied to each attested prefix. The first is by origin: Greek, Latin, native Germanic, or standardised international. The second is by function, using four categories established inductively from the material: quantitative prefixes, which specify degree or amount; spatial and relational prefixes, which specify position with respect to a reference point; temporal prefixes; and negative or reversative prefixes, which negate the base or reverse the process it denotes.

The counts reported below are counts of prefix types attested in the compiled inventories, not of tokens in a corpus. They therefore indicate the range of resources each domain draws on, not the frequency with which those resources are used. This is a limitation of the design and it is stated again in Section 8.

## 4. Prefixation in medical terminology

Medical vocabulary draws its prefixes almost entirely from Greek and Latin, and it uses them in a way that is unusually close to the terminological ideal.

The quantitative series is the most systematic part of the inventory. Hyper- and hypo- form a productive antonymic pair applied to a wide range of bases: hypertension and hypotension, hyperglycaemia and hypoglycaemia, hyperthyroidism and hypothyroidism, hyperkalaemia and hypokalaemia. The pair brady- and tachy- performs the same function for rate: bradycardia and tachycardia, bradypnoea and tachypnoea. Poly- and oligo- oppose abundance to

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scarcity in polyuria and oliguria, and macro- and micro- oppose size in macrocyte and microcyte.

The negative series is equally regular. The privative a- and its pre-vocalic variant an- produce anaemia, apnoea, anuria, asymptomatic and aphasia, while dys- marks disordered rather than absent function in dyspnoea, dysphagia and dysuria. The contrast between the two is systematic: an item with a- denotes absence, an item with dys- denotes impairment, and the pair anuria and dysuria illustrates the distinction precisely.

Spatial and relational prefixes are used to locate a process with respect to an anatomical reference. The series peri-, endo-, epi-, sub-, inter- and intra- is applied to the same bases repeatedly: pericarditis, endocarditis and myocarditis distinguish three layers of the same organ; epidural and subdural distinguish two sides of one membrane; intramuscular, intravenous and subcutaneous distinguish routes of administration. Temporal prefixes are fewer but productive: preoperative and postoperative, prenatal and postnatal, antenatal.

Two properties of this inventory deserve comment. The first is that the prefixes are not interchangeable with native equivalents. A clinician writes hypoglycaemia rather than low blood sugar not because the latter is unclear but because the former belongs to the system and the latter does not. The second is that the base is normally itself bound, so that hypertension and hypotension are built on a formative rather than on a free word. This is the neoclassical pattern identified by Bauer (1983), and it is the reason medical prefixation looks more regular than prefixation elsewhere: both members of the construction belong to a closed and codified inventory.

A boundary problem arises within this inventory. Elements such as cardio-, gastro-, nephro-, haemo- and osteo- occupy the same initial position as the prefixes discussed above and are frequently listed alongside them in medical dictionaries. They are not prefixes, however, but combining forms: they carry lexical rather than modifying content, they can occupy either position in a

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compound as in gastroenterology and enterogastric, and two of them can combine without any further base, as in cardiomyopathy. The distinction matters for the argument of Section 8, because a combining form names the entity while a true prefix names the property predicated of it, and only the second reproduces the genus-differentia structure of a definition.

## 5. Prefixation in technical terminology

Technical vocabulary presents a different profile. Part of its prefix inventory is not merely conventional but formally standardised, and the rest is drawn from a mixture of Latin and native sources.

The standardised part is the series of decimal multiples and submultiples used with units of measurement: kilo-, mega-, giga-, tera- on one side and milli-, micro-, nano-, pico- on the other. These are prefixes in the morphological sense — they are bound, they attach to more than one base, and they do not change word class — but they differ from all others discussed here in that their meaning is fixed by international agreement rather than by usage. A kilometre is a thousand metres by definition, and no drift of meaning is possible while the standard holds. This is the closest approximation in any natural language to the terminological ideal of complete monosemy.

The remainder of the inventory is conventional. Quantitative and evaluative prefixes appear in supersonic and subsonic, superconductor and semiconductor, overvoltage and undervoltage, overload and underload. Relational prefixes are frequent in the vocabulary of computing and control: interface, interlock, interconnect on one side, and intranet, intramodular on the other. Multi- is highly productive in multiplexer, multicore, multithreading and multimeter, and micro- functions in this domain not as a unit prefix but as an evaluative one in microprocessor, microcontroller and microcircuit.

The reversative series is the most characteristic feature of technical prefixation. De- reverses a process in demodulator, decompression, decoupling and

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deburring; re- repeats it in rectifier, reboot and recalibration; and non- negates a property in non-linear, non-destructive, non-volatile and non-return valve. Auto- marks self-directed operation in autopilot, autoignition and autofocus. Anti- and counter- mark opposition in anti-lock, anti-corrosion, counterweight and countershaft.

Where medical prefixation attaches classical prefixes to classical bases, technical prefixation typically attaches a prefix of any origin to a free English word: overvoltage, non-destructive and multicore all have transparent free bases. The consequence is that technical terms are more easily read by non-specialists than medical terms of comparable complexity, and correspondingly more exposed to semantic drift once they pass into general use, as microprocessor and interface both have.

The standardised series also illustrates a constraint that operates in terminology but not in general morphology. SI prefixes may not be stacked: a thousand kilograms is a megagram, never a kilokilogram, and the rule is explicit in the standard rather than emergent from usage. General English imposes no such restriction, which is why re-re-examine and great-great-grandfather are possible. The contrast shows that standardisation can add rules to a word-formation process as well as fix the meaning of its elements, and it explains why the SI series behaves more regularly than any other prefix set examined in this study.

## 6. Prefixation in economic terminology

Economic vocabulary is the least classical of the three and the closest to general language, and its prefix inventory reflects both facts.

The most visible pair is macro- and micro-, which does not specify size here but partitions the discipline itself: macroeconomics and microeconomics denote two levels of analysis rather than two magnitudes. The same pair recurs in macroprudential and microfinance, in each case marking the level at which a

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phenomenon is observed. This is a specifically terminological use, since neither member has this sense outside the field.

The process series is the most productive part of the inventory and the most characteristic of the domain. De- marks a reversal or reduction in deregulation, devaluation, deflation, deleveraging and dollarisation reversed as de-dollarisation; re- marks restoration or repetition in reflation, refinancing, reinvestment and restructuring; and dis- marks the negative counterpart of an established process in disinvestment, disinflation and disintermediation. The three prefixes are not synonymous, and the near-minimal triple deflation, disinflation and reflation shows the distinctions clearly: deflation is a fall in the price level, disinflation is a slowing of its rise, and reflation is a deliberate policy of raising it again. A vocabulary that expresses three distinct concepts through three prefixes on one base is doing exactly what terminological systematicity requires.

The evaluative pair over- and under- is equally productive: overproduction and underproduction, overvaluation and undervaluation, overemployment and underemployment, overwriting and underwriting. Negative prefixes appear in non-performing loan, non-tariff barrier and non-resident, and oppositional ones in antitrust, anti-dumping and countercyclical. Relational prefixes appear in interbank, intermediation, intra-industry trade and transnational, while co- marks shared liability in co-insurance, co-payment and co-financing. Temporal prefixes are frequent in the language of taxation and accounting: pre-tax and post-tax, ex-ante and ex-post.

Two features distinguish this inventory. First, the bases are almost always free words in common use, so an economic term is formally transparent to a lay reader even when its technical content is not: a reader who does not know what disinflation means will nonetheless parse it correctly as a negative counterpart of inflation. Second, several of these prefixes carry an evaluative charge that a terminological system would ideally exclude. Overvaluation and undervaluation

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are not neutral descriptions but judgements relative to an assumed correct value, which is a case of the polysemy and perspective-dependence that Temmerman (2000) identified as normal rather than exceptional in real terminologies.

A further property distinguishes economic terminology from the other two domains: its terms circulate outside the specialist community. Deregulation, devaluation and subprime appear in newspapers, and their prefixes remain transparent there. The consequence is a two-way influence. On one side, a prefix that becomes familiar through economic reporting is then reused for new coinages, which is how de- acquired its current productivity in de-risking and de-globalisation. On the other, terms lose precision as they spread: recession has a technical definition, whereas deflation is used loosely in journalism for any fall in prices. Neither process occurs to the same degree in medical or technical vocabulary, where the term rarely leaves the domain in which it was coined.

## 7. Comparison of the three domains

Table 1 sets out the oppositional pairs attested in each domain. The pattern is the clearest single result of the study.

Table 1. Oppositional prefix pairs by domain

| Opposition | Medicine | Engineering | Economics |
|---|---|---|---|
| degree | hyper- / hypo- | over- / under- | over- / under- |
| size or level | macro- / micro- | macro- / micro- | macro- / micro- |
| rate | brady- / tachy- | — | — |
| amount | poly- / oligo- | multi- / mono- | — |
| position | endo- / ecto-, intra- / inter- | intra- / inter- | intra- / inter- |
| time | pre- / post- | pre- / post- | pre- / post-, ex-ante / ex-post |
| direction of process | — | de- / re- | de- / re-, dis- / re- |

Source: compiled by the author

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Three oppositions are shared by all three domains: level, position and time. One is confined to medicine, where the rate of a physiological process must be named constantly. One is confined to engineering and economics, where processes are reversed and restarted rather than merely observed. The distribution is not accidental: it follows the kinds of concept each discipline needs to name.

Table 2 classifies the attested prefixes by origin.

Table 2. Origin of the prefixes attested in each domain

| Origin | Medicine | Engineering | Economics |
|---|---|---|---|
| Greek | dominant | limited | limited |
| Latin | frequent | frequent | dominant |
| Native Germanic | absent | frequent (over-, under-, by-) | frequent (over-, under-) |
| Standardised international | absent | present (SI series) | absent |

Source: compiled by the author

Table 3 classifies them by function and reports the number of prefix types attested in each cell of the inventory compiled for this study.

Table 3. Functional classes and number of prefix types attested

| Functional class | Medicine | Engineering | Economics |
|---|---|---|---|
| Quantitative | 8 | 11 | 5 |
| Spatial and relational | 7 | 5 | 5 |
| Temporal | 3 | 2 | 4 |
| Negative and reversative | 4 | 5 | 4 |
| Total types attested | 22 | 23 | 18 |

Source: compiled by the author from the inventories described in Section 3

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The totals are close, but the internal distribution differs. Medicine concentrates its resources on the quantitative and the spatial, which is what a discipline organised around measurement and anatomy requires. Engineering has the widest quantitative range because the SI series is counted here. Economics has the flattest profile and the largest temporal set, which reflects a discipline in which the timing of an observation relative to a policy is itself a technical distinction.

## 8. Discussion

The first finding is that oppositional pairing is the organising principle of terminological prefixation. In general English, prefixes that form neat antonymic pairs are the exception; pre- and post- are one of few clear cases, and un- has no positive counterpart at all. In the three specialised inventories examined here, pairing is the norm. The reason is functional. A terminological system is a system of concepts before it is a system of words, and where two concepts stand in a symmetrical opposition, a symmetrical pair of designations makes the relation visible in the form. This is the requirement Wüster (1979) called systematicity, and prefixation satisfies it more economically than any other word-formation device.

The second finding concerns the division of labour between domains. Medicine draws on a closed classical inventory attached to classical bases; engineering combines standardised, Latinate and native prefixes attached to free English words; economics relies on process prefixes attached to free words in common use. The three profiles correspond to three different balances between precision and accessibility. Medical terms are maximally precise and minimally accessible; economic terms are the reverse; technical terms occupy the middle. Sager (1990) predicted this trade-off from the communicative situation of each field, and the prefix inventories confirm it.

The third finding is the most theoretically interesting. Prefixation is category-preserving: hypertension remains a noun, non-linear remains an adjective,

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deregulate remains a verb. In general morphology this property is usually presented as a limitation, since it makes prefixation less powerful than suffixation. In terminology it is an advantage, and a decisive one. A terminological definition is conventionally built as a genus with a differentia — a superordinate concept plus the feature that distinguishes the concept being defined. A prefixed term reproduces that structure directly: the base names the genus and the prefix names the differentia. Bradycardia is a cardiac rhythm (genus) that is slow (differentia); a microprocessor is a processor that is small; disinflation is a change in inflation that is negative in direction. Suffixation cannot do this, because it replaces the head. Prefixation is therefore not a weaker form of affixation in terminology but the form that matches the structure of terminological definition.

A qualification follows from Cabré (1999) and Temmerman (2000). Terms obey the word-formation rules of the language they belong to, and they are used by people rather than by systems. Several of the prefixed terms examined here are not monosemous: micro- means one millionth in microsecond, small in microprocessor and low-level in microeconomics, and the three senses coexist without difficulty because the domain disambiguates. Over- and under- in economics carry an evaluative component that the classical model would exclude. The systematicity described above is therefore a tendency in real terminologies rather than a property of them.

A consequence follows for Uzbek terminological practice. Uzbek has no prefixes of Turkic origin and acquired its small prefix inventory by borrowing from Persian and later Russian. Prefixed specialised terms are therefore normally adopted whole rather than calqued: gipertoniya, gipotenziya, mikroprotsessor, makroiqtisodiyot, deflyatsiya, reinvestitsiya. This has one clear benefit and one clear cost. The benefit is that the international form is preserved, so the term is recognisable across languages and the opposition encoded in the prefix travels with it. The cost is that the opposition is invisible to an Uzbek speaker who does

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not know the source language: gipertoniya and gipotoniya differ by two letters in the middle of an opaque word, whereas in a language with a productive native prefix the contrast would be carried by a meaningful element. Where a native equivalent is available, as with the pair bepul and pulsiz on the base pul, Uzbek word-formation shows that it specialises rather than remaining synonymous, which suggests that calquing a prefixal opposition wholesale into Uzbek would not reproduce the symmetry of the source.

Three limitations should be stated. First, the study is inventory-based, so it establishes the range of prefixes available in each domain but not the frequency with which they are used; a corpus study measuring productivity by the method of Baayen (2009) or Plag (2003) would answer the frequency question. Second, the three domains were represented by the vocabulary of their core subfields, and a different selection — surgery rather than internal medicine, civil engineering rather than electronics — might shift the counts. Third, the analysis is confined to English, and the Uzbek observations in the preceding paragraph are drawn from the treatment of borrowed terms rather than from an independent Uzbek inventory.

## 9. Conclusion

Prefixation behaves differently in specialised vocabularies than it does in general language, and the difference is systematic rather than incidental. Three results support this conclusion.

Terminological prefixation is organised around oppositional pairs. Where general English uses prefixes chiefly for unpaired semantic modification, medicine, engineering and economics all use them to encode symmetrical conceptual oppositions of degree, level, position, time and direction of process, because a system of concepts is best reflected in a system of designations.

The three domains draw on different resources in proportion to their communicative situation. Medicine uses a closed classical inventory on bound

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classical bases, engineering combines standardised and native prefixes on free English bases, and economics uses process prefixes on words in common circulation. The resulting terms differ correspondingly in precision and in accessibility to non-specialists.

The category-preserving character of prefixation, ordinarily treated as a weakness of the process, is its principal strength in term formation, because a prefixed term reproduces in its form the genus-differentia structure of a terminological definition.

These results have a practical bearing on standardisation. Where a new concept stands in a symmetrical opposition to an existing one, a prefixed designation on the same base will make the relation visible and should be preferred to an unrelated coinage. For Uzbek and other languages without a productive native prefix inventory, the same reasoning supports the wholesale adoption of the international prefixed form rather than partial calquing, since a half-translated term loses the symmetry without gaining transparency.

Two directions remain open for further work. A corpus-based measurement of prefix productivity within each domain would convert the type counts reported here into frequency data. And a comparable inventory built directly on Uzbek specialised texts would establish how far borrowed prefixed terms have become morphologically analysable for Uzbek speakers, which is ultimately an empirical question about the users of the terminology rather than about its form.

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