

The use of “as” as a post-adjectival intensifier in English

Imogen Davies (Christ's College)

Since when was watching boring as performances from Glastonbury acceptable entertainment?

The phenomenon

1. Adjectives are followed by the word “as”, which intensifies the adjective
2. The word “as” is always pronounced with a full vowel not a schwa
3. For many speakers, “Adjective + as” cannot be used directly before a noun (contrary to the example we’ve just seen)
4. Anecdotally, the construction seems to be most widely used in UK, Australian, and New Zealand Englishes

Where does “Adjective + as” come from?

- ▶ The requirement to have a full vowel in “as” suggests ellipsis is involved
- ▶ Probably starting from the equative comparative construction “X is (as) Adjective as Y”
 - ▶ Moon (2008) find that about 80% of these similes are genuine, where X and Y almost always *are* very adjective
 - ▶ The other 20% are ironic or humorous, often indicated by the word “about” e.g. “(about) as useful as a chocolate teapot”

Where does “Adjective + as” come from?

- ▶ Evidence for ellipsis after “Adjective + as” in other constructions



The image shows a screenshot of two tweets. The first tweet is from HTAFC Opinions (@HtafcO) replying to @Wardell1990, with the text "He's gone, or as good as anyway". The second tweet is from karissi. (@KaRissiNykeia) with the text "The \$3-4 products are just as good as those \$15-20+ products (sometimes better than, tbh).".

HTAFC Opinions
@HtafcO

Replying to @Wardell1990

He's gone, or as good as anyway

karissi.
@KaRissiNykeia

The \$3-4 products are just as good as those \$15-20+ products (sometimes better than, tbh).

- ▶ But is “his performance at Glastonbury was boring as” the same as this?

Definitions for “guilty as” (192/385)

- ▶ guilty as fuck
- ▶ guilty as hell
- ▶ guilty as can possibly be
- ▶ guilty as it gets
- ▶ guilty as sin
- ▶ guilty as charged
- ▶ guilty as a mass murderer
- ▶ “the final word can be a lot of interchangeable expletives”
- ▶ “the word after as is missing so the simile is incomplete”
- ▶ “guilty as [someone/something very guilty]”
- ▶ “guilty as *insert name of somebody convicted beyond reasonable doubt*”

More definitions for “guilty as” (261 / 385)

- ▶ very guilty
- ▶ really guilty
- ▶ certainly guilty
- ▶ 100% guilty
- ▶ prototypically guilty
- ▶ indisputably guilty
- ▶ obviously guilty
- ▶ couldn't be more guilty
- ▶ “a more emphatic way to say someone is guilty”
- ▶ “like a seal caught in a fishmonger”
- ▶ “as acts as an intensifier”

Other post-adjectival degree words in English

- ▶ Almost all English degree words precede adjectives, with a few exceptions:
 - ▶ enough
 - ▶ -ish
 - ▶ -ass
 - ▶ as?
 - ▶ af??

Adj-Deg-N in English?

- ▶ Suffixes like “ish” and “ass” are allowed before nouns
 - ▶ Amy has a big-ish house
 - ▶ Amy has a big-ass house
- ▶ In fact, “-ass” is only allowed before nouns and cannot appear predicatively (Elgersma, 1998)
 - ▶ Amy’s house was big-ish
 - ▶ *Amy’s house was big-ass
- ▶ NB exceptions: badass, deadass

Adj-enough-N in English?

- ▶ “enough” is certainly allowed before a noun when the small clause it selects follows the noun
 - ▶ e.g. this is a big enough bag to carry the shopping
- ▶ but loses its stress

- ▶ only allowed to keep stress in certain compound-like set phrases?
 - ▶ good-enough parsing

Post-adjectival degree words and prosody

| | Attributive (Adj-Deg-N) | Predicative (Adj-Deg) |
|------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Unstressed | ish ass enough | *? |
| Stressed | * | ish enough |

Is this enough to explain the (potential) ungrammaticality of “as” between Adjective and Noun?

Adj-Deg order across languages

- ▶ Very rare in Adjective-Noun languages: out of 138 Adjective-Noun languages, WALS only has 12 languages with Adjective-Degree order (Dryer, 2013a; Dryer, 2013b)

| | Adjective-Noun | Noun-Adjective |
|------------------|---|---|
| Degree-Adjective | 126 (34%) 'very boring performance' | 80 (21%) 'performance very boring' |
| Adjective-Degree | 12 (3%) 'boring very performance' | 158 (42%) 'performance boring very' |

Universal 21

“If some or all adverbs follow the adjectives they modify, the language is one in which the qualifying adjective follows the noun and verb precedes its nominal object as the dominant order.”

(Greenberg, 1963)

Adj-Deg, Adj-N languages

- ▶ According to WALS, there are 40 languages which are Adj-Deg, Adj-N at least sometimes
- ▶ This includes languages which are:
 - ▶ Adj-Deg and Adj-N
 - ▶ Adj-Deg and Mixed Adj/N
 - ▶ Mixed Adj/Deg and Adj-N
 - ▶ Mixed Adj/Deg and Mixed Adj/N



Adj-Deg-N avoidance strategies

There are four strategies used by Adj-Deg, Adj-N languages to avoid the order the order Adjective-Degree-Noun (*boring as performances*):

1. Allow N-Adj order specifically when adjectives are modified by degree words
performances boring very
2. Allow Deg-Adj order specifically with attributive adjectives
very boring performances
3. Postpose the degree word to the right edge of the noun phrase
boring performances very
4. Ban degree words from ever appearing with attributive adjectives
BORING performances

Head-Final Filter

- ▶ Head-Final Filter is “a constraint barring post-head material in prenominal modifiers”

(Williams, 1982)

- ▶ Intended to explain difference between English and German in allowing complements of adjectives
 - ▶ *a [proud [of his son]] man
 - ▶ English -> a man who is proud of his son
 - ▶ German -> an [[of his son] proud] man

HFF and the Final-Over-Final Condition

- ▶ Having one “disharmonic” order (Adj-Deg-N) banned while its linear reverse order N-Deg-Adj is allowed is reminiscent of FOFC
 - ▶ Although typically, FOFC is a statement about heads and complements, not about modifiers
- ▶ Sheehan (2017) argues that the HFF can be unified with FOFC, following Kayne’s assumption that attributive adjectives are raised from covert relative clauses

Adj/Deg/N order in Kwomtari (Spencer, 2008)

▶ *rori metie sai-sai*

fish really many = “very many fish”

▶ *rori sai-sai feti*

fish many very = “very many fish”

▶ *metie sabele buletu*

really huge basket = “really huge basket”

▶ **sabele feti buletu*

huge very basket = “really huge basket”

▶ Instead, we find *sabele buletu feti* (Strategy 3)

Exceptions to the rule

- ▶ There are (at least) seven languages which seem to allow Adjective-Degree-Noun order:
 - ▶ Carib (Cariban, Suriname) *Hoff 1968*
 - ▶ Tariana (Arawakan, Brazil) *Aikhenvald 2003*
 - ▶ Maung (Australian Aboriginal) *Capell & Hinch 1970*
 - ▶ Alamblak (Sepik, Papua New Guinea) *Bruce 1984*
 - ▶ Tzutujil (Mayan, Guatemala) *Dayley 1985*
 - ▶ Kwoma (Sepik, Papua New Guinea) *Kooyers 1974*
 - ▶ Savosavo (Papuan, Solomon Islands) *Wegener 2008*

Examples of exceptions

pimana-yha-wani du-kuda du-depidana

Tariana

harsh-APPROX-EMPH 3sgf-body 3sgf-had

‘She really did have a harsh-ish body’

Aikhenvald (2003:366)

ino:royo po:to po:re yo:poto:ri

Carib

one-mentioned large exceedingly chief

‘The aforementioned [Maka:nowa:ka] was a very great leader’ Hoff (1968:332-3)

ngai torongo gnegaghulalo ka basi

Savosavo

big very length.LOC already is.lost

‘It is already lost for a really big length [of time].’

Wegener (2008:72)

Choosing to break the rule? (1)

- ▶ In Kwoma, adjectives usually have to precede nouns, and the intensifier *wey* “very” always follows adjectives
- ▶ Intensified adjectives count as heavy, and so can be postposed (Strategy 1 for avoiding Adj-Deg-N)

aka mayaka wey Bangwis ma ye kwowuk otiito
house large very Bangwis man they on.the.mountain working
‘the Bangwis people are building a very large house on the mountain’

- ▶ But this is entirely optional: leaving Adj-Deg in place is also grammatical

tobo wey ma rii bensin tokok yawa
short very man he came to.buy petrol
‘A very short man came to buy petrol.’

Choosing to break the rule? (2)

- ▶ Alambhak also allows adjectives to precede or follow nouns, and has a degree enclitic “-en” with a diminutive meaning
- ▶ When adjectives precede nouns, the degree enclitic can optionally move onto the noun (Strategy 3), creating an ambiguity:
 - ▶ *habhi yawy-en-r*
small dog-DIM-3sg = “extremely small dog” OR “small puppy”
- ▶ Only Adjective-Noun=*en* allows an interpretation where *en* is an adjectival degree clitic: “dog=*en* small” would unambiguously mean “small puppy”
- ▶ But this is optional: leaving the clitic on the adjective is also grammatical
 - ▶ *habhi-en yawy-r*
small-DIM dog-3sg = “extremely small dog”

Bruce (1984:121)

A typological puzzle

- ▶ On the one hand, we have the extreme rarity of Adjective-Degree & Adjective-Noun languages compared to any other fixed order for these elements, and the innovation of avoidance strategies in many languages
- ▶ On the other, there are a small number of languages which do allow Adjective-Degree-Noun as a surface order, sometimes as a completely free choice, where other orders of the same elements were available

Exceptional exceptions

▶ Prosodic restrictions

- ▶ (some) degree markers are described as affixes/inflections/clitics/affix-like
 - ▶ Tzutujil, Alambalak, Kwoma, Savosavo(?)
- ▶ degree markers occupy same surface position as existing meaningless element
 - ▶ Tzutujil, Maung

▶ Semantic restrictions

- ▶ on adjectives
 - ▶ Only with size adjectives - Alambalak
- ▶ on degree words
 - ▶ Only intensifiers - Maung, Tzutujil, Kwoma, Savosavo

Data collection: hypotheses

- ▶ “as” (and “af”) will be dis-preferred in attributive positions / positions immediately preceding nouns, following the cross-linguistic generalisation expressed in U21, the HFF, and potentially FOFC
- ▶ if they *are* allowed to intervene between adjectives and nouns, they may share some of the exceptional properties on the previous slide:
 - ▶ e.g. restriction to certain semantic classes or individual lexical items, allowing an analysis of them as structure-less compounds
- ▶ “af” might be more flexible than “as”, because it does not originate from ellipsis and can therefore lose its stress more readily

Data collection: methods

- ▶ Twitter corpus: two corpora of tweets likely to include “Adjective + as” and “Adjective + af” respectively, to determine frequency of use with different adjectives and in attributive/predicative positions in natural language-production context
- ▶ Grammaticality judgements: survey of English speakers to check how well-known constructions are, and obtain grammaticality judgements on “Adjective + as”, “Adjective + af” and “Adjective + as fuck” in attributive/predicative positions

Survey design

- ▶ Participants rated sentences on a Likert scale from 1 to 7 (1 = completely unacceptable, 7 = completely acceptable)
- ▶ 12 adjectives tested in 2 positions (attributive + predicative) with 3 intensifiers (as, af, as fuck)
 - ▶ 4 monosyllabic adjectives: hot, long, tall, thick
 - ▶ 4 disyllabic adjectives: funny, boring, ancient, random
 - ▶ 4 trisyllabic adjectives: annoying, comfortable, expensive, difficult



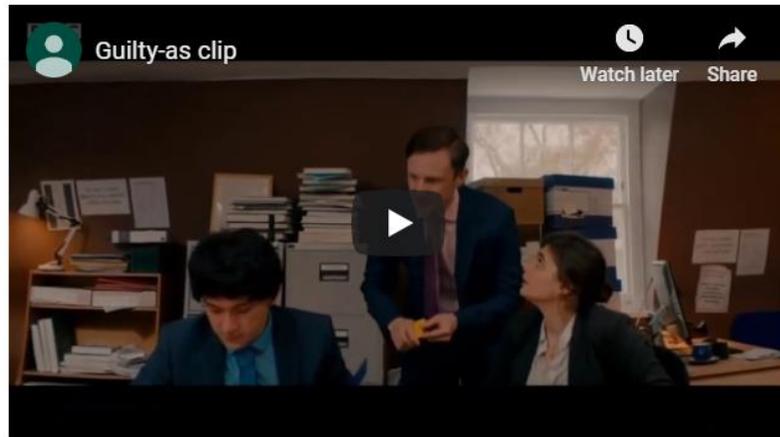
"Elly wanted me to buy these expensive as train tickets."

- 7 - completely acceptable
- 6
- 5
- 4

Survey design

- ▶ Initial questions asked people whether they already knew “Adjective + as” and “Adjective + af”

This is a short clip from the BBC comedy 'Defending the Guilty', which follows several trainee lawyers. In this scene, the trainees have just been told they will compete against each other in a "mock trial", where they have to act out a pretend trial in court. Please watch the clip and then answer the questions below.



At the end of the clip, one of the characters describes someone as "guilty as". Do you ever use the word "as" in this way?

- Yes
- No, but I've heard other people do this
- No, and I've never heard of this

Have you heard of the abbreviation "af", which stands for "as fuck"?

- Yes
- No

Some people pronounce this abbreviation as "aff" when speaking out loud (like the "aff" in "raffle"). Is this something you ever do?

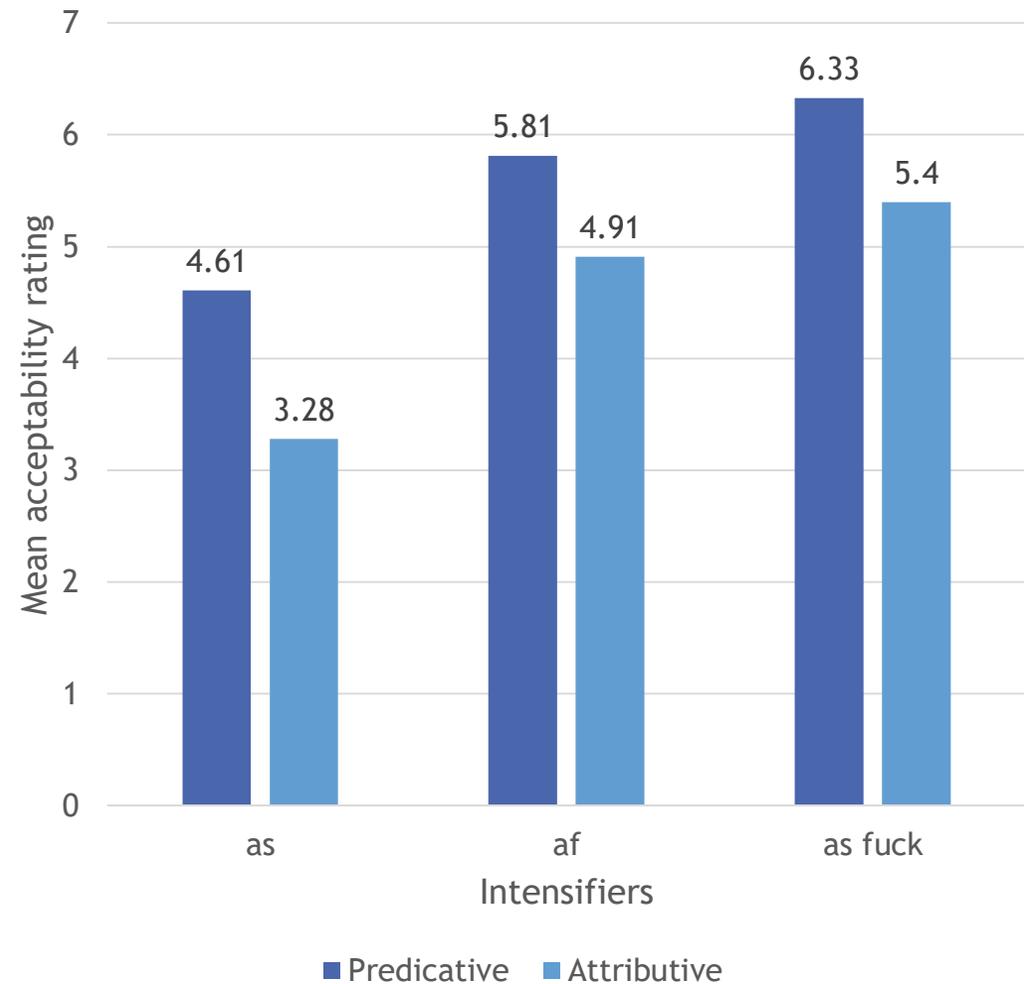
- Yes
- No, but I've heard other people say this
- No, and I've never heard of this

Survey design

- ▶ There was also a final page of questions checking for the ability of “as” to co-occur with other degree words:
 - ▶ That must be the most boring as event I’ve ever been to
 - ▶ My interview this morning was easier as than the one last week
 - ▶ That was a really long as car journey
 - ▶ He’s too short as to dance professionally
- ▶ These sentences were expected to be totally ungrammatical for most people, so these sentences also provide a baseline rating for genuine ungrammaticality

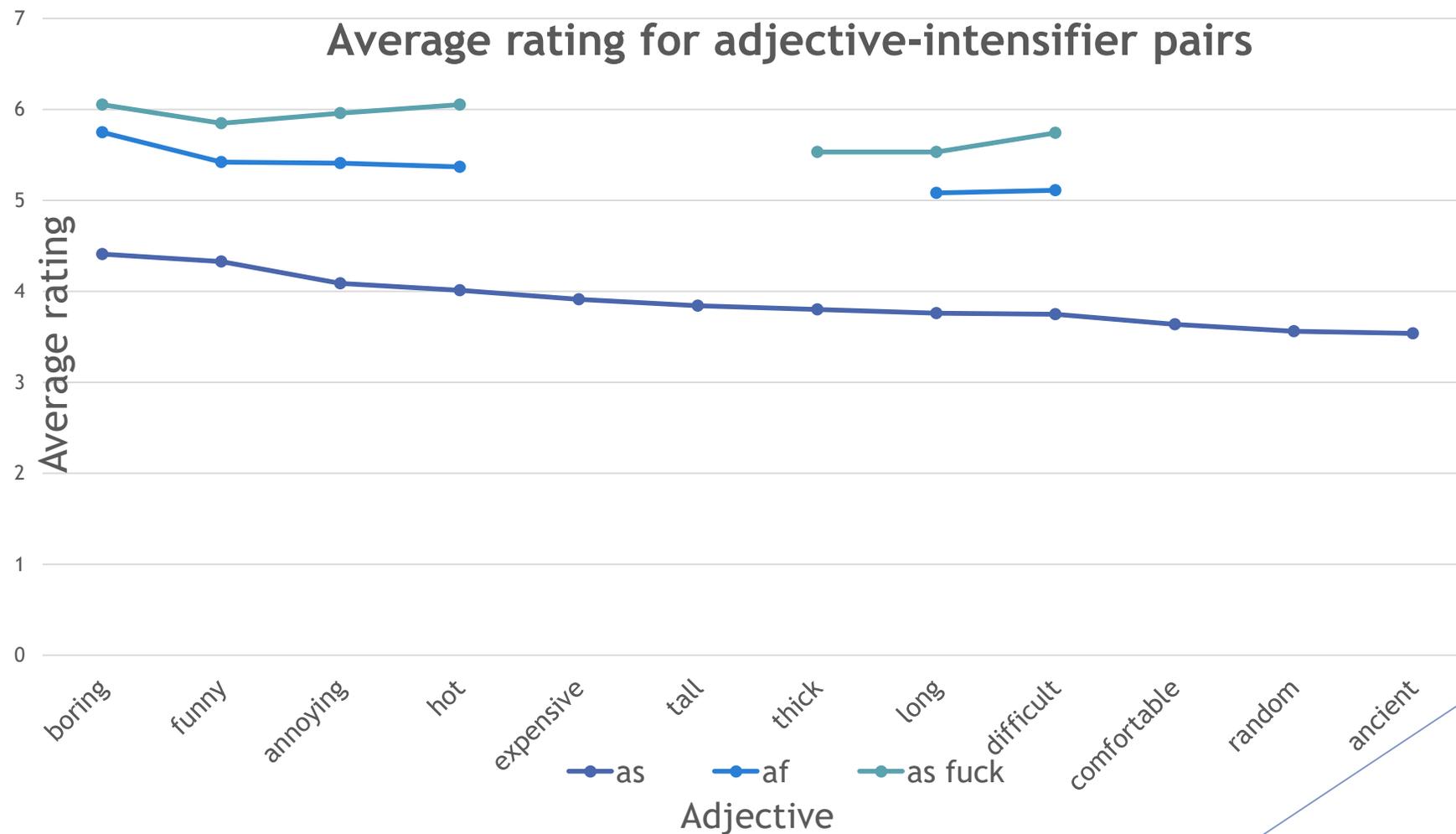
Survey results (1)

- ▶ 282 complete responses to grammaticality judgements (excluding non-native English speakers and people who gave an incorrect definition for “guilty as”)
 - ▶ 153 come from survey which only contains “as” and “as fuck”, 129 come from survey with all three intensifiers
- ▶ Clear effect of intensifier and sentence position
 - ▶ “as fuck” > “af” > “as”
 - ▶ predicative > attributive
- ▶ Interaction: larger ‘attributive penalty’ for “as” than for other intensifiers



Survey results (2)

No effect of adjective (or number of syllables in adjective) - but could be related to context I constructed rather than the adjective itself



Survey results (3)

- ▶ Surprisingly, no effect of participants
 - ▶ No effect of varieties of English participant has had most exposure to (but almost everyone who took survey will have had some exposure to British English)
 - ▶ No effect of whether people used/knew “Adjective + as” before they took the survey, suggesting people form similar intuitions about its use very quickly
- ▶ Very small effect of definition type (but not statistically significant) - people whose definition for “guilty as” included ellipsis rate “Adjective as Noun” slightly lower than people whose definition referred only to emphasis

Survey results (4)

- ▶ Results from final page of questions

| Intensifier combination | Sentence | % rating 2 or below | Mean rating |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|-------------|
| superlative | “most boring as event” | 39 | 3.29 |
| comparative | “interview was easier as” | 86 | 1.62 |
| <i>really</i> | “really long as journey” | 47 | 2.99 |
| <i>too</i> | “he is too short as” | 75 | 2.03 |

- ▶ Mostly received very low ratings (although “most boring as event” is similar to other Adjective-*as*-Noun sequences)
- ▶ Particularly low ratings for comparatives “easier” and “too”, perhaps because of origins of “Adjective + as” in equative comparative

Twitter corpora

- ▶ Created by streaming from Twitter’s public API (with thanks to Deepthi Gopal for her help with this)
 - ▶ Should give up to 1% of all tweets being sent, but in this instance my filters were probably narrow enough that I collected all public tweets that met my conditions
- ▶ Corpus 1: English-language tweets sent from within the UK and Ireland containing the word “as”
 - ▶ This includes any tweets containing “as fuck” by default
- ▶ Corpus 2: English-language tweets sent from anywhere in the world containing “af”, “as fuck”, or several spelling variants of these

Twitter results

- ▶ 201 examples of “Adjective + as” in the Britain/Ireland corpus - more than expected!
- ▶ Found throughout the UK
 - ▶ Locations are where the tweets was sent from, not necessarily where the tweeter comes from



“Adjective + as” examples



Tony Knox
@tonyknox

Replying to @mrichardshost

In all fairness you do look cool as

3:13 AM · Nov 18, 2019 from Higher End, England · Twitter for iPhone



Gerry
@Gerry1881_

We need to take the blame?, I'm not being funny but why would the fans need to improve, we bring top numbers home and away and watch us get beat by even the worst teams in our division and still keep going? Players need to sort themselves out, simple as. #lofc

8:08 PM · Nov 19, 2019 from Walthamstow, London · Twitter for iPhone



sixpence
@CoyneTom

Replying to @splinterdream

Good luck with that. This Tory party are out for the top 1% of earners. @Emmabarnett s glasses are classy as. Also probably the best political interviewer in the UK , very balanced , would you agree?

12:06 AM · Nov 29, 2019 from Clare, Ireland · Twitter for iPhone



Marcos E6wardo73
@MarkEdw02850591

Replying to @Davescouse3

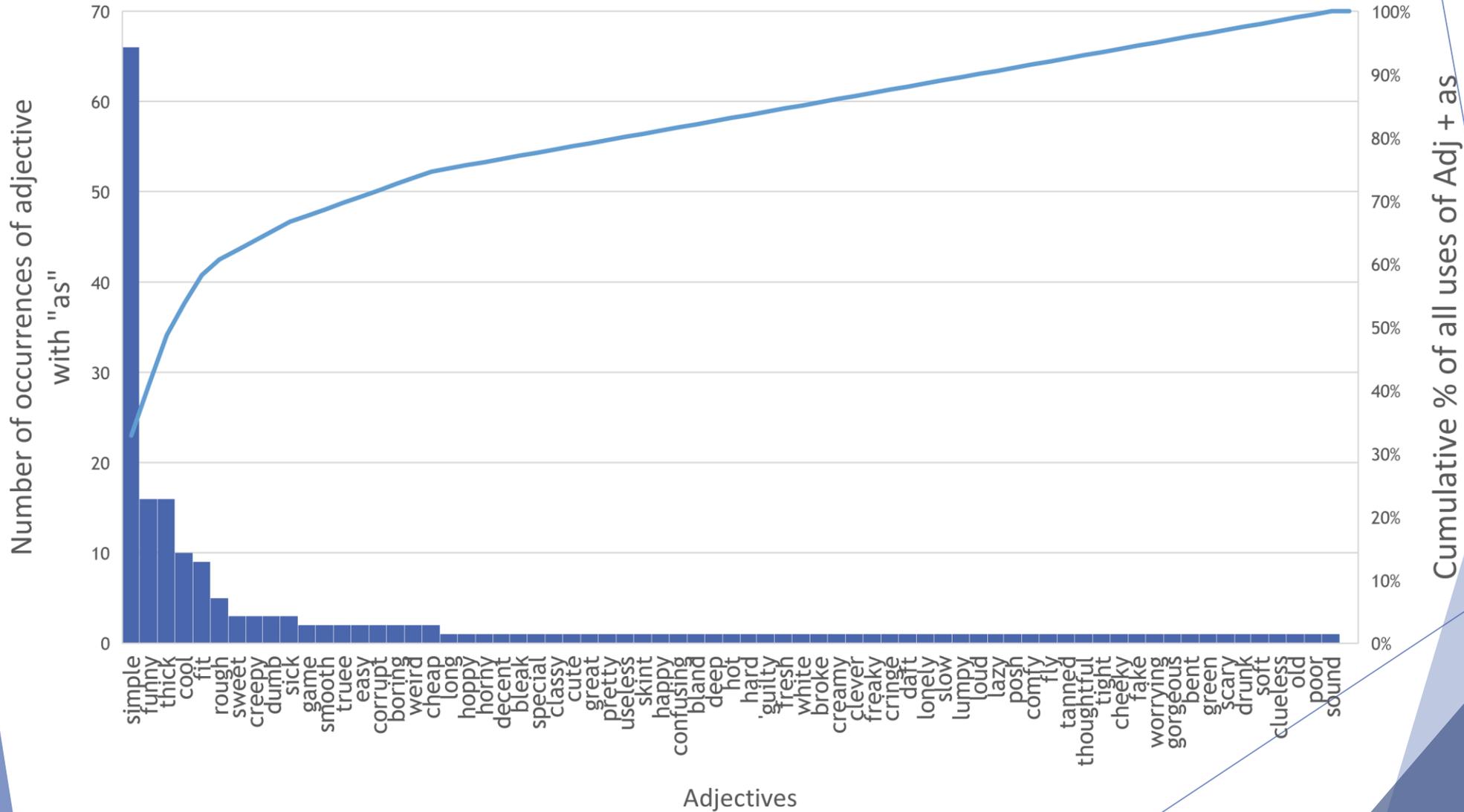
Love that! Funny as. 😂

12:25 PM · Nov 20, 2019 from Halewood, England · Twitter for iPhone

Twitter results

- ▶ Very strong preference for avoiding Adjective-Degree-Noun:
 - ▶ Out of 201 tweets containing “Adjective + as”, in 197 (98%) the adjective is predicative, or used as a fragment
- ▶ Four attributive examples
 - ▶ One is a post-nominal attributive adjective:
 - ▶ “Lovely NEIPA , creamy, pillowy , smooth as, stonefruit-aplenty! Just lovely!!!”
 - ▶ Two normal pre-nominal attributive adjectives:
 - ▶ “This fake as bitch will tweet about you then snap you for “Twitter support””
 - ▶ “Gonna be a long as day today”
 - ▶ One example where fragment usage is turned into an attributive adjective:
 - ▶ “That’s the worst ‘guilty as’ interview I’ve ever seen”

“Adjective + as” productive?



Prosodic constraint for “Adjective + as”?

| Rank | Adjective + as (201) | Adjective + as fuck (1043) |
|------|----------------------|----------------------------|
| 1 | simple (66) | funny (73) |
| 2 | funny (16) | thick (47) |
| 3 | thick (16) | boring (32) |
| 4 | cool (10) | hot (25) |
| 5 | fit (9) | fit (24) |
| 6 | rough (5) | corrupt (24) |
| 7 | sweet (3) | sexy (23) |
| 8 | creepy (3) | annoying (22) |
| 9 | dumb (3) | rough (20) |
| 10 | sick (3) | weird (18) |

*Don't have full data yet but doesn't look like there's any similar restriction on “af”:
very similar adjectives are popular with “af” and “as fuck” in the other corpus

Explaining “simple as”

- ▶ “simple” is by far the most common adjective, making up a third of all the “Adjective + as” instances
- ▶ This doesn’t seem to be semantic - there are no other easy/hard adjectives used frequently
- ▶ Alternative explanation: “simple as” is probably short for “simple as that” -> this is another case of fairly standard ellipsis under semantic (if not syntactic) identity

Explaining “simple as”



HTAFC Opinions
@HtafcO

Replying to @Wardell1990

He's gone, or as good as anyway



Gerry
@Gerry1881_

We need to take the blame?, I'm not being funny but why would the fans need to improve, we bring top numbers home and away and watch us get beat by even the worst teams in our division and still keep going? Players need to sort themselves out, simple as. #lofc

- ▶ He's gone, or as good as ~~gone~~ anyway
- ▶ Players need to sort themselves out, simple as ~~that=players need to sort themselves out~~
- ▶ There is probably a substantial number of British English speakers who use “simple as” in this way, without using the true “Adjective + as” construction where there is no antecedent available in preceding discourse

“Adjective + as” excluding simple



Unrestricted use of “Adjective + as”?



Ben Burkinshaw ✂
@sufcben

Replying to @nathsufc

Yeh it's confusing as

9:55 pm · 16 Nov 2019 from [Brampton, England](#) · [Twitter for iPhone](#)



laura pirrie
@LozzaPee_

Right I've had quite enough of being sent Black Friday emails when im fkn skint as

9:01 pm · 25 Nov 2019 from [Manchester, England](#) · [Twitter for iPhone](#)



Paul Jameson
@Modquokka

Not only has [#bbcqt](#) [#leadershipdebate](#) shown Swinson and Johnson for inepts they are and statesmanship of Corbyn and Sturgeon, but now it proves spin televised propaganda outlets ... woops ... news media works on their behalf.

Like living in North Korea;
Corrupt as.



Joe Gillam
@JoeGillam90

Replying to @_JackLewis

🤔 it's worrying as that there were two [redacted] who thought it was a good idea after reading the comments again

6:45 pm · 13 Nov 2019 from [Wednesfield, England](#) · [Twitter for Android](#)

Conclusions

- ▶ Judgements of English speakers differ quite substantially on “Adjective + as/af”
 - ▶ general dispreference for pre-nominal attributive adjectives + as/af (as we would predict typologically) but certainly not a complete ban
 - ▶ preference for single-syllable adjectives with “as”, but perhaps not shared by all speakers
- ▶ “as” is generally much less flexible than “af”, even though it’s (probably) older, suggesting that surface-level prosodic constraints are involved in the ungrammaticality of Adjective-Degree-Noun
 - ▶ or that compounding and the resultant prosodic changes are a mechanism for avoiding violations of deeper syntactic principles which ban Adjective-Degree-Noun

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