

Feeling Incalcitrant?

Jeffrey K. Parrott
Georgetown University

The word *incalcitrant* is often used in Modern English, and is understood by native speakers to mean something like 'stubborn,' 'resistant,' 'uncooperative' (a Google search on *incalcitrant* brought 193 results, all with this meaning). Yet *incalcitrant* does not appear in any dictionaries that I have consulted. *Incalcitrant* appears to be related to the word *recalcitrant*, whose Webster's (Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1991) definition is as follows:

1. Obstinate defiant of authority or restraint
2. a: Difficult to manage or operate b: Not responsive to treatment
3. Resistant

This is the same definition as *incalcitrant*, so why the new word? Are Modern English speakers stupid, or ignorant, or what? Is English in danger? Is the language decaying? Can a word that is used by native speakers 'not exist'? Where did *incalcitrant* come from, and why is it used by Modern English speakers?

According to Webster's, *recalcitrant* comes from the Late Latin word *recalcitrant-*, *recalcitrans*, 'to be stubbornly disobedient,' derived from Latin *re-* + *calcitrant*, 'to kick back.' The prefix comes from the Latin *re-*, *red-* which means 'back, again, against.' The root comes from Latin *calcitrare*, 'to kick,' from *calc-*, *calx* 'heel.'

In Modern English, *re-* is a highly productive prefix that means 'again,' e.g. *reconsider* 'to consider again.' (The prefix also has the possibly non-productive meaning of 'back.' Webster's provides the example *recall* 'to call back.' I can't come up with any more.)

Of course, the word *calcitrant* no longer has its Latin meaning of 'to kick.' In fact, it doesn't mean anything in Modern English. *Calcitrant* is a bound root--it never appears independently, but only in combination with the prefix *re-*, where the (entire) word has the meanings shown above.

So how does a naïve Modern English speaker (that is, a native speaker unarmed with linguistics, dictionary entries, or knowledge of Latin) analyze the word *recalcitrant* when they encounter it in everyday (or more likely written) usage? Morphologically, the word looks like it ought to mean '*calcitrant* again,' but it's used to mean 'stubborn, etc.' That meaning doesn't have anything to do with 'again,' and *calcitrant* has no meaning at all to modern speakers. Therefore the morphological form of *recalcitrant* is totally opaque--there is no apparent connection between its constituent morphemes (*re-* and *-calcitrant*) and its meaning ('stubborn, etc.').

Because of its opacity, the word *recalcitrant* has been morphologically reanalyzed by Modern English speakers. The word's constituent morpheme *-calcitrant* is reanalyzed according to its semantic context. Since *recalcitrant* always means 'stubborn, etc.' -

calcitrant is taken to mean something along the lines of 'cooperative, tractable, easily resolvable.' Note that this semantic reanalysis does not affect *-calcitrant's* morphological status as a bound root. No back-formation has occurred (yet), and *-calcitrant* does not appear independently (confirmed by a Google search).

If *-calcitrant* means 'cooperative, etc.' than *recalcitrant* should mean 'cooperative, etc. again.' But the word is never used with that meaning. A native speaker hears the bound root *-calcitrant* only when it is associated with the opposite meaning 'stubborn, etc.' A natural expression of 'stubborn, etc.' is 'not cooperative, etc.' So the native English speaker needs to derive a word with the meaning 'not cooperative, etc.' from a bound root *-calcitrant* meaning 'cooperative, etc.'

Enter the next constituent, the semi-productive prefix *in-*. This prefix means 'non-, not' and has phonologically conditioned variants. If you care about such stuff, they are: *il-* before /l/, e.g. *illogical, illiterate*; *ir-* before /r/, e.g. *irretrievable*; *im-* before labials, e.g. *immaterial, impatient*; variably realized as /ng/ before velars, e.g. *incomplete* /ingkompli/ or /inkomplit/; *in-* before all other phoneme classes, e.g. *intolerant, indecent, infirm, insincere, inhuman, injudicious, inadvisable, etc.*

The prefix *in-* comes to English from an identical Latin prefix with the same meaning. It coexists in Modern English with another prefix *un-*, which comes from Old English, not Latin. These two prefixes have the same meaning 'non-, not,' e.g. *uninteresting, unthinkable*. (There is also a homophonous prefix *un-* meaning 'reverse,' e.g. *untie*.) The difference between them? *in-* may attach only to Latinate vocabulary, e.g. **ininteresting, *inthinkable*, while *un-* attaches primarily to non-Latinate vocabulary including new and borrowed words, e.g. *unhip, *inhip*. Thus in Modern English *un-* is a much more productive suffix.

Summarizing, naïve Modern English speakers encounter the opaque *recalcitrant*, with the meaning 'stubborn, etc.' They semantically reanalyze *-calcitrant* as meaning something like 'cooperative, etc.' and replace the semantically unrelated prefix *re-* with the semantically relevant negating prefix *in-*. This yields the fully transparent new word *incalcitrant*, meaning 'stubborn, etc.,' literally 'not cooperative, etc.' The reanalyzed derivation of *incalcitrant* seems clear enough, and it should dispel any notion that English speakers are stupid or ignorant. The successful reanalysis of *recalcitrant* requires sophisticated (unconscious!) knowledge of morpho-lexical semantics, morphological constituency, morphotactics, and morphophonology (this latter because English speakers never mistakenly use the wrong variant of *in-*, e.g. **ilcalcitrant, *ircalcitrant, *imcalcitrant*).

One question remains: why is the less productive prefix *in-* used instead of the fully productive prefix *un-*? That is, why don't we ever see **uncalcitrant* (a Google search on this non-word brought back one single result, compared with 193 results for *incalcitrant*)? The answer is simple, but has a fascinating implication. As noted above, the prefix *in-* attaches to Latinate vocabulary. Because *-calcitrant* is a Latin root, it will be negated with *in-* and not *un-*. But that means that naïve Modern English speakers have

unconscious knowledge about the Latinate/non-Latinate distinction in their vocabulary items! They retain this knowledge in spite of the fact that the Latin meaning of *-calcitrant* is not only lost, but changed in the reanalysis. So speakers of Modern English are much smarter than they are portrayed by prescriptivists and their ilk. The English language is in no danger of decay, whatever that would mean.