

A new metalinguistic degree morpheme

M. Ryan Bochnak (UC Berkeley) and Eva Csipak (Göttingen)

In this talk, we discuss the use of ... *ish* in English as in (1), which is especially prevalent among younger speakers of English. It appears at the end of a sentence, following a pause, which we represent orthographically with ellipses. We argue that it is part of the paradigm of metalinguistic degree morphemes. With it the speaker signals that she is not wholly committed to the truth of the proposition. This morpheme also comes in an ordinary variety as the suffix *-ish*, where it occurs with gradable adjectives as in (2), and also as an adjectivizing morpheme on nouns, as in (3).

- | | | |
|-----|---|---------------------|
| (1) | I liked the movie ...ish. / Lee drew a circle ...ish. | PROPOSITIONS |
| (2) | John is tallish. / The dishes are dry-ish. | GRADABLE ADJECTIVES |
| (3) | Kim's childish behavior was annoying. / The cake has a coffee-ish flavor. | NOUNS |

That there is such a metalinguistic degree morpheme should not come as a surprise given the existence of metalinguistic comparatives, which have received recent attention (e.g. Giannakidou & Stavrou 2009; Morzycki 2011). This literature highlights both the similarities and the differences between metalinguistic and 'ordinary' comparatives (*Your problems are more financial than legal* vs. *Kim is taller than Lee*), which operate over propositions and gradable predicates, respectively, while sharing a common semantic core of comparison. We propose that ... *ish/-ish* likewise has a common semantic core in its metalinguistic and 'ordinary' uses.

Distribution and use. Propositional ... *ish* displays properties of both attenuating modifiers like *sorta*, which have been given a degree analysis (Anderson, 2013), and modal particles in languages like German (e.g., unstressed *schon*), which typically do not receive a degree analysis (Zimmermann, 2012). On the one hand, ... *ish* acts as a hedge on speaker's commitment to the truth of a proposition. In this respect, ... *ish* has a truth conditional effect similar to *sorta* in (4). Also like *sorta* (and unlike modal particles, cf. Zimmermann 2012), it has a truth-conditional effect.

- (4) I sorta liked the movie. / I liked the movie ...ish.

On the other hand, whereas *sorta* combines with a predicate within the sentence (Anderson, 2013), ... *ish* does not attach to a particular predicate, but rather embeds an entire proposition. This behavior makes ... *ish* similar to modal particles in that it operates at the level of the proposition. Another similarity to modal particles is the inability of ... *ish* to appear in embedded positions like (5), unless the embedding predicate is a reportative or attitude predicate, see (6)-(7).

- (5) ??If Lee draws a circle ...ish, he will get a gold star.
(6) John told me that Kim liked the movie ...ish.
(7) John believes that Kim liked the movie ...ish.

Note that the attenuation in (7) can be relative to Kim's liking the movie (Kim sort of liked the movie) or John's attitude towards the embedded proposition (John sort of believes that Kim liked the movie). Similar to the German modal particle *schon* (Zimmermann, 2011), ... *ish* makes implicit reference to some attitude holder. In unembedded contexts, the speaker is the attitude holder, while it is the subject of the attitude verb in embedded contexts.

Core analysis. We propose that because of its contribution to the truth conditions of the proposition it attaches to, ... *ish* is not a modal particle, but a metalinguistic degree morpheme. To make clear the connection between ... *ish* and metalinguistic comparatives, we borrow some of the terminology and formal apparatus of Giannakidou & Stavrou (2009) (though we do not believe this

choice is crucial – an alternative account involving degrees of precision a la Morzycki (2011) could just as well be implemented). First, we make use of an individual anchor or epistemic agent α , as providing the basis for the metalinguistic judgment. The value of α is by default the speaker of the utterance, although in cases like (6)-(7), the subject of an attitude predicate makes available another epistemic agent. Second, we make use of a gradable propositional attitude predicate R : roughly, α 's degree of commitment to a proposition. Third, we use a vague degree predicate \mathbf{small}_c , which holds of a degree if it is sufficiently small according to a contextual standard. The semantics of $\dots ish$ can then be modeled as in (8), where d_s is the standard degree of commitment to a proposition.

$$(8) \quad \llbracket \dots ish \rrbracket(p) = 1 \text{ iff } \max\{d|R(\alpha)(p)(d) = 1\} < d_s \wedge \mathbf{small}_c(d_s - \max\{d|R(\alpha)(p)(d) = 1\})$$

In prose, $\dots ish(p)$ is true iff the maximal degree to which α is committed to p is less than the standard degree of commitment to a proposition, and the difference between those degrees is sufficiently small according to a contextual standard. We assume that d_s will typically be quite high, in fact maximal or nearly so, given Grice's (1975) maxim of Quality, by which speakers only say what they believe to be true and have good evidence for. The use of $\dots ish$ thus hedges on that commitment to the proposition it embeds.

The broader picture. Just as metalinguistic and ordinary comparatives share a common semantic core, the proposed meaning for metalinguistic $\dots ish$ can be easily translated to adjectival *-ish*. Compare our semantics in (8) to that of Sugawara (2012) for adjectival *-ish* in (9), where $s(P)$ is the standard for a gradable predicate P , and d_c is the contextually expected deviance from the standard.

$$(9) \quad \llbracket -ish \rrbracket = \lambda P_{(d,et)} \lambda x. \max\{d|P(d)(x) = 1\} < s(P) \wedge (s(P) - \max\{d|P(d)(x) = 1\}) < d_c$$

Under this analysis, *ADJ-ish* is a property that holds of an individual to a degree that is close to, but somewhat less than, the standard degree for *ADJ*. Note that this correctly predicts that *-ish* is generally unacceptable with minimum-standard adjectives (e.g., *#bent-ish*), whereby an individual could not possibly hold the property to a degree lower than the standard, which corresponds to the minimum value on the scale. Such an analysis can also be extended to cases like (3): *-ish* picks out a particular property associated with the noun and marks that the degree to which that property holds of an individual is (slightly) less than a standard degree. For example, someone who is *childish* may have a degree of immaturity which is slightly less than that of an actual child. Other properties of being a child (e.g. being young) are ignored.

In sum, we believe it possible to provide a unified(-ish) analysis for all the uses of English $\dots ish/-ish$, based on the semantics in (8), thus providing further evidence for metalinguistic degree morphemes in natural language. To the extent that speakers' metalinguistic judgments are gradable, language provides a means for talking about this gradability.

References. Anderson, 2013. Inherent and coerced gradability across categories: manipulating pragmatic halos with *sorta*. *SALT 23*. • Giannakidou & Stavrou, 2009. Metalinguistic comparatives and negation in Greek. *Workshop on Greek syntax and semantics*. • Grice, 1975. Logic and conversation. • Morzycki, 2011. Metalinguistic comparison in an alternative semantics for imprecision. *NaLS*. • Sugawara, 2012. Semantics of English suffix *-ish*. *CLS 48*. • Zimmermann, 2011. Contrastive discourse particles in German: Effects of information-structure and modality. *MOSS 2*. • Zimmermann, 2012. Discourse particles. *Handbook on Semantics*.