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The „unbound“ use of *ish*: A contextualist approach

There is a recent development in the use of the suffix *-ish* thus far only briefly mentioned in comprehensive works about word-formation (see Bauer, Lieber, Plag 2013).

The phenomenon under investigation is the so-called “unbound” use of *ish* in examples like the following (from Bauer, Lieber, and Plag 2013: 9):

(1) A: Are you feeling cold?

B: Ish.

Here, the element is not attached to a base word. This apparent “free” use of the suffix prompted an analysis that deals with the phenomenon in the light of the *unidirectionality hypothesis* within the theoretical framework of grammaticalization (see Kuzmack, 2007). While this line of argument goes along with the assumption that suffixes merely serve as transpositional elements which change the word’s lexical category, it has been shown that suffixes possess semantic content (see Trips 2009). They are not grammatical elements, but lexical ones, since some affixes attached to the same base result in a different meaning in the derivative. Therefore, they fall under the scope of word-formational processes and are thus not a case of antigrammaticalization.

Instead, this paper focuses on the “unbound” *ish* from a pragmatic angle. Meibauer (2015) has investigated phrasal compounds (PCs) within the pragmatic framework of contextualism, claiming that hearers can only understand the complex words if they make pragmatic inferences about the relation R that holds between the head and the non-head of the PC. In doing so, “massive import of background knowledge” is necessary to fully understand the meaning of a PC (cf. Meibauer 2015: 17).

He also discusses constructions, which he calls “N-CP-N constructions” (cf. Meibauer, in prep.), which are even more complex than PCs. These constructions consist of a proper noun (N-N), in which a full sentence (CP) is inserted. In order to understand the CP in connection to the proper noun, the hearer has to pragmatically enrich the underdetermined construction and has to interpret it in the context of its occurrence. Just as in the case of the PCs above, the hearer also has to import a massive amount of background knowledge to grasp the meaning of the construction adequately.

In my talk, I will show that the analysis Meibauer proposes for PCs and N-CP-N constructions is also well suited to adequately account for *ish*, since its meaning in the example above only becomes accessible if the prior proposition is taken into account as well. I propose that *Ish* might be free formally, but that it is bound contextually. In order to understand *ish* within its context, the hearer has to interpret the relation R between the proposition of the sentence and *ish*. Thus, Meibauer’s concept of pragmatically enriching a structure is necessary in fully analysing the meaning of *ish* when it occurs without a base to which it attaches. Instead of terming this use of *ish* “unbound”, I opt for calling it “pragmatically bound *ish*.”

Words: 466

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