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A Freezing Approach to the Ish-Construction in English

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Abstract

The English affix *-ish* has historically been a derivational morpheme that creates adjectives denoting approximation to the root. In this paper, I introduce a novel use of *ish* in English, in which it may appear following VP/PP and a pause, even when no adjective is present. I assert that this novel use is a syntactic construction, and provide an analysis of the syntax of the *ish*-construction. Based on facts from clefting, Sluicing, and incompatibility with NPI-licensing, I show that *ish* is TP-Internal and triggers island effects. Because it appears to the right of the island in the surface structure, I propose an analysis drawing from Müller's (1998) discussion of Freezing, by which moved objects cannot be extracted from. I argue that *ish* Merges above the VP/PP it modifies, which then moves past *ish* to derive the surface structure. I provide evidence from Raising constructions that support predictions made by such an analysis.

A Freezing Approach to the *Ish*-Construction in English

Daniel Duncan*

1 Introduction

Ish has historically been a derivational morpheme used as a Qualifier (Norde 2009), denoting approximation to the root (*reddish*, *boyish*, etc.). It is currently the focus of a syntactic change in progress in American English, as some speakers may use it following a VP (1a) or PP (1b), even when no adjective is present (Duncan et al. 2015).¹ In such uses, there is a pause between the phrase being modified and *ish*, denoted as \emptyset . It has a meaning of likeness to the VP/PP, which resembles that of the derivational morpheme:

- (1) a. I finished my homework \emptyset ish.
 ‘I kind of finished my homework.’
 b. I live in Chicago \emptyset ish.
 ‘I live kind of in Chicago (perhaps in a suburb).’

This use is rather understudied; most previous studies of *ish* focus on the productivity of its derivational adjectival use or use with numerals (D’Arcy 2006, Theijssen et al. 2010, Ruzaitė 2012). Norde (2007, 2009) discusses uses such as (1) in the context of theories of grammaticalization, while Bochnak and Csipak (2014) offer a formal semantic account. In this paper, I treat *ish* as a syntactic construction, as it is TP-internal and triggers island effects. I offer a formal analysis of its syntactic structure, proposing that it forms the head of a Qualifier Phrase that takes a VP/PP complement. The surface structure in (1) is then obtained via movement.

This paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 gives details of the distribution of *ish* and shows that it is not an adverbial. In Section 3 I use Müller’s (1998) discussion of Freezing to propose an analysis of the syntactic structure of the *ish*-construction. In Section 4 I discuss and confirm the prediction of the Freezing analysis that *ish* is incompatible with Raising constructions, while Section 5 discusses an apparent anti-Freezing example. Finally, I offer concluding remarks in the final section.

2 Distribution

Because of its use in modifying VP/PP, a reasonable assumption would be that *ish* has simply become an adverb. In this section, I show that this is not the case. I then further outline its syntactic properties, namely, that it is TP-internal and that it triggers island effects.

2.1 *Ish* is Not an Adverb

Cinque outlines a hierarchy of functional heads, whose specifiers adverbs may reside on, that extends above and below VP (1999:16–17). Under his analysis, adverbs share several properties that *ish* does not. Crucially, what he terms focus adverbs, as well as many other types of English adverbs, may appear within various projections of an auxiliary string (Cinque 1999:30–32). Qualifier *ish* may not.

- (2) a. I will have quickly been beaten by Mary.
 b. I will have only been beaten by Mary.
 c. *I will have \emptyset ish been beaten by Mary.

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¹While it is possible that *ish* may modify an AP in a similar manner, I focus on the VP/PP uses in this paper. Likewise, I set aside uses of *ish* as a standalone answer to yes/no questions.

Likewise, most adverbs may be fronted; again, qualifier *ish* may not.

- (3) a. Often I take the bus to school.
 b. Carefully, he wrapped the present.
 c. *Ish, Katie answered my question.

Cinque points out that focus adverbs take the following DP, AdjP, AdvP, PP, or VP as a complement, and the focus adverb *too* is seen as raising its complement to Spec,AdvP (1999:31–32). Because qualifier *ish* appears phrase- or clause-finally, we might wonder if it is this kind of adverb as well. However, it differs from *too* in a few key ways. It can appear following some wh-phrases (with no pause), while *too* cannot.

- (4) a. When ish will you arrive?
 b. *When too will you arrive?

Some other key differences between *too* and *ish* are illustrated in (5). NPs can be focused out of or extracted from VPs and PPs followed by *too*, while NPs cannot do so when qualifier *ish* follows the phrase. Likewise, a PP modified by *too* can be focused without moving *too*; the same is not true for those modified by qualifier *ish*.

- (5) a. [My questions *too*]_i were answered *t_i*.
 b. *[My questions \emptyset ish]_i were answered *t_i*.
 c. [THE BUS]_i, I ride *t_i* too.
 d. *[A PAPER]_i, I finished *t_i* \emptyset ish.
 e. [TO THE STORE]_i, I'll go *t_i* too.
 f. *[FOR AN HOUR]_i, I met up with Mary *t_i* \emptyset ish.

Based on the data presented in (2–5), it appears that *ish* is not an adverb, focus or otherwise.

2.2 *Ish* is TP-Internal

Since *ish* is not an adverb, it is worth considering what properties it does have. Whatever *ish* is, it must be TP-internal. This may be seen in that, as predicted by the typology of polarity items presented in Israel (1996), it behaves like a positive polarity item. Sentences in which an NPI-licensor is present are ungrammatical, as shown in (6):

- (6) a. *I didn't like the movie \emptyset ish.
 b. *Did you like the movie \emptyset ish?
 c. *Few people liked the movie \emptyset ish.
 d. A lot of people liked the movie \emptyset ish.

While Szabolcsi (2004) argues that positive polarity items have more complex properties than simply being unable to appear within the scope of negation, their grammaticality is still tied to whether they appear within the scope of NPI-licensors. Crucially, sentences containing positive polarity items within the scope of one NPI-licensor are ungrammatical, but not when the positive polarity item is outside the scope of the NPI-licensor. Thus, in order for polarity effects to appear in (6a–c), *ish* must be c-commanded by the NPI-licensor. The ungrammaticality of (6a–c), then, shows that *ish* must appear within TP rather than, for example, constituting a head in the left periphery which attracts the entire TP to its specifier. If this were the case, the NPI-licensor would clearly not c-command *ish* at any point in the derivation.

2.3 *Ish* Triggers Island Effects

When there is no island, arguments in English may be clefted and extracted from VP and PP. This is not the case for such arguments when *ish* appears; clefting the object is ungrammatical.

- (7) a. It was [a paper]_i that John [finished t_i].
 b. *It was [a paper]_i that John [finished t_i] \emptyset ish.
 c. John [finished a paper] \emptyset ish.
 d. It's [New York]_i that I'm moving [to t_i].
 e. *It's [New York]_i that I'm moving [to t_i] \emptyset ish.
 f. I'm moving [to New York] \emptyset ish.

This restriction only applies to objects: subjects may be clefted when there is an *ish* construction.

- (8) a. It was [Mary]_i that t_i finished her homework \emptyset ish.
 b. *It was [her homework]_i that Mary finished t_i \emptyset ish.

This is surprising, because the minimal pair suggests that the qualifier seems to be what instigates a strong island effect. Note that arguments may not be extracted from a strong island like an adjunct (Szabolcsi 2006:482–83).

- (9) *What_i are you tired [_{CP} because you ran t_i]?

This effect does not only appear in cases of clefting. Merchant observes that Sluicing constructions and VP ellipsis constructions have a key difference when there is an island in the antecedent. Wh-movement out of the island is apparently licit in Sluicing, but not in VP ellipsis (2008: 132–39).

- (10) a. The university hired someone who speaks a Balkan language—guess which!
 b. *The university hired someone who speaks a Balkan language—guess which they do!

The *ish* construction behaves in the same manner.

- (11) a. They [studied a Balkan language] ish—guess which!
 b. *They [studied a Balkan language] ish—guess which they did!

Szabolcsi notes that strong island violations may be repaired through use of parasitic gaps or pied piping the entire island (2006:485–86). As illustrated in (12), this is also true for *ish*; wh-questions and fronted PPs are only licit if *ish* moves with them. In particular, fronted PPs are only licit if the entire PP moves; that is, if the entire island is pied-piped.

- (12) a. *[When]_i will you arrive t_i ish?
 b. [When ish]_i will you arrive t_i?
 c. *[On a track]_i, I ran t_i \emptyset ish.
 d. *[A track]_i, I ran on t_i \emptyset ish.
 e. *[A track \emptyset ish]_i, I ran on t_i.
 f. [On a track \emptyset ish]_i, I ran t_i.

3 A Freezing Analysis of the *Ish*-Construction

Given the surface structure of clauses with *ish*, the presence of island effects is somewhat strange since the qualifier follows the clause. For this to happen, the phrase that *ish* modifies appears to have undergone movement. Müller notes that in most cases, moved items are islands (1998: viii). An XP that has moved cannot be extracted from, which Müller formalizes and defines as Freezing: “At S-structure, a trace t may not be included in a moved XP (i.e., an XP that binds a trace) if the antecedent of t is excluded by XP” (1998:20). In other words, extraction can only occur if the extraction site is *in situ*.

- (13) a. ... α_i ... [β ... t_i ...]_j
 b. * ... α_i ... [β ... t_i ...]_j ... t_j

If we suppose that *ish* undergoes External Merge above elements of the clause, movement would be necessary to obtain clause-final *ish*. As such, any XP that *ish* takes scope over on the surface would show Freezing effects, evidenced by the inability to extract from the XP.

We can begin formalizing the proposal now. Motivated by its origin and echoing Norde (2009:223–225), I propose simply calling *ish* a Qualifier, which resides in a Qualifier Phrase. It is a functional head of a QualP, which takes an XP complement. That XP in turn undergoes Internal Merge to raise to a higher position. This yields both the facts described above as well as the surface structure of clauses with *ish*. While the moved XP cannot be extracted from, movement of QualP itself is licit, which I propose is occurring in *wh*-questions and PP-fronting.

Based on the evidence from *wh*-questions and PPs, it is clear that QualP may take a PP complement. It does not appear to be grammatical with a DP complement, though.

- (14) a. *[My concerns] \emptyset *ish* were addressed.
 b. *[That whale] \emptyset *ish* scares me.

I suggest that *ish* may also take a VP complement. As seen in (8), repeated below as (15), subjects may be clefted when there is an *ish* construction, but not objects.

- (15) a. It was [Mary]_i that t_i finished her homework \emptyset *ish*.
 b. *It was [her homework]_i that Mary finished t_i \emptyset *ish*.

Additionally, *ish* may appear between an object and VP adjunct, but not between objects in a Double Object construction.

- (16) a. John answered my question \emptyset *ish* in his talk.
 b. I worked on my paper \emptyset *ish* for an hour.
 c. *John gave Mary \emptyset *ish* a letter.
 d. *Mary sent John \emptyset *ish* a letter.

Each of these observations suggests that QualP may take a VP complement. Any higher, and we would not expect subjects to be extracted or for *ish* to appear between objects and adjuncts.

One final issue is the question of where the XP complement moves to. It cannot be the Spec,QualP position immediately above *ish*, as that is too local and would trigger Anti-Locality effects (Abels 2003, Grohmann 2003, inter alia). Here I follow Abels' analysis, which defines Anti-Locality in terms of feature satisfaction and economy conditions, particularly the Last Resort condition (17, borrowed from Abels 2003:103).

- (17) Last Resort: A constituent α may only be merged, i.e., base-merged or re-merged, if that leads to the immediate satisfaction of a previously unsatisfiable feature.

In this analysis, a complement of a head may not move to the immediate specifier position of that head. This is because the head and complement are already in a c-command relationship, and thus a feature satisfaction relationship. Under the Last Resort condition, movement is only possible if it results in a new feature satisfaction relationship. For Abels, moving to the immediate specifier does not result in a new feature satisfaction relationship, and as such, the movement is ruled out under the Last Resort condition (Abels 2003:103–110). Within such a system, movement of the XP complement to the immediate specifier position of QualP is ruled out then as too local. However, crossing further category segments is not ruled out. Thus, the XP complement needs to move to a higher position. To achieve this, I propose that the pause \emptyset is present both in PF and LF: it occupies the immediate Spec,QualP position. This allows the complement XP to raise to a Spec,QualP position above the pause. In such a structure, the complement XP would cross both the head *ish* as well as the pause in Spec,QualP to reach a higher Spec,QualP position. This would not be too local, and would avoid Anti-Locality problems as defined in Abels 2003. There is evidence to support that the pause is present in the syntax; the *ish*-construction is ungrammatical without the pause:

- (18) a. *I live in Chicago ish.
 b. *I swam ish.

Furthermore, the presence of \emptyset changes the meaning of a sentence with coordinated adjectives:

- (19) a. I saw a [tall and thin] \emptyset ish man.
 ‘I saw a somewhat tall and somewhat thin man.’
 b. I saw a tall and [thin] ish man.
 ‘I saw a tall and somewhat thin man.’

We may thus finalize the proposal: \emptyset *ish* forms a Qualifier Phrase, the head of which is *ish*. Spec,QualP is inhabited by \emptyset . QualP takes an XP complement, which may be either VP or PP. This XP then undergoes Internal Merge to occupy Spec,QualP above \emptyset . This may be seen in the following tree:²

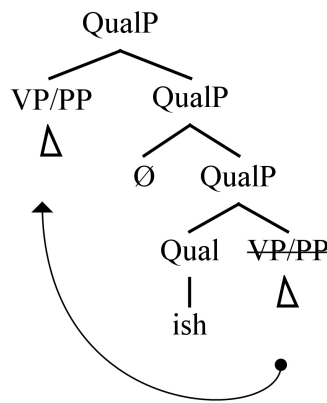


Figure 1: The structure of the Qualifier Phrase.

4 Predictions of the Analysis

Because this analysis relies on movement of VP/PP, by necessity they cannot be extracted from. This makes the prediction that Raising constructions, which involve A-movement of the Internal Object, should be ungrammatical with *ish*. The prediction appears to bear out. Consider examples of Subject-to-Subject Raising. Because the subject originates below the matrix verb, these are predicted to be ungrammatical for the reading in which the matrix verb is qualified. This appears to be the case; the reading is only available with control verbs.

- (20) a. [John]_i needs t_j to [swim]_i \emptyset ish t_i.
 ‘John needs to kind of swim.’
 b. *[John]_j [needs t_j to swim]_i \emptyset ish t_i.
 ‘John kind of needs to swim.’
- (21) a. John wants PRO to [swim]_i \emptyset ish t_i.
 ‘John wants to kind of swim.’
 b. John [wants PRO to swim]_i \emptyset ish t_i.
 ‘John kind of wants to swim.’

²Chris Collins (p.c.) observes that another possibility would be to consider \emptyset a functional head in and of itself. This would mean the following: \emptyset is the head of a Pause Phrase (simply a placeholder name), which takes QualP as a complement. QualP would then consist of the head *ish* and the XP complement. The XP would undergo Internal Merge to occupy Spec,PauseP. This does not substantially differ from my proposal in terms of deriving the surface structure, but there is not enough evidence at this point to distinguish between the two. In the lack of such evidence, I am defaulting to a minimal phrase structure.

Likewise, unaccusatives should be ungrammatical with *ish*, and either are or are highly degraded.

- (22) a. *John fell \emptyset ish.
 b. *John arrived \emptyset ish.
 c. ??The window broke \emptyset ish.
 d. ??The door opened \emptyset ish.

4.1 Passives

Testing the prediction with passives is more complicated. At first glance, it appears that passive constructions are licit with *ish*.

- (23) My questions were answered \emptyset ish.

This is problematic, as passive subjects are the object of VP, which seems to provide a contrast to the observation that objects cannot be extracted. However, (23) only takes a stative reading: “My questions were in the state of being kind of answered.” In fact, *ish* is only compatible with stative passives. This may be seen using a verb that differs in form between stative and eventive readings (Embick 2004):

- (24) a. The door was open \emptyset ish.
 b. *The door was opened \emptyset ish.

In contrast to eventive passives, which are verbal, stative passives are typically adjectival (Bruening 2014). This means *ish* is only licit with adjectival passives. Further diagnostics for distinguishing verbal and adjectival passives suggest this is indeed the case, as shown in (25). For example, adjectival passives may be embedded under a raising predicate like *remain*; verbal passives may not. When the passive is embedded under *remain*, *ish* may appear, suggesting that it is modifying an adjectival passive. Likewise, verbal passives are interpreted with temporal adverbs like *at 5:00* to mean that the event occurred at that time; adjectival passives do not carry this interpretation (Harves and Myler 2014:236). When *ish* modifies the passive, the interpretation with temporal adverbials does not mean the event occurred at the given time, again suggesting that *ish* is modifying an adjectival passive, not a verbal passive.

- (25) a. My question remained answered \emptyset ish.
 ‘My question remained kind of answered.’
 b. The letter will be written \emptyset ish at 5:00.
 ‘The letter will be kind of in the state of having been written at 5:00.’
 #‘At 5:00, the act of kind of writing the letter will occur.’

While compatibility with *by*-phrases has traditionally also been a diagnostic, there is evidence to suggest that both adjectival and verbal passives may be compatible with them (Bruening 2014:379). Even if passives modified by *ish* were licit with *by*-phrases, this would not be a reliable counter-example to the above argument. For this reason, I do not include this test.

Under the analysis of the syntactic formation of adjectival passives put forward in Bruening 2014, an Adj head merges with VoiceP to create an AdjP, which may then undergo affixation (*unbeaten*, etc.). I suggest that in the case of stative passives, we are encountering the derivational morpheme *-ish*, not *ish*. As such, stative passives are perfectly acceptable. However, eventive passives, which are verbal, are ungrammatical due to the expected Freezing effects, as seen in (26).

- (26) a. My questions were answered-ish.
 b. *[My questions]_i were [answered t_j]_i \emptyset ish t_i.

Thus, the behavior of the *ish*-construction with passives is consistent with the predictions of the Freezing analysis.

5 An Apparent Anti-Freezing Example

While I have thus far argued that the *ish* construction shows Freezing effects from movement, there is a licit situation with the qualifier which appears to show Anti-Freezing effects instead. Take the following licit sentence:

(27) I know \emptyset ish that a senator will resign.

Given the analysis outlined above, (27) is problematic. If *ish* takes a VP complement, raising the VP to Spec,QualP should place the qualifier on the right of the embedded clause. Following Müller 1998's discussion of extraposition and remnant movement, though, I argue this example is unproblematic. First, note that the above example is only licit with an embedded clause, and not with an argument.

(28) a. *I know \emptyset ish the answer.
b. I [_{QualP} [_{know the answer}]_i \emptyset ish _{t_i}].

Müller argues that right-adjunction to an XP is always legal (1998:151), and that apparent Anti-Freezing effects seen in remnant movement and extraposition are the result of strict ordering in movement. This line of argumentation obtains the grammaticality of (27): the order of movement is extraposition of the embedded CP by right-adjointing to the matrix CP (Müller 1998:154), then raising of VP to Spec,QualP. This gives the following derivation:

(29) a. [_{TP} I [_{QualP} \emptyset ish [_{VP} know that a senator will resign]]]
b. [_{CP} [_{TP} I [_{QualP} \emptyset ish [_{VP} know _{t_i}]]] [_{that a senator will resign}]_i]
c. [_{CP} [_{TP} I [_{QualP} [_{know _{t_i}}]; \emptyset ish]]] _{t_j} [_{that a senator will resign}]_i]

Happily, this is not an explanation that comes out of left field. Müller makes a case for extraposition occurring in a similar way within English (1998:167–68), so the process outlined above is a process independently argued for in the language.

6 Conclusion

In this paper, I explored the structure associated with the novel use of qualifier *ish* in English, in which it is used to modify VP/PPs. As shown, *ish* has a somewhat adverbial meaning, but is not an adverb. Rather, I argue that it is a syntactic construction and propose that it is the functional head of a Qualifier Phrase. While it Merges above its complement, the complement obligatorily raises to obtain the apparent phrase- or clause-final surface structure. This analysis correctly predicts the incompatibility of the *ish*-construction with Raising constructions. While *ish* may behave similarly with AP complements as well, I leave discussion of this and other novel uses of *ish* to future work.

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