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Getting *close-ish*: A corpus-based exploration of *-ish* as a marker of approximation and vagueness

Abstract: This paper investigates the approximative nature of *-ish*, which takes its origin in de-adjectival adjectives in Middle English and from there spreads to *-ish*-derivatives from a wide array of bases, in terms of both categoriality and complexity. Drawing on data from the TV corpus, the paper charts the inventory of *-ish*-derivatives expressing approximative senses and zooms in on de-adjectival derivatives (*largish*, *small-er-ish*), de-numeral derivatives (*fourth-ish*, *2.8-ish*), as well as on non-category changing *-ish*-formations (*a few weeks-ish*, *nothingish*). Building on both the diachronic trajectory of approximative *-ish* as of Middle English and the inventory of *-ish*-formations in the TV corpus, the paper proposes an approximation cline ranging from the earliest relational/associative senses of the suffix via similitudinal and genuinely approximative senses to incipient privative senses, (almost) all of which are attested in the data investigated.

Keywords: approximation cline, corpus-based analysis, derivation, frequency, *-ish* suffix, productivity, TV data

1. Introduction

Compared with its cognates in various other Germanic languages, the English derivational suffix *-ish* proves to be quite exceptional not only in that it may attach to a multitude of bases¹, but also in that it has developed approximative semantics in addition to the relational or associative senses that it has in common with, e.g., German *-isch*, Norwegian *-(i)sk* or Dutch *-s*. While the relational/associative senses manifest most prominently in nationality-denoting derivatives (1) as well as with denominal derivatives (2), the approximative sense, which is absent in all of the Germanic sister languages, can be seen in de-adjectival formations (3), numerals (4) or proper nouns (5).²

¹ The fact that *-ish* attaches to a wide categorial range of bases has been acknowledged among others by Marchand (1969: 305–306), Bauer et al. (2013: 311, *passim*), Dixon (2014: 96, *passim*) and Plag (2003: 96).

² Apart from the approximative function lacking in other Germanic languages, English *-ish* is also exclusive in that it has been extended to phrasal bases and may occur as a free lexical item.

- (1) Spanish, cf. German ‘spanisch’, Norwegian ‘spansk’, Dutch ‘spaans’
- (2) heavenish, cf. German ‘himmlisch’, Norwegian ‘himmelsk’, Dutch ‘hemels’
- (3) cleanish, greenish
- (4) 1-ish, 50-ish
- (5) Al Caponish, James Deanish

The crucial difference between the relational/associative meaning and the approximative meaning is that the former indicates a relationship of belongingness and similarity in the sense of ‘characteristic of’, whereas the latter ultimately emphasises a dissimilarity to a greater or lesser extent, ranging from ‘vaguely x’ to ‘almost x, but ultimately not belonging to x’ (on this issue see also Kuzmack 2007). This tension is humorously exploited in the following example taken from the TV corpus:

- (6) I discover I’m an eighth *Swedish*, which makes me *Swede-ish*. (2017, *The Real O’Neils*)

The utterance juxtaposes two diametrically opposed senses of *Swedish*: on the one hand, *Swedish* in the well-established meaning of an ethnic adjective, and on the other hand, a re-segmented derivative, with a hiatus between the base *Swede* and a phonologically stressed affix, that puts emphasis on the non-prototypical reading of *Swede-ish* as ‘not Swedish, only vaguely so’. In this regard, the approximative *-ish*-derivative also denotes some sort of deficiency of a property.

The TV corpus abounds with instances similar to the one in (6), which indicate a meta-awareness of the approximative semantics of *-ish*-derivatives. Consider (7)–(9):

- (7) I wouldn’t call it rude. Rude-ish. Rude-esque. Whatever you wanna call it. (2000, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*)
- (8) Are you okay with the guy thing? – Yes. – Really? – Okay-ish. – That’s not okay. – That’s okay with an “ish”. (2000, *Gilmore Girls*)
- (9) We’re not platonic. Platon-ish, maybe. (2013, *How I Met Your Mother*)

In (7), the speaker explicitly contemplates the approximative nature of *rudish* vis-à-vis the positive form of the adjective, while at the same time offering another morphological means of marking approximation with the word-form *rude-esque*. (8) discusses the vagueness of *okay-ish* as opposed to the more affirmative *okay*, with an additional metalinguistic comment on the underlying morphological process. In (9), the suffix change from *-ic* to *-ish* results in

platon-ish as the opposite of *platonic*, which playfully conveys the notion that being in a ‘platon-ish’ relationship will most surely undermine the ethics of a platonic connection.

Examples like these raise a number of issues, which form the basis of two major research interests pursued in this paper. The most straightforward one concerns the task of generally taking stock of approximative morphology via *-ish*-derivation, thus going beyond those *-ish*-derivatives that meet the eye due to their comical quality. The inventory of *-ish* derivatives provides the opportunity for a closer inspection of those base categories where approximative senses are given most prominently. A second issue involves the differentiation of pragmatic uses and functions of approximative *-ish*-constructs. An exploration into the morphology-pragmatics interface on the basis of attested data allows us to perceive approximation as a more fine-grained notion and to establish a taxonomy of various approximative senses.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 revisits the evolution of approximative *-ish* in the history of English and elaborates on the impact that de-adjectival *-ish*-derivatives, which were the first ones to adopt the sense of approximation, had on the overall system of *-ish*-derivation. Section 3 then proceeds to discuss data from the TV corpus, starting out with a bird’s eye view of the patterns of *-ish*-derivation that emerge from the corpus data (3.1.). The further analysis then zooms in on more fine-grained aspects pertaining to approximative senses, namely de-adjectival (3.2.) and de-numeral derivatives (3.3.) and a number of cases amongst hapax legomena constructs where *-ish*-suffixation does not yield adjectival outputs (3.4.), which seems to be a recent development tying in with other *-ish*-derivatives that do not induce a change of the base category. Section 4, then, recapitulates the approximative nature of *-ish*-derivatives by categorising them in terms of an approximation cline. The paper is wrapped up by a brief conclusion in section 5, which addresses to what extent the findings from the case study on the approximative nature of *-ish* bear a more general significance for the investigation of approximation in morphology.

2. Previously on (approximative) *-ish*

Approximative *-ish* as a morphological means to mark vagueness is an innovation of Middle English when the suffix came to be attached to adjectival bases – it is since then that the career of English *-ish* has parted ways with that of its Germanic cognates.

Before that pivotal moment, *-ish* had been a derivational affix exclusively conveying an associative sense that it shares with all sister languages, a meaning that is most prominently represented in derivatives denoting nationality/ethnicity and origin, such as Old English *englisc* ‘English’, *denisc* ‘Danish’ or *grecisc* ‘Greek’. As the diachronic study conducted in Eitelmann, Haugland and Haumann (2020) shows, these ethnonymic expressions constitute the lion’s share in terms of both types and tokens in the earliest period. Besides names for peoples as a reference to nationality or their respective language, this group of Old English *-ish*-derivatives also comprises names for cities (*lundenisc* ‘from London’), countries (*ethiopisc* ‘from Ethiopia’) or individuals (*pontisc* ‘of the Pontius family’), with the sense of relatedness being the common denominator in all of these cases. Apart from that, *-ish* also attaches to nominal bases – both simplex (e.g., *eotenisc* ‘made by a giant’ < *eoten* ‘giant’) and compound bases (e.g., *god-spellisc* ‘evangelical’ < *god-spell* ‘gospel’) –, once again conveying the sense of association firmly established with ethnic adjectives.

In Middle English, the pattern of *-ish*-derivation is affected by several changes, which set the scene for the ultimate extension of base categories beyond nouns and the evolution of the approximative sense. On the one hand, nominal bases have come to outnumber ethnonyms, which is due to a general decline of *-ish* as a nationality-denoting affix, ousted by other functionally equivalent affixes like *-ese* or *-ian* (cf. Dixon 2014: 268). At the same time, proper noun bases become virtually extinct. On the other hand, the associative sense with denominal derivatives increasingly shifts towards similitudinal meaning, expressing a likeness rather than an inherent relatedness (cf., e.g., *shepishse* ‘sheep-like’).

With de-adjectival derivatives entering the scene, *-ish*-derivation undergoes its most substantial change yet, namely the rise of approximative senses that Marchand (1969: 306) paraphrases as ‘nearing, but not exactly x’. The widespread assumption that colour adjectives are the forerunners in this development (see, e.g., the OED entry on *-ish*, *suffix1*) could not be confirmed in Eitelmann, Haugland and Haumann (2020: 812), which drew on data from the *Middle English Dictionary* (MED): Formations based on colour adjectives such as *whitish* (1379), *yelwish* (1379) or *reddish* (1392) originate roughly at the same time as those based on common adjectives such as *fattish* (1369), *palish* (a1398) and *sourish* (a1398). Early metalinguistic comments found in medical treatises show that Middle English

writers were fully aware of a semantic difference between the common form of the adjective and its *-ish*-derived counterpart, as illustrated in (10):

- (10) Et for to know how Y tak þis term ‘thenysshē,’ tak hede þat þer is differens bytwene ‘þenne’ and ‘thennysshē’: for ‘thenne’ is purpurly when it is mykel thenne (...); ‘thennysshē’ when it is but o partie thenne, or elles menely thenne. (?c1400(1379) *Treat.Uroscopy [MED, s.v. *thinnish*])
- ‘And in order to understand how I use this term ‘thinnish,’ note that there is a difference between ‘thin’ and ‘thinnish’: for ‘thin’ is proper when it is very thin (...); ‘thinnish’ when it is only partly thin, or else slightly thin.’

It is important to point out that in such early examples of de-adjectival *-ish*-derivatives, the meaning of attenuation is prevalent, with the explicit naming of the underived adjective serving as a baseline.

In Traugott and Trousdale’s (2013) Construction Grammar analysis, the extension of *-ish* to adjectival bases is conceptualised as an instance of constructionalisation, i.e. the introduction of a new constructional schema with innovative formal and semantic properties that differ fundamentally from the ones already established in the constructional network. In other words, the admission of adjectival bases serves as the ‘door opener’ for approximative meanings which then also spread to other base categories. What we are dealing with in the case of *-ish* are two schemas (cf. Traugott & Trousdale 2013: 233–235). On the one hand, there is the original *-ish* schema attested since Old English times and shared by all Germanic languages, which has the meaning ‘having character of *x*’. This schema is instantiated in two subschemas, i.e., an ethnic subschema and an associative subschema. On the other hand, the approximative *-ish* schema with the meaning ‘having character like *x*’, attested since Middle English, can be said to have developed from the original schema via the similitude sense ultimately resulting in a separate schema with its own distinct properties. Importantly, the rise of the approximative sense, initiated by the attachment of *-ish* to common adjectival bases, also has ripple effects for the meaning potential of denominal *-ish*-derivatives: while generally instantiating the sense of relatedness, denominal derivatives may occasionally also induce an approximative reading, particularly so as the meaning ‘having the characteristics of *x*’ is largely expressed by *-ish*’s competitor *-y*.

Once consolidated, the newly established approximative schema is affected by further constructional changes. Indeed, as of Early Modern English, there is a surge in *-ish*

constructs with an approximative meaning. At the same time *-ish*, generally, sees the laxing of selectional restrictions. As the array of bases that *-ish* attaches to becomes progressively more varied, both in terms of base category and complexity, approximative *-ish* constructs increase not only with adjectival bases, but also extend to numeral (*sixtyish*), adverbial (*foreverish*) or pronominal bases (*me-ish*). Numerals in particular serve to consolidate the approximative sense of *-ish*, together with proper noun bases that experience a comeback as of the 18th century. Resurfacing in Late Modern English, *-ish*-derivatives from names are no longer of the associative kind as in Old and Middle English, but now exclusively express approximation. For instance, *Graham Greenish* or *Londonish*, as attested in the British National Corpus (BNC), do not refer to something authored by Graham Greene or something directly related to London (as such formations would have in earlier periods); instead, they merely indicate a resemblance and simultaneously underscore an essential dissimilarity since *Graham Greenish* and *Londonish* imply that the entities thus described are ultimately *not* related to Graham Greene or London.³

A further crucial step in the development of *-ish*-derivation that contributed to the consolidation of the approximative sense concerns the extension to phrasal bases from the 18th century onwards so that *-ish* takes scope over an entire phrase, illustrated in (11) with examples from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA):

- (11) a. She finally issued just a sigh, but she was [[don't car]_{TP} *ish*]_A in her finery (...)
 b. What a saint! There was nothing remotely [dog-in-the-manger]_{DP} *ish*]_A about Beth, that was one of her special qualities.

Moreover, the attachment to complex phrasal units as in (12) may result in *-ish* displaying clitic behaviour, thus blurring the boundaries between morphology and syntax. Note that the clitic is less integrated than its affixal relative and can even constitute an intonation phrase of its own due to phonological strengthening (cf. Norde 2009: 224–225; Kuzmack 2007):

- (12) GEIST: How long have you been together?

³ In this regard, German *-isch*-derivation is crucially different in that *-isch*-derivatives from names still indicate association, i.e., “das Shakespearsche Werk” ‘the Shakespeare-ish work’ is indeed authored by Shakespeare (cf. also Kempf & Eitelmann 2018 on this issue).

The continuous loosening of the selectional restrictions and the development of pure clitic *-ish* may have facilitated the rise of unhosted *ish* in the 20th century:

- The gradual debonding of *-ish*, to use Norde's (2009) term, is accompanied by a semantic shift from approximator to epistemic marker (cf. Traugott & Trousdale 2013: 236–237; see also Oltra-Massuet 2017: 312, *passim*).⁵ Thus, closely related to the approximative senses as found with de-adjectival, de-numeral and deonymic bases, the free lexical item *ish* marks vagueness and, in addition, expresses speaker attitude, indicating a subjective assessment of the proposition. Traugott and Trousdale regard the rise of unhosted *ish* as another instance of constructionalisation since again, formal and semantic changes go hand in hand, with the extension to phrasal bases first facilitating cliticisation and then allowing for the occurrence of free *ish*.

⁴ We interpret Zwicky’s (1987) original notion somewhat liberally (see Payne 2009 for a more recent implementation of edge morphology).

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3. *-ish* in the TV corpus

3.1 Overview

In order to shed light on approximative *-ish* in contemporary English, we wanted to draw on a database that contains an informal variety of English as close to spoken speech as possible since we can assume approximative uses of *-ish* to thrive most prosperously in such contexts. To this end, we opted for the 325 million word *TV corpus* (www.english-corpora.org) as our data source, which comprises data from six English-speaking countries, covering a timespan from the 1950s to the 2010s.⁶ This choice was made for primarily two reasons. On the one hand, various studies concerned with TV data have shown that scripted dialogue comes remarkably close to natural speech (see the discussion in Stange 2017). On the other hand, TV data can be expected to contain innovative language use that tests out the limits of established word-formation patterns, thus constituting a valid source to investigate language variation and ongoing changes.

Using **ish* as our search string, we extracted all word- or phrase-final occurrences of *-ish*, with manually purging the strings to exclude any occurrences that end in the sequence *ish* but do not instantiate *-ish*-derivatives (e.g., *-ish* in verbs such as *establish* or in surnames such as *Whitish* or *Reddish*). This search string also allowed us to retrieve any instances of unhosted *ish* occurring in the data. In the case of spelling variants, relevant types of *-ish*-derivatives were subsumed under a unified lemma (e.g., *blonde-ish*, *blondish* and *blond-ish*). Subsequently, they were annotated for the category of the base *-ish* attaches to and the resultant category of the *-ish*-formation (if not adjectival).

We retrieved 73,717 *-ish* formations that fall into a total of 972 types, 618 of which are hapax legomena. Additionally, the data contain 402 cases of free lexical *ish*. The picture that emerges from the TV corpus snapshot is visualised in Fig. 1, which differentiates the respective distributions of the various base categories with respect to tokens, types and hapaxes. The miscellaneous category comprises pronouns (*nothing-ish*), prepositions (*through-ish*), interjections (*yeah-ish*) and degree markers (*kind of-ish*) serving as bases for *-ish*-attachment.

⁶ See Davies (2020) on how the TV corpus was compiled drawing on freely available subtitles as well as for a well-argued rationale considering the use of TV data as an appropriate substitute for other spoken-language corpora, which are, by necessity, far smaller than the TV corpus.

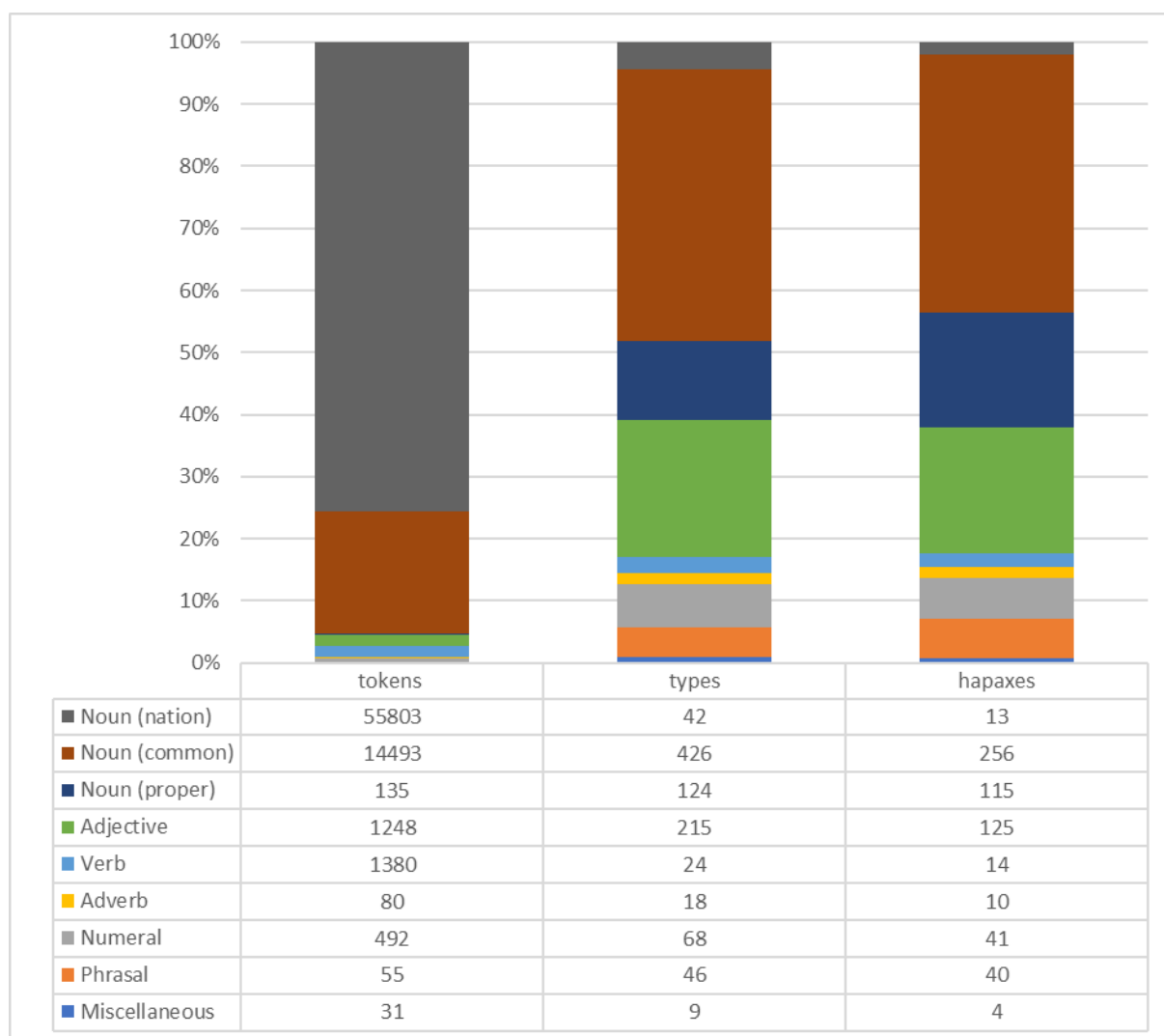


Fig. 1: Distribution of *-ish* formations in terms of tokens, types and hapaxes

A differentiated glance at the individual base categories reveals where exactly *-ish* flourishes – and it is interesting to note that the order of tokens, types and hapaxes differs across all base categories. As Fig. 1 illustrates, nationality-denoting *-ish*-derivatives loom large token-wise, covering almost 75% of all tokens, but play an insignificant role with respect to types or hapaxes. This observation once again underscores that *-ish* no longer forms ethnic adjectives, with just a few exceptions such as *whaleish* (i.e. the language of whales) or *Dornish* (referring to the people from a place called Dorne in *Game of Thrones*), such attestations formed in analogy to the most frequent *-ish*-derivatives.

In terms of types and hapaxes, it is de-nominal and de-adjectival *-ish*-derivatives that feature prominently, taking first and second place, with 60% of de-nominal types and 58% of de-adjectival types being hapaxes. If we put the number of hapaxes in relation with the respective tokens, thus computing what Baayen (2009: 902) calls “potential productivity”

for individual base categories, we can assess “the probability of coming across new, unobserved types” (Plag, Dalton-Puffer & Baayen 1999: 215). In our case, every tenth de-adjectival *-ish*-derivative turns out to be a hapax, while this is true for only every hundredth denominal *-ish*-derivative. Since de-adjectival derivatives instantiate approximative meanings across the board, the approximative function of *-ish* can also gain a strong foothold in general. This assumption is supported by other base categories with a high hapax-type ratio, i.e., numerals (60%), adverbs (58%) or phrases (87%). Here, too, occurrences of *-ish* as a vagueness marker abound, which, again, points to the firm establishment of *-ish*’s approximative function:

- (14) I’d estimate the injury was sustained within the last three-*ish* weeks. (2017, *Silent Witness*)
- (15) How are you and Gunnar? Um... hanging on, sort of, barely*ish*. (2017, *Nashville*)
- (16) This is a man who believes in the rule of law-*ish*. The legislative process-*ish*. The Constitution-*ish*. (2015, *House of Cards*)

Note that in (16), the last two *-ish*-formations take scope over elided VPs, i.e., the VP *believe in* of the first sentence.

In the following, we are going to zoom in on those derivatives that express approximation and vagueness most conspicuously: de-adjectival (3.2) and de-numeral (3.3) formations. Also, we will briefly attend to some notable cases of approximative *-ish*-formations within the set of hapax legomena in which the attachment of approximative *-ish* does not yield an adjective as their outputs, thus not leading to a change of the base category (3.4).

3.2 Approximative *-ish* in de-adjectival formations

Claiming second place in terms of types and hapaxes, adjectival bases display a high degree of variability. Simplex qualitative adjectives figure prominently in *-ish*-formations (74%); these include relative adjectives (e.g., *stubbornish*, *cheapish*, *smallish*), gradable absolute adjectives (e.g., *cleanish*, *openish*, *fullish*) and non-scalar adjectives (e.g., *dead-ish*, *lesbian-ish*).⁷ Morphologically complex formations represent more marginal types, with derived adjectives such as *beautifulish*, *educationalish* or *affordable-ish* (13%) outnumbering

⁷ For finer grained distinctions within the class of absolute adjectives see, among others, Kennedy & McNally 2005; Sugawara 2012; Bochnak & Csipak 2014; Harris 2020. See also below.

compound adjectives such as *brand-new-ish* (3 out of 185).⁸ Particularly noteworthy are de-verbal adjectives, e.g., *recommended-ish*, *intimidating-ish* or *drunk-ish* (9%) as well as four graded adjectives, i.e., 3 in the comparative (e.g., *laterish*) and one in the superlative (*bestish*). Formations from colour adjectives, in turn, first and foremost cover the usual suspects, i.e., *greenish*, *bluish* and the like (20 out of 30), with the colour hapaxes mostly covering compounded adjectives such as *orange-pinkish* or *grayish-yellowish* (9 out of 30). Note also *greeny-ish* for its sequence of two attenuating suffixes.

In order to check the syntactic function of de-adjectival *-ish*-derivatives, we took a closer look at the respective concordances. Leaving aside contexts in which de-adjectival *-ish* was not embedded in any kind or not unequivocally analysable, we found the majority of formations to be used attributively (65%),⁹ followed by predicative uses (14%). Apart from that, a remarkable 12% of the contexts involve utterances in which speakers repeat a previously mentioned positive form of the adjective, thus adding a revised approximated perspective to the proposition, a context that is highly reminiscent of the earliest approximative uses discussed above in (10):

- (17) I'm not young. I'm not old-old. I'm just youngish. (1991, *Cheers*)

A closer look at the contexts also reveals to what extent de-adjectival *-ish*-derivatives may be premodified, which allows for a follow-up on an alleged restriction on *-ish*-formations as proposed by Morris (1998). While Morris concurs that *-ish*-derivatives from nominal bases “take intensifiers quite readily” (*very sheepish*, *truly fiendish*), *-ish*-derivatives from adjectives are said to “refuse most attempts at intensification” (Morris, 1998: 210). The non-availability of intensifiers with *-ish*-derivatives from adjectives (*?very oldish*, *?truly tallish*) is attributed to the derivative expressing attenuation/diminishment, which also purportedly precludes *-ish*-derivatives from comparatives/superlatives (**colderish*, **tallestish*) as these express “full lexical value[s]” (Morris, 1998: 210–211).¹⁰

⁸ It should be noted that *intimidating-ish*, *affordable-ish*, *medievalish* etc. counter the oft-referred to tendency of *-ish* to combine with monosyllabic bases (cf. Dixon 2014: 235, Malkiel 1977: 348).

⁹ We subsumed de-adjectival *-ish*-derivatives that premodify adjectives (i) under attributive:

(i) We saw a flashing *reddish* orange light coming through the pantry window. (Ancient Aliens, 2014)

¹⁰ Apart from semantic reasons, there seems to be an additional morphologically related factor preventing formations such as **tallisher*, as Plag (2003: 177) elaborates: “[A]n easily decomposable suffix [such as *-ish*] inside a non-decomposable suffix [such as inflectional *-er*] would lead to difficulties in processing, whereas a less easily decomposable prefix inside a more easily decomposable suffix is easy to process.” Therefore, the

As Morris' (1998) claims have been perpetuated in a number of publications, especially the claim that de-adjectival *-ish*-derivatives are essentially non-gradable adjectives and thus cannot co-occur with degree expressions or comparatives/superlatives (see, for example, Sugawara 2012: 10; Oltra-Massuet 2017: 63),¹¹ it is worthwhile testing whether these claims are corroborated empirically. We therefore coded the data for co-occurrences with all kinds of degree expressions ranging from garden-variety degree modifiers such as *a little (bit)* or *very* (18) over sundry adverbial modifiers, e.g., *relatively*, *fairly* (19) to comparatives and superlatives (20):

- (18) a. You think you could sign this check for us? We're a little bit broke-*ish*. (2009, *Psych*)
- b. Were they red? Like, very reddish? (2016, *You Me Her*)
- (19) a. For full disclosure's sake, I very much want it to end with relatively sober-*ish* sex. (2016, *You Me Her*)
- b. I need a fairly largish malted milk. (1992, *Lovejoy*)
- (20) a. Was he bigger than you? What? It's a valid question. Look, I'll give you he was small-er-*ish*. But quite mean. (2007, *Rules of Engagement*)
- b. This new Mexican place just opened right by my parents' house. They have the best-*ish* tacos. (2008, *Brothers and Sisters*)

In addition, we coded for *kind of/kinda* and *sort of/sorta* (21) which, according to Oltra-Massuet (2017: 63), may co-occur with de-adjectival *-ish*-derivatives because they are approximators and not degree elements. However, given that *-ish* is an approximator itself, her argument loses force:

- (21) a. I thought the shape was supposed to be kind of roundish. (2011, *Project Runway*)
- b. it's my office, and I like to keep it sort of cleanish. (2005, *Criminal Minds*)

As these examples immediately illustrate, the claim that de-adjectival *-ish*-adjectives are non-gradable and resist degree modification is not supported empirically: de-adjectival *-ish*-formations do co-occur with a variety of degree expressions. We found a total of 152

sequence of affixes in *stronger-ish* or *small-er-ish* is accounted for, which still makes these forms appear unusual.

¹¹ According to Oltra-Massuet (2017: 57, *passim*), only *-ish*-derivatives from nouns and verbs are gradable; derivatives from adjectives, adverbs, numerals and phrases are not.

premodified de-adjectival *-ish*-derivatives. In other words, de-adjectival *-ish*-adjectives are gradable adjectives after all (pace Morris 1998; Sugawara 2012; Oltra-Massuet 2017).

The scale structural, i.e., gradable, properties of the adjectival base in *-ish*-derivatives have been shown to play a key role in the emergence of approximative readings. Thus, across frameworks and approaches, *-ish*-derivatives from relative adjectives which are associated with an open scale (e.g., *small*, *cheap*) as well as *-ish*-derivatives from gradable absolute adjectives which are associated with an upper-bound/upper-closed scale (e.g., *clean*, *safe*) are considered semantically well-formed because their scales do not have a default minimal standard. In other words, *-ish* targets a value that is slightly “below the standard for that adjective” (Bochnak & Csipak, 2014: 436; see, among others, Kennedy & McNally 2005; Sugawara 2012; Harris 2020 for discussion). Thus, *smallish* and *cheapish* in (22) and *cleanish* and *safe-ish* in (23) refer to a value that is (slightly) below the default value *small* and *clean*. In this respect, the derivatives in (22) and (23) express attenuation of the default (or standard of comparison) associated with the adjectival base:

- (22) a. I’m looking for a young, single woman, driving alone in a *smallish* vehicle. (1990, *Inspector Morse*)
- b. And there’s tons of storage. Yeah, and the rent’s *cheapish*, of course, compared to Montreal. (2009, *Being Erica*)
- (23) a. There are *cleanish* towels in the bathroom. (2015, *The Middle*)
- b. He’s one of the most modern doctors here at the historical dentists. You’re in *safe-ish* hands. (2012, *Horrible Histories*)

Conversely, adjectives that are associated with a lower-bound/lower-closed scale (e.g., *open*, *dirty*) have a default minimum standard and thus do not sanction a degree lower than the lowest one on their semantic scale. However, as the examples in (24) illustrate, *-ish*-derivatives from these adjectives are felicitous.

- (24) a. Do you have an open relationship? – *Openish*. (2017, *When We Rise*)
- b. Yeah, it went from real blond to a *dirty-ish* blond in the 24 hours she’s been with us. (2015, *Rosewood*)

Non-scalar adjectives (e.g., *dead*, *gay*) are not associated with scales and thus are non-gradable at all. Again, the *-ish*-derivatives *dead-ish* and *gay-ish* in (25) are felicitous:

- (25) a. Although it does at least make her look *dead-ish*. (2013, *Face Off*)

- b. This is the part where you say I'm the one who turned her *gay-ish*. (2017, *You Me Her*)

Accounts of semantically ‘anomalous’ but pragmatically felicitous *-ish*-derivatives from lower-bound/lower-closed and non-scalar adjectives build around the notion of ‘imprecision’, as captured by Morzycki’s (2011) type shift operation PREC (originally postulated in connection with metalinguistic comparison), which makes available degrees of imprecision (see also Anderson 2016 for discussion). Another case in point is Lasersohn’s (1999) Pragmatic Halos, which surround the truth-theoretic denotation of linguistic expressions and whose size is partly dependent on the presence of so-called ‘slack regulators’, such as *exactly* which requires a stricter interpretation, or *sorta* which allows for a looser interpretation (cf. Lasersohn 1999; Anderson 2016).

Sugawara (2012) and Bochnak and Csipak (2014), for example, argue that the imprecise uses of absolute adjectives with a lower-bound/lower-closed scale (cf. (23) above) result from a type-shifting operation by which the *-ish*-derivative targets “a scale of precision” rather than the bound/closed scale of its adjectival base (see Bochnak & Csipak 2014: 437, 440–441).¹² In their account, *-ish* is a ‘precision regulator’ giving rise to an approximative, ‘around the threshold’ interpretation. As has been argued by Anderson (2016: 45, *passim*) and Harris (2020: 79–81), for example, non-scalar adjectives can be coerced into gradable (absolute) adjectives and thus allow for pragmatic slack, as Anderson (2016: 17) illustrates with (26), to which we may add the examples in (25) above:

- (26) I’ve been *sorta* pregnant four times. Being *sorta* pregnant *sorta* sucks. It’s like you’re late, you test early, you see two lines, you go for a blood test, you’re pregnant, and then it’s JUST KIDDING!

In brief, it appears that deadjectival *-ish*-derivatives receive an attenuative or approximative interpretation. *-ish*-derivatives from relative adjectives and adjectives with upper-bound/upper-closed scales target an attenuated default, whereas *-ish*-derivatives from adjectives with lower-bound/lower-closed scales and non-scalar adjectives approximate a default (by targeting the pragmatic halo). In those cases in which deadjectival *-ish*-derivatives are modified, the modifier refers to degrees of attenuation or the size of the pragmatic halo.

¹² They do not discuss *-ish*-derivatives from non-scalar adjectives.

3.3 Approximative -ish in de-numeral derivatives

The natural numbers serving as bases for -ish-derivation attested in the TV corpus data are remarkably diverse, going beyond the kind of de-numeral bases discussed in Ruzaitė (2012); while she did not find certain numbers, e.g., 11, 80 or 90 to be suffixed by -ish, these interestingly do occur in our data. There are even some rare cases of suffixed ordinal numbers, which are particularly noteworthy in that the attachment of approximative -ish undermines their function of linearly ordered labelling:

- (27) You really think we shouldn't tell them we're fourth-ish? (2009, *Greek*)
- (28) ...you find a perpetrator you call me first before you put your hand to your head.
– First? – First. – How about first-ish? (2010, *Psych*)

Yet, even if the amount of numbers that approximative -ish could possibly attach to is basically infinitesimal, the 68 de-numeral types in our dataset show clear preferences for high-frequency cardinal numbers from 1 to 10, amongst the teens the numbers 12 and 15, tens such as 20, 30, 40, 50 etc. and tens with the digit 5 such as 25, 35, 55. This observation might not come as too much of a surprise since these are the numbers typically used for calendar-clock references (29), to talk about a person's age (30) or to make a guess about an object's decade of origin (31) – communicative scenarios which in our data make up 87% of contexts in which de-numeral -ish-derivatives are used:

- (29) I'll come to you. Hotel bar, 7-ish? Can't wait. (2016, *Queen Sugar*)
- (30) I guess there must be a reason why women have babies when they're 20ish instead of 40ish (1989, *The Golden Girls*)
- (31) Bingo. Brass. Looks 1890s-ish, doesn't it? (2011, *Warehouse 13*)

In all these cases, the numbers thus approximated are not to be interpreted as exact values. Rather, they spell out Lasersohn's (1999) pragmatic halos and indicate pragmatic slack: the meeting time in (29) is not 7 sharp but is only near to 7 (plus/minus a few minutes), the women in question in (30) are not exactly 20 or 40 years of age but at an age when they can still be called to be in their 20s or 40s (which at the same time implies that they are probably not in their *late* 20s or 40s), and in (31), the object at hand is from any year belonging to the decade of the 1890s. It is crucial to note that such values allow for some interpretative tolerance since they involve numbers which refer to clear points of orientation, i.e., full hours, prototypical hours-minutes-combinations (mainly quarter to/past and half),

significant birthdays, memorable years, decades, etc. However, we also find quite a few numbers where such a threshold interpretation is not readily given, as for instance with some more random numbers as in (32) or (33) or with highly precise decimal numbers (34):

- (32) Boom. Married. That would make you... 32-*ish*. (1996, *Everybody Loves Raymond*)
- (33) Yep, we've had it since about 2005-*ish*. (2010, *Museum of Life*)
- (34) Cool. 3.4 pounds. That's heavy-*ish*. A female brain tips the scales at probably 2.8-*ish*.
Average male brain weighs just over three pounds. (2011, *Crime Scene Investigation*)

While in (29)–(31) the suffixed numerals could be rendered as ‘not exactly 7/20/40/1890 but sufficiently close to it’, those in (32)–(34) do not seem to allow for a similar paraphrase. For instance, in (32), if marriage does not make someone exactly 32, the question is what 32-*ish* is supposed to refer to;¹³ those numbers coming close to 32 would be 31 or 33, but just like 32, they do not normally indicate any significant ages. Instead of giving an approximative reading to the base, such cases rather attenuate the speaker's commitment to the proposition, thus serving as downplaying hedging devices, which is also indicated by the conspicuous co-occurrence with further mitigating lexical items such as *about* or *probably* (on the issue of multiple hedging with approximated numbers see also Ruzaitė 2012: 195).

3.4 Non-category-changing -*ish*-derivatives

Closely related to de-numeral -*ish*-formations, which, in the majority of cases, do not derive adjectives but retain their numeral status, the TV corpus data contain quite a few further instances spotted amongst the hapax legomena, where the category of the base -*ish* attaches to remains unchanged, thus not yielding an adjectival output. This seems to be an innovation of the late 20th century; as far as we can tell from the diachronic study conducted in Eitelmann, Haugland and Haumann (2020), cases comparable to the ones discussed here are not attested in the periods before present-day English.¹⁴ In this respect, they tie in with a development triggered by de-adjectival derivatives (which are also non-category changing even if they still result in an adjectival derivative), followed up by other derivatives

¹³ An anonymous reviewer suggested that approximated precise numbers, e.g. (32), may have a surprisal (comic) value attached to them.

¹⁴ The earliest example of a non-category changing -*ish*-derivative apart from numerals comes from the BNC in which de-adverbial *forever-ish* is still used adverbially:

(i) the forever-*ish* trickly sound of her high giggle

which further instantiate the approximative sense originally consolidated by de-adjectival derivatives, but which do not generate adjectival outputs.

The first example is an instance of a denominal derivative retaining its noun status:

- (35) So, when I met you on the bus, with your son
– Son-*ish*. (2013, *Seed*)

Here, the protagonist Harry corrects the other speaker's false assumption that the child he was with was his actual son, the derivative *son-ish* alluding to the fact that he is only the kid's biological father (which is, all in all, a complicated constellation that the sit-com *Seed* humorously exploits). Verbs, too, can take *-ish* affixation without changing their category as verbs:

- (36) My ship automatically, uh, noticed-*ish* that your ship was having some bother.
(2011, *Doctor Who*)
- (37) You have to know exactly? Couldn't you just know-*ish*? (1998, *The Practice*)

The same holds true for adverbs (38), prepositions (39) and pronouns (40) the latter of which are particularly noteworthy since pronouns are functional items and as such are not expected to participate in word-formation processes.

- (38) Where did you leave her? Um, uh - - you know, there-*ish*. (2012, *The Big C*)
- (39) You sure you can get us around that shield? Well, not around, but through-*ish*. As in, between the molecules. (2017, *Guardians of the Galaxy*)
- (40) Nothing happened. Nothingish. (2015, *The Mysteries of Laura*)

Finally, we also find a number of affixed phrases which preserve their phrasal status; these involve cases of clitic *-ish*. In (41), *-ish* combines with the entire NP and thus approximates the referent of the NP, a measured-out time interval. Note that *-ish* follows the inflectional suffix, which is indicative of *-ish* attaching to the entire phrase. In (42), *-ish* combines with the entire VP, yielding an approximated reading of 'seeing someone', and in (43), with the PP *four years ago*, *-ish* approximates the timespan that has elapsed between the time of the event and the time of speech.

- (41) What, for a few days, or...? I was thinking more like a few weeks-*ish*. (2011, *Heartland*)
- (42) I'm kind of seeing someone-*ish*. (2016, *2 Broke Girls*)

- (43) When? – Uh, four years ago-*ish*. (2014, *Rizzoli & Isles*)

The fact that these ‘new’ constructs differ from ‘regular’ *-ish* derivatives in that the category of the base remains unchanged and that their meaning is unequivocally approximative makes them reminiscent of Scalise’s (1986: 131ff., 1988: 233ff.) notion of evaluative affixes. De-numeral derivatives may be assumed to have triggered the increasing consolidation of non-category-changing derivatives: Just like de-adjectival derivatives paved the way for the approximative meaning with further base categories, the widespread use of approximative numbers with no induced category change might have opened the door for similar uses in other contexts as well. In any case, what we can observe here is a new constructional change in the making.

4. *-ish*, approximately

Our analysis of de-adjectival and de-numeral *-ish*-derivatives as well as the exploration of non-category changing formations as attested in the TV corpus has shown that derivatives instantiating what is commonly referred to as ‘approximative *-ish*’ actually display subtly different nuances of meaning. Ultimately, the label ‘approximative *-ish*’ rather serves as an umbrella term that covers quite a wide range of different senses, with the notion of approximation being more or less evident. We can thus use the data to establish a taxonomy of approximation that also takes into account the extent to which approximation is related to the expression of inherent relatedness, similitude and attenuation, particularly so as these senses are intricately interwoven as shown by the trajectory of change which the pattern of *-ish* derivation has undergone.

Against this backdrop, we can conceive of approximation as a gradient ranging from relation/association at the one end of the scale to approximation/privation at the other end of the spectrum, the two endpoints representing the contrast between inherent similarity and ultimate dissimilarity. We thus suggest the approximation cline in Fig. 2, which may be read both diachronically and synchronically. To spell this out, on the one hand, it regards the different grades of approximation as evolving from each other in a certain

chronological order.¹⁵ On the other hand, it displays the wide array of different meanings that the pattern of *-ish*-derivation instantiates from a synchronic point of view. It needs to be kept in mind that *-ish* is quite a special case in that it manifests almost all stages in the cline since older and newer functions co-exist.



relational > associative > similitudinal > attenuative > approximative > disproximative > privative

Fig. 2: Approximation cline

As pointed out in the diachronic overview (see section 2), fully relational senses are instantiated by nationality-denoting *-ish*-derivatives: these well-established ethnic adjectives, which make up the largest share of tokens in our data, indicate an intrinsic relationship to the name of nations or ethnic groups. With a few exceptions (see section 3.1), novel deonymic formations are of the approximative kind as, e.g., *Latino-ish* or *Norwegianish*.

Similarly to such relational senses with ethnic adjectives, derivatives realizing associative senses constitute an identity relation to the base, which can be paraphrased by ‘characteristic of/typical of’. However, purely associative *-ish* has largely given way to the expression of similitudinal senses, such derivatives emphasising the likeness to the entity denoted by the noun they attach to. Put differently, while derivatives of the associative kind are intrinsically connected to the base, derivatives of the similitudinal kind imply a comparison, thereby focussing on either particularly salient features of the base or the entire category (cf. Bauer, Lieber & Plag 2013: 312). These two readings are nicely illustrated by the following two examples:

(44) Monkey, you’re all limber and bendy and monkey-*ish*. (2012, *Kung Fu Panda*)

(45) ... Finlay is the small, well-intentioned monkey-*ish* little fellow. (2013, *Misfits*)

Used in connection with *limber* and *bendy*, *monkey-ish* in (44) characterises the monkey’s behaviour as typical of a monkey, whereas *monkey-ish* in (45) merely states that Finlay’s

¹⁵ The assumption that approximation results from similarity by way of inference is also discussed by Bauer, Lieber and Plag (2013: 313) for the case of de-adjectival derivatives: “If we say something is similar to [qualities like] *dull*, (...), the inference is drawn that we cannot mean exactly *dull* (...) but rather must mean something not exactly the same as those qualities, that is, approximating those qualities.”

appearance reminds one of a monkey (without insinuating, of course, that he *is* a monkey). A cursory look at new de-nominal formations reveals that most of them express a similarity sense, with the associative sense rather being conveyed by competitor *-y*. At the same time, we find similitudinal *-ish* competing with suffixes like *-like* or *-esque*, as illustrated in (46):

- (46) Hey. Is everything in here onion-like, bacon-esque or cheese-*ish*? (2010, *Desperate Housewives*)

Similarity is just one step away from the expression of attenuation, i.e., the reduced degree of a quality, which then is prototypically instantiated by de-adjectival formations from colour adjectives: *greenish*, for example, is just a weaker form of *green*, albeit still essentially green. Such a sense of reduction is also given with other de-adjectival derivatives: thus, *-ish*-derivatives from relative adjectives and gradable adjectives with an upper-bound/upper-closed scale, as in (47) and (48), can be paraphrased as ‘weakly ADJ’ or ‘vaguely ADJ’:

- (47) A simple girl from a one-stop-light town, and you, the worldly, handsome-*ish* Sam Winchester. (2016, *Supernatural*)
- (48) The great and the good clamouring for invitations to tea. Well, the *greatish* and *goodish*, anyway. (2015, *Life in Squares*)

Unequivocally approximative senses are evidenced in those cases where the resultant derivative’s meaning revolves around a default threshold value, i.e., ‘nearing X’ or ‘almost X’. In other words, we have moved further down the approximation cline towards the dissimilarity end. As elaborated above, de-adjectival formations from both gradable adjectives with a lower-bound/lower-closed scale (49) and non-scalar adjectives (50) as well as numerals (51) play an important role in this context. Note also (52), which adds approximative *-ish* to relational *-ish*:

- (49) Do you have an open relationship? – Open-*ish*. (2017, *When We Rise*)
- (50) Um, it just seems a little dead. – He’s not dead. Dead-*ish*. (2016, *Rizzoli & Isles*)
- (51) At that hour? – Yeah, it’s open till, like, ten-*ish*. (2017, *Gypsy*)
- (52) You’ve been spending a lot of time with Rita, and she’s British-*ish*. (2005, *Arrested Development*)

Derivatives from names are particularly noteworthy in this context since their semantics is in-between similitudinal and approximative, with a strong sense of subjectivity.

- (53) a. Betsy, this is hot. This is actually like lady-gaga-*ish*. (2013, *The Mindy Project*)
 b. He's gonna act all normal and un-Norman-Bates-*ish* and then once I drop my guard, bam, that's when he strikes. (2012, *One Tree Hill*)

In all these cases, if the *-ish*-derived name derivatives were replaced by simply the name without a suffix or by adding *like*, these would indicate the comparison explicitly, thus implying a direct comparison to the person in question. In contrast, the *-ish*-derived variants abstract the person referred to by metonymically approximating their most salient characteristics (Lady Gaga's shrill outfits in (53a)) or their persona as a whole (Norman Bates' psychopathic behaviour in (53b)).

Disproximation in the sense of Cappelle, Daus and Hartmann (2023) obtains in those cases where the resultant derivative denotes that a standard is not met, thus refuting a prototype reading – as opposed to approximation proper, which expresses that something comes close to a standard or baseline level. The non-category-changing formations in, e.g., (35) and (39) above fit into this class in that a [son-*ish*]_N is not a son proper, or [through-*ish*]_P does not describe a straightforward movement through something. In this regard, such derivatives have a downscaling effect, which is also observable with the following non-category changing de-adverbial formations:

- (54) a. So we've got a highly-*ish* skilled covert agent who probably has millions of dollars in cash. (2011, *Archer*)
 b. Maybe. – Maybe? – Not a definite maybe. A maybe-*ish* maybe. (2013, *Raising Hope*)

While in (54a) the intensifying effect of *highly* is turned down a notch, thus making “a highly-*ish* skilled covert agent” essentially ‘a not entirely highly skilled covert agent’, the inherent vagueness of *maybe* is made even more vague in (54b), with *maybe-ish* an even weaker commitment than *maybe*. For good measure, we can add here the examples in (55), where *-ish* enhances the hedging or epistemic stance-marking function of *kind of/sort of*:

- (55) a. Weren't you, like, antisocial, kind of-*ish*? (2015, *I am Jazz*)
 b. Absolutely! Almost completely positive, sort of-*ish*. (2016, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*)

The sense of disproximation also comes into play in cases of free *ish* as hedges or epistemic stance markers which downplay the speaker's commitment to the truth value of the proposition:

- (56) a. I can cook. *Ish*. (2011, *Supernatural*)
 b. There's a black market for flowers? *Ish*. Most transactions are completed via online auction sites. (2015, *Elementary*)

The ultimate end of the approximation scale is reached with fully privative senses ‘not X’, which privative prefixes such as *fake-* and *pseudo-* express (cf. Van Goethem & Norde 2020). *-ish*, as of yet, does not seem to realise such privative meanings – and still, rare findings such as *friendship-ish* in (57) seem to be a close match since the relationship that the speaker suggests to forge would only pretend that it is friendship:

- (57) So we're, you know, forging this friendship-*ish* type thing? (2012, *Jane by Design*)

The examples presented in this section illustrate the intricate nature of approximative *-ish*-derivatives: rather than constituting one single sense, approximation is a gradient between inherent similarity, as expressed by relational *-ish*-derivatives, and implied dissimilarity, as expressed by disproximative *-ish*-derivatives.

5. Conclusion

This paper investigated the English suffix *-ish* as a morphological means to convey approximation and vagueness with two main objectives. The first concerned providing an inventory of *-ish*-derivatives in order to inspect more closely those base categories related to approximative senses. Against the backdrop of *-ish*'s trajectory of change particularly since Middle English and on the basis of data from the TV corpus, we first of all took stock of the base categories that *-ish* attaches to: while ethnic adjectives make up the lion's share in the data token-wise, similitudinal and approximative *-ish*-formations abound type-wise. We then revisited those base categories that lend themselves most readily to approximation, i.e., adjectival and numeral bases, and spotted some ongoing changes concerning *-ish* formations that do not induce a change of base category and thus do not yield adjectival outputs. As *-ish* continues to be used innovatively and creatively, it will definitely be interesting to keep track of any further developments. It remains to be seen whether *-ish* can hold its ground as a multifunctional affix with a further expansion of its cross-categorical nature, or whether one of the other adjective-deriving suffixes such as *-y* as a close competitor will

catch up in the long run, potentially restricting *-ish*'s range of application to predominantly the approximative function in novel word-formations.

The second objective was to establish a taxonomy of approximative senses. Following up on the assumption that approximation results from association, we proposed an approximation cline that goes from relational senses on the one end of the scale to privative senses on the other end, with an intrinsic identity relation successively transgressing into an ultimate non-identity relation via the intermediary steps of similitude and approximation proper. As we saw, *-ish*-formations as attested in the TV corpus realise (almost) all grades of the approximation cline, which further highlights the versatility and multifunctionality of this suffix.

Going beyond the case study on *-ish*, the proposed approximation cline bears general implications for the investigation of approximation in morphology. We can expect morphological means of expressing approximation to develop out of derivational morphology originally denoting associative senses. Whether adjectives act as a door opener for the establishment of approximative senses is something that remains to be investigated more thoroughly; it is conspicuous, however, that the English derivational affix *-y* also displays approximative semantics (albeit weakly in comparison to *-ish*) when attached to adjectives as, e.g., in *cheapy* (vs. *cheap*) or *greeny* (vs. *green*). Also, it is of interest to test the cross-linguistic validity of the proposed approximation cline, i.e., to investigate to what extent a given derivational affix that has developed approximative functions along the cline loses its former, less approximative senses. As the case study on *-ish* shows, synchronically, all of its functions, both original and more recent, are readily attested in a scenario of layering (Hopper 1991: 22), which may not necessarily be the case for other affixes that have moved down the cline.

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