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The English intensifier ass
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English has recently developed a new intensifier, ass, which means something very close to very, is marked as vulgar and colloquial, and appears in cases such as in (1):

(1) a. That is a big-ass chair
b. It is a cold-ass night
c. It is freezing-ass cold

However, to my knowledge, no one has ever listed or discussed some of the interesting features of ass. The first difference between ass and the other intensifiers in English is that ass is a bound morpheme, and apparently suffixal. However, ass also doesn’t act like the other suffixes that can attach to adjectives (-ly, -er, -est) nor does it have the same distribution of the other intensifiers. Ass seems to have a requirement that it appear right of the adjective that it is modifying AND left of the head the adjective modifies (i.e. it cannot be phrase final, (2)):

(2) a. The night is very cold.  *The night is cold-ass.
b. I am very happy.    *I am happy-ass.
c. I am hottest in leather.   *I am hot-ass in leather.
d. I run quickly.    *I run quick-ass.

The only time that ass can appear phrase-finally is when attached to bad (e.g. That receiver is badass), but, in such cases it is always stressed (otherwise it is not). I expect badass is the source of the affix rather than an exception.

In this regard, the word ass has similar distribution to another intensifier in English, expletive insertion, which, as an infixation, also requires that there be phonological material on either side of it (McCarthy 1982). Expletive insertion famously behaves like a true infix appearing in the middle of even mono-morphemic words as long as there is a prosodic foot on either side of it (in-freakin`-side, halle-freakin`-lujah). It happens that this infixation, because of this constraint, occasionally appears between an adjective and its head, giving it an identical distribution to ass in (1) and (2), see (3). However, ass behaves differently from expletive insertion in that it cannot appear in the middle of a word (*in-ass-side, *halle-ass-lujah).

(3) a. That is a big-freakin`-chair
b. It is a cold-freakin`-night
c. It is freezing-freakin`-cold
d. *The night is cold-freakin`.
e. *I am happy-freakin`.
f. *I am hot-freakin` in leather.
g. *I run fast-freakin`.
Ass has a restriction that it appear with phonology on either side, suggesting that it is an infix. However, unlike other infixes, ass’s restrictions on its distribution are that it requires syntactic heads (in the same phrase) to be on either side of it. This, of course, seems to be a standard case of tmesis, but tmesis, on a morpho-syntactic level, is typically constrained to compound nouns or morphologically complex words (suggesting morpho-phonemic restriction). This suggests that ass infixation does not seem to be typical tmesis either. This makes the English intensifier ass a curious syntactic infix, perhaps providing more evidence for a sophisticated morphology-syntax interface.

References