

GRAMMATICALIZATION IN ENGLISH: A DIACHRONIC AND SYNCHRONIC
ANALYSIS OF THE "ASS" INTENSIFIER

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
San Francisco State University
In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree

AS

36

2017

ENGL

. M55

Master of Arts

In

English: Linguistics

by

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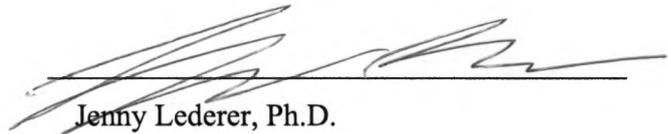
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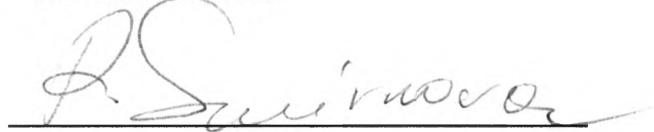
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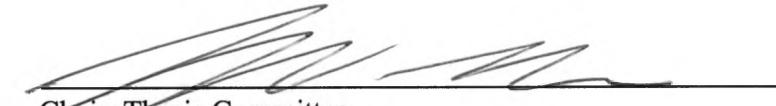
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GRAMMATICALIZATION IN ENGLISH: A DIACHRONIC AND SYNCHRONIC
ANALYSIS OF THE “ASS” INTENSIFIER

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San Francisco, California
2017

Grammaticalization theory is used to analyze language change cross-linguistically and in historical linguistics as lexical items move from open class content to closed class functional words. With natural language as the data, this analytic framework is used to perform a diachronic and synchronic analysis of “ass”—which has grammaticalized in colloquial American English into an intensifying clitic. The diachronic analysis focuses on the linguistic shifts “ass” underwent as a result of polysemy, metonymy, syntactic reanalysis and decategorialization, semantic bleaching, and pragmatic influences. The synchronic analysis is performed in lieu of the historical shifts to explicate descriptively the parameters for grammatical usage in contemporary language performance, focusing on the topics of syntax, semantics, phonology, and morphology.

I certify that the abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.


Chair, Thesis Committee

12/12/17
Date

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I must take the time to thank, greatly, all of the people who have helped me along the way to complete this project. Particularly, I have to thank Dr. Jenny Lederer who oversaw this project in its entirety from beginning to end, and who was also my greatest mentor in the time I spent at San Francisco State University. I also have to thank Dr. Suzanne Scott and Dr. Mark Wicklund of Humboldt State University; they were my introduction to linguistics, and I wouldn't be where I am today without them. Lastly, I also have to thank countless friends and family, including Isadora Jade Bjelland, who gave me the support I needed so badly in my educational endeavors to complete an M.A. in Linguistics.

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Section 1: Introduction

No language is exempt from change. Through everyday linguistic performance, speakers spur language shifts, revamping pre-existing lexical items into new, innovative constructs. Often nuanced and complex at the same time, these changes highlight trends not only in language usage, but also in the way speakers construct meaning through salient linguistic changes. English has recently, within the past eighty years, undergone an interesting change: it has grammaticalized an intensifier from the lexical item *ass*. There is no analysis that looks at the grammaticalization of *ass*, either in a diachronic or synchronic fashion. In using a grammaticalization framework and considering the findings of past research focusing on *ass* as an intensifier, this work performs a more in-depth, comprehensive diachronic and synchronic analysis than has been done to date.

Three driving research questions motivate this work: (1) how did *ass* develop into an intensifier? (2) what are the typical features and restrictions of its use today? (3) what features does it share when it is compared to other English intensifiers? A grammaticalization framework makes it possible to delve deeply into these issues, answering questions related to both historical developments and contemporary usages.

This paper is broken down into multiple sections: a literature review, a methodology, an extensive diachronic and synchronic analysis, a discussion, and a conclusion. The literature review is performed in three phases: (1) an explanation of the analytic framework used in this project; (2) a review of major grammaticalization definitions and concepts; and (3) a review of previous analyses of *ass*. The previous

analyses on *ass* contribute to the findings within this project in a variety of ways. In some instances, the findings of previous works corroborate the findings within this project, and at other times they serve as the basis for rebuttal or contention.

Section 2: Literature Review

Section 2a: A Diachronic, Synchronic, and Multi-Modular Framework

This project conducts a diachronic (i.e., “change between two or more points in time”—the historical development) and synchronic analysis (i.e., “structure at a single point in time”—a current, contemporary state), using grammaticalization theory as its analytic foundation (Hopper & Traugott, 2003, p. 2). This framework allows an analysis that can delve deeply into the areas of semantics, syntax, phonology, and morphology, and it will highlight a clearer, more in-depth picture of the lexical to grammatical changes that *ass* has undergone in its shift to an intensifier.

Debates on grammaticalization have a long history in historical linguistics (for this history, see: Heine, Claudi, & Hunnemeyer, 1991; Hopper, 1996; Hopper & Traugott, 2003; Lehmann, 2015). Projects with this framework can typically be divided into two camps, where researchers look at language change exclusively through either a diachronic or synchronic lens, rarely both. In the spirit of Hopper & Traugott (2003), this project performs a combined synchronic and diachronic analysis, mainly focusing on semantic and syntactic shifts connected to the development of the *ass* intensifier, but also looking into phonological and morphological aspects, as well.

A multi-modular framework (Sadock, 1991; Yuasa, 2005; Francis & Yuasa, 2008) is also used within this project. This additional framework undergirds an in-depth analysis of how grammaticalization occurs through processes of separate but related semantic and syntactic shifts, and it will show how semantic and syntactic changes occur together in the development of grammaticalized elements. In the diachronic history of *ass*, the interaction of semantics and syntax have led to salient changes and functions which we can see in modern use—lending credence to the importance of a multi-modular framework. Combined together, the diachronic and synchronic perspectives along with the multi-modular framework spur an extensive investigation into the grammaticalization of the *ass* intensifier.

Section 2b: Grammaticalization Concepts

Grammaticalization can be defined in a multitude of ways. The most commonly cited definition comes from Meillet (1912): “the attribution of grammatical character to an erstwhile autonomous word”¹ (“l’attribution du caractère grammatical à un mot jadis autonome”; p. 131). Though commonly attributed to Meillet, predecessors like Wilhelm von Humboldt and Georg von der Gabelentz had been forming similar definitions for language change prior to Meillet (Hopper & Traugott, 2003). In current applications, researchers use a slightly altered form of Meillet’s definition (for a review of additions to this definition, see: Smith, 2011): grammaticalization is the systematic shift of a lexical morpheme (i.e., a content or open class word) into a grammatical structure (i.e., a

¹ Translation by Paul J. Hopper (Hopper & Traugott, 2003, p. 19)

function or closed class word). Also of important note, while at one point linguists distinguished between the terms *grammaticalization* and *grammaticization* (Hopper & Traugott, 1993, xv-xvi)—this is no longer the case; therefore, “grammaticalization” and its few derivations will be used within this research.

The term *reanalysis* refers to a word’s syntactic changes and is often found to be an inherent step in shifting from an open class word to a closed class element as a lexical item is grammaticalized (Smith, 2011). Langacker (1977) provides an early definition for syntactic reanalysis as a “change in the structure of an expression or a class of expressions that does not involve any immediate or intrinsic modification of its surface manifestation” (58). In other words, reanalysis involves the changing of a word or phrase’s “constituency, hierarchical structure, category labels, grammatical relations, and cohesion” (Hopper & Traugott, 2003, p. 51, following Harris & Campbell, 1995). And, also important to note, while *reanalysis* can be used both in syntactic and semantic contexts (Fortson IV, 2003), *reanalysis* will only be mentioned in regards to syntactic shifting within this project.

Semantic weakening or bleaching (Hopper & Traugott, 2003) is a necessary step in grammaticalization; some will contend that if semantic bleaching hasn’t occurred, then a word has not become grammaticalized. Lehmann (2015, p. 4) defines this process as the point where “[g]rammaticalization rips off the lexical features until only the grammatical features are left. Consequently, the relationality of an item is normally conserved while most of the original semantic features are lost.” Also labeled desemanticization (Welna,

2000), semantic bleaching is the process whereby a morpheme loses all or nearly all of its related meanings. In considering both the semantic history and syntactic changes, semantic bleaching will be shown in the development of the *ass* intensifier.

Pragmatic contexts (i.e., the interactions between speakers and hearers) spur changes in meaning as new and innovative ways are found to say old things, commonly referred to as deroutinization (Hopper & Traugott, 1993). These situations between speakers and hearers allow pragmatic enrichment (Heine, Claudi, & Hunnemeyer, 1991) and are central to the early stages of grammaticalization. Connected to semantic bleaching, pragmatics shows the final steps of meaning-making in relation to *ass* and how it became imbued with an intensified sense that had never existed prior to the first appearance of the *ass* intensifier.

A cline can be thought of as a “pathway” along which a lexical item moves in a spectrum from “openness” to “closedness” (Hopper & Traugott, 2003, pp. 6-7), shown here:

content item > grammatical word > clitic > inflectional suffix

Clines are models of grammaticalization and are unidirectional (i.e., lexical items fairly consistently shift towards grammatical function—almost never the other way around). The aforementioned cline displays a unidirectional pathway similar to what *ass* has undergone in its change into intensifier, though it will be adjusted later to account for changes and functions particular to *ass*.

Section 2c: Previous Research on “ass” as an Intensifier

The first major academic works to discuss or analyze the *ass* intensifier focused on its presence in African-American Vernacular English (Spears, 1997; Bucholtz, 1999; Smitherman, 2000). A working definition for its intensifier use comes from Smitherman (2000):

Ass

- (1) Added to the end of a word or expression to give the description of *extra emphasis*. The Brotha asked, “How come they call it the ‘British Empire’? It ain nothing but a po-ass country!” That is, England is a very poor nation, materially, thus hardly meriting the label “empire” (my emphasis; pp. 56-57)

This definition is still relevant and is found to be the meaning and usage occurring with the data examples of this project. Spears (1998) locates a variety of different uses of *ass* in AAVE, including the “discourse marker use”—which in certain instances can “have the force of an intensifier” (pp. 8-9). Particularly pertinent to the analysis here, Spears shows that *-ass*² must typically be followed by a noun to express intensification, which is restated as a syntactic restriction by later research (Elgersma, 1998; Whitman, 2012).

Other research expands Spears’s parameters for *ass* intensification, defining an alternate, yet less frequent, occurrence. Siddiqi (2011) finds intensification in the sentence predicate with the lone example of *badass*, where *-ass* augments the predicate adjective *bad*. The *ass* intensifier has been compared with other lexical intensifiers, like *fucking* and *butt* (Lieberman, 2004; Lieberman, 2005; Whitman, 2012), showing that these profanity-based uses carry similarities in meaning and function. Altogether, these

² Spears refers to various compounds containing *ass* as “ass words” (AWs) and orthographically represents the intensifier as *-ass*, simply to distinguish it from *ass* in noun compounds (e.g.: “bitchass” and “punkass”); this same practice is used in this paper to denote the *ass* intensifier.

findings encompass what past research has found for syntactic instances of *ass* intensification, findings which this research will expand upon.

Various researchers have analyzed the phonological traits, including prosodic features and possible syllabic constraints of *-ass*. Spears (1998) first found that in attributive constructs there is no stress on the intensifier, following prosodic patterns in English in which grammatical elements or function words typically do not carry stress. Trends for occurrences connected to adjective syllable count were first analyzed by Elgersma (1998), and were later contested by Liberman (2012). Liberman states that *ass* cannot modify polysyllabic adjectives of more than three syllables and that the word-final syllable must be unstressed in order for intensification to occur.

Prior research has produced minute work on the morphological characteristics related to *ass* intensification. Researchers typically identify the *ass* intensifier as a suffix that carries with it certain restrictions from the items in syntax and phonology already discussed (Pullum, 2011; Siddiqi, 2011), and even some restrictions related to the formal register of the adjective being augmented in situations of intensification (Pullum, 2011). Siddiqi's analysis moves past the labeling of *-ass* as a suffix and defines it as a syntactic infix as he thinks evidence points towards a "sophisticated morphology-syntax interface" (p. 17) in situations of *ass* intensification. Morphological analyses have yet to agree as to whether the *ass* intensifier is a suffix, an infix, or something else entirely.

Altogether, the prior findings in syntax, semantics, phonology, and morphology inform the analysis within this paper, and will be expanded upon, refuted, clarified, or reworked.

Section 3: Methodology

The data collection for this project was adapted from a language-recording methodology used by William Labov (1972). A similar process of transcription was used in this research: when the researcher heard instances of *-ass* usage, the utterances were recorded in digital or hand-written formats (available in Appendix, Section 1). Along with this natural speech, data was collected from social media (e.g., Facebook and Snapchat) in the forms of personal posts, memes, and even videos or pictures (available in Appendix, Section 2). These pieces of data were recorded via screenshots, and they were anonymized by removing or covering the personal information present within the screenshots.

One view on language undergirding this paper comes from John McWhorter (2013), who states that current technologies of writing (i.e., texting, social media posts, etc.) allow us to write in modes and in textual genres that reflect a more accurate picture of how humans speak than formal writing does. Following that lead, the social media data is seen as equal to the spoken language data because it will give a deeper and more accurate picture of the synchronic characteristics of the *ass* intensifier in its typical informal contexts.

Adding to the natural language data in this project, examples from the Contemporary Corpus of American English were collected for this research (available in Appendix, Section 3). In performing a search of the top 100 collocates in the syntactic slot that precedes *ass*, a mix of both nouns and adjectives occurred. Because many of the top 100 collocates were actually examples of noun compounds containing *ass*, only the examples where *-ass* collocated with an adjective were included in the data pool. And, lastly, to trace out the etymological history of *ass*, the Oxford English Dictionary was the major source for reference.

Altogether, the steps and processes outlined above assembled a small corpus of data (108 separate examples) that this research uses for analysis.

Section 4: Analysis

The analysis is divided into two sections. The first portion focuses on the diachronic development of *-ass*. Focusing on syntactic and semantic shifts, the diachronic analysis uses the multi-modular framework (Sadock, 1991; Yuasa, 2005; Francis & Yuasa, 2008) and the relevant grammaticalization theories already reviewed. The previous works on the *ass* intensifier (Spears, 1998; Elgersma, 1998; Smitherman, 2000; Liberman, 2004, 2005, 2011; O'Connor & Kellerman, 2010; Pullum, 2011; Siddiqi, 2011; Whitman, 2012; Zimmer, 2013) inform the synchronic analysis, where previous findings will be verified, corroborated, and—in some cases—refuted with data collected for this project. The diachronic findings inform the synchronic analysis, and

highlight the characteristics and restrictions connected to the *ass* intensifier and its current uses.

Section 4a: Diachronic Analysis

Etymology

Ass as an open class lexical item has a long history with a variety of meanings. The oldest attested senses³ for *ass* are: (1) a well-known quadruped of the horse kind, distinguished from the horse by its smaller size, long ears, [and] tuft at the end of the tail. . . . [I]t has been used from the earliest ages as a beast of burden . . . [and was] introduced as a domestic animal to Europe (c. 1000); (2) [a creature which has], since the time of the Greeks, figured in fables and proverbs as the type of clumsiness, ignorance, and stupidity (c. 1200); (3) as a term of reproach: an ignorant fellow, a perverse, a conceited dolt (c. 1578); and (4) to treat as an ass—to make an ass of oneself, or to behave absurdly—related to the adjective *asinine*, where *ass* is a clipped form of the adjective (c. 1600).

Within roughly the first 600 years of its use, *ass* becomes polysemous through a process of semantic widening. The word started out (c. 1000; sense 1) as a referent for a donkey. We still know this to be one of the meanings of *ass* today, though antiquated. The first sense gave rise to the second sense, where *ass* could be used to refer to a creature or creatures—not necessarily of a quadruped alignment—within fables (c. 1200; sense 2). By the middle years of the 16th century (c. 1578; sense 3), the term had developed a human sense: this is probably the first instance of metaphorical and

³ The following definitions (c. 1000-1578) found in Oxford English Dictionary *ass*, n. 1

figurative use connected to *ass*, where speakers took the understanding applied to creatures and mapped it onto a human being (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Lastly, within these antiquated meanings, *ass* takes on a more pejorative meaning (c. 1600; sense 4). All of these historical meanings are important because they are the foundation for the grammaticalization that takes place later. In its first 600 years of usage, *ass* underwent changes in semantic widening and metaphorical usage (i.e., understanding human qualities through the abstract conceptualization of animal qualities)—processes that are fundamental for grammaticalization to occur.

The modern senses⁴ for *ass* are: (5) arse—often considered vulgar—relatively meaning the part of the body referred to as ass, buttocks, or butt (c. 1860); (6) an object or person that affords sexual gratification (c. 1942); (7)⁵ used casually in various phrases as an intensifier, especially to indicate strength of feeling, action, etc.—*to work one's ass off, to chew ass, to tear ass, to kiss ass* (c. 1946); and (8) one's self or person, either referring to the specific body part, or metonymically representing the whole person (c. 1958). The latter senses (the meanings occurring post-1860; senses 5, 6, and 8) are wholly connected in meaning to the human body.

Polysemy & Metonymy

Polysemy and metonymy are cross-linguistic drivers of grammaticalization (Heine, Claudi, and Hunnemeyer, 1991; Hopper & Traugott, 2003; Francis & Yuasa,

⁴ The following OED definitions can be found in *ass*, n. 2

⁵ The following examples are instances of an intensified understanding connected to nominal forms; research related to these forms of intensification can be found in: Hoeksma & Napoli (2008)

2008). Polysemous lexical items and metonymic usages are essential to metaphorical understanding and the process of language change. Only from an environment with many senses and figurative uses can a word transform from an open-class to a closed-class designation. The abstract process of meaning generation connected to polysemy and metonymy spur syntactic reanalysis.

Polysemy⁶ is when one lexical item has a range of interrelated yet different meanings. *Ass* is a polysemous word—shown through its etymological development and the process of semantic widening—because it is the same phonological and syntactic construct with an array of closely-related yet slightly different meanings that are associated to it. Polysemy is the first step to figurative and metonymic usage because it is also figurative in nature. For example, the meanings once associated to creatures (sense 2; c. 1200) eventually became the form through which we came to understand certain humans and their own characteristics (sense 4; c. 1600).

Metonymy (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1987) is an everyday process of meaning-making. In short, it is the cognitive process by which one structure can stand in for another, resulting in a figurative meaning. For example, if we were to say something like *A woman ran me off the freeway last night*, we would know, as the result of metonymic understanding, that “a woman” (the operator of a vehicle) was standing in metonymically for “a car” (the vehicle or machine being operated). In this instance, a

⁶ Definition from Saeed, 2009, pp. 64-65

woman was not traveling down the freeway without her car when she ran another driver off the freeway.

Spears (1998) laid the foundation for the discussion of *ass* and its metonymic usage (sense 8; *c.* 1958) when he discusses this eighth sense as it occurs in epithets within AAVE. He gives the examples: (A) *His ass is going to get fried*; (B) *I saw his ass yesterday*. In both examples, *his ass* can be replaced by the pronoun *he* (Ex. A) or *him* (Ex. B); in essence, “a person” was going to get fried or “a person” was seen yesterday. These examples show *ass* being used to refer to a whole person through metonymy, where a part of an entity can refer to the whole entity. Along with the metonymic instances of *ass* when it is occurring as a head noun, Spears also shows that the same understanding occurs when it is seen in noun compounds.

Research into noun compounds⁷ containing *ass* suggests that the oldest—and possibly original—compound is *jackass* (*c.* 1727). Originally, *jackass* referenced the quadruped animal sense of *ass*, but eventually it was applied to people, meaning “a stupid or foolish person, a dolt, a blockhead” (*c.* 1823). The OED has entries for other compounds, such as *asshole* (*c.* 1935), *smartass* (*c.* 1951), *wiseass* (*c.* 1971), and *ass-kisser/ass-kissing* (*c.* 1974/78). Spears shows that the metonymic sense of person can be understood in nominal compounds, such as *bitchass* (a person that is a bitch), *punkass* (a person that is a punk), *stupidass* (a person that is stupid), or *dumbass* (a person that is dumb). With the historical sense of *ass* “an ignorant fellow” (*c.* 1578), the use of *jackass*

⁷ Performed using the Oxford English Dictionary

to refer to a person (*c. 1823*), and Spears’s noun compound examples, strong connections had been made in using *ass* to express the idea of “person”; along with the rest of its etymological history, this shows that polysemy and metonymy with *ass* had been developing and was well underway by the 1940s—when the *ass* intensifier appeared for the first time—allowing grammaticalization to take place.

The First Appearance of the *ass* Intensifier

O’Connor & Kellerman (2010) discuss how the *ass* intensifier results from an adjective form of *ass* used by Marines during WW2. They cite the OED wherein the first occurrence of the adjective form is *assed* (*c. 1944*), in the acronym BAM (i.e., big-*assed* marine; a female Marine with a big ass). Here, in BAM, *assed* is anatomical in nature and occurs as a past participle form. The *-ed* form of *assed* would mark the first shift related to decategorialization.

Along with using *assed* to refer to female Marines, it would also be used when referring to an airplane with a large tail section (i.e., typically a Boeing Flying Fortress). When soldiers would talk about this airplane, it would be called a *big-assed bird* because it was a plane with a large “rear end” or tail section. This is an instance of metaphorical understanding (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980)—where the soldiers understand the characteristics of the plane through their understanding of the human body, equating the anatomical *ass* with the tail section of the plane.

O’Connor & Kellerman contend that the *ass* intensifier comes from this adjectival and metaphorical usage. They cite the first instance of *ass* intensification in the OED as

big-ass nightstick (c. 1945), that is, a policeman's really big nightstick. This is the first documented example of the *ass* intensifier. The use contains the meaning that Smitherman (2000) outlined, and it occurs in the attributive adjective construct that is still in use today (Spears, 1998; Siddiqi, 2011; Whitman, 2012). It is this development in the 1940s that marks the shift in grammaticalization where *ass* has become an intensifier, moving from an open class to a closed class word.

Syntactic Reanalysis & Decategorialization

Syntactic reanalysis is defined by Langacker (1977) as a “change in the structure of an expression or a class of expressions that does not involve any immediate or intrinsic modification of its surface manifestation” (58); in other words, a word undergoes a transformation in its part of speech and syntactic functioning while not necessarily undergoing a change in phonological form. Decategorialization, closely related to reanalysis, is defined as a decline in structural properties, related to major and minor part of speech (Hopper & Traugott, 2003). A word undergoes decategorialization when it moves from the class of major words (open class words) to the class of minor words (closed class words). The major category consists of nouns and verbs, the indeterminate consists of adjectives, and the minor category consists of function words like articles, prepositions, or conjunctions.

Both syntactic reanalysis and decategorialization are represented through cline models. The clines (below) illustrate—for the most part—the unidirectional movement of *ass* as it grammaticalized into an intensifier.

*Syntactic Reanalysis Cline*⁸

content item > grammatical word > clitic > inflectional suffix

*Decategorialization Cline*⁹

major category > indeterminate category > minor category

Documented cross-linguistically (Hopper & Traugott, 2003; Traugott, 2003; Lehmann, 2015), unidirectional movement is not necessarily “linear” movement, but is movement along a path from “less grammatical” to “more grammatical.”

The syntactic reanalysis and decategorialization of the *ass* intensifier is shown both in relation to the senses of *ass* and the syntactic properties being displayed (Table 1).

Table 1¹⁰

Sense # Origin Year	Example Sentence or Phrase	Syntactic POS Categorical class
#1 c. 1000	While he spoke, a braying ass did sing most loud and clear	Noun Major
#2 c. 1200	As angry as an ass with a squib in his breech	Noun Major
#3 c. 1578	I am not altogether an ass	Noun Major
#4 c. 1600	Don't make such an ass of yourself as to suppose that	Noun Major
#5 c. 1860	You give me a pain in the ass	Noun Major
#6 c. 1942	I was anxious to get some ass off that frantic whore	Noun Major
#5b c. 1944	a big-assed Marine / a big-assed bird	Adjective Indeterminate

⁸ Hopper & Traugott, 2003, p. 6-7

⁹ Hopper & Traugott, 2003, p. 107

¹⁰ Examples for senses 1-6 taken from OED entries and written in contemporary English forms; examples for senses 5b and 9 from O'Connor & Kellerman (2010)

#9 c. 1945	big- ass nightstick	Intensifier Minor
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In the time period from 1000-1942, *ass* is seen as a noun (a content item) and in the major class of words—identified as being within the first stages of the reanalysis and decategorialization clines. By 1942, sense 6 (a metonymically related sense, in that a body part was standing in for an action—sex—that the body part could be related to) was already in use, and other metonymic trends¹¹ were already underway. So, even though the OED’s metonymic sense (c. 1958; sense 8) didn’t take place until after 1945—the year of appearance of the A intensifier—the semantic process of metonymy had already been in place, allowing the possibility for a shift in grammaticalization that took place in the 1940s.

In 1944, *ass* shifts to the indeterminate (adjective) category in its process of decategorialization, due to its co-occurrence with the past participle *-ed*. At this point in time, *ass* is still in the first phase of the syntactic reanalysis because *-assed* doesn’t yet have a grammatical function. By 1945, *ass* shifts again, this time in both syntactic reanalysis and decategorialization. The shift here indexes the movement of *ass* into the classification as a grammatical word and into the minor category (stage 2 in reanalysis and stage 3 in decategorialization).

In the example sentence for sense 9, the *ass* intensifier occurs for the first time. In the *big-ass nightstick* example, *-ass* has reduced its meaning down to something like

¹¹ Already noted in the section on polysemy and metonymy

“very” or “really”; therefore, *a big-ass nightstick* is *a very big nightstick*, where *big* has been augmented by *ass* to express strength in the assertion that the nightstick is big. From this point on, *ass* continued in its usage as an intensifier and is still widely used today.

Semantic Bleaching and Pragmatics

Semantic bleaching—also known as semantic weakening (Hopper & Traugott, 2003) or desemantization (Welna, 2000)—is a process typical to grammaticalization. Lehmann (2015) defines the process wherein after semantic bleaching occurs only “grammatical features are left” and “most of the original semantic features are lost” (p. 4). In its intensifier sense, *-ass* has the meaning of *very* or simply emphasizes, in a hyperbolic fashion, the adjective it modifies (Siddiqi, 2011).

The intensifier sense (already listed in Literature Review) has been defined by Smitherman (2000):

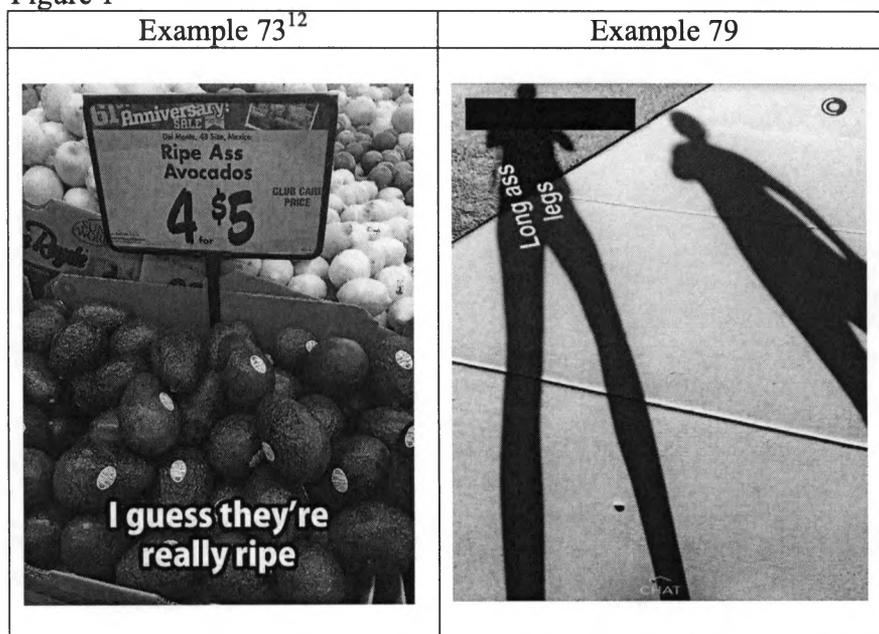
Ass

- (2) Added to the end of a word or expression to give the description of *extra emphasis*. The Brotha asked, “How come they call it the ‘British Empire’? It ain nothing but a po-ass country!” That is, England is a *very* poor nation, materially, thus hardly meriting the label “empire” (my emphasis; pp. 56-57)

And, if we look to more recent data (Fig. 1; below), we can see the sense of *very* or *really* being understood in both examples. In the first example, the produce sign presumably should’ve been printed as “Ripe Hass Avocados”. When the “H” of “Hass” is left off, however, the intensifier function and sense is indexed, creating the understanding of *really ripe* avocados. In the second example, the picture shows legs that have been

elongated as the result of shadow, making it appropriate to describe them as *long-ass legs*.

Figure 1



The understanding of *very*, or strength of feeling and emphasis, shows the semantic bleaching of *ass* in its intensifier form because it carries nearly no meaning from the senses that existed prior to its realization (i.e., there is no apparent connection to any of the meanings listed to have occurred from 1000-1942). Since there is not really a strong connection between

If we consider the examples, once again, of *a big-assed Marine* and *a big-assed bird*, the sense of “very” or “really” becomes clearer. In both instances, *-assed* was being

¹² Examples from data pool are listed with their according example number from the Appendix

used to describe something bigger or larger than a central perception of what was being referenced. In *a big-assed Marine*, *-assed* was used to describe the buttocks of a female Marine that was larger in proportion to a more average sized one. Again, in *a big-assed bird*, *-assed* was used in a situation to describe the tail of a plane than was larger than most other planes of its day.

When *-assed* became clipped in *big-ass nightstick* (c. 1945), the sense of intensification or emphasis (i.e., larger than what one might normally see or think of) comes from the pragmatic event of comparison. The meaning of the *ass* intensifier results in one part from bleaching or desemanticization because there is no semantic content brought in from its historical senses prior to 1945. The sense of *very* or *really* arises from the pragmatic context of comparison, which carries with it a sense of something “larger than what one might normally see or think of.” In summary, from the interrelated processes of semantic bleaching and pragmatic enrichment, the meaning of *very* or *really* in the emphatic use of *ass* results, which we can still see in modern examples from the data pool:

(Ex. 11) I had a *shitty-ass* day (a day that was very shitty)

(Ex. 13) I stole your *dope-ass* lighter (a lighter that is really dope)

(Ex. 40) She was telling some *annoying-ass* stories (really annoying stories)

(Ex. 45) I love my *dysfunctional-ass* family (a very dysfunctional family)

The *ass* Intensifier: Syntactic-semantic Processes of Change

To recount, the multi-modal framework (Sadock, 1991; Yuasa, 2005; Francis & Yuasa, 2008) shows that non-linear interactions between systems of meaning and syntax result in grammaticalization. It is pertinent, now, to recall the first major research question driving this project: how did *ass* develop, given historical shifts in meaning and syntactic distribution, into an intensifier? In the time period between the origin of *ass* (c. 1000) and the first appearance of its intensifying use (c. 1945), the A intensifier went through the shifts in semantic widening, through metonymy and metaphor, and syntactic shifts in reanalysis and decategorialization. Since then, it has become a common intensifier in colloquial American English, displaying unique characteristics to itself and also typical characteristics that one can see in the use of other intensifiers.

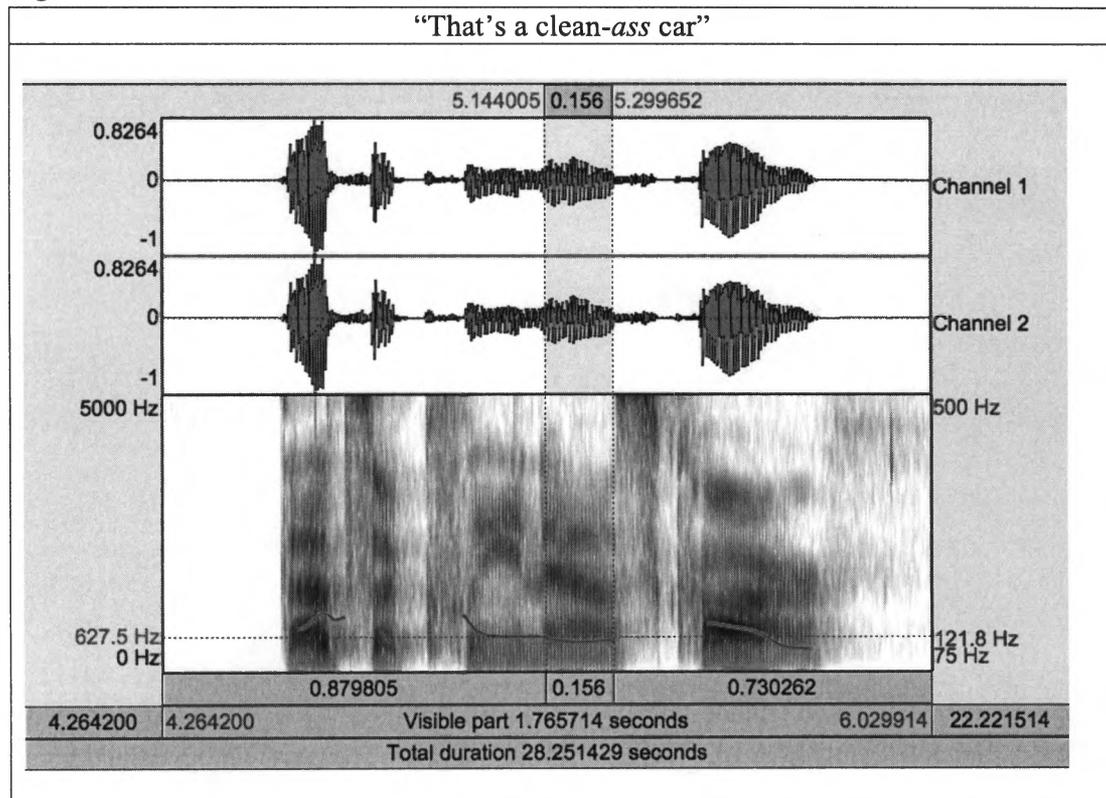
Section 4b: Synchronic Analysis

Phonological Characteristics

Stress

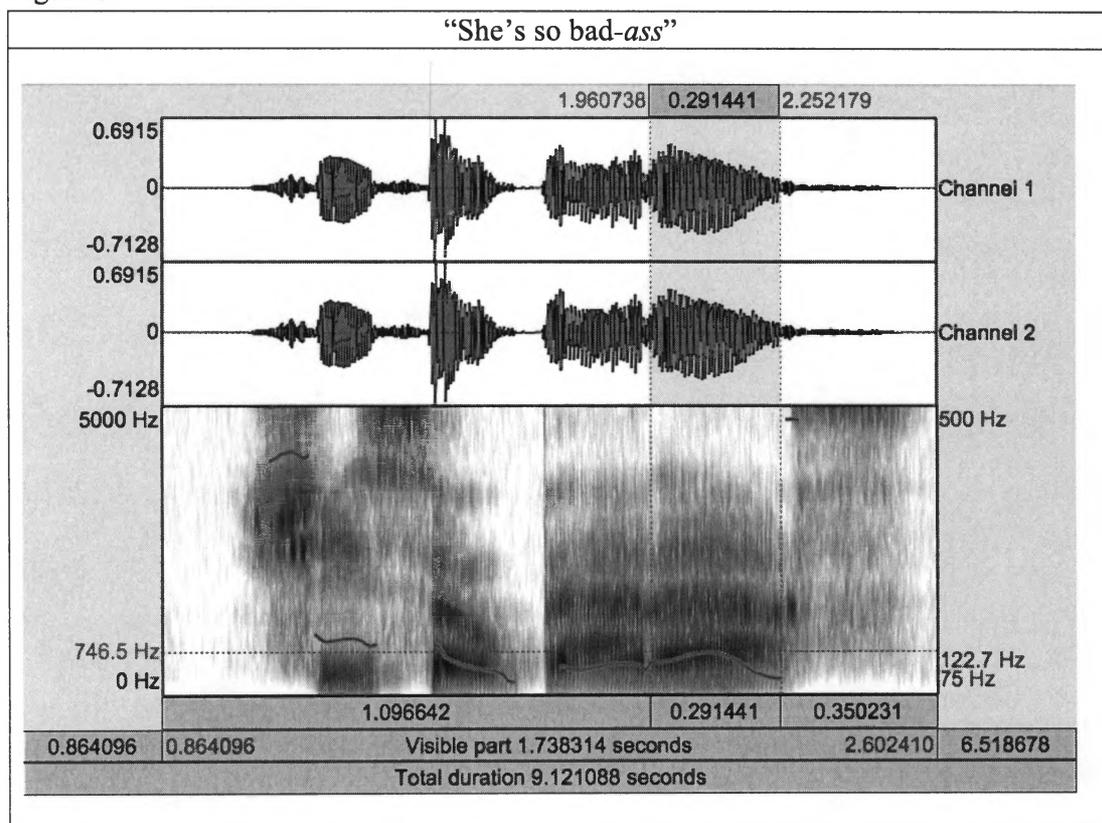
In relation to stress, findings of Spears (1998) are confirmed in the data of this project. Similar to other grammatical parts of speech in English, the *ass* intensifier typically displays no stress—unless it is the final element of a clause occurring in a predicate adjective construction. In the example of *That's a clean-ass car* (Fig. 2; stress denoted by the blue line), *-ass* carries no stress. The segment in the middle of the diagram (the portion labeled 0.156) is where the *ass* intensifier occurs. The adjective *clean*, which

Figure 2



comes directly before the highlighted middle section, shows primary stress before *-ass* occurs. Stress resumes again on the production of *car*, which can be seen roughly halfway through the right-most section of the image (the portion labeled 0.730262). In predicate constructs, *-ass* takes secondary stress (see Fig. 3; stress is denoted by the blue line). Secondary stress occurs with *-ass* (the portion labeled 0.291441) in *She’s so bad-ass*. The stress patterns in predicate constructs probably result from emphasis, as these examples are typically done in exclamations.

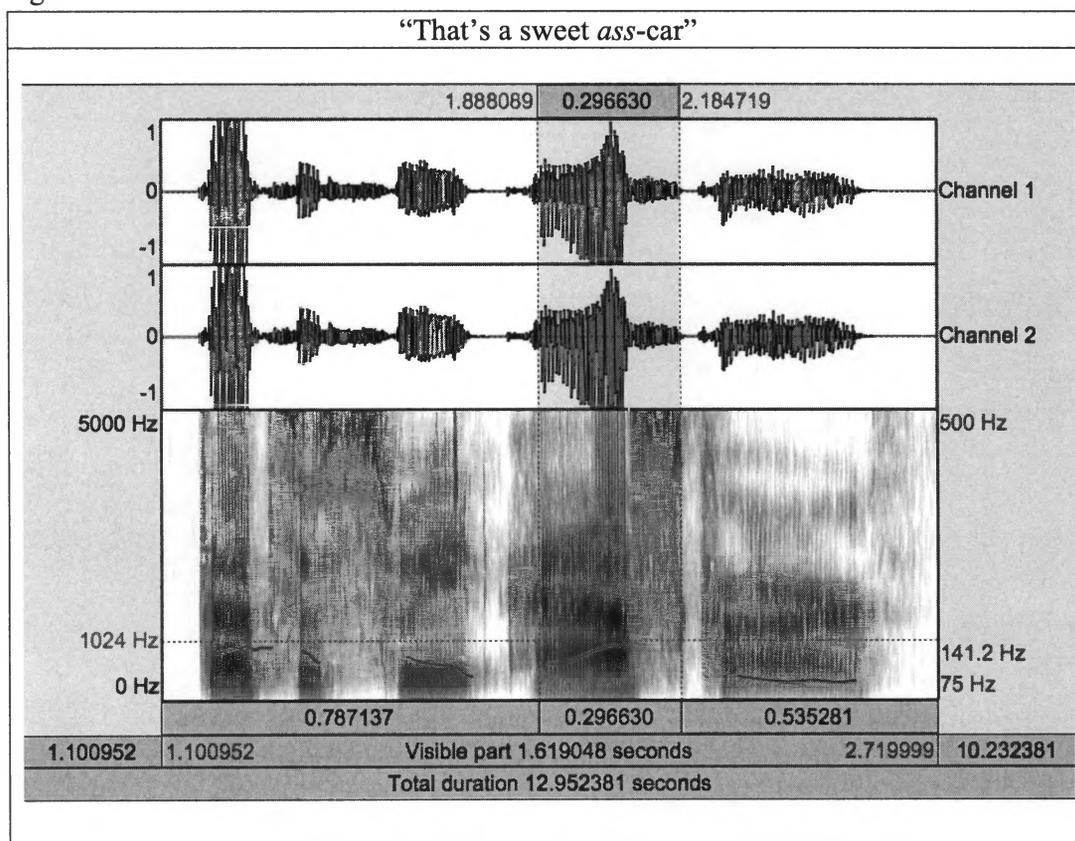
Figure 3



Stress itself, as it can be seen in Figure 2, actually marks the *ass* intensifier for the syntactic category it is representing. This can be used as a kind of phonological test for – *ass*. For example (see Fig. 4, next page), if *ass* were to carry stress—as it does in the stretch labeled 0.296630—it would actually be understood as part of a noun compound “*ass-car*”, that is, a car of *ass* (made of *ass*) or maybe even a car for getting *ass* (a car successful in getting lots of sexual gratification for its driver). In other words, without stress, we understand *ass* to be an intensifier in *clean-ass car* while with stress we would

understand the same utterance to be *clean ass-car* (the hyphen designating the syntactic orientation for *ass*).

Figure 4



Similarly, the same kind of phonological test could be used for predicate constructs. If the example of *bad-ass* (Fig. 3) were to lose its secondary stress, the result would mark the same item as the common noun compound *badass* (e.g., *She's a badass*; /bæd̩.æs/). *bad*, in this case, would carry the primary stress of the compound, following typical stress patterns of two-syllable noun compounds in English. Therefore, in both attributive and predicate cases, stress actually marks the *ass* intensifier for its

syntactic slot. In other words, stress is actually marking the grammatical function of intensification.

Syllabic Restrictions

Both Elgersma (1998) and Liberman (2011) make analytic claims towards the syllabic restrictions pertaining to adjectives that *-ass* can intensify (i.e., the *ass* intensifier can only augment adjectives falling within certain parameters of syllable length).

Elgersma puts forward that *-ass*, while most commonly occurring with one or two-syllable adjectives, can occur with adjectives of longer length. Liberman disagrees with Elgersma's parameters, saying that *-ass* is restricted to occurring with adjectives of three or less syllables.

Within the examples for this project (in Appendix, Sections 1-3), a frequency count of syllable lengths was performed to test the claims of Elgersma and Liberman. As it can be seen in Table 2 (below), at least within the one-hundred plus examples from this project's data pool, there does seem to be a stronger correlation between one and two-syllable words and their modification with the A intensifier. There is almost double the likelihood that *-ass* will modify

Table 2

Syllable Length	Example	Total Occurrences	Frequency Percentage
1	"hot- <i>ass</i> day"	66	61.1%
2	"ugly- <i>ass</i> baby"	34	31.5%
3	"retarded- <i>ass</i> shit"	7	0.065%
4	"dysfunctional- <i>ass</i> family"	1	0.0093%
>4	N/A	0	0.0%

an adjective that is one syllable in length than one that is two syllables. And, overall, one and two syllable adjectives make up over ninety percent (92.6%) of the intensification examples within the collected data pool for this research. While it doesn't seem impossible for *-ass* to occur with polysyllabic words longer than three syllables, contrary to the findings of Liberman, it seems to be less likely.

It should also be noted, as a reminder, that the data for this project comes both in spoken and written forms. The syllabic parameters of adjective might apply more to speech than in writing. While examples of usage with one to three syllable words can be found in both spoken and written data samples, the lone four syllable occurrence comes from a social media post (Appendix, Section 2, Example 45: *I love my dysfunctional-ass family*). The findings here, demonstrated in Table 2, work to corroborate the restrictions made by Elgersma (1998) and somewhat disprove the claims put forth by Liberman (2011). However, because the data for this project is limited, Liberman's findings cannot be wholly dispelled.

Phonological Environment

Finally, in regards to phonological characteristics and restrictions, the last findings to be attested here are made by Siddiqi (2011) and Zimmer (2013). Both authors state that, except in predicate constructions where it is typical for the *ass* intensifier to be a clause-final element, the *ass* intensifier must be "surrounded by phonological material"—that is, it must be preceded and followed by some sort of phonetic production. The data for this project verifies these prior claims, as *-ass* cannot typically stand alone as

an intensifier. A word must come before and after it—except when it occurs in predicate examples (from Appendix, section 1, examples 26-28: *She's so bad-ass; That food was bomb-ass; That shit's whack-ass*).

Semantics: Characteristics, Restrictions, and Meaning-making Processes

The semantic features of *-ass* have been analyzed by many authors (Elgersma, 1998; Liberman, 2005, 2011; Pullum, 2011). Some thought there to be a human-relevancy constraint pertaining to its use (Liberman, 2005; Pullum, 2011), wherein only nouns and adjectives connected to human traits and qualities could participate in *ass* intensifier constructs. However, these points of view did not consider the work of Elgersma (1998), which stated that any adjective works in production with *-ass*, and later work by Liberman (2011) reflected a change in findings to align with Elgersma's original point of view. Generally speaking, that same point of view is advocated for within this research: there are no human-quality relevancy restrictions for the use of the *A* intensifier. And yet, while there are no pure restrictions, there are some tendencies with *-ass* related to semantics.

Characteristics and Meaning

As it has already been shown in the diachronic analysis of this paper, *-ass* in its contemporary intensifier usage means “very”. In general, any time the *ass* intensifier is in use, the same construction can take the substitution of “very” or “really” without any change in meaning.

Typically, *-ass* can modify the same semantic content as other English intensifiers, or adverbs of degree; therefore, if “very” or “really” can’t be used, then neither can *-ass*. Similar to other degree words or intensifiers, *-ass* works with gradable or scalar adjectives. Gradable adjectives show that something can have differing degrees of qualities, which allows them to be intensified through modification. Some simple scalar adjective examples would include:

(Ex. 6) We were sitting in a *big-ass* circle during the meeting

(Ex. 35) It’s a *hot-ass* day

(Ex. 36) That’s an *ugly-ass* baby

Because of the gradations of understanding in meaning with the adjectives *big*, *hot*, and *ugly*, this allows augmentation of meaning to take place.

If the parameters defined by other intensifiers are followed, then *-ass* can be seen occurring grammatically with adjectives that have been derived with the *-y* suffix (e.g., “*nappy-ass* hair” and “a few *grumpy-ass* squares”), and also working with present and past participle words that have been derived into adjectives (e.g.: “some *annoying-ass* stories”; “some *retarded-ass* shit”). In the data pool for this research, no past participle (*-en*) adjectives were found to occur acceptably with the intensifier; this could be because many *-en* adjectives are more polar or non-gradable in their semantic content. So, following this logic, we might expect it to be difficult to use the A intensifier with adjectives that are categorical in nature, and this does seem to be true in some cases.

A sentence like **I found this free-ass couch on the street* isn't a grammatical construction, for something cannot be *very* free—it can only be free or not free. Because *-free* lacks a scalar understanding, this should and does prevent intensification. That being said, however, though some polar adjective constructions seem to be awkward or ungrammatical, there are some instances of acceptable categorical adjective intensification (e.g., *dead* and *pregnant*), because they can be construed as scalar through a cognitive meaning-making process.

Cognitive Processes of Meaning-making

While the fact that *-ass* doesn't seem to typically work in constructions that contain non-gradable adjectives, there are a few noted exceptions within the data pool of this project that prove this to not be a universal limitation of *-ass*. Two polar adjectives which successfully take intensifying modification are the words *dead* and *pregnant*.

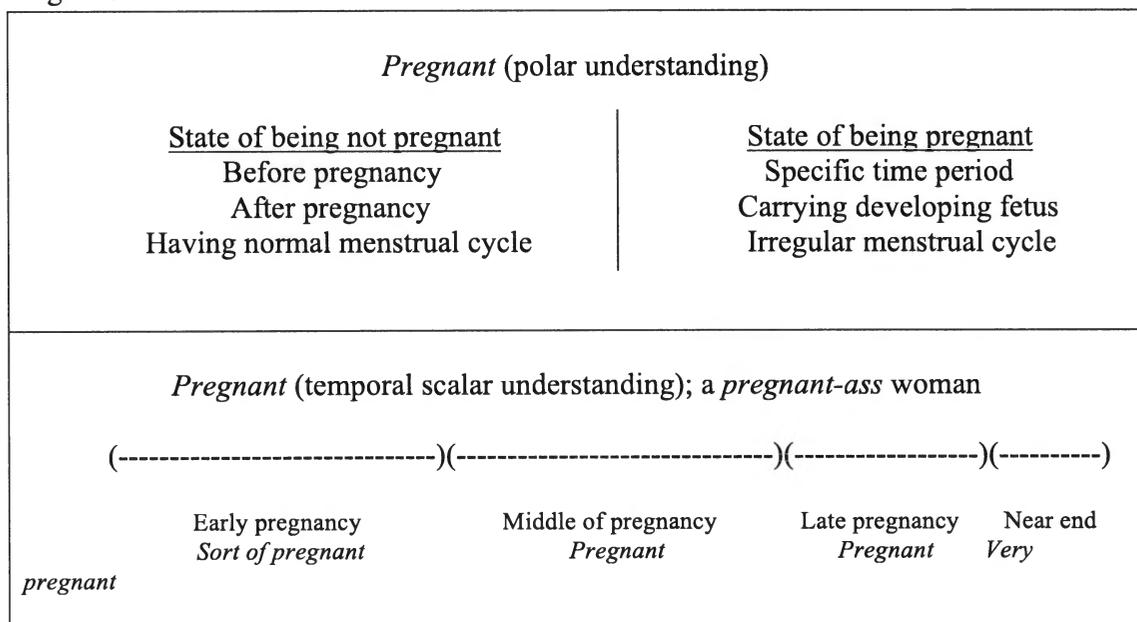
We can say grammatically appropriate sentences like *That's a dead-ass dog* or *That's one pregnant-ass woman*, while we cannot say something like **I found a free-ass couch on the side of the road*. Even though words like *dead* and *pregnant* aren't scalar in their semantic content, there are scalar understandings that can be projected onto these words through intensification, resulting from a cognitive meaning-making process. In this process, we understand something (in this case, *dead* or *pregnant*) through another understanding which is scalar in nature.

When we say *That dog is very dead* or *That's a dead-ass dog*, we perform scalar projections to inform our understanding: (1) the dog has been dead for a very long time (a

temporal scale); or (2) it was so obliterated in its death—let’s say, by a pack of piranha—that there is no way it’s coming back to life (an intensity scale). Similarly, with *pregnant*, if we say *That woman is very pregnant* or *That’s one pregnant-ass woman*, we are performing two possible scalar projections: (1) she is far along in her pregnancy (a temporal scale); or (2) she is of a very large size in her pregnancy, either about to give birth or possibly carrying more than one baby (a size scale).

These scalar projections, the cognitive meaning-making process, can also be thought of as the same processes behind metaphorical understandings (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). A metaphoric framework allows us to see how non-scalar meaning can come to be understood in a scalar sense. In the figure below, the focus will just be on the word *pregnant*. As it can be seen,

Figure 5

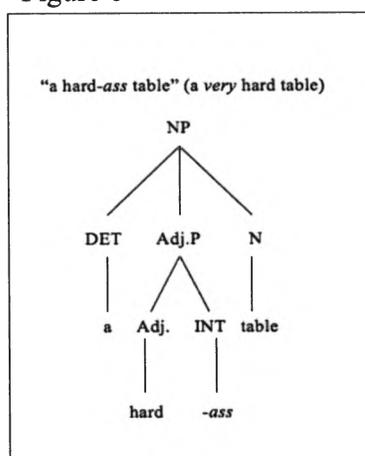


when we intensify a non-scalar lexical item like *pregnant*, we are importing a scalar understanding from a source domain (time) and are understanding the target domain (i.e., the state of being pregnant) through that notion of meaning, in this case time. By running this cognitive meaning-making process with polar adjectives, we can understand them through a scalar framework, allowing intensification to take place. Whether it be with *-ass* or *very*, the understanding resulted from the meaning-making process is the same.

The examples of intensification with adjectives like *dead* and *pregnant* shed some light on the cognitive processes behind some usages of *-ass*. They show us that while it is related primarily to understandings of a scalar nature, it can also be put through metaphoric and cognitive processes to produce grammatical, understandable constructs, the same as with other intensifiers in English.

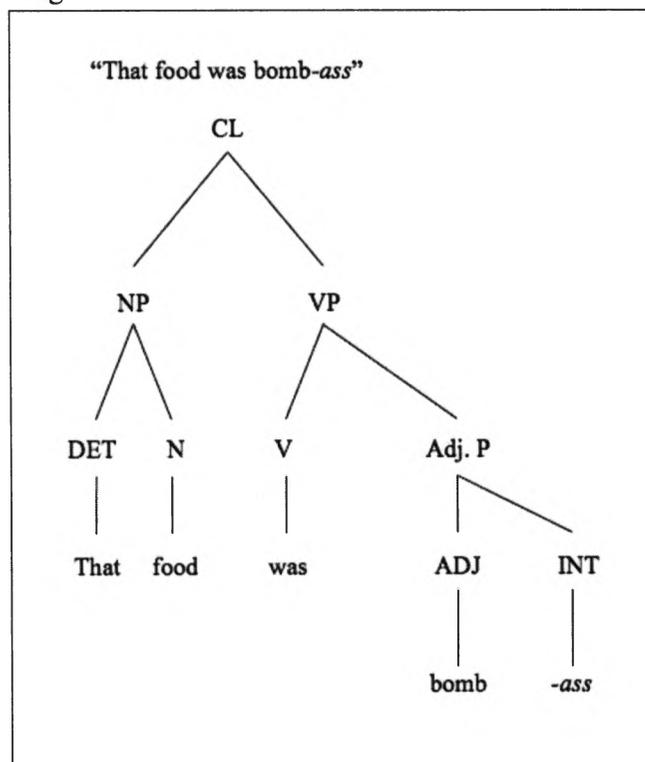
Syntactic Structures, Characteristics, and Restrictions

Figure 6



A number of works (Spears, 1998; Siddiqi, 2011; Whitman, 2012; Zimmer, 2013) have described the syntactic parameters with the use of *-ass*. The typical structure for *-ass* can be seen in Figure 6 (above), shown through phrase structure diagramming. With this kind of structure, *-ass* is typically identified as a suffix to the adjectival head *hard*, reiterated in the findings of Siddiqi, Whitman, and Zimmer. The *ass* intensifier can also occur in predicate constructs (see Fig. 7, below).

Figure 7



In the following examples, we can also see the *ass* intensifier as a pre-adjectival suffix, occurring mostly in predicate constructions but also in one attributive example:

(Ex. 29) It was the *ass*-end of the coffee

(Ex. 30) His politics are *ass*-backwards

(Ex. 31) He is *ass*-ugly

(Ex. 32) That idea is *ass*-brilliant

(Ex. 33) That idea is *ass*-radiant

This use of the *ass* intensifier was productive and grammatical at one point in time, and though it is no longer in popular use the above examples can still be seen as *ass* intensification. While the dates where these pre-adjectival occurrences were popular are not known, they highlight a period of “syntactic flexibility” where *-ass* was less frozen in its post-adjectival parameter for usage than we typically see today. Also important to note is that the latter four examples are probably influenced by the first one. *assbackwards* originally meant “to do something backwards” in the directionality of the body, (i.e., pointed backwards in anatomical orientation). After the development of the intensifier sense related to *ass* that occurred in the 1940s, the perceived meaning of *assbackwards* probably changed to something like *very backwards*, which then gave rise to the latter examples of pre-adjectival intensification that have just been shown.

Siddiqi (2011) also finds that *-ass* cannot behave as an intensifier for adverbs like other English intensifiers, and this is considered true in this research, as well. We cannot use it within pure adverbial phrases like the one Siddiqi offers: **I run quick-ass*. This is a hard restriction of *-ass*; unlike other intensifiers in English, it cannot be used to modify

words that we would typically classify as adverb (e.g., words ending with the adverbial *-ly* suffix).

Intensifier Iteration

While *-ass* is restricted from augmenting adverbs, it can occur with other intensifiers, a typical syntactic trait of English. From the data for this project, we can see numerous examples of what we could call “extra intensification” or “intensifier iteration” (i.e., where *-ass* isn’t the only intensifier modifying a single adjective). In the examples (below), we see a variety of other intensifiers (set off in italics and bold) modifying the same adjective as the *ass* intensifier. In each case, the given attributive adjective is undergoing the process of intensification by more

(Ex. 1) He’s got that nappy-*ass* ***fucking*** hair

(Ex. 2) You don’t want a ***super*** long-*ass* paragraph

(Ex. 9) Take that baby-*ass* ***mother fucking*** shot

(Ex. 18) She’s got some ***hella*** brown-*ass* nipples

than one intensifier—one being *-ass* and one being another. Of note here, you will see the other non-typical intensifiers of *hella*, *fucking*, and *mother fucking*, along with a more typical intensifier in *super*. While this finding is not necessarily surprising, past research does not typically address this topic, with the lone exception being Whitman (2012).

Even though *-ass* is productive in the process of extra intensification, the *ass* intensifier cannot recur endlessly like other adverbs of degree can in English. For example, for hyperbolic effect, one could say *That tree is very very very tall* or *That water is really really really hot*—both of these examples would be absolutely grammatical and acceptable. The same sort of iteration cannot be done with the *ass* intensifier, that is, we cannot say **That is a tall-ass-ass-ass tree* to mean *That is a very very very tall tree*. It's possible that *-ass* cannot function this way because affixes in English typically can't be iterated over and over again in constructions.

Modification of Lexical Intensifiers

Items like *dead serious*, *dead wrong*, and *butt naked* are normally identified as adjective compounds because they are typically indivisible (i.e., they occur as one lexical unit); however, in the following examples, *-ass* can be seen splitting these. *-ass* in these examples (below) splits,

(Ex. 34) I'm being dead-*ass* serious

(Ex. 44) That dude was dead-*ass* wrong

(Ex. 51) That one time my mom posted a nude of one of his girlfriend's
butt-*ass* naked

(Ex. 52) Dead-*ass* serious he goes, "Will he punch me back?"

like an infix, what would normally be an indivisible construct. Liberman (2004 & 2005) identifies the words *dead* and *butt* to be acting as lexical intensifiers in certain instances

(e.g., *dead wrong*, *dead serious*, *butt naked*). Someone can be *wrong*, and then they can be *dead wrong*; someone can be *serious*, and then they can be *dead serious*; someone can be *naked*, and then they can be *butt naked*: all of these comparisons show that *dead* and *butt* are in themselves performing intensification, and can be further intensified with *-ass*.

Noun Modification

Along with the more typical features connected to English intensifiers already discussed, there seem to be some atypical features connected to the *ass* intensifier, particularly in instances of what appears to be noun modification. In the following examples, *-ass* seems to be

(Ex. 14) We didn't have to sit next to any bum-ass fans that didn't pay for their shit

(Ex. 41) Live Nation has a hell a shit-ass way for buying tickets

(Ex. 42) I think Madison Bumgarner is a bullshit-ass player

(Ex. 78) What kind of snitch-ass children of the corn type shit is this?

functioning as a noun intensifier, which would be unique probably only to *-ass* and possibly *fucking* (in general, in instances of the *ass* intensifier, *fucking* can replace *-ass* as a kind of intensifier test; in the cases above, it only works productively with Ex. 1—a *bullshit fucking player*—or a *dead beat fucking parent*).

Instances like the ones above exemplify an analytic problem. Within syntactic theory—depending on which view of syntax is adopted—words like *bullshit*, *shit*, *snitch*,

and *bum* might not be classified as nouns. Through conversion, the process of converting one part of speech to another by inserting it into a particular syntactic slot (Larsen-Freeman & Celce-Murcia, 2016), or zero-marking, what would normally be a noun could be an adjective in this case—making the intensification here not unique. However, the words in the aforementioned examples are noun-like in their nature in that they are typically identified as nouns more so than as adjectives.

Taking a view of “natural grammar” (Langacker, 1977), which is typical of grammaticalization theory, we can say that *-ass* does seem to have the ability to modify nouns, which is probably unique to itself and possibly also *fucking*. This finding with *-ass* represents a topic yet to be breached by prior research, and it begins to erode the classification of the *ass* intensifier as a suffix. A suffix or affix is typically going to be more heavily restricted in its usage parameters, and the instances of noun intensification highlights that fact that past identifications as a kind of suffix could possibly be inadequate.

The Intensifier Clitic

Prior works typically classify the *ass* intensifier as a syntactic infix (Siddiqi, 2011), a bound suffix (Pullum, 2011), or generally as a post-adjectival adverb of degree or intensifier. The analysis of *-ass* as a clitic is informed by the grammaticalization framework adopted for this project. As the syntactic reanalysis of *ass* occurred (following the developmental cline, below),

content item > grammatical word > clitic > inflectional suffix

it moved from its designation as a noun into a grammatical form: the *ass* intensifier. Due to *-ass* being flexible in its syntactic restrictions (i.e., having the ability to intensify nouns), it is more appropriately identified as a clitic instead of a suffix. Therefore, after its instantiation in the 1940s as a grammatical word, *-ass* steadily grammaticalized into an intensifying clitic, resulting from the usages it developed between World War II and today.

Clitics are “forms that are not affixes, but are constrained to occurring next to an autonomous word, known as the host” (Hopper & Traugott, 1993, p. 5). Given that the *ass* intensifier is typically occurring as a post-adjectival modifier of some kind of syntactic head (i.e., an adjective, a lexical intensifier, and nouns), this would suggest its designation as a clitic as appropriate. Currently, *-ass* fits the designation as an enclitic (i.e., it follows its host or syntactic head) (Hopper & Traugott, 1993).

The analysis as a clitic is also relevant and probably a more accurate description because *-ass* has derived from a noun and typically serves a grammatical function defined by a particular syntactic orientation or “lean” (Hopper & Traugott, 2003; Heine et al. 1992). The lean of the clitic can be thought of as the direction of modification. The *ass* intensifier is typically a post-structure modifier, in that it is placed after the item undergoing its modification: this is seen in all of the topics already discussed within the analysis section pertaining to syntax.

Generally speaking, clitics can be thought of as words that are “half-way between autonomous words and affixes” (Jeffers and Zwicky, 1980), which is echoed by the third

stage of the syntactic reanalysis (shown in the cline model, above) that *-ass* currently appears to be within. The last element that suggests *-ass* to be in the status of clitic are the examples of syntactic flexibility. Because it has an outlying function as an apparent noun modifier—a kind of syntactic flexibility—this points to the idea that *-ass* hasn't fully reanalyzed into the class of suffix yet—and is currently in a “half-way between” state as an intensifying enclitic.

The categorization as a clitic allows for all of the grammatical functions we see *-ass* performing within the data. This analysis is not to say that the process of grammaticalization has stopped; rather, it just highlights the fact that this is where *-ass* is in the current moment—in a gray area, possibly pushing towards the class of affix, but without being there quite yet. We might expect it to become more fixed in the future in the completion of its grammaticalization, especially if it loses its ability to modify nouns, in which case it will have fully reanalyzed into an intensifying suffix.

Morphology

Possible Derivational Abilities

If the *ass* intensifier doesn't actually have the ability to modify nouns—given a specific structural view of phrase structure grammar—or if the process happening with nominal forms isn't just intensification, then the possible findings here will work to absolve those open-ended problems.

The *ass* intensifier has already been designated as an intensifier clitic in this work, and that analysis is going to be held for the time being. If we reconsider the

grammaticalization cline again (shown here), it is easy to see that the next step in grammaticization would be to become a

content item > grammatical word > clitic > inflectional suffix

suffix. Now, though this cline shows the final step of grammaticalization to be that of becoming an inflectional suffix, the last step could easily be to become a derivational suffix, as well. This final step would be similar to the grammaticalization of *full* to *-ful* (Welna, 2000). And while *-ass* may have not yet fully grammaticalized into the class of derivational suffix that would also serve the grammatical function of intensification, the nominal modification examples could highlight the process of *-ass* going through a final shift in grammaticalization, represented as: clitic > derivational suffix.

The following examples containing the words *bitch*, *shit*, and *snitch* (shown below) would all be analyzed, within the analytic syntactic parameters used so far within this paper, as nouns modifying other nouns. If these nouns are being intensified, then this would be a unique characteristic for an intensifier.

(Ex. 22) What kind of *bitch-ass* comment is that?

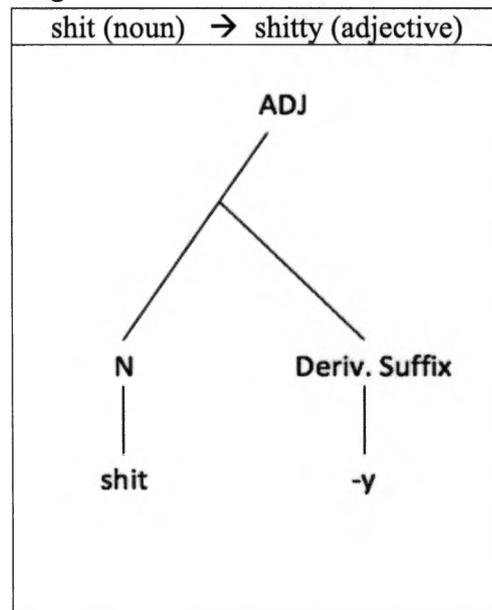
(Ex. 41) Live Nation has a *shit-ass* way for buying tickets

(Ex. 78) What kind of *snitch-ass* children of the corn type *shit* is this

One common derivational suffix commonly found in the data pool is the derivational *-y*. A majority of the two syllable adjectives in the data pool are derived with this suffix. If we derive the above examples (shown in Figure 8), there isn't a change

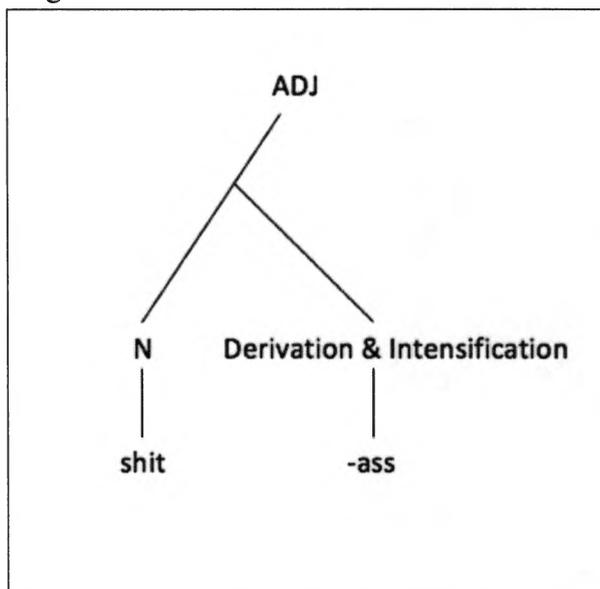
in meaning or function of *-ass*. If we can take away the derivational *-y* and still see the *ass* intensifier functioning in that

Fig. 8



manner, it must have additional derivational qualities that move *bitch*, *shit*, and *snitch* from the classification of noun to adjective (shown in Figure 9, next page), allowing intensification to take place. In general, if the *-y* could be removed from what would otherwise be a noun and *-ass* can still intensify what would appear to be an attributive noun, then some derivational transformation must be taking place that is resulted from the use of the *ass* intensifier.

Fig. 9



Section 5: Discussion

Though this paper has delved deeply into the historical developments of *-ass*, it has yet to tackle any sociolinguistic issues related to the topic. Within the bodies of prior work that inform this paper, there can essentially be a line drawn between two camps: (1) those discussing the *ass* intensifier in African American Vernacular English and (2) those discussing it within a dialect of English that is probably best described as the informal register of Standard American English, or colloquial American English.

Since the first major works (Spears, 1998; Bucholtz, 1999; and Smitherman, 2000) dealing with the *ass* intensifier are done in AAVE work, one might expect that this non-standard dialect is the place of origin for *-ass*. AAVE researchers, including Labov

(1998), Smitherman (1998 & 2000), and Spears (1998), commonly state that a large variety of slang terms and colloquialisms move freely from non-standard dialects, in this case AAVE, into standard dialects. Due to the social prominence of standard dialects, they can do this appropriation of language without worry of backlash because of the prestige related to the socially dominant dialect.

Considering the sociological history of World War II, one might expect it to be a logical place for *-ass* to have moved into colloquial American English. World War II, though Jim Crow laws still existed within the United States, was at the time probably the least segregated of all the wars that America had yet to participate in. With the unsegregated mixing of black soldiers with white soldiers, and with the mixing of soldiers from a wide array of demographics, it could have been the perfect place for something like the *ass* intensifier to move into the informal register of Standard American English.

Aside from dialects, it should also be noted that *-ass* has probably existed entirely within an informal register of English. This should be unique, in that its whole synchronic history is probably relatively untouched by formality. Some research (Pullum, 2011) posits the idea that the *ass* intensifier cannot occur with adjectives that are more formal in register. While this claim could not really be verified by this research, it could not be wholly dispelled either. Recalling from the analysis of this project the absence of *-ass* occurring with words of four syllables or more, it could be that this is connected to Pullum's claims around register. Since words of a more formal register are typically

longer and have more syllables, the infrequent occurrence of *-ass* with these longer polysyllabic words could underscore this “register restriction” as being valid.

Because *-ass* is informal, and yet since it is frequently used in everyday American English (e.g., it’s heard in public situations, and it’s commonly present in television shows like *Reno 911*, *Parks & Recreation*, and *Workaholics*, along with appearing in movies like *Sausage Party*), it’s possible that it might bleed into more formal registers if its frequent usage increases even more. And, given that the *ass* intensifier commonly occurs in pop culture programming, one might expect it to have carried into other Englishes located around the world, including lingua francas, since English is a globalized language.

Largely, probably more so than anything else, its presence in American pop culture helped the dissemination of *-ass*, allowing it to become the popular and frequent intensifier that it is today. And, along with the ubiquitous nature of social media, this has probably also been a driving force in the spread of *ass* intensification. Altogether, the *ass* intensifier has been spread within American English in a way that distinctions between usage in standard and non-standard dialects breaks down.

The answers to these sociological and sociolinguistic topics can only be answered with more research. Unfortunately, the work in this project has barely breached these topics; however, hopefully this work can serve as a starting place, in the future, for more

research connected to the topics already discussed here, or ones that have yet to be mentioned.

Section 6: Conclusion

This work is a descriptive work that has looked into more analytic topics in one project than any previous work has, focusing on the *ass* intensifier. This paper serves as a kind of “one-stop-shop” on linguistic origins and current features related to *-ass*. In the future, this paper should inform newer works that delve into the same topic, in the same way that the works that have come before this project have done.

Also, in a larger sense, while this project focuses mainly on colloquial American English, it does not claim that the same findings here are applicable across all the varieties of global English. While the findings in this paper do not guarantee that the same findings would exist in British English or South African English, this work could serve as a reference and comparison point for works delving into those topics which—to the knowledge of this researcher—have yet to be explored.

At this point in its synchronic history, *-ass* is still in a state of flux and going through the process of grammaticalization. In relation to being an intensifier, *-ass* has certainly passed from the classification as an open class word to a classification more grammatical in nature. It is seen as an intensifier clitic because of its history of development and current somewhat restricted but also somewhat flexible usages. While it has come a long way in its development over the past 1000 years, the analysis here finds that it is not yet done. Certain features—particularly the examples of possible noun

modification and possible derivational properties—suggest that *-ass* could be starting to move into the final stage of syntactic reanalysis, shifting from intensifying clitic to derivational suffix.

While *-ass* may never become a true suffix, and may stop with being a clitic, only time and future research will reveal this to be true or untrue. This work only captures its historic development and describes its functions in the current day. This work will, however, be a valuable point of reference when this topic can be taken up again later in the future. The *ass* intensifier is a perfect example of how language can change, and it exemplifies the complex semantic and syntactic shifts that lead to this change, how this change can also influence a lexical item's phonological and morphological characteristics, and how these changes result in contemporary, current day uses.

The *ass* intensifier, in its own right, in its current state, is pushing on the boundaries of the English language. It could be one of only a few lexical items to be doing this currently, and it could be one of only a few to do this within the near future. It is not known currently if other words and linguistic developments will follow that path that *-ass* has taken. For this, we need to look to the future, for only time will tell.

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Appendix

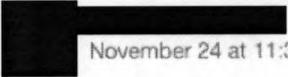
Section 1: Recorded Spoken Data

Ex. #	Recorded Utterance
1	“He’s got that nappy-ass fucking hair”
2	“You don’t want a super long-ass paragraph”
3	“Then some suck-ass team comes along and beats you”
4	“We were on a sketch-ass road”
5	“That’s a bullshit-ass reason”
6	“We were sitting in a big-ass circle during the meeting”
7	“I took that class a long-ass time ago”
8	“That’s a clean-ass car”
9	“Take that baby-ass mother fucking shot”
10	“That’s some fucked up retarded-ass shit”
11	“I had a shitty-ass day”
12	“I’m cut out for this life, no bra, just a loose-ass dress, and my Chuck Taylors”
13	“I stole your dope-ass lighter”
14	“We didn’t have to sit next to any bum-ass fans that didn’t pay for their shit”
15	“Plain-ass chicken is just so boring to me”
16	“I’ll ask a question and then she’ll ask a hella stupid-ass question”
17	“Look at those phallic-ass veiny dick tubes hanging from the ceiling”
18	“She’s got some hella brown-ass nipples”
19	“It’s just like retarded-ass backwards bullshit”
20	“Have you seen that old school-ass version of Merlin with Sean Connery?”
21	“There’s some weird-ass fucking Snapchat filters right now”
22	“What kind of bitch-ass comment is that?”
23	“Hella full-ass moon, right in my face”
24	“I don’t want some dry-ass fucking brownies”
25	“That movie was kickass”
26	“She’s so badass”
27	“That food was bombass”
28	“That shit’s whackass”
29	“It was the ass-end of the coffee”
30	“His politics are ass-backwards”
31	“He is ass-ugly”
32	“That idea is ass-brilliant”
33	“That light is ass-radiant”
34	“I’m being dead-ass serious”
35	“It’s a hot-ass day”
36	“That’s an ugly-ass baby”

37	"I fell on that hard-ass table"
38	"That's one pregnant-ass woman"
39	"That's a dead-ass dog"
40	"She was telling some annoying-ass stories the whole time we were driving"
41	"Live Nation has a hella shit-ass way for buying tickets"
42	"I think Madison Bumgarner is a bullshit-ass player"
43	"I'm a grown-ass woman"
44	"That dude was dead-ass wrong"

Section 2: Social Media Data

Example 45

 November 24 at 11:30am · 🌐

i love my dysfunctional ass family ❤️

Example 46a & 46b

 35 mins · 🌐

I wanna hug this guy he speaks the truth...Especially if the dead beat ass "parent" only pays 200\$ a month an doesn't see the child! There are some bitter ass dead beats out there!!

Example 47a & 47b

  37 mins · 

Done with cheap ass tricks. You gonna act like a thirsty ass bitch, that's how I'm gonna treat you.
#aintmyloss

  10 1 Comment

 Like  Comment  Share

Example 48

  2 hrs · Santa Clara, California · 

So, if you told the world that you're expecting today, then you are either just a basic ass prankster or you have really terrible timing!

  14 3 Comments

 Like  Comment  Share

Example 49

56 mins · 

So I will not be accepting anymore friend requests. If you decide to delete, don't expect me to accept your request again months later. Tired of nosy ass people lol

  1 Comment

 Like  Comment  Share

Example 50



The worst thing about the presidential election isn't the fact that us Berners had to conceded to HRC, or that we had to sit and watch Trump the clown endorse 1,000 + backward-ass values for over a year, No, the worst part is that once this election

Example 51

 6 mins • 

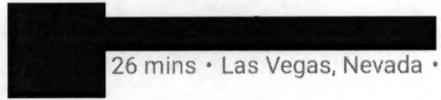
When your brother goes live on fb 3x in 15 minutes,

Its almost as embarrassing as that one time my mom posted a nude of one of his girlfriends butt ass naked, as her profile picture.

 Like  Comment  Share

Example 52

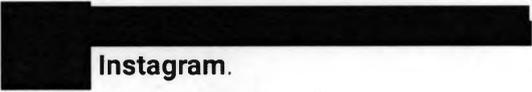
 26 mins • Las Vegas, Nevada • 

Bruh 😂😂😂 Landon's in the bathroom and I hear him hitting the mirror and I tell him to stop. He says he's hitting his "shadow" and I tell him it's a reflection and to stop. Dead ass serious he goes, "Will he punch me back?" 😂😂😂😂

 3

 Like  Comment  Share

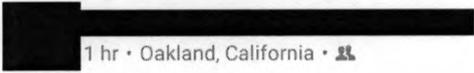
Example 53

 **Instagram.** 

2 hrs · Instagram · 

Thanks for the dope ass pin dawg!
 stoked to slap this thing on my work bag! **#luckyhorseshoe #pinsonpinsonpins**

Example 54

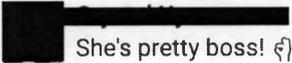
 

1 hr · Oakland, California · 

Shout out to my mommy for being a boss ass bitch! Excuse my language 🙄

 6 2 Comments

 Like  Comment  Share

 She's pretty boss! 🙄🙄🙄🙄

Example 55

[Redacted] Jan 12 at 6:49pm • 🌐

Fri 😂😂

Like my page → [Redacted] for more video's 📺

👤

22 savage got a real ass friend 😂

Example 56

[Redacted] 10 hrs • 🌐

who's done this before? LOL

When you're high AF and the munchies got u
mixing random ass food 🤢🤢

Example 57

[Redacted] 1 hr • San Jose, California • 👤

I'm super stoked on all the texts and calls I've received. I have some rad ass friends. Thanks for reaching out to me ❤️

👍❤️ 6

👍 Like 💬 Comment ➦ Share

Example 58

4 hrs · 

Anyone out there a kick-ass AD and interested in working on a short film project in early April? \$200/day

Send me your email/phone number so I can refer you to the Producer and Director!

  5 20 Comments

 Like  Comment  Share

Example 59

May 10 at 5:00pm · 

these would be bombass mixers for summer cocktails but added sugar is not necessary...hellooo fruit are already all sugar

Example 60

 1 hr • 

CRAZY ASS GAME BUT HELL
YEAH WARRIORS! 

  8

 Like  Comment

Example 61

 28 mins • 

I need a recommendation on a place downtown
that has bomb ass fish tacos. Breaded or fried
fish. Not grilled. Also preferably somewhere
open a little later since I work until 8.

4 Comments

 Like  Comment

Example 62

[Redacted Profile Picture] 7 mins · [Redacted]



**Tired of fake ass
friends. Bye cunts!**

 Try this background in your post. [TRY IT](#)

 Like  Comment

Example 63

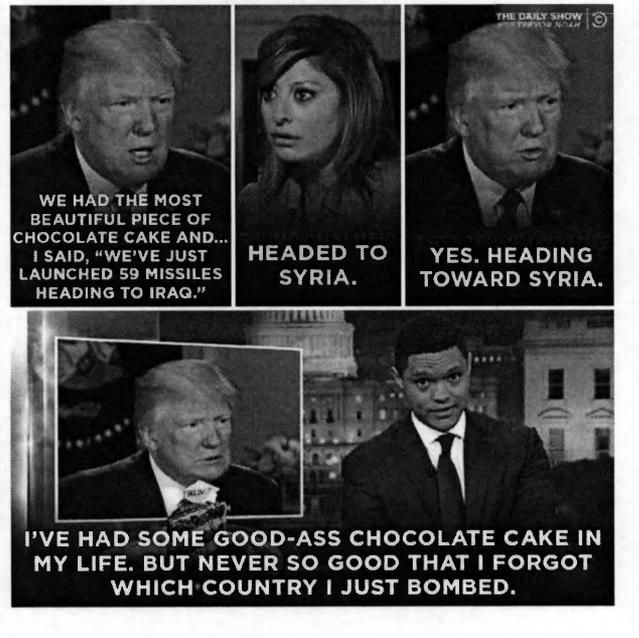


Example 64

When your girl keeps touching you
with her cold ass feet



Example 65



Example 66

IM TIRED OF HEARING ABOUT DONALD TRUMP
AND HIS FUCK ASS ADMINISTRATION BUT I
NEED TO STAY AWARE OF WHATS HAPPENING



RETWEETS
8,888

LIKES
8,901



2,404,554 views

Example 67

THINGS THAT ARE NOT A CASHIER'S
FAULT:

- STORE POLICIES
- STORE PRICES
- UR CREDIT CARD DECLINING
- UR EXPIRED COUPON
- UR SHIT ASS MOOD

Example 68

**NOBODY GIVES A F*CK ABOUT
YOUR FEELINGS, BRO**



where I ship wine and
this fuckin' bullshit ass state

Example 69

**NOBODY GIVES A F*CK ABOUT
YOUR FEELINGS, BRO**



paid your fuckin' bullshit
ass Houston politicians

Example 70

The Girl Scouts' partnership with Planned Parenthood leaves these cookies with a ~~bad~~ taste in your mouth.

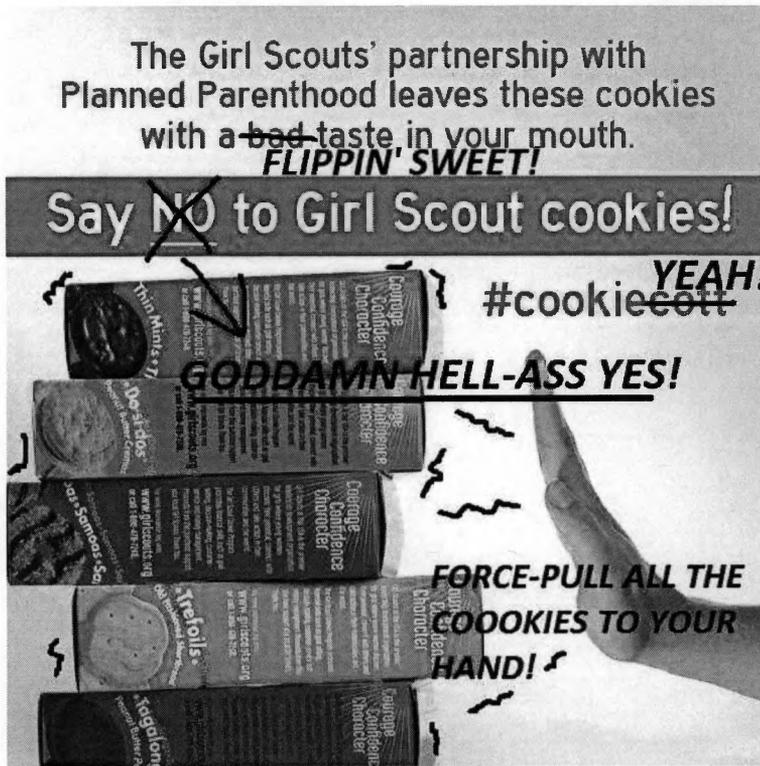
FLIPPIN' SWEET!

Say NO to Girl Scout cookies!

~~#cookiecott~~ **YEAH!**

GODDAMN HELL-ASS YES!

FORCE-PULL ALL THE COOKIES TO YOUR HAND!



Example 71

this lil ass child about to be sent to the uno equivalent of the shadow realm



Example 72





Example 74

STOP POSTING BOMB ASS FOOD WITH
NO LOCATION!
DROP THE ADDRESS, STORE NAME, AND
PRICE



Example 75

When your friend says he found a dank
ass meme, but he shows you a dicks out
for Harambe meme.



Example 76

EVER BEEN IN THOSE PETTY
ASS MOODS WHEN YOU START
UNFOLLOWING PEOPLE FOR
THE DUMBEST REASONS? LIKE
I'M TIRED OF SEEING THAT
DAMN MOLE ON HER FACE

Example 77

To all my sensitive ass friends. Its
cause I love you bitch.

Science Says: Your
"Meanest" Friend Is The One
Who Actually Wants The
Best For You

By Mary Wright - Sep 16, 2017 602



Example 78

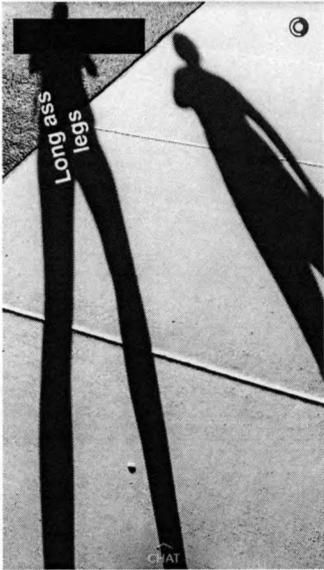
[Redacted]

what kind of snitch ass children of the corn type shit is this

CNN @CNN
Kids form human arrow to point police chopper toward suspects on the run.
cnn.it/1Y8335t

An aerial photograph showing a group of children lying on a grassy field, forming a human arrow shape. The children are arranged in a line, with their arms and legs extended to form the shaft and fletching of the arrow. The field is a mix of green grass and brown earth.

Example 79

A close-up photograph of a person's legs, showing the lower half of the body. The person is wearing dark pants and is standing on a light-colored, possibly concrete, surface. The text "Long ass legs" is written vertically in white on the left leg. A shadow of the person is cast on the ground to the right. A small "CPAT" logo is visible in the bottom right corner of the image.

Section 3: COCA Data

Ex. #	Adjective	Example Sentence/Phrase
80	<i>fat</i>	"Take your lame ass ideas, your fake ass toupee, your fat ass wife..."
81	<i>sorry</i>	"We don't need any sorry ass compassion from conservatives!"
82	<i>big</i>	"I could give my baby the big ass wedding she'd dreamt of."
83	<i>dumb</i>	"And those dumb ass basketball games... what's that?!"
84	<i>smart</i>	" Smart ass college girl."
85	<i>bad</i>	"So braces, no braces, it's a bad ass show."
86	<i>pompous</i>	"Perhaps the difference between that pompous ass Cal and I is ..."
87	<i>fine</i>	"Then that fat bitch kick me right in the nuts. Wit that fine ass big toe."
88	<i>great</i>	"The Felix Trinidad/Fernando Vargas fight. It was a great ass fight..."
89	<i>stupid</i>	"What kind of stupid ass question is that?"
90	<i>lazy</i>	"That lazy ass brother of mine was suppose to help me."
91	<i>hard</i>	"Flat on my back again lying on a hard ass table with a sheet over me..."
92	<i>ugly</i>	"I was tired of this ugly ass bar and ugly ass bathroom."
93	<i>wild</i>	"They ought by right of birth, to enjoy the liberty of wild ass colts . . ."
94	<i>hairy</i>	"Oh, you're dumb all right, you hairy ass punk."
95	<i>wise</i>	"If this is some wise ass ploy of yours..."
96	<i>good</i>	"And you wake up in a good ass mood."
97	<i>lame</i>	"Go listen to a bunch of Phish records while you read your lame ass poetry."
98	<i>sexy</i>	"Damn, I love my sexy ass wife."
99	<i>fake</i>	"And another thing: all that fake ass jewelry."
100	<i>long</i>	"We have a long ass waiting list to get in here."
101	<i>loud</i>	"Dribbles's loud ass screams like the crazy white woman she is..."
102	<i>shitty</i>	"You want shitty ass presents for Christmas?"
103	<i>broke</i>	"I got to get my law degree so I can represent broke ass motherfuckers like you."
104	<i>creepy</i>	"You don't think that a creepy ass cracker is a racial comment?"
105	<i>funky</i>	"Music is playing extremely loud in a funky ass trailer as Judy dances."
106	<i>grumpy</i>	"A few grumpy ass squares start complaining and shit."