The semantics of *unalive*

unalive is an interesting word in online culture. Although it is morphologically derived from *alive*, it is not a noun but a verb. It shares some properties with "kill", and perhaps with "die", but which exactly?

We begin by noting that from a compositional viewpoint, the word *dead* does not mean *not alive*. Rather, it can only apply to individuals who have been alive, e.g. for some past time t_- and present t_0:

t_-: e *alive*
t_0: e *not alive*

In this way, George Washington is dead, but not the Eiffel Tower, as the Eiffel Tower has never been alive.

By the compositional reading, we will also assume we have the meanings of *die* and *kill* as composed of one another with the abstract verbs BECOME and CAUSE:

x *die*: BECOME (*dead*)

x *kill* y: x CAUSE (y BECOME (*dead*))

Depending on the context, *unalive* seems to mean *die*, *kill*, or *kill myself*. Here are representative examples for each (source: reddit)

1. (die) "Has anyone gone to the ER wanting to *unalive* due to insomnia?"

2. (kill) "... started growing on a tree where my aunt *unalives* chickens"

3. (kill myself) "I wish I had *unalive* pills right now".

It is important to note that contrary to expectations, *unalive* cannot be used as an adjective: while there may be marginal uses for describing nonliving objects ("?this table is unalive"), this usage is not considered proper. In fact, the meaning is significantly more complicated than *not alive*.

A compositional definition for *unalive* must involve *alive*, not in the sense of an opposite (*unemployed*), but in the sense of reversal, as with *undo*, *unpack*, or *unzip*. Someone can be unemployed without ever having been employed, but you cannot undo something that has not been done. In the same way, you must be alive to unalive.

At first glance, "I want to unalive" seems to mean something like "I want to die". We might want to compare *unalive* to *die*, but clearly this cannot be the case, as it has a transitive use in (2). Furthermore, "I want to die" is **not**

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equivalent in meaning to "I want to unalive".

So instead, as (2) suggests, we might compare *unalive* to *kill*; except *kill* lacks an intransitive version that means "to kill oneself".

We see that *unalive* must actually mean *kill*, but with the same structure as transitive-intransitive words like *wash* or *shave*. In the base case, it can be thought of as an transitive verb with a subject and object. In the intransitive case, null complement anaphora fills in the object.

"I wash him"
"I wash ()" → "I wash myself"

"I unalive him"
"I unalive ()" → "I unalive myself"

Importantly, "kill" does not have this usage:

"I kill him"
"I kill ()" → ?

The most common form we see *unalive* is "I want to unalive" or "I want to unalive myself". Although traditionally, we might find "I want to die" and "I want to kill myself" paralleling the above, it is much more useful to compare against "I want to wash" and "I want to wash myself".

With the examples above, it is clear they have equivalent meaning. That is, "I want to unalive" does not mean "I want to die". It means "I want to kill" in the reflexive intransitive sense, or "I want to kill myself". In the intransitive application, *unalive* provides a economic way to say "kill myself", that avoids the unacceptability of "commit suicide" and the passivity of *die*.

In informal online communication, this reflexive intransitive use of *kill* "they/he/she kill themselves" appears much more frequently than its true intransitive "they/he/she kill", which only has the habitual reading, e.g. that they/he/she is a killer. This provides theoretical support for this definition of *unalive*, as "they/he/she unalived" has that exact meaning, that is "they/he/she killed herself".