A Frequency-Based Analysis of the Modern -s Register-Marking Suffix

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1. Introduction

1.1 Question

In recent years, an -s suffix has been affixed to a set of neologisms. The forms initially gained prominence in text-based media such as Twitter™ before filtering into oral speech. Given the many other English -s suffixes, what is the origin of this morpheme, and how has the form developed into its present state? Here, frequency effects from Twitter will be used to assess the origins and development of this mysterious, modern morpheme.

1.2 Background of the Form

This morpheme is seen on the following types of neologisms:
- Clipping, e.g. prob > prob > probably > adverb > adverbs
- Acronymy, e.g. by the way > BTW > BTW
- Contraction, e.g. for (e.g. formal) thesis.

Figure 1 gives two examples of these forms in context, from Twitter:

"Why don’t you do it (laughter)?"

"Facts sitting here jammery? Pike!"

It should be noted that some forms do not contain this morpheme, but a role, plural marker, e.g. dir (deliberations) and congrats (congratulations).

1.3 Allomorphy

While this form often appears in text-based speech, it is phonologically determined. Figure 1.2 below shows how the morpheme is realized. Note the lack of an [w] allomorph.

1.4 Previous Literature

2. Previous Literature

"I’m totally sitting here jamming. Are you jealous?"

2.1 Twitter and Urban Dictionary

Data for this study was collected using the social-networking website Twitter, which has certain benefits and difficulties:
- Nearly all tone on Twitter is searchable, especially recent posts within the past day.
- This website constitutes a large corpus of modern speech. For example, the word is in use several dozen times per minute.
- Speech on Twitter is limited to 140 characters per post.
- Some speaker variables, such as location and gender, are tracked, but not reliably or consistently.
- Spelling, especially with these new forms, is highly variable. The urban dictionary website Urban Dictionary was consulted for pertinent spellings.

2.3 Effects of Written Speech

Some speaker variables, such as location and gender, are tracked, but modern text-based media such as Twitter™ present a wide range of speaker-based speech styles.

2.4 Word Type Category

Twitter may be searched by individual term. The term’s frequency may be ascertained by the results page. In Figure 3, 10 is filtered several times per minute, but results in Figure 3.2 only occur slightly several times per day.

3. Research Methods

3.1 Twitter and Urban Dictionary

In emulation of Bieber’s study described in Section 2.3, a separate corpus of the Twitter speech of 40 users was constructed. A second corpus of written, non-conversational text was also constructed. Figure 3.3 shows the general method of marking word classes, with verbs and interjections circled.

3.2 Word Class Corpus

In Figure 4.2, word class frequency in Twitter speech is compared with non-conversational written speech along with Bieber’s original study. Another word class, interjections, is included.

3.3 Word Class Category

The Twitter corpus shows a noticeable increase in adjective and adverb usage, and a drastically greater use of interjections. Again, there was a wide range of speaker-based speech styles.

3.4 Initial Results

4. Initial Results, cont’d

The conversation in Figure 4.3 illustrates, some extreme examples of Twitter speech are markedly different from other forms of speech.

4.1 Word Type Frequency

Figure 4.1 shows the frequency of -al and -ess forms, i.e. comparing posts to prob. Several forms, oh novel and help year, were omitted, but these forms seem to be the most common examples of this novel morpheme.

- Initial results show that no forms have transitioned completely to the -s morpheme. This could suggest a change in progress. Alternately, the -s suffix could be semantically distinct from its counterpart. Further possibility is that the -s form is idiosyncratic.
- It is worth noting that each of these forms is an adverb, adjective, or otherwise inflective form, such as an interjection.
- Similarly, each form acts semantically as subject coloration, what a speaker means of a noun as opposed to a content noun.

5. Discussion

5.1 The Origin of -s

The Diminutive, adverbial, and interjocular -s morphemes all seem to contribute semantics to the novel morpheme, so it is difficult to point to a precise origin. If one assumes an exemplar-based memory, each of these phonologically similar forms would be thus connected, leading to this coexistence of semantics. Figure 5.1 illustrates this concept.

5.2 The Development of -s

Owing to the results in Section 5.2, it seems that a semantic niche of non- verbal was opened. Like much emotions, which mark gesture or tone, this novel morpheme may have been enabled to mark a set of subject coloration forms in order to indicate factors such as register. The answer to why -s was chosen is in the fact that this morpheme is of the part morpheme to be found in English, along with suffix like -ing, -ed, -ness. Figure 5.2 outlines this path of development.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary

Proximal frequency effects from Twitter suggest that the novel -s morpheme marks non-verbal register; a semantic niche from the modern transition to text-based conversational media. Additionally, the morpheme appears to have arisen from a conspiracy of s, the suffix’s high frequency and applicable semantics in its other instantiations.

6.2 Further Research

- Especially, the register marking -s suffix filters into speech, oral speech may also be tracked and compared with Twitter speech.
- This morpheme itself may still be in the process of evolving.

7. Notes


8. References

Twitter: Twitter, Inc., 2011, [http://research.twitter.com/].


Register, Genre, and Style.

