

ATTENUATIVE MORPHOLOGICAL FORMS
ACROSS VARIETIES AND REGISTERS:
A CORPUS-BASED STUDY OF THE SUFFIX *-ISH*



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1. INTRODUCTION

Diminutive forms, including the suffix *-ish*, are an especially important category in English since they are used as attenuative or evaluative forms that de-emphasize information, and express imprecision and subjective evaluations of a quantity or feature. There are two major types of evaluative affixes in English: (1) diminutives, and (2) augmentatives (e.g. Lieber 2010: 40). In very broad terms, augmentatives are affixes that ‘signal a bigger version of the base’ (e.g. *mega-* in *megastore*, *megabite*) (Lieber 2012: 40). More specifically, augmentatives can signal ‘an increase in size, force, or intensity’ of the base (Aronoff and Fudeman 2005: 235). Diminutives, in contrast, ‘signal a smaller version of the base’, e.g. *-let* in *booklet*, *droplet*) (Lieber 2012: 40). However, as Booij rightly observes, ‘in many languages diminutive forms of words are not used primarily for indicating the small size of the object denoted, but for giving a positive or negative evaluation’ (2007: 14, the emphasis is mine). Therefore, diminutives are primarily expressive constructs.

As expressive constructs, such evaluative morphological forms as diminutives and augmentatives are important not only in terms of morphology but also in terms of pragmatics and discourse functions. Diminutives commonly express pragmatic aspects of meaning and attitudes, such as affection, or endearment (Lieber 2012: 40), intimacy (Plag 2003: 13), pejorative attitudes, or imprecision (Booij 2005: 14-15). As Booij notes, “the English morpheme *-ish* is often used to express the notion ‘sort of, not exactly’” (2005: 15); this way a morphological form can convey subjective feelings and ‘weaken or relativize a notion’ (Booij 2005: 15). Plag further argues that diminutives do not commonly express the meaning ‘small’, ‘but often merely express the speaker’s emotional attitude’ (Plag 2003: 103), which makes them an arguable category in grammatical morphology (cf. Schneider 2003, as cited in Plag 2003: 103).

1.1. THE STATUS OF THE SUFFIX *-ISH* IN MORPHOLOGY: EVALUATIVE VS. PLAIN MORPHOLOGY

Since evaluative affixes can convey some emotional load through a morphological form, some linguists treat them as affixes that belong to the domain of evaluative (Dressler and Barbaresi 1994), or expressive morphology (Booij 2005: 14, Fortin 2011, Lieber 2012: 109). This relatively new domain was introduced by Scalise in 1984 as an area distinct from both derivational morphology and inflectional morphology. Prieto (2005: 11) provides an exhaustive overview of the terminological variety used to refer to evaluative morphology: ‘diminutive and augmentative morphology’, ‘affective morphology’, ‘appreciative morphology’, ‘expressive morphology’, ‘connotative affixes’, and ‘affective suffixes’. All these terms highlight the expressive and attitudinal nature of augmentative and diminutive affixes, but perhaps the most canonical of them is ‘evaluative morphology’, which will be adopted in this paper.

There is an on-going disagreement between linguists arguing that evaluative morphology is distinct from derivational morphology, and those who argue that attenuative and augmentative affixes *are* part of derivational morphology. Evaluative Morphology is often distinguished from Plain Morphology; the latter then is perceived, to use Fortin’s terms, as a domain that encompasses “the ‘ordinary’ processes of lexeme-formation and inflection” (2011: 1). The basic criteria that are proposed to distinguish between different types of affixes (derivative, inflectional, and evaluative) are well summarized by Grandi (1998) on the basis of previous research; these are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Evaluatives as opposed to inflection and derivation (Fortin’s translation from Grandi 1998: 644, as cited in Fortin 2011: 50).

Property of the morphological rule	Derivation	Inflection	Evaluative
<i>a.</i> Can change the category of the base	YES	NO	NO
<i>b.</i> Can change the subcategorisation frame of the base	YES	NO	YES
<i>c.</i> Can change the conceptual meaning of the base	YES	NO	YES
<i>d.</i> Can change the grammatical meaning of the base	NO	YES	NO
<i>e.</i> Are completely productive	NO	YES	NO
<i>f.</i> Are relevant to syntax	NO	YES	NO
<i>g.</i> Are obligatory	NO	YES	NO
<i>h.</i> Their possible outputs are predictable and “closed”	NO	YES	NO

The properties of different types of affixes in Table 1 suggest that diminutives are not a prototypical category of derivational morphology; they have features of both derivation and inflection. Fortin’s (2011) research provides arguments which additionally highlight that diminutives can behave both as an inflectional and a derivational category.

Since diminutives have mixed formal properties, it is impossible to arrive at an

unambiguous answer about their status; besides, this is unnecessary for the purposes of the present study. In this paper the distinction between the two types of morphology, Plain and Evaluative, and the attribution of diminutive suffixes to a specific area of morphology are not of primary importance as I do not aim to reconcile or reject any of the theoretical approaches. Instead of resolving the tension between the two conflicting views, I adopt a usage-oriented and corpus-driven approach. I focus on the versatile pragmatic nature of the morpheme *-ish* and its distribution across registers, genres, and varieties of English. In this paper I treat the suffix *-ish* as an evaluative, or expressive, morpheme that has the force of attenuating the base that it attaches to, but I do not aim to arrive at any stringent criteria that would help to ascribe it to either of the two domains of morphology.

Evaluative morphology has received considerable attention from a large number of linguists and has given rise to a variety of studies in different languages from a diachronic and synchronic perspective (e.g. Stump 1993, Prieto 2005, Albair 2010, Appa & Amfo 2011, Böhmerová 2011, Fortin 2011, Grandi 2011, Tovina 2011, Körtvélyessy 2011). The majority of these studies focus on typology-related issues; such studies are mainly concerned with morphological and semantic properties of evaluatives, and explore cross-linguistic differences/similarities with regard to the repertoire of morphological forms available for evaluative morphology in different languages. Some of the studies also account for the productivity of evaluatives.

In the area of evaluative morphology, there have also been some studies on the basis of corpus data; however, these are still rather scarce. For instance, Albair (2010) examines 13 evaluative affixes (*hyper-*, *mega-*, *micro-*, *mini-*, *nano-*, *pico-*, *tera-*, *uber-*, *ultra-*, *-ette*, *-let*, *-ling*, and *-y*) in terms of word formation rules and productivity on the basis of substantial corpus data (*Corpus of Contemporary American English*). His well-grounded study aims to show that evaluative morphology in English is productive, and the degree of productivity relates to the origins of the affixes. However, it does not analyse in detail how much English evaluative affixes are context-sensitive.

The studies that highlight the sensitivity of morphological forms to socio-cultural context are still highly limited, but those that exist have disclosed interesting observations about the usage of evaluatives. For example, Prieto's investigation of Spanish evaluative morphology has clearly shown that 'sociolinguistically, evaluatives may mark contexts (e.g., informality) and groups or segments of the society (e.g., children, women, and low classes), which may reveal much about the power structure in modern societies of the Spanish speaking world' (Prieto 2005: xi).

In general, pragmatic properties of diminutives are accounted for by relying on limited amounts of (usually introspective) data. However, such investigations can serve as an excellent impetus for a data-driven study as they have pinpointed some intriguing characteristics of diminutives with respect to their semantics and pragmat-

ics. Jurafsky (1996), for instance, provides an elaborate schema of the semantics and pragmatics of diminutives.

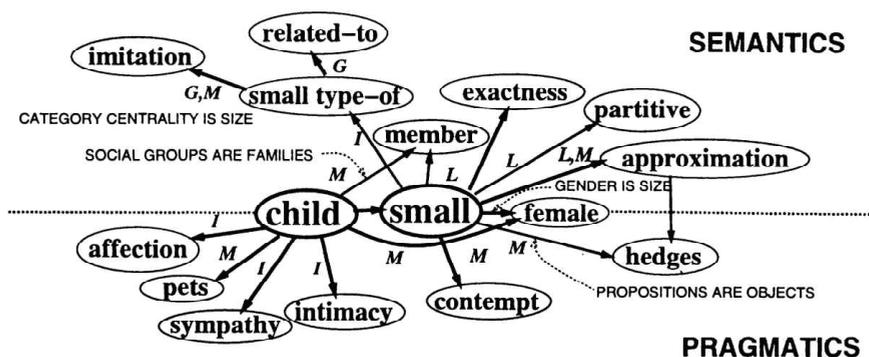


Figure 1. Proposed universal structure for the semantics and pragmatics of diminutives (Jurafsky 1996: 542)

The universal structure proposed by Jurafsky (1996) clearly shows that the use of diminutives must be predetermined by socio-cultural factors and genre variation as they can serve important pragmatic functions in interpersonal communication. Jurafsky’s structure provides a useful basis for raising hypotheses about the use of *-ish* in English (these will be formulated in Section 2).

1.2. THE SUFFIX *-ISH* AS A VAGUE LANGUAGE CATEGORY

As a category that signals imprecision of the base, words with the suffix *-ish* are sometimes treated as a vague language category (e.g. *boyish*, *fortyish*); this diminutive suffix, according to Crystal and Davy, has an ‘extreme flexibility’ in terms of the base that it attaches to (1979: 113). When attached to numbers, the suffix *-ish* approximates it and functions as a morphological approximator. As such, it can be attributed to the broad category of approximators usually realized through lexical units including such approximators as *approximately*, *about*, and *around* (e.g. Channell (1980, 1990, 1994), and such partial specifiers as *almost*, *or less*, *at least* and *more than*, *over*, which specify either a lower or higher limit for quantities (e.g. Jucker et al. 2003).

A morphologically expressed approximation is different from lexically represented approximations with regard to its structure. A lexical approximator is a lexical item that precedes a cardinal number to make the number less specific. The whole noun phrase including an approximator, a number, and a measure noun (which is optional) is called an approximation (Channell 1994), e.g. *about five minutes*, where *about* is an approximator, *five* is an exemplar number, and *minutes* is a measure noun. In the case of the approximation with the suffix *-ish*, the

approximation is lexically less complex: *-ish* is attached to an exemplar number (e.g. *fortyish*), which is usually not followed by a measure noun; the measure noun is implied by contextual signals. For example, in *He's fortyish* the measure noun *years* is implied but not stated overtly.

Due to its attitudinal and evaluative load, a morphologically marked approximation is just as context-sensitive as a lexically expressed one, and thus cannot be studied solely from the morphological perspective; it should necessarily be related to contextual (socio-cultural) factors. Previous research of lexically expressed approximators shows that they are treated predominantly from a context-sensitive theoretical and methodological approach or a combination of more than one approach, e.g. pragmatics, relevance theory, corpus linguistics, and discourse analysis. Some linguists treat approximators as a pragmatic category and thus analyse them as hedges (e.g. Lakoff 1972, Stenström 1994, Itani 1996). Approximators as a category of hedges are discussed in relation to various politeness strategies by Brown and Levinson (1994). Channell (1980, 1990, 1994) combines a variety of approaches including the methodology of corpus linguistics. Jucker et al. (2003) deal with interactive aspects of approximators in conversation within the framework of relevance theory.

The use of approximators, just like other vague language categories, is triggered by a variety of pragmatic reasons. Crystal and Davy (1979) point to the following reasons for the use of vague language categories:

- (1) memory loss (when as speaker cannot remember a word);
- (2) a lexical gap in language (when there is no suitable word in the speaker's language);
- (3) the subject of the conversation does not require precision;
- (4) the necessity to maintain the informal atmosphere.

These reasons are communication- and speaker-oriented and are related to the functions of vague language enumerated by Channell (1994). The reasons listed above show that there is a necessity for vagueness as a stylistic device and as a strategy to achieve certain communicative goals.

2. METHODS AND DATA

This paper combines the methodological and theoretical approaches used in the fields of morphology, corpus linguistics, and discourse analysis. These three approaches are employed in this study to check and interpret results from multiple perspectives to account for the manifold nature of the approximating suffix *-ish*.

This analysis resorts to corpus data; the corpus evidence is obtained from two corpora:

- (1) British National Corpus (BNC) : 100 mln words; <http://corpus.byu.edu/bnc/>
 (2) Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA): over 410 mln words; <http://www.americancorpus.org/>.

These maximally comparable databases allow comparing and contrasting the use of *-ish* across two varieties of English (British and American) and several registers (fiction, academic texts, newspapers, and conversation). The corpora also provide sufficient evidence to reveal how speakers use morphology to evaluate the informative content of their utterances (these aspects will be dealt with mainly from the perspective of discourse analysis).

These two corpora have been chosen for the present analysis because of their representative size and a high degree of comparability. These data sources are comparable with regard to both quantitative (size of the corpus) and qualitative criteria (interaction type, e.g. monologue/dialogue, and speaker categories). The BNC and COCA can be reliably compared as they both contain a sufficient number of words (100 and 400 million words respectively); to compensate for the uneven size of the corpora, relative frequencies will be calculated in the discussion of the results. Both corpora represent several identical types of speech events ('or registers' as they are referred to in the two corpora and thus will be referred to in this paper). Finally, in both databases there is an acceptable balance of interaction types and speaker categories (e.g. roles and age of the discourse participants).

The focus of this study is put on the suffixed numbers, e.g. *nineish*, *twoish*, *threeish*, etc. The category under investigation is expected to reveal the sensitivity of the suffix *-ish* to contextual factors as well as its regional and generic variation. In this investigation, I raise the following research questions to account for the pragmatic and morphological nature of this suffix:

- (1) How are suffixed numbers used across varieties?
- (2) How are they used across different registers?
- (3) What is the combinability of the suffix *-ish* with numbers?
- (4) How is this suffix used to achieve different communicative purposes?

To address these research questions, the following hypotheses have been formulated and tested on the basis of corpus data:

Hypothesis 1. The general frequency of numbers with the approximating suffix *-ish* differs in BE and AE.

Hypothesis 2. The frequency of suffixed numbers differs across registers.

Hypothesis 3. The combinability of the suffix *-ish* with numerals differs in BE and AE.

Hypothesis 4. The suffixed numbers are pragmatically important and perform multiple communicative functions.

3. RESULTS: THE SUFFIX *-ish* ACROSS VARIETIES AND REGISTERS

The data has provided clear evidence that the use of the suffix *-ish* is highly context-sensitive, just as was hypothesised at the beginning of the research. Its usage varies with regard to two major factors chosen as the most important variables in the present investigation, namely, English language variety and register. The following sections will elaborate on the way the use of the suffix *-ish* is predetermined by these two contextual factors.

3.1. VARIATION ACROSS VARIETIES

Several major tendencies in the use of the suffix *-ish* have surfaced from the corpus data. First, the approximating suffix *-ish* is used with numbers to a different extent in BE and AE; second, the two varieties especially differ with regard to (1) the dominant types of numbers suffixed with *-ish* and (2) the frequency of individual suffixed numbers. Finally, the combinability of *-ish* with cardinal numbers is clearly restricted in English, but only some of these restrictions are at work in both varieties.

It has been observed that the total frequency of suffixed numbers is higher in BE than in AE (82 and 71 occurrences per 100 mln words). To represent the extent of their usage, both raw and relative frequencies are provided in Table 2. Here and further on, all the relative frequencies are calculated per 100 mln words unless specified differently.

Table 2. Frequency of suffixed numbers in BE and AE

BE (Per 100 mln)	AE (Raw)	AE (Per 100 mln)
82	293	71

The difference in the total numbers is not dramatic and might be argued to be not very important, but a more detailed analysis of the frequency of different types of suffixed numbers suggests that important cross-varietal differences do exist.

The numbers that the suffix *-ish* attaches to can be categorized into three broad sets, namely, numbers from 1 to 9, teens, and tens. The distribution of these numbers with *-ish* in AE and BE has revealed some interesting tendencies; these are summed up in Table 3.

Table 3. Types of numbers used with *-ish* in BE and AE (freq. per 100 mln)

	BE	%	AE	%	TOTAL	%
1-10	44	53.66	2.93	4.10	46.93	30.58
Teens	5	6.10	0.72	1.01	5.72	3.73
Tens	33	40.24	67.80	94.89	100.80	65.69
Total:	82		71.45		153.45	

First of all, the results clearly show that teens are rarely approximated with the suffix *-ish* either in BE or AE. Teens with the suffix *-ish* comprise only 3.73% of all the suffixed numbers in both varieties. This result may be interpreted as a semantic restriction on the combinability of *-ish* with numbers (a more detailed account of its combinability follows later in this section). The other two types of numerical bases, i.e. tens and numbers from 1 to 9, strongly suggest that there exist variety-specific preferences for the numerical bases for morphologically expressed approximations.

Interestingly, numbers from 1 to 9 occur with the suffix *-ish* considerably more frequently in BE than in AE (44 occurrences in BE as opposed to only 2.93 occurrences in AE); more than half of the suffixed numbers in BE are those from 1 to 9. This dramatic difference between the two varieties is undoubtedly significant just as is the difference in the use of tens as bases for the suffix *-ish*. Tens are strongly preferred in AE, where they are used twice as frequently as in BE (67.80 and 33 occurrences respectively). The results in Table 3 clearly show that almost all the suffixed numbers, i.e. as many as 94.89% of the total number, are tens. Such drastic cross-varietal differences in the types of numbers used for morphologically expressed approximations were not initially expected.

The cross-varietal differences in the dominance of certain types of numbers as bases for *-ish* further lead us to some interesting observations about individual forms preferred in either of the two varieties. The analysis of the frequency of individual suffixed numbers has revealed that speakers of BE and AE favour different individual approximated numbers:

- forms preferred in BE:
 - *oneish, threeish, fourish, fiveish* (i.e. numbers from 1 to 10)
- forms preferred in AE:
 - *fortyish, fiftyish, sixtyish* (i.e. tens)

The frequency of these and all the other numbers is provided in Table 4; the numbers that signal the most important differences between the two varieties are highlighted in bold.

Table 4 once again supports the observation that tens are most commonly approximated with *-ish* in AE, whereas in BE some numbers from 1 to 9 are predominantly used with it. However, some numbers seem to be suffixed extremely rarely in either BE and AE; these need some special attention.

The preferences for certain numerical bases imply that there exist some rather rigid restrictions on the combinability of the suffix *-ish* with cardinal numbers. The combinability of *-ish* is restricted in the following way:

- it rarely attaches to numbers from one to ten, but it is considerably more frequently used with some tens (esp. in AE),
- some numbers are never used with *-ish* (esp. teens),
- some cross-varietal preferences can be observed with regard to individual numbers.

Table 4. Frequency of individual suffixed numbers in BE and AE

	BE (Relative freq)	AE (Raw freq)	AE (Relative freq)
oneish	8	-	-
twoish	3	2	0.49
threeish	4	-	-
fourish	8	1	0.24
fv(e)ish	10	2	0.49
sixish	4	4	0.12
sevenish	1	1	0.24
eightish	2	2	0.49
nineish	3	-	-
tenish	1	-	-
twelveish	1	1	0.24
thirteenish	2	1	0.24
seventeenish	1	-	-
eighteenish	1	1	0.24
twentyish	1	9	2.19
thirtyish	9	49	11.95
fortyish	16	116	28.29
fiftyish	4	66	16.09
sixtyish	1	35	8.54
seventyish	-	3	0.73
ninetyish	2	-	-

The numbers that apparently do not combine with *-ish* are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Numbers that tend not to combine with the approximating suffix *-ish*

	BE	AE
one	yes	no
three	yes	no
nine	yes	no
ten	yes	no
eleven	no	no
fourteen	no	no
fifteen	no	no
sixteen	no	no
seventeen	yes (but rare)	no
nineteen	no	no
seventy	no	yes
eighty	no	no
ninety	yes	no

As Table 5 demonstrates, teens are almost never suffixed in either of the two varieties. In the American corpus, numbers *one*, *three*, *nine*, *ten*, and *ninety* are never

suffixed, whereas in the BNC, *seventy* never appears with *-ish*. The cardinal number *eighty* is not approximated with *-ish* in either of the two varieties.

In short, the results of this study clearly point to the existence of some cross-varietal differences on different levels of the usage of the suffix *-ish* (e.g. general frequency and combinability). To see whether any important tendencies can be observed with respect to distribution across registers, we turn now to the discussion of the variation of this suffix across spoken and written registers in BE and AE.

3.2. VARIATION OF THE SUFFIX *-ISH* ACROSS REGISTERS

A considerable variation of the frequency of suffixed numbers has been observed in different registers in both BE and AE. The use of the diminutive *-ish* varies greatly across registers, which further supports that it is a highly context-sensitive morphological category. It is also important to note that register differences vary in the two English language varieties.

The registers where the use of the suffix *-ish* was examined include spoken discourse (SPOK) and four types of written discourse: fiction (FICT), magazines (MAGAZ), news reports (NEWS), and academic texts (ACAD). Both corpora include the category of miscellaneous texts (MISC), which includes texts that were difficult to categorize into any homogenous sets. Because of their highly varied nature, they are not really informative, and will not be analysed here in greater detail. The frequency of suffixed numbers in this category of texts is presented in the figure below just for general information.

The most general observation related to register variation is that the approximating suffix *-ish* is used mainly in fiction and spoken discourse to approximate the number that it attaches to. Its distribution across registers in BE and AE is represented in Figure 2.

Figure 2 clearly shows that the results strongly diverge in the two varieties in some registers (especially spoken discourse and magazines), but in some registers there is some overlapping in AE and BE.

The data strongly suggests that suffixed numbers are a feature of spoken interaction especially in BE, where they are predominantly used in spoken discourse (63.4% of the total number). Suffixed numbers are frequent in fiction in both AE and BE (61.4% and 28.1% respectively), but in AE they are evidently more predominant in fiction than in BE. When suffixed numbers are used in fiction, they appear in dialogues, which imitate daily conversations; therefore, this usage again supports the idea that suffixed numbers are characteristic of oral communication.

It is interesting to note that in AE suffixed numbers are more frequently employed in magazines and news reports than in spoken interaction; see Figure 2, where this difference is clearly displayed. In BE suffixed numbers appear in these two registers very rarely.

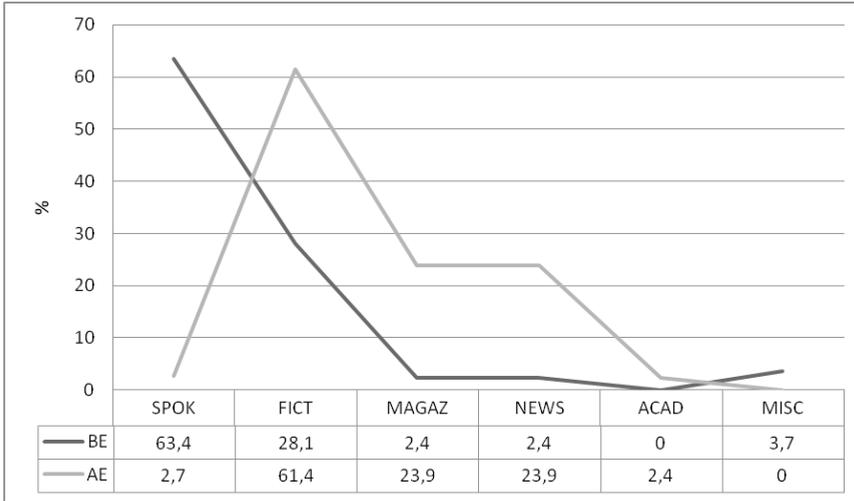


Figure 2. Distribution of suffixed numbers across registers in BE and AE

What is more, in AE numbers with the suffix *-ish* appear in academic texts; however, its incidence in these texts is very low (only 7 occurrences in total). Thus, the results of the present analysis suggest that in AE suffixed numbers are rather extensively used in written texts, which may further signal that mass media texts in AE are less formal than those in BE. However, such a generalization requires additional cross-examination.

To summarize, the results lead us to two broad generalisations in relation to the register variation of suffixed numbers. Firstly, the suffix *-ish* is clearly used to a different extent in different registers, which seems to be predetermined by the degree of formality. Secondly and rather unexpectedly, its register distribution is different in the two varieties of English. In BE suffixed numbers dominate in spoken interaction and in invented dialogues in fiction; such instances make up as many as 71.5% of all the uses of *-ish* with cardinal numbers. In AE, strangely enough, suffixed numbers are relatively equally distributed in fiction, magazines and news reports. Nearly half of their uses (47.8% of all the instances) have been encountered in the last two registers. However, in both BE and AE, the registers where suffixed numbers dominate, are associated with a lower degree of formality; magazines and newspapers usually adopt a much less formal style than, for instance, academic texts.

3.3. FUNCTIONS OF THE ATTENUATED NUMBERS

Morphologically approximated numbers, as has been expected, serve a variety of communicative purposes and are often employed as a mitigating or hedging device. It has already been mentioned that the suffix *-ish* is commonly dealt with from the

perspective of evaluative morphology since it usually expresses subjective attitudes and evaluations, and thus has an emotional load. Therefore, when describing the meaning of this suffix, its pragmatic uses and functions are of essential importance.

The data has demonstrated that the number approximated with the suffix *-ish*, can be used:

- as a hedging device to express uncertainty:
 - (1) ...went down there till late. It were about **twoish**. *Think* it were about two. Yeah cos we're always back for then... (BNC, SPOK)
- when precision is impossible:
 - (2) ...think self-employed actually means well I can crawl out of bed at **elevenish**, work till **fourish**, that's three days a week because the other two days I can have... (BNC, SPOK)
- when guessing:
 - (3) ...No. Two chaps just walked down through there oh *I suppose* they were upper **fortyish** they could have been older. Yeah. (BNC, SPOK)
- as a politeness strategy in suggestions:
 - (4) ...right okay em are you free a bit later on this afternoon, *probably around about* **threish** *possibly*? (BNC, SPOK)

In example (1), the speaker's uncertainty is signalled by the hedge *think* in the utterance following the suffixed number and the rephrasing of the suffixed number with a lexically approximated number *about two*. In example (2), more precision is impossible since this utterance is a hypothetical generalisation. Guesses in the present analysis were determined by relying on such signals as hedges (e.g. *I suppose*) and elaborate considerations as the underlined item in example (3). Example (4) is a polite suggestion to meet, which involves extensive hedging (highlighted in italics) used alongside the number suffixed with *-ish*.

All these uses of numbers suffixed with *-ish* support earlier observations of other linguists made about the uses and functions of vague language in general. Perhaps the most comprehensive list of vague language functions is the one provided by Channell (1994), who claims that by appropriately using vague language in appropriate situations the following functions can be performed:

- (1) give the right amount of information and deliberately withhold information;
- (2) use language persuasively;
- (3) display power;
- (4) use it as a strategy of politeness and as a means of self-protection;
- (5) use it as a means to demonstrate informality;

(6) fill in lexical gaps and missing information. (Channell 1994)

Not all of these functions are relevant for the numbers suffixed with *-ish*, but some of them (these are presented in italics in the list above) have been supported by the results of the present investigation. The obtained corpus data shows that morphologically approximated numbers are employed (1) to give the right amount of information, especially when more precision is unnecessary, (2) to achieve politeness, and (3) to demonstrate informality. The last function is strongly suggested by the distribution of *-ish* across registers in the two varieties of English, which has revealed that *-ish* tends to appear in less formal discourse types.

The corpus evidence has revealed a high incidence of patterns where multiple hedging is involved alongside the approximated number. This evidence confirms the tendency to use *-ish* as a marker of politeness and as a means of self-protection. Patterns with multiple hedging are summed up and exemplified below; the relevant hedging categories are presented in italics:

- *About/ (a)round + suffixed number:*

- (7) ... Yeah, I've seen you going in *about* half **fiveish**. Ya. Cos I've sometimes caught bus up from other end, if ... (BNC, SPOK)
- (8) ... "I'm going into Norwich this afternoon. I'll drop it in *round* **sixish**. Shall I change your library book at the same time?" (BNC, FICT)

- *Adverbs as hedges:*

- (9) ... A young man orbiting the women, one of their sons, *perhaps*, a **twentyish** kid with sharp features and low-slung, faded jeans over boots, elaborated upon their... (COCA, FICT)
- (10) ... Saturday with her son. Her son's about 17, and she's *probably* **fortyish**. And they come in every Saturday and they sit at this one marble table... (COCA, SPOK)

- *Other hedges:*

- (11) ... No. Two chaps just walked down through there oh *I suppose* they were *upper* **fortyish** they *could have been* older Yeah. (BNC, SPOK)
- (12) ... you stop over, you wasn't coming down to me till *sort of like* after **threeish**. Right. Is that okay with you? Yeah. Fine, fine. (BNC, SPOK)

As can be seen in examples (7)-(12), multiple hedging can involve approximators (e.g. *about* or *around*), adverbs (e.g. *perhaps* or *probably*), and other hedges (e.g. *I suppose*, *sort of*, or *like*). Most commonly, more than one additional hedge is employed alongside the suffixed number. Highly recurrent multiple hedging and self-distancing point to how much speakers are conscious of upholding the principles of politeness and face-saving. In cases of uncertainty, speakers tend to employ multiple linguistic means to indicate this uncertainty, to avoid erroneous claims, and to save their face.

Multiple hedges thus can be treated as evidence of the speaker's conscious and deliberate face-saving behaviour.

Finally, in relation to the functions of numbers with *-ish*, it is important to discuss shortly what is hedged or mitigated with suffixed numbers. The notion quantified with an approximated number is called the 'exemplar noun'; the exemplar nouns quantified with suffixed numbers depend on the category of the number, as can be seen below:

- **Numbers from 1 to 9** are used for **time references**:

(13) ... You've got ta pick us up about half past **fourish**. Half past **fourish**. Yeah? Yeah what whatever. Alright then?... (BNC, SPOK)

(14) ... That means we'll arrive about **twoish** or leave around **fiveish**," explains Toots Maloy. "It could vary 24 hours one way or... (COCA, MAGAZ)

- **Tens** are used to refer to **age** (esp. in FICT), and sometimes **percentages** and **people**:

(15) ...in there's nine you know the little one with the glasses she's about **fortyish** Oh fortyish Well I'm not very good at the ages like I mean she... (BNC, SPOK)

(16) ... can't tell you but I Right. know I know it'll be say **thirtyish** percent. Yeah as Right. opposed to the forty in the UK so... (BNC, SPOK)

When time and age are referred to with a suffixed number, the exemplar noun is omitted, as in examples (13)-(15). The exemplar noun *percent*, however, is given overtly, as can be seen in example (16).

4. CONCLUSIONS

The corpus evidence obtained for the present investigation demonstrates that a corpus-based approach can definitely yield some revealing results in morphological studies by relating morphological aspects to register variation and cross-varietal differences. This study has revealed some important and interesting observations about the suffix *-ish* with respect to its cross-varietal distribution and distribution across registers, restrictions on its combinability in the two varieties of English, and its functions. It is also important to note that numbers suffixed with *-ish* are of a relatively low frequency in English; therefore, only really huge corpora can reveal the subtle aspects of their usage observed in this investigation. As will be argued further on, these findings can have practical applications in the area of foreign language teaching.

As has already been noted, the variation of *-ish* has been observed with regard to English language varieties and registers. As far as cross-varietal differences are concerned, BE and AE differ in terms of the total frequency of suffixed numbers, which means that Hypothesis 1 about the divergent frequencies of suffixed numbers in BE

and AE has been corroborated. As the data shows, there also exist considerable differences in the types of numbers that are suffixed with *-ish* in BE and AE; it has been manifested in this analysis that suffixed tens dominate in AE, and suffixed numbers from 1 to 9 dominate in BE. This result was initially not predicted, but it additionally confirms the general hypothesis that there exist cross-varietal differences in the way *-ish* is used with cardinal numbers.

The analysis of the distribution of *-ish* across registers in AE and BE has corroborated Hypothesis 2, which claimed that the frequency of suffixed numbers differs across registers. This study demonstrates that suffixed numbers tend to dominate in spoken interaction either in real daily communication or invented conversations in fiction. However, some register-specific results in BE and AE diverge in several important respects. In BE suffixed numbers dominate in spoken interaction and fiction, whereas in AE they are more extensively used in fiction and mass-media texts, i.e. newspapers and magazines. This observation may signal that speakers of AE tend to adopt a less formal style in written texts.

The analysis of the combinability of *-ish* has also disclosed some intriguing and useful tendencies that point to some semantic restrictions on the types of bases attachable to *-ish*. The most general tendency that has been observed in both BE and AE is that teens are rarely suffixed. However, the combinability of this suffix with other numbers differs considerably in the two varieties: tens in AE are suffixed markedly more frequently, whereas numbers from 1 to 9 are often suffixed in BE, but very rarely in AE. Though the suffix *-ish*, according to Crystal and Davy, has an 'extreme flexibility' in terms of the base that it attaches to (1979: 113), there exist some restrictions on numerical bases; moreover, these restrictions vary in different varieties of English. The differences in the combinability of the suffix *-ish* in the two varieties of English validate Hypothesis 3, which predicted that the combinability of this suffix with numerals differs in BE and AE.

Since the suffix *-ish* is used as an attenuative or evaluative form that de-emphasizes information, expresses imprecision, and conveys subjective evaluations of a quantity or feature, it was important in this study to account for the main functions that it performs in spoken and written communication. To account for the pragmatic features of the suffix *-ish*, Hypothesis 4 was raised and tested; it speculated that suffixed numbers are pragmatically important and perform multiple communicative functions.

The analysis has revealed that suffixed numbers perform important communicative functions and can be used for very specific communicative effects. Suffixed numbers are mainly used to express lack of certainty; they can be treated as a category of hedging and thus can function as a face-saving strategy or a politeness device. What is noteworthy is that morphologically approximated numbers are recurrently employed in patterns with multiple hedging.

The results pertaining to multiple hedging in this study confirm similar observations

made in previous investigations of other vague language categories, such as lexical approximators, general extenders, and placeholders. Some linguists have observed that hedging devices tend to cluster (e.g. Ediger 1995, Overstreet 1999, Ruzaitė 2006, 2007). Previous research shows that different grammatical and lexical hedging devices co-occur when the speaker hedges on the content of an utterance and aims to uphold the principles of politeness; such co-occurring hedging devices include qualifiers (e.g. *maybe, kind of, just, actually, usually, sort of*), modals (e.g. *will, would, should, might*), the subjunctive (e.g. *what I wanted, if this were*), hypotheticals and conditionals (e.g. *let's say, for example, when, if*), verbs of opinion, interpretation, and verbs related to cognition (e.g. *seem, be sure, I mean, think*), expressions of indefinite reference (e.g. *other opinions, some people, some stuff*), indefinite compound pronouns (e.g. *somebody, everybody, someone*), and discourse markers (e.g. *well, I don't know, you know, I mean*) (Ediger 1995: 253). As Stenström (1994) observes, co-occurring self-distancing devices are a characteristic feature of spoken interaction in general. According to her, their effect is mainly 'to modify and mitigate an utterance'; or maybe they are used as pause fillers 'for want of something better to say' (Stenström 1994: 65).

The obtained results not only highlight the usefulness and advantages of corpus-based studies in the field of morphology, but can also have some practical applications, especially in language teaching. As Cheng and Warren (2003: 382) note, teachers often neglect such phenomena as indirectness, inexplicitness and vagueness, which learners, in fact, need to be competent to process and produce (cf. Stubbs 1996). However, to sound native speaker-like, learners of English have to become competent in the use of pragmatically important categories.

Corpus evidence can serve as a useful teaching resource to help students acquire such pragmatically important categories as the suffix *-ish*. To see the differences between the information that can be obtained from a corpus and a dictionary, the findings of the present research have been compared to the information about *-ish* in *The Longman English Dictionary On-line*. This dictionary defines the suffix *-ish* by distinguishing the approximating uses of this morpheme as meanings 5 and 6 in the entry:

5 [in adjectives] rather [= quite]:

- youngish (=not very young, but not old either)
- tallish
- reddish hair

6 [in adjectives] *spoken* approximately:

- We'll expect you eightish (=at about 8 o'clock).
- He's fortyish (=about 40 years old).

The entry highlights the pragmatic importance of *-ish* and provides information about the notions that can be quantified with suffixed numbers; however, the information about register distribution and cross-varietal differences is underspecified. Of course, a dictionary cannot provide a complete and detailed account of every word; therefore, a corpus can be employed as a useful complement to other sources of information about word usage.

Jūratė Ruzaitė

ŠVELNINAMŪJŲ MORFOLOGINIŲ FORMŲ ŽANRINIS IR REGIONINIS VARIANTIŠKUMAS:
TEKSTYNAIS PAREMTA PRIESAGOS *-ISH* ANALIZĖ

S a n t r a u k a

Šio tyrimo tikslas – ištirti, kaip švelninamosios anglų kalbos priesagos *-ish* vartoseną su kiekiniais skaitvardžiais (pvz., *fortyish*, *nineish*) priklauso nuo kontekstinių faktorių, taip pat nustatyti, kokias pragmatines funkcijas vediniai su šia morfologine forma atlieka sakytiniame ir rašytiniame diskurse. Tyrimui buvo pasirinkti du pagrindiniai faktoriai, galimai nulemiantys priesagos *-ish* vartoseną: (1) anglų kalbos atmaina ir (2) registras. Priesagos *-ish* vartoseną buvo tirta dviejose anglų kalbos atmainose: britų ir amerikiečių anglų kalboje, todėl tyrime buvo remtasi dviem tekstynais – „Britų nacionaliniu“ (angl. *British National Corpus* – BNC) ir „Amerikiečių šiuolaikinės kalbos“ (angl. *Corpus of Contemporary American English* – COCA). Remiantis šiais tekstynais, straipsnis siekia atsakyti į kelis pagrindinius klausimus: (1) kaip skaitvardžių su priesaga *-ish* dažnumas skiriasi amerikiečių ir britų anglų kalboje; (2) kaip priesagos *-ish* vartoseną priklauso nuo registro; (3) koks yra priesagos *-ish* junglumas su kiekiniais skaitvardžiais; (4) kokias pragmatines funkcijas ši priesaga atlieka.

Tekstynais paremtas tyrimas parodė, kad morfologinių kategorijų analizė, pagrįsta ne introspektyviais duomenimis, o gausia ir autentiška empirine medžiaga, gali atskleisti įdomių, netikėtų ir svarbių morfologinio vieneto vartojimo aspektų. Priesaga *-ish* anglų kalboje nėra itin dažna, todėl jos vartoseną gali išryškėti tik gana didelėje duomenų bazėje, o tirtuosius tekstynus sudaro 100 milijonų (BNC) ir daugiau nei 410 milijonų (COCA) žodžių. Tokios apimties duomenų šaltinis gali reprezentatyviai parodyti net ir smulkius tiriamosios kategorijos vartosenos niuansus, kurie ne visada atsispindi žodynuose, bet gali turėti taikomąją vertę mokant užsienio kalbos.

Pagrindinės tendencijos, išryškėjusios per tyrimą, rodo, kad priesaga *-ish* priklauso ir nuo anglų kalbos atmainos, ir nuo registro. Bendras pavartojimo atvejų su priesaga *-ish* dažnumas britų ir amerikiečių anglų kalboje skiriasi: britai šią kategoriją vartoja dažniau. Dar svarbesnis atradimas yra tai, jog kalbos atmaina lemia tiriamosios priesagos junglumą su kiekiniais skaitvardžiais, taip pat ir jos paplitimą skirtinguose registruose. Skaitvardžių su priesaga *-ish* funkcijos mažiau priklauso nuo kalbos atmainos, tačiau tyrimas atskleidė ir patvirtino tyrimo pradžioje išsikelto hipotezę, jog priesaga *-ish* turi ypatingą pragmatinę svarbą. Skaitvardžiai su priesaga *-ish* dažniausiai vartojami, kai kalbėtojas sąmoningai vertina savo teiginio tikrumą bei tikslumą ir išreiškia abejonę, todėl dažniausiai vediniai su *-ish* yra vartojami kaip mandagumo raiška, padedanti išsaugoti kalbėtojo „veidą“.

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