

-s: The latest slang suffix, for reals

Vanessa McCumber
University of Victoria
vmccumber@alumni.uvic.ca

This paper explores the recent use of the suffix *-s* in English slang formation, as found in such forms as “whatevs,” “totes,” and “for reals.” A morphological analysis contrasts *-s* with similar suffixes and describes related morphological processes, including clipping and reduplication. The history, productivity and usage distribution of the suffix are also examined.

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1 Introduction

The suffix *-s* serves many purposes in English: it can mark plurality, possession, or grammatical person. Recently it is also becoming popular for creating informal, slang versions of common words and phrases. For example, “see you later” becomes “lates!” and “this is certainly my favourite song” becomes “this is totes my faves song”. Including “for reals” in a sentence expresses the truth or sincerity of the statement.

This paper is exploratory and aims to describe the relatively new linguistic phenomenon of what will be referred to as “slang *-s*”, and will examine the suffix's morphology, history, and productivity, and its connections to other English morphological processes.

2 Data

Examples of words and phrases using slang *-s* are presented in Table 1. These were collected from the author's personal lexicon, self-reported data from colleagues and acquaintances (both male and female native English speakers, ranging in age from 12 to 60), and online sources. As slang, these words do not appear in any standard dictionaries, and, presumably because of their recency, only two were found in published slang dictionaries. Many words with slang *-s* can be found in Urban Dictionary, an online resource that is wholly user-edited and is thus much more current than most published works, but which lacks

professional standards and official citations. This website was used to find possible samples of slang *-s*, which were then confirmed in other sources before being included in the data set.

The data span several word classes, which suggests the productivity of slang *-s* is not limited to any one category. As discussed in the next section, though, there are likely two separate but related suffixes that constitute the slang *-s*.

The suffixation of *-s* does not appear to change word meaning, but rather serves to change the register to informal, colloquial speech; thus definitions are not included in the data set.

Table 1. Words and phrases with slang *-s* suffix.

Nouns	
babes < baby/babe	pops < pop
cutes < cutie	dins < dinner
homes < homey (< homeboy)	(what's) the haps < what's happening
Adverbs	
blates < blatantly	mabes/maybs < maybe
defs < definitely	obvs < obviously
for reals < for real	probs < probably
howeys < however	totes < totally
laters < later (< see you later)	supes < super
lates < later (< see you later)	whenevs < whenever
Adjectives	
brutes < brutal	faves < favourite
fabs < fabulous	perfs < perfect
Verbs	
jokes < I'm joking	
Interjections	
hells no/yeah < hell no/yeah	tevs < whatever
(oh) noes < (oh) no	wevs < whatever
no probs < no problem	whatevs < whatever
okays < okay	(oh) wows < wow
Pronouns	
whoeys < whoever	whomeys < whomever

3 Morphological analysis

3.1 Clipping

Slang *-s* suffixation is often, though not necessarily, accompanied by clipping, a process of “extracting a word from a longer word of the same meaning” (Millar, 2007, p. 39). When clipping occurs with slang *-s*, the word is often reduced to the first closed syllable, as in *totes* and *perfs*. Sometimes only the final syllable is dropped, as in *whatevs* and *howevs*, which may be because the monosyllabic form is blocked by another common word, e.g. *what-s* could be easily confused with *what's*, and thus it must be *whatevs* instead – this may also be why there are not many nouns that take slang *-s*, because the extremely common plural *-s* suffix would block the use of slang *-s*. In the case of words like *tevs*, the clipped form has been extracted from the middle of the word (*tevs* also demonstrates that there may be more than one slang form for a word, e.g. *whatevs*, *tevs*, and *wevs*). *Obvs* is an interesting example, since it ends in a consonant cluster, consisting of the coda of the first syllable and the onset of the following syllable. This may be because the *v* is perceived to be an integral part of the word, but may also be influenced by written English, where an abbreviated form of the word would likely maintain the *v* for clarity.

Slang *-s* could possibly be a form of embellished clipping (i.e. clipping plus suffixation), along the same lines as British *-ers* (e.g. *preggers* < *pregnant*, *starkers* < *stark naked*) (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 1636); however, the fact that some words with slang *-s* do not undergo clipping, such as *for reals* and *laters*, suggests that this is a stand-alone suffixation process that may optionally be accompanied by clipping, rather than a case of clipping accompanied by suffixation.

3.2 Hypocoristic

A review of the Oxford English Dictionary revealed that some of the words included in the slang *-s* data set are in fact derived from an older process of hypocoristic formation, dating back to the 19th century. The OED defines *-s* (suffix²) as a “shortened form of the hypocoristic diminutive suffix *-sy*, added to the same classes of words, as *babs*, *toots*; *ducks*, *moms*”. This *-sy* suffix is a diminutive suffix added to proper names (e.g. *Betsy*, *Patsy*, *Nancy*) and common nouns (e.g. *ducksy*, *petsy*, *popsy*), and is also used with adjectives “expressing a degree of mocking contempt” (e.g. *artsy-fartsy*, *backwoodsy*, *folksy*) and may sometimes be considered a nursery form (e.g. *itsy-bitsy*, *teensy*) similar to words in *-y*. Huddleston & Pullum (2002) share this analysis, stating that *-s* may be used in terms of address (e.g. *pops*) or “playground words” with the diminutive *-ie*

(e.g. *onesies*, *widesies*). This playground suffix may be found on some of the same words as listed in the data set above; for example, *for realsies* and *favesies*.

In this way, the nouns included in Table 1, like *babes* and *homes*, may be separated from the other word classes and categorized under this older *-s* form rather than a new slang *-s* suffix. However, it is possible that the two suffixes interact with one another, and that the hypocoristic/diminutive form is the origination of slang *-s*, or that the rise in popularity of slang *-s* has renewed the use of the older *-s* form. More detailed analysis is necessary to determine exactly how the two suffixes are related.

3.3 Adverb *-s*

The OED includes another *-s* (suffix¹) which is used in adverb formation and accounts for the alternations between null and *-s* in words like *anyway(s)* and *backward(s)*. It was originally a genitive suffix for Old English nouns and was used as an adverb-marker in Middle English. Although many slang *-s* words are adverbs, it is unlikely that the new suffix is derived from this older adverb-marking one, given their different functions (grammatical changing versus register changing) and the fact that slang *-s* can apply to many other word classes as well.

3.4 Additional morphological processes

Another word-formation process, *Mc*-reduplication, can be found to accompany slang *-s*. *Mc-* can be used as a prefix for forming (often pejorative) names, such as “Crazy McLegs”, for a person with notable legs; alternatively “McGee” may be used to the same effect (e.g. “Legs McGee”). With slang *-s*, *McG-* is used as a prefix for rhyming reduplication to add an element of playfulness or emphasis, creating forms like *totes McGotes* (alternatively spelled *magotes*), featured in the film *I Love You, Man* (2009), and *brutes magutes*.

The suffix *-ski*, borrowed from Slavic languages, applies to the same classes of words as slang *-s*, leading to diminutive forms like *brewski* (< brew, = beer), and adverbs like *toteski* and *whatevski*. This suffix, like slang *-s*, does not have a specific meaning but rather changes the register to a more casual or playful one. In addition, *-ski* may then be followed by slang *-s* to create words like *toteskies* and *whatevskies*.

4 History and productivity

4.1 Time frame

Many words that take slang *-s* have only recently been used as slang. For example, in the Partridge Dictionary of Slang (2008), *fave* is only dated to 1921 (US usage), *for real* to 1952 (US), *later* to 1954 (US), *no prob* to 1971 (Australia), *perf* to 1979 (Australia), *totally* to 1982 (US), and *whatever* to 1989 (US). *Laters* and *lates* are listed with no date under the definition for *later*, but must be at least more recent than *later's* date of 1954.

In Urban Dictionary, which has been online since 1999, most of the words with slang *-s* have been added between 2003 and 2005. This suggests that, although these words were almost certainly being used before these dates, they may have been increasing in frequency and becoming more accepted among a larger population in the early- to mid- 2000s.

A search of the Corpus of Contemporary American English (2008) revealed two print sources of slang *-s*: *whatevs* in a passage of dialogue in a young-adult fiction novel from 2006 (*Dial L for Loser*, Lisi Harrison), and *laters* in a short story in a 2008 issue of Asian-American magazine *Hyphen*. The British National Corpus (2001) has one undated recording of London teenagers using *laters* (13 conversations recorded by “Terry” (PS5A1)). There is also a recently published book titled *The Will to Whatevs* (Eugene Mirman, 2009). This scarcity of print sources confirms that slang *-s* is not yet well-established in mainstream media.

4.2 Usage distribution

According to self-reported data collected from native speakers, slang *-s* is available in at least some Canadian, American, and British dialects of English. It can be heard spoken in North American and British films and television, but is more readily found in online text. The Partridge Dictionary gives Australian origins to several clipped slang words, but not the forms in *-s*, so the suffix's presence in Australian English could not be confirmed.

Although present in spoken English, slang *-s* seems to be even more prevalent in written language, particularly in casual online writing and texting. The *-s* is occasionally spelled with <z> in some instances (e.g. *for realz* or *whatevz*), possibly in association with hip-hop culture where <z> is a common alternative to <s>, as seen in, for example, the film title *Boyz n the Hood* (1991).

4.3 Productivity

As seen in Table 1, slang *-s* can attach to a wide variety of word classes, including adjectives, pronouns, interjections, nouns (hypocoristic slang), and even verbs (e.g. the participle *joking* in *I'm joking*). The suffix seems least commonly attached to nouns, perhaps, as mentioned in Section 2, because of blocking from the plural *-s* suffix. It may be attached to a monosyllabic word, often in clipped form, or a bisyllabic one; the data are insufficiently complete to confirm the productivity for longer words. Except in the case of *noes* and *okays*, *-s* always attaches to a closed syllable. It is possible that these two words are part of a separate suffixation process, since they seem to be more like nursery or playground words, with the suffix *-ies*, rather than like the rest of the words in the data set.

Slang *-s*, when combined with clipping, could potentially be used for convenience, since the resultant words are shorter than the non-slang forms. However, there is sometimes a sacrifice in ease of articulation, for example in the word *obvs*, which has a cluster of three consonants with different places of articulation, which is rather difficult to say. This may be a case of writing influencing spoken word.

As a final note, many of the adjectives with slang *-s* are used as a verb complement rather than a noun modifier, as in “these cookies are fabs” rather than “these are fabs cookies”, although *faves* functions equally well as both.

5 Conclusion

This paper has explored the suffix *-s* as used to create informal slang words for colloquial speech. It is a recent development, dating no earlier than the mid- to late twentieth century, and gaining in popularity and use in the past decade. Slang *-s* is often accompanied by a clipping process, and is related or similar to other suffixation processes in English, such as diminutive *-sy* and playground *-ies*. It is productive for many word classes, including adverbs, adjectives and interjections, and is sometimes used in conjunction with *Mc*-reduplication and the suffix *-ski*.

Popular slang can quickly fall out of use, and given that slang *-s* has had a relatively short lifespan in which to establish a permanent place in the language, this suffix may eventually fade as a passing trend. However, slang words derived from clipping, to which slang *-s* is closely tied, appear to be fairly stable in the language, so perhaps slang *-s* too will become a standard component of the English word-formation repertoire.

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