

A morphosyntactic and morphosemantic analysis of English slang suffixoids

ELISA MATTIELLO

ABSTRACT

This study investigates English slang suffixoids (Sfxds) such as *-ass* (in *fat-ass*), *-brain* (in *birdbrain*), *-face* (in *shitface*), and *-head* (in *airhead*) from the morphosyntactic and morphosemantic viewpoints. Hitherto, the productivity of these morphological elements and their transitional character, borderline between compounding and derivation, have been amply demonstrated. In this study, the focus is on the two privileged morphosyntactic patterns creating denominal and deadjectival nouns – i.e. $[[X]_N [Sfxd]_N]_N$ and $[[X]_A [Sfxd]_N]_N$ – and on their literal or figurative interpretation. A qualitative analysis of a dataset drawn from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA) and *Green's Dictionary of Slang* shows the general metonymic nature of suffixoids, referring to individuals, hence conveying the seme [HUMAN] by making reference to one of their body parts with a negative [PEJORATIVE] intent. By adopting a construction morphology approach, the analysis aims at finding out regular schemas for the scrutiny and understanding of English nouns displaying a slang suffixoid, as well as for the prediction of new words.

KEYWORDS: English slang, morphosyntactic patterns, schemas, suffixoids, Construction Morphology.

1. Introduction

Suffixoids are morphological elements which are productively used in English slang to coin an array of (mainly offensive) nouns referring to negative characteristics (e.g. unintelligence, stubbornness, cowardice, laziness, overweight, etc.; Mattiello, 2023)¹. From the morphological viewpoint, suffixoids are part of transitional morphology

¹ For a morphopragmatic analysis of English slang suffixoids, especially in contexts of offensiveness and impoliteness, see MATTIELLO (2023).

(Mattiello, 2022), in that they straddle the borderline between derivation and compounding. Like affixes, they are bound morphemes appended to bases, both simplex (e.g. *bird* + *-brain*) and complex (e.g. *skinny* + *-ass*), yet, like compound constituents, they correspond to autonomous words. From the semantic viewpoint, slang suffixoids are body parts metonymically used to indicate the whole individual. For instance, *birdbrain* is an epithet for ‘a stupid person’ and *skinny-ass* refers to ‘a thin individual’, both activating a metonymic (a part of the whole that is signified) interpretation of the suffixoid (*-brain* or *-ass*), but a figurative vs. literal reading of the base: while *bird* metaphorically alludes to the small size of a person’s brain, and hence to their little intelligence, *skinny* literally refers to the quality of having no fat in a person’s ass, and hence in their body. These two instances also illustrate the two prevalent morphosyntactic patterns of slang nouns displaying a suffixoid (henceforth, Sfxd), namely, denominal nouns $[[X]_N [Sfxd]_N]_N$ and deadjectival nouns $[[X]_A [Sfxd]_N]_N$.

This paper provides a morphosyntactic and morphosemantic analysis of slang Sfxds with the aim to detect recurrent schemas (a) for the interpretation of complex nouns deriving from them, and (b) for the prediction of new words. Slang is either the restricted speech of marginal subgroups or a very unconventional vocabulary characterized by informality, vulgarity, and often offensiveness (Mattiello, 2008). The focus in this study is on four Sfxds (i.e. *-ass*, *-brain*, *-face*, *-head*) which are often used in English slang to form complex words referring to specific groups, such as fools or ineffectual people, mostly with an offensive, derisive or humorous intent (Mattiello, 2023).

The paper adopts a Construction Morphology approach (Booij, 2009; 2010; Booij and Hünig, 2014) to investigate the morphosemantic development of schemas through the shades of meaning of the Sfxds in context. The paradigmatic relationship between sets of complex words sharing the same Sfxd (e.g. *-ass*) gives rise to a schema of the following form in the mind of the speaker of English:

- (1) $\langle [[X]_{N/A} [ass]_N]_N \leftrightarrow [\text{one who is negatively characterized by/relating to SEM}_1] \rangle$

This kind of notation is used in Jackendoff (2002) and Booij (2009; 2010). The double arrow symbolizes the relationship between a particular form and a particular meaning. The variable *x* stands for the major lexical categories, reduced to noun (N) and adjective (A) for suffixoids. The variable *i* stands for the lexical indexes on the phonological, syntactic, and semantic (SEM) properties of words. In the schema in (1), *-ass* represents a morpheme that conveys the seme [HUMAN] (Bauer, 2022; Sánchez Fajardo, 2022; Mattiello, 2023) and which is generally linked to the evaluative construction of contempt through the seme [PEJORATIVE] (henceforth *-ass_{hum/pej}*).

The qualitative analysis of a dataset drawn from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA; Davies, 2008), supported by an exploration of the possible meanings of the slang Sfxds in *Green's Dictionary of Slang* (Green, 2023), is expected to confirm the productivity of these morphological elements in terms of their profitability in the formation of sets of words which can be accommodated in regular paradigms or schemas. The process which intervenes in the production of words displaying a Sfxd is analogical, based on morphosyntactic and morphosemantic similarities between series of complex words sharing the same schema (Mattiello, 2017). Through paradigmatic substitution, for instance, we construct a series of complex words following the schema in (2):

- (2) *big-ass* 'a superior individual'
candy-ass 'a weak, oversensitive individual'
crazy-ass 'a crazy individual'
dumb-ass 'a stupid individual'
hard-ass 'a tough individual'
fat-ass 'a very fat individual'
sorry-ass 'a pathetic individual'

From the complex words in (2), different paradigms emerge depending on the interpretation of the base, either literal (*crazy*, *fat*) or figurative (*big*, *candy*) (see Section 5.1)².

² See the slang meaning of *candy*, namely 'of a person, soft, weak, effeminate' (GDS).

Findings are expected to show that $-ass_{hum/pej}$, $-brain_{hum/pej}$, $-face_{hum/pej}$, and $-head_{hum/pej}$ schemas are productive (cf. $-head_{loc}$ in Sánchez Fajardo and Mattiello, 2024)³ and elicit various argumentative frames that originate from both the semantics of the base and the secreted (negative) meaning of the Sfxds. This implies that meanings go from offensive (*fat-brain*, *shitass*) to critical (*big-ass*, *thickhead*), from derisive (*moon-face*, *yellowface*) to even humorous (*egghead*, *pie-face*). The base to which the Sfxds are added also contributes to the semantics of the overall expression, whereby vulgar or offensive bases already activate negative meanings (e.g. *dickhead*, *shithead*). On other occasions, negative meanings emerge from the metaphorical meaning of the overall word (as in *airhead* meaning that there is nothing but *air* in one's *head*).

The paper is organized as follows. After this introductory section, Section 2 illustrates the theoretical framework of Construction Morphology and shows its relevance to the morphological category of affixoids. Section 3 clarifies the distinction between affixoid, combining form, and compound constituent, and classifies Sfxds as instances of transitional morphology. Section 4 explains the methodology used for data selection and presents the morphological means under investigation. The corpus-assisted analysis conducted in Section 5 is primarily qualitative and aims at (a) investigating the different schemas developing from the slang Sfxds under scrutiny, and (b) demonstrating their profitability in the formation of word series. A general discussion and some conclusive remarks are made in the final section.

2. Construction Morphology

The theory of Construction Morphology (henceforth, CxM) has been elaborated by Geert Booij in successive steps (Booij, 2009; 2010; 2015; 2019) with the primary goal of better understanding the rela-

³ In this study, the focus is neither on the standard meaning of *head* as ‘the head or end of a specified thing’ (e.g. *spearhead*), nor on its slang meaning as ‘an addict of a given drug or substance’ (e.g. *dopehead*), but only on its pejorative sense of ‘a fool or despicable individual’.

tion between syntax, morphology, and the lexicon, and the semantic properties of complex words. Within CxM, both individual complex words and abstract schemas are part of the lexicon, whose organization is hierarchical, with layers of generalizations and subgeneralizations.

In order to analyze complex words and reconstruct their schemas, Booij (2010) resorts to the traditional notion of ‘construction’ coming from Construction Grammar (Goldberg, 1995; 2006) and referring to a syntactic pattern in which particular formal properties correlate with specific semantics (e.g. the syntactic form of passive constructions correlates with passive meaning). In Booij’s (2009; 2010) work, a construction is defined as a pairing of form and meaning. Hence, it is relevant not only to syntactic constructs, but also to the word structure of complex words, which are instantiations of constructional schemas.

According to CxM principles, paradigmatic relations between sets of complex words can be expressed which are generalizable as schemas with a systematic correlation between form and meaning, as in:

$$(3) \quad <[[x]_V [er]]_N \leftrightarrow [one\ who\ vs]>$$

instantiated by the set of complex words *reader* ‘one who reads’, *writer* ‘one who writes’, *worker* ‘one who works’, etc. The idea that word-formation patterns can be seen as abstractions across sets of related words is rooted in the tradition of German linguistics, from Paul’s (1880) *Prinzipien der Sprachgeschichte* onwards, based on the assumption that language learners first learn individual concrete words, then gradually abstract away from these words to form schemas, and finally re-use the same abstract schemas to coin new words⁴.

The agentive schema expresses a generalization about the form and meaning of existing deverbal nouns in *-er* listed in the English lexicon, i.e. a case of derivation, and also functions as the starting point for coining new English agent nouns in *-er*. The present study adopts the

⁴ See PAUL (1880) and its translation by Strong (PAUL, 1891: 98-99): «In the process of naturally mastering one’s mother-tongue no rule, as such, is given, but only a number of examples. [...] and it thus comes about that the rule is unconsciously abstracted from the examples. [...] As soon as a rule learned by rote has been frequently enough applied, the time has arrived when it can begin to operate automatically».

CxM perspective to investigate another morphological phenomenon – Sfxds – in order to show how constructional schemas can be used to express (sub)generalizations about sets of complex words displaying affixoids and how such schemas generate word series. The Sfxd *-head* has been already investigated from the perspective of CxM by Sánchez Fajardo (2022: 163-174), who describes *-head* as a combining form (see Section 3 for the distinction between affixoid and combining form) with a metonymic origin and a pejorative meaning.

The next section specifies how affixoids depart from both combining forms and compound constituents and how they are treated within CxM.

3. *Terminological distinctions: Affixoid vs. combining form and compound constituent*

Before we move on to the data and methods, a preliminary distinction between ‘affixoid’, ‘combining form’, and ‘compound constituent’ is in order. The term ‘affixoid’ is used within CxM by Booij and Hüning (2014), who note how the German adjective *frei* “free”, like its English counterpart *free*, has developed the more general meaning ‘without what is denoted by the base word’ when used as the right constituent of compounds, as in German *alcohol-frei* “without alcohol” or English *sugar-free* and *fat-free*. Moreover, unlike the English suffix *-less* having the same denotative meaning in *sugar-less* and *fat-less*, the affixoid *-free* also presupposes a slightly negative evaluation (e.g. that the presence of sugar or fat is not good for one’s health), or positive, if we consider the fact that *-free* words do not contain such unhealthy substances. Therefore, affixoids exist alongside formally identical and usually free ‘parent’ morphs; yet, they acquire a more generalized meaning (Stevens, 2005: 73) or ‘desemanticization’ (Amiot and Dugas, 2021; cf. semantic bleaching)⁵, as illustrated by *-free* ‘clear of something which or someone

⁵ MATISOFF (1991: 384) describes ‘bleaching’ as «the partial effacement of a morpheme’s semantic features, the stripping away of some of its precise content so it can be used in an abstracter, grammatical-hardware-like way».

who is regarded as problematic' in *trouble-free*, *pollution-free*, *risk-free*, etc. Moreover, Amiot and Dugas (2021) specify that affixoids are productive, i.e. are part of schematic constructions with high type frequency (e.g. $[[X]_N [free]_A]_A$), and are bound to their bases (e.g. in *sugar-free*, the Sfxd and the base cannot be split up as **sugar very free*).

A comparable example is reported by Jespersen (1942: 457-458), who lists *-proof* among suffixes corresponding to a free parent morph, like Sfxds. Originating from the homonymous adjective, *-proof* has become more specifically used to form words meaning 'impenetrable by the thing denoted by the first component' (e.g. *rain-proof*, *sound-proof*, *water-proof*). These examples reflect the idea that affixoids such as *-free* or *-proof* have acquired a more abstract meaning than their lexemic counterparts, and that they can be used productively with this meaning.

A very recent similar example is *-exit* (in *Brexit*, after *Grexit*), which is becoming productively used with the meaning 'withdrawal (of a country) from the European Union', as in *Frexit*, *Italexit*, *Spexit*, etc., although in this case the base is clipped (e.g. *Brexit* ← *Br(itish)* + *exit*) and the use and frequency are more limited than of Sfxds. According to the above analysis, *-exit* can be regarded as a Sfxd because it is more generalized and abstract than the formally identical free morph (cf. Mattiello, 2019). In my model (Mattiello, 2022: 34), I classify affixoids as an instance of transitional morphology.

Transitional morphology is that part of morphology that lies at the boundaries of morphological grammar or straddles the demarcation line between two (sub)components. It includes (a) phenomena that are transitional between morphology and other components (i.e. phonology, syntax, lexicon, semantics, pragmatics), (b) phenomena situated at the interface between different subcomponents of morphology (i.e. inflection, derivation, compounding), and (c) borderline phenomena that are non-prototypical representatives of one of the above subcomponents. Therefore, if we focus on the internal boundaries of morphology, affixoids do not constitute a prototypical category of either compounding or derivation but may be considered transitional between these two morphological subcomponents. Like compound

constituents, affixoids correspond to autonomous words; yet, like affixes, they have a bound status, that is, they attach to words (e.g. *sugar* + *free*), and sometimes also to word parts (e.g. *Br(itish)* + *exit*). In this latter aspect, affixoids can be compared to combining forms, although the two morphological categories differ in some respects.

Like affixoids, combining forms are either initial or final bound morphemes. However, unlike pre- and suf-fixoids, combining forms are either allomorphic variants of classical Latin or Greek words (e.g. *bio-* and *-logy* in *biology*), or shortenings of (native or non-native) English words (e.g. *e-* from *electronic* in *e-book*), often with the intervention of a secretion process (e.g. *-aholic* ‘person addicted to’ in *workaholic*) (Warren, 1990)⁶. Thus, while *bio-*, *e-*, *-aholic*, and *-logy* are bound morphemes which do not correspond to formally identical parent morphs, affixoids do correspond to free morphemes (cf. freestanding *free* vs. bound *-free*), like compound constituents.

This leads us to the last differentiation between affixoids and compound constituents. Compound constituents are bases which constitute compounds and may occupy either the right or the left position, as in *birdcage*, which is a ‘cage’ (head) for ‘birds’ (modifier). As Bauer (2017: 1) observes, compounds «are made up of two elements each of which is used elsewhere in the language as a word in its own right». However, unlike affixoids, which correspond to free morphemes but undergo desemanticization, compound constituents do not undergo reinterpretation such as generalization or specification, but acquire meaning depending on the base with which they are combined. Thus, *birdcage* is ‘a cage in which birds are kept’, *birdbath* is ‘a bowl filled with water for birds to drink and bathe in’, *seabird* is ‘a bird that lives near the sea and gets its food from it’, and *songbird* is ‘any of many different types of bird that make musical sounds’. In the former two compounds *bird* acts as modifier, whereas in the latter two compounds it acts as head, while the relationship between the

⁶ According to WARREN (1990: 119), ‘secretion’ is «a process in which certain semantic elements in a linguistic unit are kept and others discarded». Thus, for instance, in *workaholic* ‘a person addicted to working’, the semantic element ‘alcohol’ which is present in the meaning of *alcoholic* is discarded.

compound constituents changes according to the other constituent combined with *bird* (Downing, 1977). By contrast, in *birdbrain* ‘a stupid individual’ and *dog-ass* ‘an objectionable, unpleasant individual’, the bases *bird* and *dog* have to be read metaphorically because they are combined with two Sfxds (*-brain* and *-ass*) with the intention to convey contempt. Other examples illustrating the dissimilarity between compound constituent and affixoid are *axe-head* and *spearhead*, which constitute endocentric compounds whose second constituent means ‘the final part of something’, and *butthead* or *pinhead*, in which the Sfxd *-head* conveys the pejorative meaning of ‘a stupid person’, or even *computerhead* and *pothead*, in which the Sfxd conveys the sense of ‘an excessive enthusiast’ and ‘a drug addict’ respectively. Thus, a key feature of slang Sfxds distinguishing them from compound constituents appears to be their metonymic nature.

To sum up, the semantic relation between the two components of a compound has to be determined for each individual compound on the basis of the meaning of its constituents, whereas the relation between a base and a combining form or a Sfxd can be generalized by means of a schema. Constructional schemas demarcate how Sfxds become morphological representations of semantic values, and more importantly, how an attitudinal value (such as ‘pejoration’) might stem from metonymization. According to Sánchez Fajardo (2022: 164), «Metonymization plays an important role in word-formation, and it clearly demonstrates how cognitive operations are indispensable to the standardization of word-building models». It definitely plays a role in the formation of offensive words displaying a Sfxd.

4. *Data and methodology*

The data analyzed in this study were collected from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA; Davies, 2008). It is the most widely used corpus of American English created by Mark Davies, freely accessible at <https://www.english-corpora.org/>. It contains more than one billion words of text (25 million words each year in the time span 1990-2019) from eight genres: i.e. spoken (SPOK), fiction (FIC),

popular magazines (MAG), newspapers (NEWS), academic texts (ACAD), and (recently updated) television (TV) and movie (MOV) subtitles, blogs (BLOG), and other web pages (WEB)⁷.

For the selection of relevant data, I used a twofold process: first, I automatically searched for complex words ending in the selected slang Sfxds (**ass*, **brain*, **face*, **head*). The asterisk allowed me to obtain as results all words ending in the selected morphemes. However, sometimes these were word chunks (e.g. *compass* or *embarrass* do not include the Sfxd *-ass*). Hence, a manual selection was then necessary to clean data from irrelevant examples.

The selected data were then searched in the digital edition of *Green's Dictionary of Slang* (henceforth, GDS; Green, 2023) for meaning and relevance. The digital version of GDS is available in updated online form at <https://greensdictofslang.com/>, including advanced search tools and the word's etymologies. In GDS, the Sfxds under investigation were all labelled 'suffixes'.

The lexicographic inspection allowed me to restrict the number of formations to recognized slang nouns. For instance, words such as *busy-ass*, *bony-ass*, *lame-ass*, *long-ass*, *stupid-ass*, *sweet-ass*, or *ugly-ass* attested in COCA but not attested in GDS have been excluded from the analysis. However, they show the productivity of the Sfxds in terms of availability and profitability in the formation of nonce words or even of hapax legomena (once-only attestations in corpora; Bauer, 2001). In addition, *cheap-ass*, *dead-ass*, *fancy-ass*, *fine-ass*, *nasty-ass*, *weak-ass*, and *weird-ass* have been rejected because only attested as slang adjectives⁸. Moreover, *bad-ass* has been excluded because in most contexts (see COCA) its meaning is positive, in spite of its additional attestation in GDS as 'an unpleasant, aggressive person'. By contrast, *sorry-ass* has been included because attested both as a noun and as an adjective, even if the raw frequency in COCA does not distinguish between the two parts-of-speech.

⁷ The abbreviations in brackets will be used for the contextualized examples drawn from COCA to specify the genre.

⁸ SÁNCHEZ FAJARDO (2022: 178) claims that *-ass* in adjectives such as *fancy-ass* «is believed to function as an adverbial intensifier», whereas in nominalizations such as *hard-ass* and *wild-ass* a functional shift might have undergone changing adjectives into nouns.

The selection process gave me 18 *-ass* words, 14 *-brain* words, 21 *-face* words, and 34 *-head* words⁹. Most of the senses associated with these words have to do with foolishness, stupidity, incompetence, or are terms of abuse associated with vulgarity and derogatoriness. For *-head* words, those having meaning related to drug or addiction have been excluded (e.g. *cokehead* ‘a regular cocaine user’, *dopehead* ‘a drug user’, *metalhead* ‘a fan of heavy metal music’, *motorhead* ‘a car or motorcycle enthusiast’) because, although equally metonymic, their use is not primarily connected with offensiveness, but with addiction, obsession, or enthusiasm. In terms of semes, *cokehead* and *dopehead* do not display the seme [PEJORATIVE], but the seme [ADDICTION], while *metalhead* and *motorhead* mainly display [ENTHUSIASM], but do not have negative connotations.

For the qualitative analysis, a close reading of the words in context (mainly spoken discourse or belonging to blog and web genres) was necessary in order to categorize the data into schemas and subschemas.

In all the words selected for the analysis, the Sfxds were metonymic and represented a bound morpheme conveying the seme [HUMAN]. The morphosyntactic and morphosemantic analyses of the series of words resulting from the addition of the slang Sfxds are aimed at identifying the source of the seme [PEJORATIVE], either from the literal or from the figurative meaning of the base, or else from the relation between the base and the Sfxd.

5. *Construction schemas of pejoratives ending in a slang suffixoid*

The findings from a corpus-assisted analysis provided different series of words marked by the slang Sfxds *-ass*, *-brain*, *-face*, and *-head*, which clearly demonstrate their profitability in the formation of not only neologisms, but also nonce words and hapax legomena. Profitability

⁹ Different spellings (hyphenated or solid) are not considered different words in this study, even if COCA gives them as separate entries. Yet, for the qualitative analysis, the most common spelling has been reported in the examples.

shows, first, the ‘realised productivity’ or ‘extent of use’ (Baayen, 1993) of Sfxds and, second, their ‘expanding productivity’, measuring the rate at which this morphological category is expanding and attracting new members. The word series obtained from the automatic search were then allocated into construction schemas of pejoratives which will be explored in detail in Sections 5.1-5.4.

5.1. *Metonymic pejoratives ending in -ass*

The slang Sfxd *-ass* owes its origin from a process of metonymization, by means of which the body part (*ass*) represents an individual, with derogatory connotation. Hence, the complex words exhibiting the Sfxd *-ass* display the seme [HUMAN]. The seme [PEJORATIVE] emerges from the literal or figurative reading of the base.

The first series of such words are deadjectival (4a) and denominal (4b) nouns whose base has to be interpreted literally:

- (4) a. *crazy-ass* ‘an individual who is foolish, out of control’
 dumb-ass ‘a stupid individual’
 fat-ass ‘a very fat individual’
 mean-ass ‘an unpleasant individual’
 skinny-ass ‘a thin individual’
 sorry-ass ‘a pathetic individual (from *sorry* ‘worthless’)’
 b. *lard-ass* ‘an overweight individual’

The deadjectival nouns in (4a) refer to people characterized by the property indicated by the adjective. All the adjectives acting as base indicate indeed negative properties, conferring a [PEJORATIVE] sense on the complex words, as confirmed by the examples (5-7)¹⁰:

- (5) Farici, nope, not a fan, dislike him a lot... He’s a dick it seems for the sake of being a dick; he’s just a *dumbass* on nearly everything... a real hatchet mouth...
 (BLOG, *Do You Want To Watch Devin Faraci Get – Ain’t It Cool News*, 2012)

¹⁰ All contextualized examples are taken from COCA.

- (6) What? Who you think training me? Get your girl in line. Go eat some more tacos, *fat-ass*. Shut the fuck up. (MOV, *First Match*, 2019)
- (7) Did anybody come in here, trying to flip these? *Skinny-ass* popped in this morning, around 11:00. So you lied to us? Right pawnshop, just came with the wrong brother. (TV, *The Shield*, 2004)

All the deadjectival nouns in (4a) are also used as pre-modifiers in noun phrases such as *crazy-ass sister*, *fat-ass bitch*, *skinny-ass motherfucker*, or *sorry-ass losers*, whose collocates confirm the speakers' derogatory intentions¹¹.

Similarly, in the denominal word *lard-ass*, the noun *lard* acting as base is again used literally to convey a derogatory sense, as confirmed by (8):

- (8) And I just need a little help getting a very large man here for tonight's game. How very large? Like those two fat twins on the mini bikes in the Guinness Book of Records? Or that fat fucking *lard-ass* they buried in a piano coffin? – More like the piano one. (TV, *Survivor's Remorse*, 2014)

The second series of deadjectival nouns ending in *-ass* displays a metaphorical base instead:

- (9) a. *candy-ass* 'a coward, a weak, oversensitive individual'
 dead-ass 'a lazy individual, an idler'
 funky-ass 'a general term of abuse, implying bad odours'
 hard-ass 'a tough individual, a thug'
 tight-ass 'a mean person, a skinflint'
- b. *half-ass* 'a stupid, incompetent individual'
 shit-ass 'a contemptible individual'
 pansy-ass 'an effeminate or homosexual man, a coward, a weakling'

The deadjectival nouns in (9a) refer to people whose characteristics are alluded to through an adjective used metaphorically: e.g. weakness

¹¹ In GDS the etymology of these complex nouns is indeed from the respective complex adjectives, by conversion or functional shift.

(*candy*, cf. slang *candy* ‘of a person, soft, weak, effeminate’), idleness (*dead*), contempt (*funky*, cf. slang *funky* ‘smelling very unpleasant’), criminality (*hard*), and stinginess (*tight*). The properties suggested by the adjectives all confer negative connotations from the moral-psychological viewpoint on the complex words, whose [PEJORATIVE] sense is substantiated by the examples (10-14):

- (10) Yet he waffled and basically acted like a giant *candy-ass*... and told you to buy a return ticket.
(WEB, *Should I wait for him to breakup with me? - space resolved*, 2012)
- (11) Ready? I’m gonna do a trick. Are you a *deadass*? I’m gonna ollie...
(MOV, *Skate Kitchen*, 2018)
- (12) There’s a stench from hell. It’s just a lot of *funky-ass*... It’s like gumbo... I’ll-hygiene-ass niggas on this bus. It’s fucking disgusting.
(MOV, *Kevin Hart: Let Me Explain*, 2013)
- (13) What’s going on? You’re acting like we’re being sent to the principal’s office. This guy can be a real *hard-ass*. Just let me do the talking.
(TV, *Arrow*, 2019)
- (14) God, you are so stubborn. – And you’re a *tight-ass*. Well, this is one *tight ass* you will not be seeing anytime soon. Okay.
(TV, *My Dad Says*, 2011)

In the denominal nouns in (9b), pejorative meaning emerges from the figurative interpretation of the nominal base alluding to ineptitude/incompleteness (*half*), contempt (*shit*), and effeminacy/homosexuality (*pansy*). For *pansy-ass*, the negative connotation is provided by both the slang meaning of *pansy* ‘an effeminate and/or homosexual man’ and by its association with cowardice and weakness, as demonstrated by example (15):

- (15) “Fuck you!” he screamed, nearly crying. “I ain’t nobody’s whore, you fucking *pansy-ass*, nigger-loving, federal fucking faggot!”
(FIC, *The Standoff*, 1995)

Other possible figurative interpretations of the base of deadjectival formatives in *-ass* include irony, as in:

- (16) *big-ass* ‘a superior person or one who claims to be so’
smart-ass ‘one who sees themselves as cleverer than they really are’
wiseass ‘one who sees themselves as cleverer than they really are’

The use of the adjectives acting as bases in these words is actually antiphrastic, as the intended meaning is opposite to the stated meaning. The words indeed imply that the referents are not as clever (*smart*, *wise*) as or as important (*big*) as they claim or believe they are¹².

- (17) What the f... Well, come on, you lime-sucking *smart-ass*. How the hell did you do it?
 (TV, *The Boys*, 2019)
- (18) “Say, is it your stiff out there?” “No. Mine is right here.” I point at myself. “Don’t be a *wiseass* with me,” he advises. “The little lady out there – she yours?” “Yes,” I admit reluctantly.
 (FIC, *Farewell, My Love*, 2016)

To sum up, the deadjectival and denominal metonymic pejoratives ending in *-ass* conform to five different meta constructions that can be abstracted as follows:

- (i) $\langle [[x_i]_A [ass]_{N,N}] \leftrightarrow [\text{one who is negatively characterized by being SEM}_i] \rangle$
 e.g. *crazy-ass*, *fat-ass*
- (ii) $\langle [[x_i]_N [ass]_{N,N}] \leftrightarrow [\text{one who is negatively characterized by having SEM}_i \text{ in their body}] \rangle$
 e.g. *lard-ass*
- (iii) $\langle [[x_i]_A [ass]_{N,N}] \leftrightarrow [\text{one who is negatively characterized by the property alluded by SEM}_i] \rangle$
 e.g. *dead-ass*, *hard-ass*
- (iv) $\langle [[x_i]_N [ass]_{N,N}] \leftrightarrow [\text{one who is negatively characterized by the property represented by SEM}_i] \rangle$
 e.g. *half-ass*, *shit-ass*

¹² For *big-ass*, only examples in adjectival use were found in COCA: e.g. «Lemme tell you 'bout brother Tyree Nichols, son, he was a smashmouth runner a few years ago, one strong, determined, *big-ass* mother» (FIC, *Tyree*, 1996).

- (v) $\langle [[x_i]_A [ass]_N]_N \leftrightarrow [\text{one who ostentatiously claims to be } SEM_i] \rangle$
 e.g. *smart-ass*, *wiseass*

The constructions in (i-v) display different degrees of morphosemantic transparency due to the literal or figurative interpretation of their base, and, in the case of figurative interpretation, to the connection between the meaning of the base (SEM_i) and the property of the individual it suggests (alluded or represented by SEM_i). Overall, *-ass* constructions show a predominance of deadjectival nouns.

5.2. Metonymic pejoratives ending in *-brain*

The slang Sfxd *-brain* arises from the same process of metonymization as *-ass*, as the body part (*brain*) represents an individual's mental state, but in this case the derogatory connotation mostly emerges from the overall reading of the complex word. The individual's brain may either be compared to a small animal's brain or to a small object, or even be filled with material other than cerebral tissue.

The first series of complex words ending in *-brain* includes the denominal nouns in (19a) and (19b):

- (19) a. *bird-brain* 'a foolish individual'
 mouse-brain 'a foolish individual'
 b. *bean-brain* 'a foolish individual'
 pea-brain 'a foolish individual'

The [PEJORATIVE] meaning in this case emerges from the small size of the brain of the animals (*bird*, *mouse*) and of the legumes (*bean*, *pea*) compared to an individual's brain, suggesting limited mental capacities. This sense is substantiated by the examples (20-23):

- (20) You are a *bird-brain*! We are electing a president, not an Imam or priest.
 (BLOG, *US intel believes some Benghazi attackers tied to al Qaeda in Iraq*, 2012)
- (21) "There's no way out, you *mouse-brain*," came a rough mew. "Shut up and let us sleep."
 (FIC, *Dawn*, 2005)

- (22) Because I'm a smacker! You see? Not a puller! I am gonna smack him some day. It tickles! Hold still, you big-footed *bean-brain*.
(MOV, *Back to the Jurassic*, 2015)
- (23) I give you the advice, you follow through. Not the other way around, all right, *pea-brain*?
(TV, *Stranger Things*, 2019)

Another series of denominal nouns displays an uncountable noun as base, as in (24):

- (24) *butterbrain* 'a foolish individual'
fatbrain 'a foolish individual'
meatbrain 'a foolish individual'
mush-brain 'a dolt, a mawkishly sentimental person'
shit-brain 'a stupid individual'

The [PEJORATIVE] semantics of these nouns is the result of a different interrelation between the Sfxd and its base. In the nouns in (24), *-brain* is added to bases indicating the substance the brain is made up of, alluding to the individual's weakness (*butter*, *mush*), unpleasantness (*fat*, *meat*), even repulsiveness (*shit*). It is interesting to notice that, while *fat-ass* in (4a) is deadjectival, as the complex noun refers to 'a very fat individual', *fatbrain* is probably denominal, as suggested by the derogatory meaning 'a fool'. Hence, *fatbrain* could metaphorically refer to 'an individual having fat in his brain' or 'having a brain made up of fat'.

The COCA examples (25-27) illustrate the overall negative connotation of the nouns¹³:

- (25) Héloise hadn't meant to be quite so sharp toward her little almost-friend. After all, Atikka was still a *butterbrain*, butterball, butter-heart.
(FIC, *A Green Silk Dress and a Wedding-Death*, 2017)

¹³ For *fatbrain*, examples in COCA only show its use as the name of the organization *FatBrAin. AI for Everyone*, <https://fatbrain.ai/>, whereas in GDS the entry *fatbrain* only records a cross-reference to synonymous *fathead*.

- (26) I just miss being in the heat of the battle and playing on Sundays. But, then again, I'm realistic about it, too. I don't want to be a *mush-brain* drooling down my chin when I'm 40 years old or 50 years old.
(NEWS, *Miller can't get NFL off mind*, 1996)
- (27) I'm done listening, *shit-brain*! Where you been all day? They shut the school? Kindergarten closed? No customers? Huh? Huh?
(MOV, *Hellraiser III: Hell on Earth*, 1992)

The last group of denominal nouns refers to people having a brain which resembles something, as in:

- (28) *bubblebrain* 'a foolish, careless individual'
dickbrain 'a foolish individual'
fuckbrain 'a foolish individual, a simpleton'

A *bubblebrain* is a person with 'a brain full of air', like a 'bubble', while a *dickbrain* and *fuckbrain* refer to a person with a brain comparable to a 'dick' or 'fuck', whose meanings range from 'the male sexual organ' to 'a fool, a simpleton', or even to 'sexual intercourse'. In any case, when the Sfxd is appended to such vulgar nominal bases, the intended function is offensive:

- (29) Larry Levy liked it because he's a *dickbrain*. Levy will sell the idea to Levison. Then I will let Levison have the brilliant idea... of letting Larry take over the project from me.
(MOV, *The Player*, 1992)

Deadjectival *-brain* nouns instead include:

- (30) *lame-brain* 'a foolish individual, a simpleton'
wet-brain 'an alcoholic; a foolish individual'

Here the adjective *lame* indicates someone 'naïve, clumsy, socially inept, incompetent', whereas *wet* metaphorically alludes to the fact that the brain is affected by alcohol, resulting in a non-lucid, foolish mind:

- (31) Come on, girl. Big city guy's going to run off with your girlfriend. Shut up, *lame-brain*! You stretch the wire, you pound in the staple and you go on to the next post. (TV, *Lassie*, 1994)
- (32) Even with that pretend augmentation, she still talked as slowly as a *wet-brain*. (TV, *Swap-Out*, 2002)

To sum up, the denominal and deadjectival metonymic pejoratives ending in *-brain* conform to another series of meta constructions:

- (vi) $\langle [X_i]_N [brain]_N \rangle_N \leftrightarrow$ [one who is negatively characterized as having a brain as small as SEM_i] >
e.g. *bean-brain*, *pea-brain*
- (vii) $\langle [X_i]_N [brain]_N \rangle_N \leftrightarrow$ [one who is negatively characterized as having a brain as small as SEM_i 's brain] >
e.g. *bird-brain*, *mouse-brain*
- (viii) $\langle [X_i]_N [brain]_N \rangle_N \leftrightarrow$ [one who is negatively characterized as having a brain made up of SEM_i] >
e.g. *butter-brain*, *meat-brain*
- (ix) $\langle [X_i]_N [brain]_N \rangle_N \leftrightarrow$ [one who is negatively characterized as having a brain resembling SEM_i] >
e.g. *bubblebrain*, *dickbrain*
- (x) $\langle [X_i]_A [brain]_N \rangle_N \leftrightarrow$ [one who is negatively characterized by the property alluded by SEM_i] >
e.g. *lame-brain*, *wet-brain*

The constructions in (vi-x) range from a high degree of morphosemantic transparency due to the comparison between the individual's brain and the meaning of the base SEM_i to a high degree of morphosemantic opacity when the individual's brain is filled with a substance indicated by the base SEM_i , to the highest opacity when the brain is described by an adjective SEM_i metaphorically alluding to a characteristic such as being alcoholic. The schemas (vi) and (vii) share the 'smallness' semantic feature (of thing or animal) alluding to the individual's limited brain capacities. Overall, *-brain* constructions show a predominance of denominal nouns.

5.3. Metonymic pejoratives ending in *-face*

The slang Sfxd *-face* mainly forms denominal nouns through metonymization: in this case, the pejorative connotation of the resulting complex words emerges from the comparison of an individual's face, metonymically referring to one's physical appearance or mental capacities, with an animal's face, snout or muzzle, or from the combination with a derogatory or vulgar word.

The first series of complex words ending in *-face* is listed in (33):

- (33) *apeface* 'an ugly, thuggish individual'
cow-face 'a general term of abuse'
dogface 'an unpleasant individual; a term of abuse'
fish-face 'a stupid or ugly looking individual'
monkey-face 'a stupid, ugly individual'
pigface 'a general term of abuse'
rat-face 'a contemptible individual'

The [PEJORATIVE] meaning appended to the denominal nouns in (33) develops from the similes 'having a face like an ape, a cow, a dog, a fish, a monkey, etc.', metaphorically associated to ugliness, stupidity, unpleasantness, awfulness, and used to show an attitude of contempt in:

- (34) You're a fucking *dogface*. How can you not get that?
 (TV, *Comedy Central Roast of Bob Saget*, 2008)
- (35) This could be a little secret between her and Stills, an opportunity to bond with *fish-face*, like buddies.
 (FIC, *The Quantum Magician Part II*, 2018)
- (36) My family was took. But in my heart of hearts, I know that little *rat-face* took 'em somehow.
 (TV, *NOS4A2*, 2019)

Similarly, the denominal nouns in (37a-b) are derogatory terms of address or refer to unpleasant people:

- (37) a. *arseface* 'derog. term of address'
assface 'an unpleasant, stupid individual'

- buttface* ‘a general term of contempt with the implication of unattractiveness’
cuntface ‘a term of address to an unattractive person; a general derog. term’
dick-face ‘a general term of derision’
fuckface ‘a fool, an idiot, a generally contemptible individual’
 b. *puke-face* ‘a term of abuse’
shitface ‘an unpleasant, distasteful person; also directly as term of abuse’

The four-letter words¹⁴ which function as bases convey a [PEJORATIVE] meaning *per se*, suggesting that an individual’s face resembles a sexual organ (37a) or a disgusting substance, such as vomit or excrement (37b).

Another small group of denominal words has a word denoting a material as their base:

- (38) *leatherface* ‘an individual with an emotionless face’
stoneface ‘a totally unemotional individual’

The bases *stone* and *leather* metaphorically suggest stillness, impassivity, and lack of emotion, as supported by the examples in:

- (39) But I will have my revenge in this lifetime or the next. I experience road rage, walk in a slow pace. Killed a handicapped man for parking in a regular parking place. Learned my art with a *leatherface*, you must be kidding.
 (WEB, *Chino Xl - That Would Be Me Lyrics*, 2012)
- (40) That’s a surprise from the great *stoneface*. I can see releasing you from Curzon’s oath is not enough.
 (TV, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, 1994)

Denominal nouns having a round object as base (41a) and deadjectival nouns referring to colour or paleness (41b) suggest particular somatic traits:

¹⁴ The word *ass* is the only three-letter base, but it is the American English variant of British English *arse*.

- (41) a. *moon-face* 'an Asian individual'
 pie-face 'an individual with a round face'
 b. *paleface* 'a white individual'
 yellow-face 'a Chinese individual'

The former (41a) are metaphorical, in that they associate face to moon or a pie for their roundness, while the latter are metonymic, in that skin colours such as yellow or white (*pale*) stand for the corresponding races of humankind (e.g. Asian people, European people, etc.), as in:

- (42) Then from the corner of the yard a little boy chanted: “Chinky
chinky Chinaman! *Yellow-face*, pigtail rat-eater!”
(FIC, *Cloud Mountain*, 1997)

The denominal and deadjectival metonymic pejoratives ending in *-face* thus conform to the following series of meta constructions:

- (xi) $\langle [[x]_N [face]_N]_N \leftrightarrow [one \text{ who is negatively characterized as having a face resembling a } SEM_i \text{ 's face}] \rangle$
e.g. *dogface*, *pigface*
- (xii) $\langle [[x]_N [face]_N]_N \leftrightarrow [one \text{ who is negatively characterized as having a face resembling a } SEM_i] \rangle$
e.g. *assface*, *dick-face*
- (xiii) $\langle [[x]_N [face]_N]_N \leftrightarrow [one \text{ who is negatively characterized as having a face made up of } SEM_i] \rangle$
e.g. *puke-face*, *shitface*
- (xiv) $\langle [[x]_N [face]_N]_N \leftrightarrow [one \text{ who is negatively characterized as having a face as round as } SEM_i] \rangle$
e.g. *moon-face*, *pie-face*
- (xv) $\langle [[x]_A [face]_N]_N \leftrightarrow [one \text{ who is negatively characterized as having a } SEM_i \text{ face}] \rangle$
e.g. *paleface*, *yellow-face*

Like (i-x), the constructions in (xi-xv) display different degrees of morphosemantic transparency due to the figurative reading of the base SEM, either metaphorical or metonymic, or to the association with despicable animals or vulgar organs. From the viewpoint

of syntactic schemas, like *-brain* schemas, *-face* constructions show a prevalence of denominal nouns.

5.4. *Metonymic pejoratives ending in -head*

The Sfxd *-head* is considered a pejorative formative by Sánchez Fajardo (2022: 165) «on account of [its] metonymic and synecdochic etymology». Hence, the metonymization process intervening in the shift from compound constituent *head* to Sfxd *-head* has been already ascertained (see Sánchez Fajardo, 2022; transitional morphology in Mattiello, 2022). However, while Sánchez Fajardo (2022) distinguishes among the three morphosemantic interpretations of *-head* – i.e. ‘the end of an object’ (e.g. *spearhead*), ‘an addict of a given drug’ (e.g. *crack-head*), and ‘an attitude of contempt towards a person’ (e.g. *airhead*) – the focus of my analysis is on the latter reading. Denominal nouns are far more numerous than deadjectival nouns ending in *-head*, but the schemas vary depending on the base.

The first series of formatives ending in *-head* includes words whose base figuratively indicates the shape of an individual’s head (43):

- (43) *beanhead* ‘a foolish individual’
egg-head ‘a foolish individual; a bald individual’
lemonhead ‘a foolish individual’
melon-head ‘a foolish individual; a bald individual’
pinhead ‘a stupid individual’
potatohead ‘a foolish individual, a simpleton’

The [PEJORATIVE] meaning of these formatives stems from the shape of the object metaphorically describing an individual’s head, either very small (*beanhead*, *pinhead*), or rounded (*lemonhead*, *potatohead*)¹⁵, but always suggesting foolishness, as in examples (44-46):

- (44) Do you think you’re gonna stop me from calling this in, you *beanhead*?
 What do you call me? What do you call me, bastard?
 (MOV, *Streets of East L.A.*, 2016)

¹⁵ In COCA, *Mr. Potatohead* is also attested as the name of a *Toy Story*’s character.

- (45) Hey, chump! Yeah, you, *potatohead*. You know who I'm talking about.
Is that your best? If it is, grab the free T-shirt and go.
(MOV, *White Men Can't Jump*, 1992)
- (46) For an exceptionally high quotient of interesting ideas to words, this is
hard to beat... What a feast of *egg-head* opinionating!
(WEB, *The World Question Center* 2009, 2012)

It is interesting to notice that, in the case of *egg-head* and *melon-head*, the implied meaning is not only related to stupidity, but also to baldness. This reading facilitates the association and increases the transparency of the complex words.

Another series of denominal nouns displays a vulgar noun, esp. a four-letter word, as base, as in (47):

- (47) *asshead* 'a foolish individual, an idiot'
butt-head 'a stupid or obnoxious individual'
dickhead 'a foolish individual, an incompetent'
fuckhead 'a foolish individual, a complete idiot'

The offensiveness of these formatives arises from the derogatory bases, to which the Sfxd appends a [PEJORATIVE] connotation, as shown by these contextualized examples:

- (48) Miley, despite acting deeply resentful and assy ever since she arrived, is annoyed nobody believes in her even though she did shoplift in New York and has been a complete *asshead* this whole time.
(WEB, *Fug the Fromage: The Last Song - Go Fug Yourself: Because Fugly*, 2012)
- (49) So far Christian is a *dickhead*, did anyone else notice this? He keeps making demands of her.
(MOV, *Life is Not a Movie*, 2012)

Reference to sexual organs negatively connotes an individual's head and brain capacities, limited to body parts that are not typically connected with intellect or cleverness.

Sometimes negative connotation comes from the association of an individual's head with an unusual substance filling it or composing it:

- (50) *airhead* 'an idiot, a foolish individual'
bonehead 'a foolish individual, a dullard, an idiot'
butterhead 'a foolish individual, an idiot'
cheesehead 'a foolish individual, an idiot'
fathead 'a foolish individual, an idiot'
ironhead 'a foolish individual, an idiot'
lardhead 'a stupid individual, a fool'
leatherhead 'a foolish individual, an idiot'
marblehead 'a foolish individual, an incompetent'
meathead 'a stupid individual'
shithead 'a derog. term of general abuse'

The material associated with the head ranges from suggesting hardness (*bone, iron, leather, marble*) to inconsistency (*air*), from limpness (*butter, cheese, fat, lard, meat*) to even disgust (*shit*). The effect produced by the association is, as a consequence, criticism for an individual's stubbornness, stupidity, or incapacity, in the case of *shit* even of their worthlessness.

- (51) So why is Creepy Lady helping us? – I don't know. – Maybe she likes us? – Well, I am pretty irresistible. – Get a move on, *airhead*. – I think she's resisting you.
 (TV, *Nowhere Boys*, 2013)
- (52) They need to tend to the general population which means putting some awful songs on the list. Anyone who takes this seriously and gets mad is a *bonehead* even though the list is clearly wrong.
 (WEB, *VH1's 100 Greatest Songs of the 90's*, 2012)
- (53) You're still a little shrimp. Stop calling me names, you *cheesehead*. Okay, that's enough, you two.
 (TV, *Full House*, 1991)
- (54) "Hey, *lardhead*," Pratt yells to Jenny. He likes her a lot. Jenny turns around and frowns at Pratt. "Drop dead, Horton!" She likes Pratt.
 (FIC, *The Cannibals of Sunset Drive*, 1993)

The offensive trait of all these complex words comes especially from the metaphorical reading of an individual having nothing but ‘air’, or ‘cheese’, or ‘lard’ in one’s head, in the place of their brains.

Less transparent associations are found in the list of complex words in (55):

- (55) *bullet-head* ‘a foolish individual, a dullard’
hammerhead ‘anyone stupid and obstinate’
knothead ‘a foolish individual’
knucklehead ‘any foolish, stupid, slow individual’

All these denominal nouns suggest an individual’s hardness and obstinacy by means of hard objects, as *knot* in (56)¹⁶:

- (56) Maybe this *knothead* needs to hold a town hall meeting and invite some of those who hold actual government jobs and work 40 hours a week unlike himself.
 (BLOG, *GOP Rep: Gov’t. workers need to ‘find a real job’*, 2012)

Other denominal nouns have to be read metaphorically:

- (57) *bubblehead* ‘a foolish, careless individual, with a brain full of air’
buckethead ‘a foolish individual, a simpleton’

These imply that the individuals referred to have their head full of liquid (*bucket*) or air (*bubble*). The examples in (58), instead, compare an individual’s head with the head of a typically stupid animal, such as a ‘chicken’ or a ‘sheep’:

- (58) *chickenhead* ‘a foolish individual’
sheepshead ‘a foolish individual, esp. a talkative one’¹⁷

¹⁶ GDS indicates that *knot* refers in this case to ‘an imperfection in a piece of wood’, which is generally harder than the surrounding wood. Hence, the word *knothead* is also used for ‘a mule or stubborn animal’.

¹⁷ In the case of *sheepshead*, the etymology of the word is probably from the noun phrase *a sheep’s head*, hence the complex word includes the residual Saxon genitive *-s-*. The meaning of ‘a foolish individual, esp. a talkative one’ comes from the perceived stupidity of sheep, reinforced by the saying ‘like a *sheep’s head*, all jaw’ referring to a talkative man or woman (GDS).

Deadjectival nouns are either literal (59a) or metaphorical (59b):

- (59) a. *dumbhead* ‘a foolish individual’
 stupidhead ‘a foolish individual’
 b. *flathead* ‘a foolish, stupid individual’
 hardhead ‘a foolish individual’
 wethead ‘a simpleton, an innocent, a novice’

The nouns in (59a) are only metonymic, as they refer to an individual who is ‘dumb’ or ‘stupid’, while the nouns in (59b) are metaphorical, in that the adjectives *flat*, *hard*, or *wet* suggest obtuseness, stupidity, hard of understanding, or weakness, as illustrated by the examples in (60)–(61).

- (60) Mindy: You almost hit me with the ball, you dumb *dumbhead*. Mike:
 Okay. Round two, coming up. (MOV, *Mascots*, 2016)
- (61) “Why didn’t you trust me enough to tell me the truth?” “Because you’re
 a *hardhead*. Because you would have stayed in Sheridan for no purpose
 and ended up in a joint like Huntsville Pen”.
 (FIC, *Going across Jordan*, 2013)

To sum up, the denominal and deadjectival metonymic pejoratives ending in *-head* conform to several different meta constructions as follows:

- (xvi) $\langle [[X_i]_N [\text{head}]_N]_N \leftrightarrow [\text{one who is negatively characterized as having a head in the size of a SEM}_i] \rangle$
 e.g. *beanhead*
- (xvii) $\langle [[X_i]_N [\text{head}]_N]_N \leftrightarrow [\text{one who is negatively characterized as having a head in the shape of a SEM}_i] \rangle$
 e.g. *potatohead*
- (xviii) $\langle [[X_i]_N [\text{head}]_N]_N \leftrightarrow [\text{one who is negatively characterized as having a head resembling a SEM}_i] \rangle$
 e.g. *butt-head*, *dickhead*
- (xix) $\langle [[X_i]_N [\text{head}]_N]_N \leftrightarrow [\text{one who is negatively characterized as having a head filled with SEM}_i] \rangle$
 e.g. *airhead*, *cheesehead*

- (xx) $\langle [[x_i]_N [\text{head}]_N]_N \leftrightarrow [\text{one who is negatively characterized as having a head as hard as a SEM}_i] \rangle$
 e.g. *hammerhead*, *knothead*
- (xxi) $\langle [[x_i]_N [\text{head}]_N]_N \leftrightarrow [\text{one who is negatively characterized as having a head resembling a SEM}_i \text{'s head}] \rangle$
 e.g. *chickenhead*, *sheephead*
- (xxii) $\langle [[x_i]_A [\text{head}]_N]_N \leftrightarrow [\text{one who is negatively characterized by the property SEM}_i] \rangle$
 e.g. *dumbhead*, *stupidhead*
- (xxiii) $\langle [[x_i]_A [\text{head}]_N]_N \leftrightarrow [\text{one who is negatively characterized by a property alluded by SEM}_i] \rangle$
 e.g. *flathead*, *hardhead*

The constructions in (xvi)-(xxiii) are morphosemantically more or less transparent depending on the literal or metaphorical reading of the base SEM_i. The semantic trait of 'smallness' of *-head* words (e.g. *bean-head*) is shared with some *-brain* words (e.g. *bean-brain*, *pea-brain*), and the trait of 'vulgarity' is shared with other *-brain* words (e.g. *dick-brain* and *dickhead*). Sometimes the two-word series also allude to stupidity through soft food (e.g. *butter-brain*, *cheesehead*) or through the fact that there is air in one's brain/head (e.g. *bubblebrain*, *airhead*, *bubblehead*). Thus, the two Sfxds *-brain* and *-head* are very close to one another as they both metonymically refer to the individual's mental capacities. The vulgarity of most bases of *-head* also contributes to the derogatory connotation of the derived words. The denominal syntactic schema once again prevails over the deadjectival schema.

6. Conclusions

The productivity of the slang Sfxds *-ass*, *-brain*, *-face*, and *-head* is undeniable, as shown by the large amount of formatives created by their addition to various bases. Moreover, this study has demonstrated that the series of complex words formed by a Sfxd conform to specific schemas whose metonymization mechanism [HUMAN] and negative trait [PEJORATIVE] represent two constants. Pejoratives ending in *-ass_{hum}*, *-brain_{hum}*, *-face_{hum}*, and *-head_{hum}* refer to individuals who are

foolish, stupid, stubborn or weak, or are generally used as derogatory epithets for the purpose of offence.

Given the generalization and level of abstraction of the Sfxds investigated and their compliance with precise schemas, *-ass*, *-brain*, *-face*, and *-head* are closer to affixes than to compound constituents. Even if their correspondence to free morphemes makes them similar to compound constituents, their desemanticization and the secretion process intervening in their use as Sfxds make their nature derivative rather than compositional. Hence, along the continuum of phenomena that are transitional from derivation to compounding, Sfxds lie close to the derivation subcomponent of word-formation.

The morphosyntactic and morphosemantic analysis has shown that the nominal and adjectival base of Sfxds can be literally read, when the individual's characteristic is made explicit (*dumb-ass*, *stupid-head*), or figuratively, when the body part is metaphorically described through objects evoking its shape (*potatohead*), its smallness (*bean-brain*), its hardness (*hard-ass*), its roundness (*moon-face*), etc. At times, the body part is negatively defined as having the same consistency as a substance such as air (*airhead*), butter (*butterhead*), cheese (*cheese-head*), fat (*fatbrain*), iron (*ironhead*), shit (*shitface*), or puke (*puke-face*). The properties alluded by these words are all negative, including weakness, stubbornness, stupidity, disgust, etc.

There are also a series of formatives displaying a four-letter word such as *arse*, *butt*, *cunt*, *dick* or *fuck* as base (e.g. *dickbrain*, *fuckbrain*; *arseface*, *cuntface*, *fuckface*; *butt-head*, *dickhead*, *fuckhead*, etc.). These formatives are inherently negative, as their vulgar and derogatory bases already activate the seme [PEJORATIVE] triggered by the slang Sfxds. However, the negative connotation is not only reiterated but strengthened by the Sfxds. In particular, words ending in a slang Sfxd are more negatively connoted than the vulgar bases they are appended to, as they metonymically refer to people with the intent to offend, insult, denigrate, or attack them.

Still other formatives stress resemblances with animals (*bird-brain*, *mouse-brain*; *apeface*, *cow-face*, *dogface*, *monkey-face*, *pigface*, *rat-face*; *chickenhead*, *sheepshead*) with overall figurative readings alluding to stupidity, unpleasantness, or ugliness.

Some of the meanings connected with the Sfxds investigated, such as the [ADDICTION] trait of *-head* in *crackhead*, *pothead*, and *computerhead*, or the [EXCESSIVE ENTHUSIASM] for something (vehicles, fantasy novels, music styles) characterizing words such as *motorhead*, *Potterhead*, or *jazzhead*, show that the metonymic extension of Sfxds is going in the direction of novel meanings and new schemas expanding their potentiality and reusability. An in-depth study of the additional meanings of *-head* and its evaluative function is currently conducted by Sánchez Fajardo and Mattiello (2024). A parallel investigation of the other three Sfxds including positive evaluation, as in *badass* or *chitty-face*, might be the focus of our future research.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Giovanna Marotta for her careful reading of the manuscript and insightful comments. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers of the paper for their useful suggestions and constructive criticism. Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to the audiences of the Conferences where this topic was presented: their incisive comments and advice were essential for my research.

List of abbreviations

ACAD:	academic texts
BLOG:	blogs
FIC:	fiction
MAG:	popular magazines
MOV:	movie subtitles
NEWS:	newspapers
SPOK:	spoken
TV:	television subtitles
WEB:	web pages

References

- AMIOT, D. and DUGAS, E. (2021), *Combining forms and affixoids in morphology*, in LIEBER, R. (2021, ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Morphology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford [available online at <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780190682361.001.0001/acref-9780190682361-e-569>, accessed on 22.04.2024].
- BAAYEN, H.R. (1993), *On frequency, transparency and productivity*, in BOOIJ, G. and VAN MARLE, J. (1993, eds.), *Yearbook of Morphology 1992*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, pp. 181-208.
- BAUER, L. (2001), *Morphological Productivity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- BAUER, L. (2017), *Compounds and Compounding*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- BAUER, L. (2022), *Interlocking paradigms in English compounds*, in RUZ, A.E., FERNÁNDEZ-ALCAINA, C. and LARA-CLARES, C. (2022, eds.), *Paradigms in Word Formation: Theory and Applications*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam / Philadelphia, pp. 59-68.
- BOOIJ, G.E. (2009), *Word-formation templates and the hierarchical lexicon*, in LIEBER, R. and ŠTEKAUER, P. (2009, eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Compounding*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 201-216.
- BOOIJ, G.E. (2010), *Construction Morphology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- BOOIJ, G.E. (2015), *The nominalization of Dutch particle verbs: Schema unification and second order schemas*, in «Nederlandse Taalkunde», 20, pp. 285-314.
- BOOIJ, G.E. (2019), *The role of schemas in Construction Morphology*, in «Word Structure», 12, pp. 385-395.
- BOOIJ, G.E. and HÜNING, M. (2014), *Affixoids and constructional idioms*, in BOOGAART, R., COLLEMAN, T. and RUTTEN, G. (2014, eds.), *Extending the Scope of Construction-based Grammar*, De Gruyter, Berlin / Boston, pp. 77-106.
- DAVIES, M. (2008-), *Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)*, [available online at <https://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>, accessed on 22.04.2024].

- DOWNING, P. (1977), *On the creation and use of English compound nouns*, in «Language», 53, pp. 810-842.
- GOLDBERG, A. (1995), *Constructions. A Construction Grammar Approach to Argument Structure*, Chicago University Press, Chicago.
- GOLDBERG, A. (2006), *Constructions at Work. The Nature of Generalization in Language*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- GREEN, J. (2023), *Green's Dictionary of Slang (GDS)* [available online at <https://greensdictofslang.com/>, accessed on 22.04.2024].
- JACKENDOFF, R. (2002), *Foundations of Language*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- JESPERSEN, O. (1942), *A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles*, Part VI: *Morphology*, Ejnar Munksgaard, Copenhagen.
- MATISOFF, J. (1991), *Areal and universal dimensions of grammaticalization in Labu*, in TRAUGOTT, E.C. and HEINE, B. (1991, eds.), *Approaches to Grammaticalization*. Vol. II, John Benjamins, Amsterdam / Philadelphia, pp. 383-454.
- MATTIELLO, E. (2008), *An Introduction to English Slang: A Description of its Morphology, Semantics and Sociology*, Polimetrica, Monza.
- MATTIELLO, E. (2017), *Analogy in Word-formation. A Study of English Neologisms and Occasionalisms*, De Gruyter, Berlin / Boston.
- MATTIELLO, E. (2019), 'Brexit, Grexit, with the possibility of Spexit': *Blend splinters and secreted affixes as creative word-formation mechanisms*, in BONSIGNORI, V., CAPPELLI, G. and MATTIELLO, E. (2019, eds.), *Worlds of Words: Complexity, Creativity, and Conventionality in English Language, Literature and Culture*, Pisa University Press, Pisa, pp. 525-538.
- MATTIELLO, E. (2022), *Transitional Morphology: Combining Forms in Modern English*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- MATTIELLO, E. (2023), *Slang and verbal aggression: A morphopragmatic analysis of the compound families X-ass, X-brain, X-face, and X-head*, in «Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict», 11, 1, pp. 101-120.
- PAUL, H. (1880), *Prinzipien der Sprachgeschichte*, Max Niemeyer, Halle.

- PAUL, H. (1891), *Principles of the History of Language* [translated by STRONG, H.A. from the second edition of the original], Longmans, Green and Co., London.
- SÁNCHEZ FAJARDO, J.A. (2022), *Pejorative Suffixes and Combining Forms in English*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam / Philadelphia.
- SÁNCHEZ FAJARDO, J.A. and MATTIELLO, E. (2024), *From spearhead to crackhead: Unraveling the morphosemantic development of -head through a network of constructions*, Paper presented at the Hybrid workshop *Unlocking evaluative morphology: Conceptual and methodological challenges*, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, March 14-15, 2024.
- STEVENS, C.M. (2005), *Revisiting the affixoid debate. On the grammaticalization of the word*, in LEUSCHNER, T., MORTELMANS, T. and DE GROODT, S. (2005, Hrsg.), *Grammatikalisierung im Deutschen*, De Gruyter, Berlin / New York, pp. 71-83.
- WARREN, B. (1990), *The importance of combining forms*, in DRESSLER, W.U., LUSCHÜTZKY, H.C., PFEIFFER, O.E. and RENNISON, J.R. (1990, eds.), *Contemporary Morphology*, De Gruyter, Berlin / New York, pp. 111-132.

ELISA MATTIELLO
Dipartimento di Filologia, Letteratura e Linguistica
Università di Pisa
Via Santa Maria 67
56126 Pisa (Italy)
elisa.mattiello@unipi.it

