The transition of the suffix *-ish* from a bound morpheme to the discourse marker *Ish* in English

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The suffix *-ish* has always only occurred as a bound morpheme. There are no instances of a free occurrence in the corpus YCOE (*York-Toronto-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Old English Prose*) and also in later stages of the language, *-ish* only appears attached to base words of several word classes (e.g. nouns (*boyish*), adjectives (*greenish*), and even compounds (*schoolgirlish*) and phrases (*middle-of-the-nightish*)).

Research on suffixation has shown that originally free morphemes can develop into bound ones in the course of time (Trips 2009). This can easily be seen in the transition from the Old English free morpheme *dōm* ('authority' or 'judgement', cf. Trips 2009: 201) via a compound stage, e.g. *cynedōm* ('kingdom', cf. Trips 2009: 203), to today's bound morpheme *-dom* (as in *boredom*, cf. Trips 2009: 8). However, the reverse process only rarely happens. A point in case are suffixes like *-ism* and *-ology* which are used as hypernyms of all derivations with the respective suffix (cf. Ramat 1992, Norde 2010). The development of these is not to be compared with that of *-ish*, however, since *-ish* does not function in this way (cf. Norde 2010: 145).

Only recently (1986, cf. OED) has *-ish* appeared as an unbound morpheme in examples like the following: 'I joke of course. *Ish*' (*GloWbE*, GB B, 2012). In such a use, the free morpheme *Ish* shares several of the characteristics Brinton (1996, 2010) has identified for discourse markers, including phonological shortness, being a marginal form, being optional, and occurring outside the syntactic structure, to name the most prominent ones (see Brinton 1996: 33-35). However, we also find characteristics said to be typical of discourse markers which do not apply to *Ish*, for example, the fact that they obligatorily have to be placed in initial position (Keller 1979, but see Brinton 1996: 33). In general, the items analysed as discourse markers vary widely, which is based on differing definitions of said markers (Brinton 1996: 32). I will nevertheless show that *Ish* presents a suitable addition to the inventory of discourse markers, albeit in its inception stage.

With the British English subsection of one of the BYU corpora (*Global Web-based English*, GloWbE), I will show the variant characteristics *Ish* can have when being analysed as a discourse marker as well as the difficulties when doing so. The subsection consists of 697 tokens in total, of which not all can be shown to have discourse marker functions, which is evidence of current language change. I will conclude that *Ish* shares some, but not all of the features of discourse markers and, hence, as of yet will have to be treated as a non-prototypical instance, as opposed to well-known discourse markers as, for example, *well* (see e.g. Schiffrin 1987a).

References

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