Semantics of English suffix -ish

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The English suffix *-ish* is productive.

**Adjective-**ish
- Ayaka is tall-ish.

**Adverb-**ish
- We have to leave now-ish.
- I check in on these blogs regularly-ish.

**Noun-**ish
- foolish/childish
- This seemingly toy-ish Ferrari is in fact a cell phone.

Questions raised in this talk:

- What is the semantics of -*ish*? Is it a degree modifier, or a degree head?
  - Degree head.
- Adding -*ish* looks very productive. Is there a case where we cannot append -*ish*? When, and why?
  - *adjective*\textsubscript{lower-bounded} -*ish*. Our semantics will capture this.
- Can we apply the semantics of -*ish* for adjectival base to other -*ish*’s, NOUN-*ish*/ADVERB-*ish*?
  - To adverbs, yes. I will leave noun cases open.
Outline

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1. Data
Data – Brief history (Morris 2009)

- *-ish (-isch)* is found only in Germanic languages.
- A cognate of Greek word meaning ‘make like’ ‘think like.’
- The idea is *approximation*, or *nearness*. 
Data – Brief history (Morris 2009)

- **Before Middle English**
  - Nationality (English, Danish)
  - Nominal base, animate (foolish, wolfish)

- **After Middle English**
  - Nominal base, inanimate (bookish, stylish)
  - Adjectival base (greenish, tallish)

- **Recently**
  - Proper noun (Gibson-girl-ish hair)
  - Noun phrase (a man-in-the-street-ish sort of opinion)
  - Numbers (Come around six-ish)
  - Adverbial (He’s been feeling rather down-ish)
**Data - *lower-bounded adjectives***

✓ open scale adjectives

- tall \(\rightarrow\) tallness

You cannot be *slightly tall* (no lower bound)
You cannot be *completely tall* (no upper bound) (cf. Kennedy & McNally 2005)

- tall-ish, expensive-ish, heavy-ish, etc.

✓ upper-bound adjectives

- dirty \(\rightarrow\) clean \(\rightarrow\) cleanliness

You cannot be *slightly clean* (no lower bound)
You can be *completely clean* (upper bound)

- clean-ish, full-ish, dry-ish, straight-ish, etc.
Data - *lower-bounded adjectives

* lower-bounded adjectives

You *can* be slightly bent (lower bound)
You cannot be completely bent (no upper bound)

*bent-ish, *?open-ish, *dirty-ish,

*?wet-ish, ??famous-ish, etc.
Data – not gradable

• Adjective-\textit{ish} does not behave like a gradable adjective.

\textit{Comparatives}

*more tall-ish, *tall-ish-er

\textit{Intensifiers}

*very tall-ish, *extremely tall-ish

\textit{too/enough/so}

*John is too tall-ish to become a miner.

\textit{how}

*I don’t know how tall-ish Sue is.

Data - summary

- *-ish* attaches to adjectives, adverbs, nouns.
- *-ish* is compatible with open and upper-bounded adjectives,
- *-ish* is incompatible with lower-bounded adjectives.
- ADJECTIVE-*ish* is not gradable.
2. Analysis of ADJECTIVE-ish
[-ish] takes an adjective of type <d, et>, and maps it to a non-gradable predicate of type <e, t>.

(Cf. “pos” of Kennedy 2007)

\[
[-\text{ish}] = \lambda P_{<d,\text{et}>}. \lambda x. \max \{d \mid P(d)(x) = 1\} < s(P) & (s(P) - \max \{d \mid P(d)(x) = 1\} < d_c)
\]

- \(s(P)\): the standard of \(P_{<d,\text{et}>}\)
- \(d_c\): contextually provided expected deviance from the standard

The maximum of the set of the degrees to which the predicate is true is below the standard, but the difference between the two degrees is relatively small.
John is tall-ish. The room is clean-ish. *The rod is bent-ish.

\[ x \text{ is bent iff } \max\{d | \text{bent}(x)(d)\} > 0 \]
Data - summary

☐ -ish attaches to adjectives, adverbs, nouns.
☑ -ish\textsubscript{ADJ} is compatible with open and upper-bounded adjectives,
☑ -ish\textsubscript{ADJ} is incompatible with lower-bounded adjectives.
☑ ADJECTIVE-ish is not gradable.
**open-ish vs. bent-ish**

- English speakers might find a difference in acceptability between different lower-bounded adjectives with -ish.
  - The door is open-ish.
  - The rod is bent-ish.

- The difference between *open-ish* and *bent-ish* is unexpected under our analysis.
**open-ish vs. *bent-ish**

- The possibility for a lower-bound adjective to append -ish is contextually dependent.

- The idea is that the context provides a non-zero degree of the standard of \("properly\) ADJ," and hence there is a gap between the degree and the lower bound.

- When speakers find open-ish relatively acceptable, it means “not very open,” and it does not mean “closed.”
*؟open-ish vs. *bent-ish


For a situation where there are only 3 people in a large theater, ✓“The theater is empty tonight.”

“Semantic shift” of closed-bound adjectives from a default absolute meaning to a relative one can be found under certain contexts.
Testing open-ish vs. bent-ish

The idea:

- If the context does not allow the non-zero degree of the standard of the predicate, lower-bounded adjectives will unambiguously disallow the appendix of -ish.

- Similarly, if a certain context is given, even bent-ish could be acceptable.
  
  - purely geometric object vs. everyday life object
Survey - *open-ish* vs. *bent-ish*

*The square is open-ish. vs. The door is open-ish.*

*The line is bent-ish vs. His nose is bent-ish.*

- Native English speakers: $n=9$
- 1 (bad description) – 5 (good description)
  - Semantic shift happens depending on the context.
Alternative analysis

- Our proposal: [[-ish]] is a degree head.
- How about [pos [[ish [ADJ]]]]?

\[
[[\text{ish}_{\text{ALT}}]] = \lambda P_{<d, et}>. \lambda d'. \lambda x. \max \{d | P(d)(x) = 1\} < d' \& \\
(d' - \max \{d | P(d)(x) = 1\} < d_c)
\]

(Note that [[ish [pos [ADJ]]]] is simply impossible due to a type mismatch. That is, [pos [ADJ]] is of type <e, t> and d is not defined.)

- When it is applied to \(P_{<d, et}>\), [[ish [ADJ]]] becomes of type <d, et>.

⇒ But ADJ-\text{ish} is not gradable! ADJ-\text{ish} cannot be of type <d, et>.

(an analogous problem arises for Kagan & Alexeyenko's (2011) analysis of a Russian affix -\text{ovat}- ‘a little bit too’).
Data - summary

- *-ish* attaches to adjectives, adverbs, nouns.
- *-ish*$_{\text{ADJ}}$ is compatible with open and upper-bounded adjectives,
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- ADJECTIVE-*ish* is not gradable.
3. Application to ADVERB-<i>ish</i>
Adverb-ish

Temporal adverbs can productively take -ish.
now-ish, 2-o’clock-ish, quarter-after-10-ish

- \text{ADV}_{\text{TEMPORAL}} -ish \text{ intuitively means “around the threshold,” not “before the time” or “after the time.”}
**ADVERB-ish**

- Note that those adverbs behave as having some degrees.
- We propose that a temporal adverb such as \([2\text{pm}]\) has the following semantics.

\[
[(\text{near} \ 2\text{pm})] = \lambda d. \lambda e. \frac{1}{|e - 2\text{pm}|}
\]

\[
[-\text{ish}] = \lambda P_{<d, \text{et}}. \lambda e_v. \max \{d \mid P(d)(e) = 1\} < s(P) \& (s(P) - \max \{d \mid P(d)(e) = 1\} < d_c)
\]
Open questions
Open questions

• Can we apply the analysis of ADJ/ADV-ish to NOUN-ish?
  (Nouns are usually non-gradable, and NOUN-ish is gradable as in ✓ more childish. Or, maybe nouns are gradable (Sassoon 2007).)

• Why do some non-gradable adjectives allow -ish?
  e.g. The teams are even-ish in the contest.
  Mr. Burns is dead-ish.
  But not *The snow leopard is extinct-ish.
Conclusions
I have argued that...

- \([-\text{ish}]\) is a degree head of type \(\langle\langle\text{d, et}, <\text{e,t}\rangle\rangle\).
- \([-\text{ish}] = \lambda P_{<\text{d, et}}. \lambda x. \max \{d \mid P(d)(x) = 1\} < s(P) \&\)
  \(s(P) - \max \{d \mid P(d)(x) = 1\} < d_c\)
- The semantics correctly predicts the incompatibility with lower-bound adjectives.
- Some grammatical examples with lower-bound adjectives are accounted for given the context dependency of the standard.

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References


