The free morpheme *Ish* – A discourse marker?

This paper discusses the origin as well as the formal and semantic properties of the free morpheme *Ish* and addresses the question of whether it can be analysed as a discourse marker.

Looking back at the earliest occurrences of formatives with the suffix *-ish* it is apparent that this morpheme always only occurred as a bound morpheme. Old English had ethnic (i.e. *Iudeisc* 'Jewish') and non-ethnic (i.e. *ceorlisc* 'churlish') adjectives with this suffix (cf. Marchand 1969: 305). That suffixes can arise out of free morphemes and turn into bound morphemes via a compound stage has been shown, for example, by Trips (2009) who investigated the origin and development of three English suffixes (i.e. *-hood, -dom, -ship*) by applying Lieber's (2004) framework of lexical semantics. In this framework Lieber explores how meanings of morphemes combine in order to form the meanings of complex derived words. She assumes that morphemes consist of a skeleton which contains a function and one or two more arguments of that function. With lexical items like nominals one of these arguments is referential (R). By creating a complex word, two referential elements amalgamate into one referential element which is projected into the syntax and this process adheres to the principle of co-indexation. Nouns in her system bear the feature [material] and simple count nouns (like *pig*) are represented by two additional features, [+B] and [-CI], the former of which corresponds to the distinction between mass and count nouns (mass nouns would bear the negative value of the feature [B]), and the latter representing the distinction of group or plural nouns (with a corresponding positive value of CI) and individual nouns (i.e. [- CI]) (cf. Lieber 2004: 136). An application of these features to the suffix *-ish* with the Old English examples from above may look like this:

(1) *-ish*: [+material, +B, -CI, ([R_i], [ ], <base>)]

The noun *ceorl* 'churl' is a concrete simple count noun to which *-ish* is attached with the features given in (1). These features also hold for present-day examples of denominal adjectives (e.g. *book-ish*). However, for adjectival bases different features apply. According to Lieber (2004: 25), adjectives are "characterized by the presence of the feature [dynamic] without the feature [material]". The features 'Bounded' (i.e. [B]) and 'Composed of Individuals' (i.e. [CI]) hold for nouns, and Lieber does not give further features for adjectives that could be applied to *-ish*. However, the meaning of *-ish* cannot be captured by the features [-material] and [-dynamic] alone, which bears the question if an additional feature has to be assumed which expresses the meaning of degree.

A relatively recent development has produced an unbound variant of *-ish*, examples of which are the following:

(2) "You have to treat it like an out of body experience – a very surreal hour or two and then normal life resumes, *ish*!" (GloWbE: GH G, ghanamma.com)

(3) "I agree with you LAWRIEJAY, Warren for president in say 2020-2024? *ish*." (GloWbE: AU G, pendentaustralia.net)

The free morpheme *Ish* modifies an element in the prior sentence, in the case of (2) it is the predicate *resumes,* and in (3) it is the numeral expression *2020-2024*. Other frequent elements of modification include adjectives, similar to the suffixal variant. However, unlike suffixal *-ish*, it does not attach to a base word of any kind. Thus, the process of co-indexation cannot take place because the referents of 'base' and suffix no longer match on the word level.

The fact that *Ish* can modify predicates also distinguishes it from the bound variant, since suffixal *-ish* never does, but is attached to nouns, adjectives, and, to a lesser degree, to compounds and phrases. Free *Ish* almost always occurs in final position of a clause or sentence and the element it qualifies does not necessarily occur in adjacent position. Semantically, *Ish* contributes the meaning 'sort of, almost, in a way', which is also partly visible in some deadjectival uses of the suffix *-ish*

(e.g. *bluish, warmish*) and in vaguely denoting a point of time (e.g. *ninish*).

As has been said above, the method of co-indexation is not applicable to the independent *Ish*. The question that arises then is how the free variant may be analysed. An interesting perspective arises from hedging particles like *sort of/ kind of*, which are also characterised as discourse (or pragmatic) markers (cf. Brinton 1996). *Ish* contributes a similar meaning as *sort of/kind of*, but is restricted to sentence-final position due to its origin as a suffix.

Discourse marker characteristics include a discussion of syntactic, semantic and phonological properties, which have been collected by Brinton (1996). Discourse markers are said to occur outside the syntactic structure (e.g. Brinton 1996: 34) and are generally optional elements (e.g. Fraser 1988: 22). While it can be stated that *Ish* occurs at the outside of the syntactic structure, it is questionable if it can be seen as an optional element. By removing *Ish*, speaker commitment would not be mitigated. Similarly, while many researchers working on discourse markers endorse a meaning-minimalist view (e.g. Schiffrin 1987), concerning propositional meaning Andersen states that "some pragmatic markers affect the propositional meaning of utterances […] as constraints on the interpretational procedure" (2001: 40f.). While *Ish* itself is not propositional per se, it does contribute to propositional meaning in that it qualifies the previous statement in attenuating it. Concerning the phonological features that are often discussed in connection to discourse markers (i.e. phonological reduction and discourse markers forming a separate tone unit), it has to be kept in mind that they are usually applied to spoken language, which is also the main focus of many discourse marker studies (e.g. Schiffrin 1987). Concerning written language, these characteristics have only been applied unsatisfactorily thus far.

In order to adequately account for discourse markers in spoken as well as in written speech, the proposed characteristics need revision. Furthermore, a classification of markers depending on their functions has been proposed (e.g. Brinton 1996: 30f.). Brinton mentions and elaborates two sets of superordinate functions, i.e. a textual function, which primarily creates cohesion and an interpersonal function, which manages the expression of speaker attitudes (1996: 38), the latter of which also describes the contribution *Ish* shows in discourse segments.

The data stem from the *Corpus of Global Web-Based English* (GloWbE), which contains almost 2 billion words in total from web pages of 20 different English-speaking countries. The independent variant *Ish* occurs 573 times in total in the GloWbE and these occurrences form the basis of this discussion.

In sum, the paper discusses the transition of the suffix *-ish* to the free morpheme *Ish* by applying the lexical-semantic framework developed by Lieber (2004). The point of departure will be the process of co-indexation, which can be applied to the former, but not to the latter. Thus, the author will briefly have a look at semantically similar elements (i.e. *sort of*) which have been analysed as discourse markers, an analysis which is applied to *Ish* due to similar semantic contributions.

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