

“I’ll be there early ... Ish.”
A corpus-based analysis of the morpheme *-ish* in contemporary
American English

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The suffix *-ish* came into the English language via its Germanic roots. Current research suggests that *-ish* is used in a greater variety of constructions than the traditional adjectival marker permitted (Eitelmann et al. 2020). Besides its original function of deriving adjectives, it now has many other meanings such as its “approximative sense ‘somewhat X, vaguely X’” (Eitelmann et al. 2020: 805). Crucially, it can now also be used as a free morpheme (Harris 2021). However, previous research has focused on the development of the suffix *-ish* and related functional changes over the course of the history of English rather than on the contemporary phenomenon of *-ish* turning into a free morpheme.

Attempting to fill this gap, this presentation examines freestanding *-ish* as part of a larger study investigating not only the diachronic changes in the use of *-ish* but also its emerging new functions. Using a quantitative as well as a qualitative approach, the morpheme *-ish* is investigated. For our analysis, we use the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), which contains a total of 351 tokens of freestanding *-ish* used in texts produced between 1990 and 2019. After eliminating tokens that are either names or not phrase final, we were left with a total of 94 tokens relevant for our research. Further steps included normalizing and visualising the data, with the aim to not only compare tokens across decades, but also to classify the data by function and base.

Results show that there has been a significant increase in the use of free *-ish* over the past 30 years. Simultaneously, the meaning of the suffix has changed and broadened, now allowing for approximative interpretations of entire sentences, as in (1).

(1) And I actually told her the truth. Ish.

These findings suggest that the change in the use of the suffix goes beyond that of an approximate sense. Instead, our research shows a shift to a free lexical item and that the former suffix can now even serve as an adequate answer to a question or reaction to a statement.

References: • Eitelmann, Matthias; Haugland, Karie and Dagmar Haumann (2020) “From *english* to *whatever-ish*: a corpus-based investigation of *-ish* derivation in the history of English”. *English and Linguistics* 24 (4): 801-831. • Harris, Tabea (2021). *-ish / Ish: Aspects of a suffix turned free morpheme*. Unpublished Dissertation. University of Mannheim.