



snippets

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Contents

1. Jason Kandybowicz and Harold Torrence, *How why is different: wh-in-situ in Krachi.*
2. Hideki Kishimoto, *Empty verb support as a morphological adjustment rule.*
3. Timothy Leffel, *English proximal/distal non-deictic demonstratives align with hearer-new/hearer-old information status.*
4. Joan Mascaró, *The realization of features in asymmetric agreement in DPs.*
5. Philippe Schlenker, *Singular pronouns with split antecedents.*
6. Daniel Siddiqi, *The English intensifier ass.*
7. Christos Vlachos, *Sluicing and relatives.*



6.

Daniel Siddiqi – Carleton University *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

McCarthy, J. (1982). "Prosodic structure and expletive insertion." *Language* 58, 574-590.