



# A NEW METALINGUISTIC DEGREE MORPHEME

M. Ryan Bochnak & Eva Csipak  
UC Berkeley & University of Göttingen



## Distribution and use

- (1) That color is blue-**ish**. *urbandictionary.com*
- (2) He opened the gifts with child**ish** delight.  
*merriam-webster.com*
- (3) I've known what they are since high school-**ish**.  
*Facebook*
- (4) They won the match ... **ish**.
- (5) I liked the movie ... **ish**.
- (6) Joey: I haven't dreamt about her like that since I found out about you two ... **ish**. *Friends season 5 ep 16*
- (7) Mac: You've got a plan, right?  
Veronica: **ish**. *Veronica Mars season 2 ep 8*

We concentrate here on the propositional uses in (4)-(7)

- ▶ attenuates speaker commitment to  $p$
- ▶ metalinguistic: speaker comments on appropriateness of uttering  $p$
- ▶ roughly: "degree to which speaker is committed to  $p$  is less than maximal"

Usually **speaker-oriented**

- ▶ ... *ish* resists embedding under negation and *if* clauses
  - ▶ can be embedded under reportative or attitude predicate, then hedging can shift to matrix attitude holder
- (8) I didn't like the movie ... *ish*.  
≠ "It's not the case that [I liked the movie ... *ish*]"
  - (9) ??If Lee draws a circle ... *ish*, he will get a gold star.
  - (10) Lee {told me/believes} that Kim liked the movie ... *ish*.

## Attitude towards a proposition

Giannakidou and Yoon (2011): Metalinguistic comparison as propositional attitude

- ▶ Epistemic agent  $\alpha$  holds an attitude  $R$  towards a proposition  $p$
- ▶ The degree to which  $\alpha$  holds  $R$  towards  $p$  is less than a maximal degree
- ▶  $R$  is roughly the attitude " $\alpha$  is willing to assert  $p$  to degree  $d$ "

$$(11) \llbracket \dots ish \rrbracket(p) = 1 \text{ iff } \max\{d | R(\alpha)(p)(d) = 1\} < d_s \wedge \text{small}_c(d_s - \max\{d | R(\alpha)(p)(d) = 1\})$$

- ▶  $\alpha$  is normally the speaker, but can be shifted to the subject of a propositional attitude verb

Compare: Sugawara's (2012) analysis of adjectival *-ish*

$$(12) \llbracket -ish \rrbracket = \lambda P_{\langle d, et \rangle} \lambda x. \max\{d | P(d)(x) = 1\} < s(P) \wedge (s(P) - \max\{d | P(d)(x) = 1\}) < d_c$$

## Degrees of precision

- ▶ Morzycki (2011) – metalinguistic comparison as comparing degrees of precision
- ▶ Interpretation function relativized to degree  $d$  of precision
- ▶ Metalinguistic degree morphemes gain access to  $d$  by means of operator PREC

$$(13) \llbracket \text{PREC } \alpha \rrbracket^d = \lambda d'. \llbracket \alpha \rrbracket^{d'}$$

- ▶ ... *ish* makes explicit that the speaker is using a lower level of precision for the statement being made
- ▶ applies to a proposition  $p$  with open degree of precision argument, and returns set of alternatives

$$(14) \llbracket \dots ish \rrbracket^d = \lambda p_{\langle d, \langle s, t \rangle \rangle} \cdot \{\lambda w. \max\{d' | p(d')(w)\} < d \wedge \text{small}_c(d - d')\}$$

- ▶ Speaker commitment as upper-bounded scale

Compare Sugawara (2012): adjectival *-ish* requires open or upper-bounded scale

$$(15) \text{ ??The room is dirty-ish.}$$

Both analyses: speaker is less than maximally committed to a proposition

## Comparison with German *schon*

- ▶ Unaccented **modal particle** *schon* has a similar effect
- ▶ only combines with propositions
- ▶ Zimmermann (2014): given the available facts  $q_1, \dots, q_n$  in the (usually circumstantial) modal base MB, the number of facts supporting  $p$  is greater than the number of facts supporting  $\neg p$
- ▶ compatible with attitude verbs
- ▶ ok with *if* clauses (unlike ... *ish*)

$$(16) \text{ Alex fand den Film schon gut.}$$

'Alex *SCHON* liked the movie.'

$$(17) \text{ Alex war schon die beste Kandidatin.}$$

'Alex was *SCHON* the best candidate.'

$$(18) \text{ Wenn er schon als Lehrer ununterbrochen redet, sollte er wenigstens in seiner Freizeit die Klappe halten.}$$

'If he *SCHON* talks a lot while teaching, he should at least shut up when he is not working.'

$$(19) \llbracket (17) \rrbracket = \forall w' \in \max(\text{MB}_{\text{circ}}(w)): \text{best-candidate}(\text{Alex}) \text{ in } w'; \text{ defined iff } \forall q \in \{\text{best-candidate}(\text{Alex}), \neg \text{best-candidate}(\text{Alex})\}: q \geq_{\text{eval}, s} \text{best-candidate}(\text{Alex})$$

## Comparison with *sorta*

- (20) a. Gas is *sorta* expensive.  
b. ... running on concrete and accidentally *sorta* kicked the ground  
*COCA*  
c. I may be your *sorta* mom now. *Modern Family season 4 ep 19*

Anderson (2013): *sorta* also tracks degrees of imprecision

(a la Morzycki)

- ▶ also accesses degrees of imprecision via PREC
- ▶ *sorta* combines only with predicates, never with propositions
- ▶ *sorta* is also ok with lower-bounded scales  
(*This stick is sorta bent/?bent-ish*)

## Comparison with ... *NOT*

$$(21) \text{ I liked the movie. ... NOT.}$$

- ▶ different function; similar form
- ▶ logical negation of a proposition (not meta-linguistic)
- ▶ resists embedding under *if* clauses and attitude predicates; can be used as an answer particle
- ▶ possibly speakers have innovated propositional ... *ish* on analogy to ... *not*

## Further issues

- ▶ **Scope ambiguities?**

$$(22) \text{ Everyone liked the movie ... ish.}$$

$$(23) \text{ Alex was the best candidate. ... ish.}$$

- ▶ **Negation of metalinguistic comparatives**

$$(24) \text{ It's not the case that Lee is more a semanticist than a philosopher.}$$

$$(25) \text{ It's not the case that Lee is a semanticist ... ish.}$$

(... *ish* >  $\neg$  only)

## References

- Anderson, Curt. 2013. Inherent and coerced gradability across categories: manipulating pragmatic halos with *sorta*. In *Proceedings of Semantics and Linguistic Theory (SALT) 23*, ed. Anca Chereches and Todd Snider, 81–96. Ithaca, NY: CLC Publications.
- Giannakidou, Anastasia, and Suwon Yoon. 2011. The subjective mode of comparison: Metalinguistic comparatives in Greek and Korean. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 29:621–655.
- Morzycki, Marcin. 2011. Metalinguistic comparison in an alternative semantics for imprecision. *Natural Language Semantics* 19:39–86.
- Sugawara, Ayaka. 2012. Semantics of English suffix *-ish*. Paper presented at CLS 48.
- Zimmermann, Malte. 2014. Wird schon stimmen! a unified analysis of modal and aspectual 'schon' as scale aligners. Handout from talk at DGfS 2014.