

## **Precariat, Precariousness, Precarity: A Linguistic Analysis of Insecurity of Life and Employment**

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### **Abstract**

In an influential work, the philosopher Judith Butler has tackled the issue of "linguistic survival" concerning individuals injured by speech, highlighting that the act of "surviving takes place in language" (Butler, 1997: 4). Moreover, in the interview by Eliza Kania, she has focused on gender disparity and on how this term effects vulnerability and social change: in particular, she has noted that "precariousness is a general feature of embodied life, a dimension of our corporeality and sociality. And precarity is a way that precariousness is amplified or made more acute under certain social policies. So precarity is induced" (Butler, 2013). As regards these terms, they both stem from the lexeme 'precariat', a concept according to the economist Guy Standing that is to be referred to as "a harbinger of the Good Society of the twenty-first century" (2011: vii). Precariat in his stance has in fact become "global" (2011: 1) and should be even defined a "*class-in-the-making*" (Standing, 2011: 7). From a linguistic approach the term precariat appears to cover a broad category of meanings: it was coined in mid seventeenth century, originated from the Latin 'prēcārius', and is linked to 'precārī', in English to 'pray', as obtained from 'prex' that is 'entreaty, prayer' (Online Etymology Dictionary; English-word Information). Whereas 'precarity' is mostly utilised in sociology, 'precariat' and its related forms 'precariously' and 'precariousness' are generally used in legal, political, economic, and other contexts. The lexical features of the aforementioned terms are thus analysed, on the one hand by looking up their meaning in the standard English language dictionaries such as Collins Dictionary, Oxford Reference, Lexico.com. On the other hand, a selection of the occurrences retrieved from two language corpora, namely the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) are examined, along with some language variation occurrences from CORE: Corpus of Online Registers of English, aiming to discuss the implications of their linguistic use (and usage) when dealing with the process of translating from the English into Italian language texts.

**Keywords:** Disparity, Language, Linguistic Approach, Precarity, Vulnerability

### **Introduction: Life's Precariousness, Precarity and the Precariat**

The issue of 'linguistic survival', which refers to individuals injured by speech, is discussed by the philosopher Judith Butler stressing how this act is plainly enacted through language (1997: 4). Considering the interrelation between body and speech, Butler also explains the forms of addressing the body that entail alternate menace and support (1997: 5). Thus, epitomising the metaphor whereby 'linguistic injury acts like physical injury', Butler points out the shift that occurs when an individual is addressed by the other's injurious statements: his/her 'body'<sup>1</sup> is brought into social life by 'the interpellation'<sup>2</sup> that renders the individual's subject conventionally dependent on 'the Other' and socially distinguishable. Interpellations are embodied in the 'process of subject-formation' (1997: 153) and constitute a ritual, which socially takes place in the hate speech: this affects the individuals' reputation and effects 'the linguistic conditions of survivable subjects' (1997: 4-5). Accordingly, the subject is involved by language preceding and exceeding his/her own living experience, thus taking the risk of losing control over the unrestrained history of language constructs developed in complex structures which would determine the subject to survive or die (1997: 28). This entails the subject reacting against the effects of detrimental language by means of an argumentative response, inasmuch as inevitable: the counterpart's reaction thus epitomises 'a risk taken in response to being put at risk' (1997: 163). Moreover, the reaction is addressed in a 'mode' unavoidably become an 'obligation' as the subject is involved by the Other not just with the aim

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<sup>1</sup> Butler spells out Pierre Bourdieu's conception of the body as linked to speech: 'Bodies are formed by social norms, but the process of that formation runs its risk' (1997: 156). Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, Edited and Introduced by John B. Thompson, Translated by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson. (Polity Press, 1991). Butler also deals with Shoshana Felman's view: 'Speech is bodily, but the body exceeds the speech it occasions; and speech remains irreducible to the bodily means of its enunciation' (1997: 155-156). Cf. Shoshana Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body, Don Juan with J L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Butler refers to Louis Althusser's conception of 'interpellation'. Cf. Louis Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. In: *Lenin and Philosophy*, transl. by Ben Brewster. (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 170-86.

to restore its good reputation: in this respect, Butler spells out the obligation is due to a necessary 'consideration of the structure of address itself' (2004: 129) which should not be left out.

However, the ethical individual's responsibility is also involved in the issues concerning 'precarious life' as well as 'the interdiction on violence'. To explain how to interrupt the predominance in favour of the understanding of life's precariousness, Butler draws upon the concept discussing the 'face' of the Other developed by Emmanuel Levinas (Butler 2004: xvii-xviii), which is based on the ethical principle stating that 'the other's right to exist has primacy over my own'<sup>3</sup>. In this regard, the statement clearly expresses the necessity to consider "[t]he face as the extreme precariousness of the other", in order to raise the awareness of how precarious life is, for the Other as well as 'of life itself' (Butler 2004: 134).

Moreover, interviewed by Eliza Kania, Butler discusses the implications linked to gender disparity reflecting on the effects of social change and epitomising the life's vulnerability and instability led by an increasing group of workers, due to anti-democratic forms of nationalism, as well as to privatisation laws in the field of labour market. In this respect, Butler focuses on the distinction between the concept of 'precariousness', that she deems 'a general feature of embodied life, a dimension of our corporeality and sociality', and 'precarity', which she considers 'a way that precariousness is amplified or made more acute under certain social policies' (R/evolution 2013: 33). On such premise, Butler states that 'precarity is induced'. Whereas, in defining the precariat, in her view the concept should be seen as semantically separated from that of the proletariat (R/evolution 2013: 33), by considering a shift in meaning of the term precariat if compared to the original use, which was lexicalised as a blend stemming from the lexemes 'precarious' and 'proletariat'. In fact, Butler associates the precariat with an

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<sup>3</sup> Butler draws upon Emmanuel Levinas's concepts of 'the face' and 'the Other'. Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, and Richard Kearney, *Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas*, in *Face to Face with Levinas*. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), pp. 23-4.

emerging 'social phenomenon' denoting a society wherein precarious labour conditions have developed and turned into an established practice. The precariat thus consists of a community characterised by an increasing range of individuals sharing the same position for whom 'labor is considered dispensable': persons being 'targeted by war' and 'living in regions that have been decimated by development' are numbered among this particular group (R/evolution 2013: 34).

### **Lexical and Semantic Features of 'The Precariat' and 'Precariat'**

According to the British economist Guy Standing 'the precariat' is 'a harbinger of the Good Society of the twenty-first century' and has become a globalised phenomenon (2011: vii). It results from the policies of neoliberalism adopted by The UK and The USA aiming at productivity and prosperity based on the employment model, whose tenets around the concept of flexible labour market act in the name of the ideal of competitive market (2011: 1). By analysing this phenomenon, Standing elaborates 'an agenda for the precariat' (2014: Preface): in particular, he associates 'the precariat' with the status of 'denizens' and spells out their related connotative meaning from the denotative content. Standing discusses the precariat from a political and socioeconomic view and deems it 'an emerging class' living in constant insecurity disconnected from the traditional labour norms (2014: §I). Correspondingly, he carries out an in-depth analysis of the several forms of precariat and firstly explores denizenship, which historically entailed an 'in-between' social rank whereby a denizen, deemed an 'alien', would advance eventually, 'from being an outsider to a partial insider, with some rights'. On this premise, 'a denizen was usually denied political rights, but was granted designated economic rights'. Nowadays, immigrants are still denied rights, the first being citizenship, which is not granted automatically to those legally residing in the country of immigration (Standing 2014: §I) and they have to meet specific criteria to apply for it. Denizenship differs from citizenship inasmuch as a resident is a 'non-citizen' with a duty-based rather than right-based status. The conception of 'denizens' in-betweenness' is also discussed by H elene Oger in her analysis of

social and human rights, which are denied to immigrants aspiring to citizenship in western European countries. They are subjected to disparaging laws, by residing in the country of immigration to the extent that their permanence turns a 'temporary derogation into the rule'. Due to their social and professional position, they carry the derogatory connotation of 'outsiders-inhabitants' (2003: §I), and the first inequity they face is that they live and work in a country 'as permanent residents' rather than 'as citizens' (Oger 2003: §III).

The policy of workfare is also deemed to play a crucial role in the increase of the precariat as favoured by a large consensus from different political ideologies: workfare appears to be responsible for the growth of social and economic inequality and insecurity. In fact, unemployed and unprotected categories of citizens, immigrants, and vulnerable people have access to welfare benefits on the condition that they are subjected to the government programme whereby labour is compulsory (Standing 2014: Art. 20). In this sense, labour is seen as a duty rather than a right an individual should have.

From a different viewpoint, the term 'precariat' is discussed by the British sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman and considered 'a social category'. Interviewed in 2013 by Eliza Kania for the Journal R/evolution, Bauman did not judge, the similarities individuals may share according to their personal, social and working history, an applicable criterion to turn them into a class characterised by a community coordinating their actions engaged in the process of integrating with the same interest and purpose. In his view, 'precariat' is the category originated from a combination of two factors: deregulating the labour market and acting in favour of individualisation, upheld by employers who take advantage of the deregulation in their business to the detriment of workers' welfare. In so doing, they render 'the plight of employees dependent on the abilities and resources at the disposal of an individual' (R/evolutions 2013: 26-27).

Correspondingly, investigating the contemporary social stratification, Jon-Arild Johannessen's analysis identifies a typology of precariat which he divides into four categories, whereof the first, 'underemployed', is made up of professionals: they are usually 'hired on short-term contracts' when needed, and accept extra work, mainly unrewarded, hoping for advancement and waiting for an available permanent position (2019: 4). The second category, 'underpaid', consists instead in skilled but inexperienced workers incapable to get lucrative positions. As to the third, 'knowledge entrepreneurs' are Master- or PhD-educated experts having had lucrative positions and subsequently working with short-term contracts by selling their professional experience, although their earnings are inferior to those they would receive if they were employed by the same organisation. The fourth category, 'vagabond workers', are educated or skilled although they are immigrants or bear disabilities: akin to the 'knowledge entrepreneurs' the 'vagabond workers' are pleased with their working conditions, as they feel they were given the opportunity to move to another country and work (2019: 5). From these assumptions, Johannessen points out that

'precariat is not yet a class with a shared ideology. Rather it is made up of isolated individuals who sit on the side-lines of society peering into a world populated by successful people' (2019: 6).

Hence, taking the different viewpoints into account, it could be stated that the concept of precariat involves individuals sharing the position of a constant uncertainty and reflecting a social and professional status of in-betweenness in countries who do not acknowledge their rights as for the other citizens. From a linguistic point of view, the lexeme 'precariat' is by definition a derived form of the adjective 'precarious'. Namely 'precarious' would first appear in 1646 and was used in legal contexts, to mean "[h]eld by the favour and at the pleasure of another": originated from the Latin, 'prēcārius' derives from 'prec-ārīus', the stem being in English to 'pray', obtaining 'prec-em' that is 'entreaty, prayer' (Oxford English Dictionary 2nd

Edition 2009)<sup>4</sup>. The noun 'precariat' is mainly found in social contexts: in Collins Dictionary, for instance, it refers to 'the class of people in society who lack a reliable long-term source of income, such as permanent employment', and it is defined as a blend of two stems, the lexemes 'precarious' and 'proletariat'<sup>5</sup>. Lexico.com provides similar information by analysing precariat semantically as a blend having been used since 1980s<sup>6</sup>. Interestingly, in the MacMillan Dictionary, the entry precariat is seen as a concept focusing on 'a social group in advanced western societies consisting of people whose lives are difficult because they have little or no job security and few employment rights'. Moreover, 'the precariat' is the form categorised in the Buzzwords, in that stemming from jargon, become fashionable and hence used by the media, by bearing the meaning of 'a new social class': it dates back to 1980s as a derived form of precarious. It is identified as a neologism appearing to be firstly used by 'French sociologists', then borrowed from French 'précariat', in the form of a loan translation, translated into Italian 'preariato', German 'Prekariat', and recently English 'precariat', and utilised in informal register<sup>7</sup> namely as social, economic, jargon.

It might be also argued that 'precariat' is a semantic field linked to 'precariousness' by a hierarchical sense relation, which concerns the different aspects of life and working conditions reflecting people's state of 'precarity'. Hence, considering precariousness as superordinate and quoting Standing's analysis, hyponyms would be the main features analytically dealt with: 'precariousness of residency', precariousness 'of labour and work', precariousness 'of social protection', namely the innermost features resulting from 'societal transformations' (2011: 3) which affect unemployed, unprotected and vulnerable people by depriving them of their human rights.

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<sup>4</sup> John Simpson, *Oxford English Dictionary*, OED. (2nd Edition, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Collins Dictionary <<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/precariat>> [Accessed 23/09/2020].

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Lexico.com* <<https://www.lexico.com/definition/precariat>> [Accessed 23/09/2020].

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *MacMillan Dictionary* <<https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/the-precariat?q=precariat>> [Accessed 23/09/2020].

With regard to variation and frequency of use in large language corpora, for instance, it can be noted that no occurrences are retrieved from the British National Corpus (henceforth BNC)<sup>8</sup>, whereas seventeen appear in The Corpus of Contemporary American English (henceforth COCA)<sup>9</sup>, along with the sixty-seven found in The Coronavirus Corpus<sup>10</sup>. Seen as Key Word in Context (KWIC), 'the precariat' is used in all the aforementioned occurrences as synonym of 'class' or 'social state' in sociological, economic and political contexts. It is noteworthy that, in the Coronavirus Corpus, 'precariat' is once used in attributive position as a modifier of the compound in 'poverty and precariat situation', stemming from a comment to a letter of the Daily Blog as follows: 'the low waged poverty and precariat situation, like the situation where many migrants come from now'<sup>11</sup>.

### **Lexical and Semantic Features of 'Precariousness' and 'Precarity'**

As defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (henceforth OED), the noun 'precariousness' is another derived form of the adjective 'precarious' stemming from the Latin, 'precārius': it is principally synonym of 'insecure', 'unstable', 'uncertain'. Precariousness is thus synonymous with 'uncertainty' and even 'weakness', as referring to '[t]he quality or condition of being *precarious*: in various senses of the adj.; esp. insecurity, liability to fail' (2nd edition 2009). The term usually concerns life's conditions which reflect the persistence of physical and psychological fragility and insecurity, by affecting the individual's identity who mainly

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. The British National Corpus BNC, 'a 100-million-word collection of samples of written and spoken [...] British English from the later part of the 20th century'. It is made up of 'extracts from regional and national newspapers, specialist periodicals and journals' as well as 'academic books and popular fiction' etc. <<https://www.english-corpora.org/bnc/>> [Accessed 23/09/2020].

<sup>9</sup> Cf. The Corpus of Contemporary American English COCA, the 'genre-balanced corpus of American English', which 'contains more than one billion words of text (25+ million words each year 1990-2019) from eight genres: spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, academic texts' etc. <<https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/>> [Accessed 23/09/2020].

<sup>10</sup> Cf. The Coronavirus Corpus consists of about 656 million words of data 'on the medical, social, cultural, and economic impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) in 883,565 texts from online magazines and newspapers in 20 different English-speaking countries from 1 Jan 2020 to the current time'. <[https://www.corpusdata.org/corona\\_corpus.asp](https://www.corpusdata.org/corona_corpus.asp), <https://www.english-corpora.org/corona/>> [Accessed 23/09/2020].

<sup>11</sup> Cf. The Daily Blog, *An Open Letter to Jacinda Ardern from the Migrant Workers of New Zealand*, May 1 (2020). <<https://thedailyblog.co.nz/2020/05/01/an-open-letter-to-jacinda-ardern-from-the-migrant-workers-of-new-zealand/>> [Accessed 23/09/2020].

experiences an existential weakness due the extended period of instability, often accompanied by the reduction of social rights in his/her working condition. In general, 'precariousness' is associated with individual's social and physical contexts, family, education, work, and the political and economic organisation of society. In a final report on 'Precarious Work and Social Rights (PWSR)<sup>12</sup>, discussing the individuals' exclusion from social rights and benefit owing to their precarious positions, it appears 'precariousness' semantically occurs as a broad term expressing the aforementioned meanings: 'Both this exclusion and cuts in social protection may create precariousness, as workers then enter unregulated forms of employment in order to survive' (2012: 7). Another instance is given by the passage 'some evidence suggests that both physical and psychological health may be harmed by precariousness' (2012: 10). A further example is in the passage 'occupational health and safety risks, also associated non-standard work with precariousness' (2012: 17).

Comparing 'precariousness' to 'precarity', it might be argued the latter tends to occur in economy, sociology, law, in more specific contexts, especially those related to labour market, social rights. This might be deduced from the excerpt

'The exclusion of workers on non-standard contracts, such as those in bogus selfemployment, from rights associated with maternity and parental rights, impacted negatively on women workers and reproduced precarity' (2012: 53).

Notwithstanding the strict lexical relation between 'precariousness' and 'precarity', another passage of the aforementioned Report provides a neat distinction in their meaning:

'Some 'elite' migrants – those who were highly skilled and internationally mobile - were also not subject to precarity since they could mobilise their skills and resources to challenge precariousness' (2012: 61).

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<sup>12</sup> Sonia McKay, Steve Jefferys, Anna Paraksevopoulou, Janoj Keles, *Study on precarious work and social rights, Carried out for the European Commission*, (Working Lives Research Institute, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, London Metropolitan University, 2012).  
<<https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=7925&langId=en>> [Accessed 10/10/2020].

The lexeme 'precarity' is a further derived form of 'precarious': Edmund Heery and Mike Noon consider it as

a term used by the sociologists to refer to the spread of contingent work and insecure employment within the labour market. The term is also used to refer to the subjective condition of those who experience insecure work<sup>13</sup>.

It occurs in current usage<sup>14</sup> in broad sense translated from Italian, Spanish and French, respectively from '*precarietà*', '*precariedad*', and '*précarité*', which mainly expresses uncertainty and instability of working conditions whereby temporary contracts or posts are assigned without benefit or social security payments (Biglia, Martì 2014: 1488). In this regard, the individual's prospect in a precarious position unavoidably shifts and changes the individual's attitude to life, making him/her feel precarious in every respect.

The term 'precarity' may be said a 20th-century neologism which was seemingly first used in an article issued in May 1952 in the USA, written by Dorothy Day, a journalist for The Catholic Worker Movement: it is entitled 'Poverty and Precarity' (Roberts 1984: vii). Examining the title syntactically, the parataxis consists in the singular noun 'Poverty' in combination with the singular noun 'Precarity' by means of the overt signal of the conjunction 'and' which marks a syndetic coordination functioning as coordinator (Quirk et al. 1985: 918). It could be inferred that this links two equal constituents, two interdependent states in a bilateral relation. In the article, however, the lexeme poverty is seen as a semantic field, representing the hypernym to which precarity is hierarchically related in meaning. Poverty is discussed in its complexity as the social state of indigent living conditions: it is also described through some individual stories that shed light upon the issue of welfare services and social security. In this

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. '*precarity*' in Edmund Heery and Mike Noon, *A Dictionary of Human Resource Management* (2 rev ed., Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Here 'usage' is meant according to the descriptive definition from John Simpson, *Oxford English Dictionary OED*, (2nd Edition, 2009): 'usage, n. 8. Established or customary use or employment of language, words, expressions, etc.'

regard, on the one hand, precarity is foregrounded as Day points out the derogatory connotation of a life position which is denied or neglected by the society. On the other hand, precarity is contextualised as 'an essential element of poverty' which characterises it: accordingly, the journalist describes the implications of living in precarity as an opportunity and a necessary condition to achieve the voluntary poverty, to which one should aspire to convey love by helping the needy (1952: 3-4). Hence, Day exhorts the reader to reflect on the significance of this concept, plausibly epitomising Henry David Thoreau's voluntary poverty, an inspired choice he first expressed and developed in *Walden* and whereby one should aim by embodying 'a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust' (1854: 15)<sup>15</sup>.

In the last decade, the noun 'precarity' has been used in the mainstream press increasingly, and it is also in a report issued in the UK and authored by the economists Stewart Lansley and Howard Reed, wherein the term occurs again in combination with poverty. An excerpt of the aforementioned report is quoted by the journalist Jessica Lindsay in her article issued in 2019 about the future of work, in order to draw attention to the precarious living conditions:

'These reforms offer a significant modification of the existing system of social security – creating one more suited to the new risks of insecurity, precarity and work-based poverty of the 21st century'<sup>16</sup>.

As to authoritative dictionaries such as the Collins Dictionary<sup>17</sup> or the OED<sup>18</sup>, no entry for 'precarity' can be retrieved. Conversely, Lexico.com<sup>19</sup>, which is the result of the cooperation between Dictionary.com and Oxford University Press (OUP), provides two definitions for 'precarity' that are available when looked up either in the UK or in the US standard varieties of

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<sup>15</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (The Internet Bookmobile 1, 1854), p. 15: "None can be an impartial or wise observer of human life but from the vantage ground of what *we* should call voluntary poverty."

<sup>16</sup> Metro.co.uk, *What if the future of work was no work at all?*, by Jessica Lindsay. (9 May 2019). <<https://metro.co.uk/2019/05/09/future-work-no-work-9385679/>> [Accessed 23/09/2020].

<sup>17</sup> *Collins Dictionary*. <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/> [Accessed 23/09/2020].

<sup>18</sup> John Simpson, *Oxford English Dictionary*, OED. (2nd Edition, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> *Lexico.com*. <https://www.lexico.com/en> [Accessed 23/09/2020].

the English lexis. The lexeme, a mass noun, bears two main meanings whereof the first concerns a) 'The state of being precarious or uncertain' in a situation or position revealing insecurity or instability, and the second focuses on the living condition which may be caused by or resulting in b) 'A state of persistent insecurity with regard to employment or income'. Thus, the latter meaning results in an extension of the former, particularly when they involve a person's life or work in a fashion that one condition affects the other.

Concerning variation and frequency of use in large language corpora, the search of matching strings for 'precarity' as KWIC in BNC<sup>20</sup> reveals no occurrences. Differently, in COCA<sup>21</sup>, 60 occurrences are found: the usage mainly refers to temporary or flexible labour conditions and unpredictable and insecure living conditions. Interestingly, in the Coronavirus Corpus<sup>22</sup> 263 occurrences are retrieved, with recurrent adjectives such as 'social', 'financial', 'economic', collocating with 'precarity' as modifiers; or with collocational nouns recurring in the semantic context to intensify the meaning of 'precarity' such as 'poverty', 'livelihood', 'vulnerability', which mostly also display a further co-occurrence with 'COVID-19'.

Focusing on the mainstream press, for instance in the Daily Mail, 'precarity' tends to collocate with 'financial', as it can be seen in two different articles<sup>23</sup>. Furthermore, three occurrences are found in The Times: one shows the same collocation as in the previous articles, in the phrase 'the financial precarity of the women's league'; another presents the syndetic coordination

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<sup>20</sup> BNC.

<<http://bncweb.lancs.ac.uk/cgi-bin/bncXML/BNCquery.pl?theQuery=search&urlTest=yes>> [Accessed 23/09/2020].

<sup>21</sup> COCA.

<<https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/?c=coca&q=91467989>> [Accessed 23/09/2020].

<sup>22</sup> CORONAVIRUS.

<<https://www.english-corpora.org/corona/?c=corona&q=92353485>> [Accessed 23/09/2020].

<sup>23</sup> Daily Mail: 1) 'I'm disturbed by nightmares and pain': One of Joseph McCann's 11 victims tells how 'psycho' robbed her of life as a 'thriving' 25-year-old professional woman who dreamt of a family - as he's jailed for 30 years for rape rampage, By Ed Riley. (9 December 2019). <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7771689/Serial-rapist-Joseph-McCann-gets-33-LIFE-SENTENCES.html>> 2) How a postcard changed my world, by Patricia Hammond. (21 July 2019). <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/you/article-7233641/Classical-singer-Patricia-Hammond-unwittingly-sent-postcards-total-stranger-six-years.html>> [All Accessed 23/09/2020].

"precarity and casualisation" of the economy'; the third occurrence sheds light upon the dangerous and insecure working life of ethnic minorities in the UK:

It's brought up a lot of ideas around precarity and who really is at the frontline, because the same NHS workers who come from ethnic minorities are now actually the first ones to die"<sup>24</sup>.

As to 'precariousness', in BNC<sup>25</sup> 18 occurrences are retrieved; whereas in COCA<sup>26</sup> 195 are found and in The Coronavirus Corpus<sup>27</sup> 202 occurrences are listed. In the three corpora, the term mainly refers to the concepts of social existence and employment. It is deemed noteworthy the usage in the string 'Precariousness, Precarity, and Family'<sup>28</sup> denoting a clear and subtle difference in meaning between the nouns: precariousness and precarity in that semantically, the latter mainly refers to the labour market. It might be thus deduced the usage of 'precarity' entails a specific meaning in the fields of economy, law, politics and sociology, as linked to the social and financial instability of the labour market or vulnerability of the living conditions. Whereas, precariousness appears to be used with overall meaning especially in cultural and social contexts, and chiefly reflects individual vulnerability.

### **A Focus on Affixation Processes in 'Precariousness' and 'Precarity'**

Inquiring into the structure and the processes of the English phonologic system with regard to the derivational affixes, Noam Chomsky and Morris Halle note that, amongst others, *-ness* is to be categorised into the class 'neutral' with the conventional boundary # 'before and

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<sup>24</sup> The Times: 1) 'Women's football is simply not sustainable', by Rebecca Myers. (Sunday March 29 2020). <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/womens-football-is-simply-not-sustainable-cdc17ks70>>; 2) Tutorials on knitting at campus picket line, by Nicola Woolcock, (Friday February 21 2020). <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/tutorials-on-knitting-at-campus-picket-line-smrbnvwqtq>>; 3) Glasgow artist Alberta Whittle's prizewinning film could go viral..., by Mike Wade, (Tuesday September 01 2020) <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/glasgow-artist-alberta-whittles-prizewinning-film-could-go-viral-glm9hm658>> [All Accessed 23/09/2020].

<sup>25</sup> <<https://www.english-corpora.org/bnc/?c=bnc&q=92352069>> [Accessed 23/09/2020].

<sup>26</sup> <<https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/?c=coca&q=83938086>> [Accessed 23/09/2020].

<sup>27</sup> <<https://www.english-corpora.org/corona/?c=corona&q=92353310>> [Accessed 23/09/2020].

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Cristopher Harker, *Precariousness, Precarity and Family: Notes from Palestine. Environment and Planning A.*, 44 (4). (2012), pp. 849 -865.

<<http://dro.dur.ac.uk/8889/1/8889.pdf?DDD14+>> [Accessed 23/09/2020].

after each string to a lexical category', with 'each string dominated by N, A, or V in the surface structure' (Chomsky, Halle 1968: 85). The *#ness* affix is akin to the other affixes carrying the # boundary: they are mostly 'assigned to a word by a grammatical transformation' (1968: 86). As a result, the deadjectival noun from the stem 'precarious' has no stress shifting in the nominal derived 'precariousness'. Differently, the affixes with stress shifting in the syllable preceding them are mainly identified as 'internal to the lexicon', and bear the conventional boundary + (Chomsky, Halle 1968: 86). In this regard, it is worth noting that the *+ity* ending should be examined as *-i+ty*, and thus included in the 'Main Stress Rule': this is due to the stress falling on the syllable that is immediately before the *-ity* ending, 'since the "stem-forming" element *-i-* that precedes the final affix is lax' (Chomsky, Halle 1968: 86-87). Hence, 'precarity' shows the lax mid front vowel / $\epsilon$ / before the *-ity* ending.

Aronoff investigates productivity in the English language and analyses two Word Formation Rules (henceforth WFRs), by comparing the pair of deadjectival nominal suffix *#ness* and *+ity* ending. The former seems to be more productive than the latter when attached to the word-type form '*Xous*' (Aronoff 1976: 37-38). This phenomenon shows a difference in the suffix *#ness* and *+ity* ending when attaching to lexemes, as respectively the former is attached to 'a word boundary', and the latter to 'a morpheme boundary'. Considering the phonetic surface analysis for the aforementioned forms, no stress shifting appears in the word-type forms '*Xous*' and '*Xousness*', differently from the shift of stress to the syllable immediately preceding *+ity* and containing a lax vowel by effect of 'trisyllabic shortening'. As a result, the analysis reveals that: 'The + boundary suffix thus makes the derived word phonetically further from the base' (Aronoff, 1976: 40).

To carry out the study, Aronoff draws upon Noam Chomsky's lexicalist hypothesis whereby grammar is 'context-free' and is structured in 'a base' containing 'a categorial component' and 'a lexicon' composed of 'lexical entries' which belong to 'a system of specified

features'. In this respect, Chomsky also considers that the 'nonterminal vocabulary of the context-free grammar is drawn from a universal and rather limited vocabulary' (1970: 184-185). On this premise, lexicon is deemed by convention 'the repository' containing the inventory of items in the grammar of a language, where certain lexical items in English mostly appear to be derivations. Accordingly, as long as they bear 'at least one of their various features', it could be deduced that 'the *+ity* derivatives of most *Xous* adjectives must be entered in the lexicon' (Aronoff 1976: 43).

The difference in the word formation rule (henceforth WFR) lies in 'the denominal adjectives', which always carry the ending *#ness* in nouns but never take *+ity* such as in '*fashionableness, \*fashionability; sizableness, \*sizability*'. Whereas, 'the deverbal adjectives' may carry both the endings as in '*acceptability, acceptableness; moveableness, movability*' (1976: 48). Furthermore, the *+ity* form, being referred to bases stemming from Latin, is opposite the suffix *#ness*, insofar as for the latter no discrimination occurs 'between *latinate* and *native words*' (Aronoff 1976: 51). In this regard, the evidence collected reveals that the *latinate* feature, which is abstract by definition, namely 'an abstract syntactic feature', is 'a property of morphemes' (Aronoff 1976: 51).

Considering the literature on morphological productivity, Frank Anshen and Mark Aronoff gather further experimental evidence from a variety of sources by determining that in English derived forms in *-ity* are stored in the mental lexicon, differently from those in *-ness* which are not, as these are built by rule when needed (1988: 642). They examine the use of word types in *-ness* and *-ity* occurring in the Brown Corpus, by taking account of Kučera and Francis's definition of 'real words'<sup>29</sup>: the analysis reveals the *-ity* words 'are much more likely

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<sup>29</sup> The concept 'real words' is not referred to the standard lexemes of English, but to the words in everyday language use occurring in the Brown University Standard Corpus of Present-Day American English (henceforth Brown Corpus). Cf. Nelson W. Francis, & Henry Kučera Computational Analysis of Present-Day American English. (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1967); Nelson W. Francis, & Henry Kučera, *Brown Corpus Manual, Manual of Information to Accompany a Standard Corpus of Present-Day Edited American English for Use with Digital Computers*. (1979). <<http://icame.uib.no/brown/bcm.html>> [Both Accessed 23/09/2020].

to be real words than are the *-ness* word types'. Moreover, Anshen and Aronoff look at the amount of the word types in proportion to that of word tokens cited in the Corpus, by calculating the various Type/Token Ratios, from which it appears that, considering the variety of the types of words with *-ness* is larger than those with *-ity* (1988: 644). Accordingly, they test the hypothesis by analysing the entries, namely the word-type forms '*X-ibleness*', '*X-ibility*', '*X-iveness*', '*X-ivity*', '*X-ousness*', '*X-osity*', in Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary. These are sorted into 'Headwords' or 'Run-ons' following the criterion that each is 'a rule-derived form' or 'a lexical entry'. As a result, it seems that run-ons are the *-ness* derived forms represented as 'bold-face entries at the bottom of a definition'; whereas headwords are the *-ity* forms having 'separate entries'. Furthermore, the aforementioned forms are classed in relation to their 'Generic vs. Specific meanings' inasmuch as generic meaning stands for 'something like 'the quality or state of...'', and specific meaning shows 'some sort of semantic shift from the generic meaning' characterised by change through time (1988: 646-647). In view of this, for the specific meanings Anshen and Aronoff note that, if compared with the several *-ity* forms identified which carry this feature, only 1 out of 622 *-ness* derived forms bears specific meaning. In this regard, they claim that semantic shift plays an essential role: 'For a word not listed in the lexicon to have an unpredictable meaning, individuals would have to recreate this same unpredictable meaning each time they used the word' (1988: 647). Hence, individuals would find derived forms in the lexicon and/or construct new derived forms from extant bases 'by rule' or 'by analogy' (Anshen and Aronoff 1988: 648).

From the assumptions on the productivity of the *-ness* and the *-ity* forms in English, it could be argued that the categorisation of run-on may be attributed to the derived lexeme 'precariousness' in that differing from that of headword, which may be applied to the lexical entry 'precarity'. Namely, 'precariousness' appears to be semantically interpreted in its quality or state reflecting a generic meaning as in fact observed in the aforementioned sources.

Whereas 'precarity', coined by means of a semantic shift resulting from the generic meaning, seems to be mainly utilised in its specific meaning.

### **Conclusion**

An interdisciplinary analysis has endeavoured to show the use of 'precariat', 'precariousness' and 'precarity' in contexts concerning the increasing group of individuals who experience inequality, uncertainty, thus instability in every respect of their lives, with the aim to discuss the linguistic implications of these terms.

As regards the different standpoints considered, the use of the lexeme 'precariat' or the phrase 'the precariat' in economic, legal, philosophical, political, sociological contexts suggests that there is no evident distinction in their meaning: both the terms are interpreted as synonyms, although they bear subtle differences in the sense attributed to them as referring expressions. The various contexts examined mainly indicate they entail 'an emerging class' living in constant insecurity and instability (Standing 2014: §I); or they concern 'a social category' having in common similarities related to their personal and working history of social and economic disparity (Bauman in R/evolution 2013); or even they refer to 'a group of people', gathered in the increasing range of individuals for whom by definition 'labor is considered dispensable', also including the persons being 'targeted by war', and even 'living in regions that have been decimated by development' (Butler in R/evolution, 2013). Similarly, they are interpreted as 'isolated individuals' who are grouped, as to the aforementioned referents, in between, for sharing the condition of temporary and insecure occupations and partaking of a common 'typology' instead of 'ideology' (Johannessen 2019: 6).

At a lexical level of analysis, it appears the noun 'precariat' is defined a blend of two stems, the lexemes 'precarious' and 'proletariat'<sup>30</sup>: observed as a neologism it dates back to

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. *Collins Dictionary*.

<<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/precariat>> [Accessed 23/09/2020].

1980s as a derived form of precarious borrowed from French 'précariat', and mainly utilised in informal register. Furthermore, 'the precariat' is categorised in the BuzzWords<sup>31</sup>, insofar as jargon become fashionable and hence used by the media. In performing the function of a semantic field, 'précariat' is linked to 'precariousness' by a hierarchical sense relation, which entails the different aspects of life and working conditions reflecting people's state of 'precarity'. As to 'precariousness', it might be argued the term mainly concerns life's conditions which reflect the persistence of physical and psychological fragility and insecurity, by affecting the individual's identity who mainly experiences an existential weakness due the extended period of instability, often accompanied by the reduction of social rights in his/her working condition. In general, the use of 'precariousness' is associated with individual's social and physical contexts, family, education, work, and the political and economic organisation of society. Either in authoritative dictionaries or large language corpora, 'precariousness' appears to be used with overall meaning especially in cultural and social contexts, and chiefly reflects individual vulnerability.

Considering 'precarity', authoritative dictionaries such as the Collins Dictionary<sup>32</sup> or the OED<sup>33</sup> do not include it: differently, Lexico.com<sup>34</sup> defines the term as a state denoting insecurity or instability, with regard to the living condition, which may be caused or results in employment. A person's life and work are thus involved in a fashion that one condition unavoidably affects the other. The analysis of a selection of occurrences from the mainstream press or from large language corpora suggests the usage of 'precarity' entails a specific meaning in the fields of economy, law, politics and sociology, as linked to the social and financial instability of the labour market or vulnerability of the living conditions.

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. *MacMillan Dictionary*.

<<https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/the-precariat?q=precariat>> [Accessed 23/09/2020].

<sup>32</sup> *Collins Dictionary*. <<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/>> [Accessed 23/09/2020].

<sup>33</sup> John Simpson, *Oxford English Dictionary, OED*. (2nd Edition, 2009).

<sup>34</sup> *Lexico.com*. <<https://www.lexico.com/en>> [Accessed 23/09/2020].

Focusing on affixation processes, it is noteworthy taking account of the *-ity* form, which is 'restricted to *Latin* bases' and is opposite to the suffix *-ness*, insofar as for the latter no discrimination occurs 'between *Latin* and *native words*' (Aronoff 1976: 51). In this respect, on the basis of what Anshen and Aronoff's study has revealed on the productivity of these and other affixes in English, it might be argued that the forms 'precariousness' and 'precarity' confirm in their use the classification generic meaning vs. specific meaning. Namely, the categories have been assigned assuming that generic meaning stands for 'something like 'the quality or state of...'', and specific meaning shows 'some sort of semantic shift from the generic meaning' characterised by change through time. In view of this, for the specific meanings Anshen and Aronoff have noted that, if compared with the several *-ity* forms identified carrying this feature, only 1 out of 622 *-ness* derived forms appear to bear specific meaning (Anshen and Aronoff 1988: 646-647). As a result, the study suggests that 'precariousness' is semantically interpreted in its state reflecting a generic meaning as in fact observed in the aforementioned sources; whereas 'precarity', coined by means of a semantic shift resulting from the generic meaning, is mainly utilised in its specific meaning.

In consideration of such outcomes, an accurate and thorough study is needed. Despite this, to conclude this argumentation, it is worth quoting Rabindranath Tagore, 'Bengali poet and Nobel Prize winner'<sup>35</sup> to reflect on the facets of interpretation of meaning:

The meaning of the living words that come out of the experiences of great hearts can never be exhausted by any one system of logical interpretation. They have to be endlessly explained by the commentaries of individual lives, and they gain an added mystery in each new revelation<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> The Arts across continents: *Tagore in London*, in *Our Migration Story: The Making of Britain*, <<https://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/tagore-in-london>> [Accessed 23/09/2020].

<sup>36</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *SĀDHANĀ, The Realisation of life*. (2013), Author's Preface. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/6842/pg6842-images.html>> [Accessed 23/09/2020].

Tagore's poetic language conveys the density of the metaphoric sense and the symbolic value that words reflect by resulting in structural constructs. Their compositionality of meaning, characterised by the relation between words aiming to signify and refer, reveal their metonymic nature, which epitomises the representativeness of any linguistic and cultural system used and interpreted by the individuals to communicate and interact.

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