



A new pill for every ill: A construction morphology analysis of *-pill* in manosphere discourse

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Abstract

In this paper I investigate the development of *pill* from a lexeme to a highly productive derivational affix. This productivity is manifested in the creation of numerous neologisms based on the constructional schema provided by stems combined by the newly-formed affix (*redpill*, *bluepill*, *blackpill*, *pinkpill*, *dogpill*, etc.). I focus on the semantic and functional development of *pill* in the online discourse of the members of the so-called manosphere as well as its gradual spread beyond these communities. I adopt the general theoretical framework of the usage-based approach to language change with special reference to the field of construction morphology. I apply the notion of constructionalization in order to place adequate focus on the semantic and functional aspects of change that the lexeme *pill* undergoes. Constructionalization bypasses the limitations and biases present in grammaticalization research and allows a focus on the more abrupt modifications in form and meaning that are taking place in limited pockets of language over relatively short timespans.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the lexeme *pill* has undergone a remarkable transformation in online discourse, particularly within the ideological communities collectively referred to as the manosphere. Originating from the red pill/blue pill dichotomy popularized by *The Matrix* (1999), *pill* has been recontextualized to signify ideological awakenings or alignments. Within the manosphere, *redpill* denotes the rejection of mainstream societal narratives in favour of perceived truths about gender dynamics, often aligned with anti-feminist or reactionary worldviews. This foundational metaphor has since given rise to a proliferation of neologisms – *bluepill*, *blackpill*, *pinkpill*, *dogpill*, among others – each marking nuanced ideological stances.

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This paper investigates the semantic and morphological development of *pill* from a concrete noun to a productive derivational affix. Adopting the framework of construction morphology and the concept of constructionalization, the study explores how *pill* has evolved into a schema capable of generating new forms with relatively predictable meaning patterns. Special attention is given to how these innovations emerge within specific online subcultures and gradually diffuse into broader discourse. The analysis aims to demonstrate how constructional change can occur rapidly and unevenly in digital communication environments, challenging traditional models of grammaticalization. Specifically, it is investigated in the discourse of the manosphere.

The manosphere is a loosely defined network of websites, forums, and social media groups unified by the belief that men's rights are under threat in modern society. It emerged as a reaction to the growing influence of feminist movements and comprises four main subgroups: Pickup Artists (PUAs), Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), Men's Rights Activists (MRAs), and incels (cf. Ribeiro et al. 2020). While varying in focus, these groups share a common anti-feminist stance and frequently overlap with other radicalized movements, including the alt-right and white supremacist communities. MRAs originated in response to perceived legal inequalities affecting men – such as those involving child custody or military service – and have increasingly migrated online, where their rhetoric has become more radicalized. MGTOW evolved in part from MRA discourse but reject legal reform in favour of complete withdrawal from relationships with women, promoting a form of masculine separatism. PUAs, by contrast, actively pursue women, treating dating as a competitive "game" centred on manipulation and seduction techniques. Incels, the most extreme subgroup, are united by a sense of sexual entitlement and hostility toward women, often expressing violent ideologies (Ribeiro et al., 2020, p. 2). Each of these communities develops and maintains its own specialized jargon reflecting its core concerns. In particular, the incel lexicon is notably insular and metaphor-rich, often inaccessible to outsiders (Bogetic et al. 2023; Prażmo 2020b; Prażmo 2024a). Despite their differences, the subgroups share certain terms and rhetorical frameworks, with the so-called "pill jargon" being one of the most widespread (Waśniewska 2020). These communities play a significant role in language change by coining new terms and fostering their circulation within and beyond online spaces. Their discourse often functions as a testing ground for emerging lexical and morphological patterns that can later spread into mainstream usage. One notable example is the once innocuous lexeme *pill*, which has undergone semantic and morphological evolution and been appropriated by members of the manosphere.

2. The *pill*

Pill, from Middle Dutch or Middle Low German *pille* is defined by the Etymonline online etymology dictionary as a "globular or ovoid mass of medicinal substance of a size convenient

for swallowing".¹ This meaning derived from the Latin *pilula*, literally ‘little ball’, allegedly related to *pilus*, ‘hair’, if the origin was ‘hairball’. Its figurative sense of “something disagreeable that must be accepted (‘swallowed’)” dates back to the 1540s.

Wiktionary² lists nine meanings of *pill* as a noun and five of *pill* as a verb. What is of interest in this article is the most prototypical nominal meaning (i.e., “A small, usually round or cylindrical object designed for easy swallowing, usually containing some sort of medication”) and how it developed into non-prototypical nominal meanings not listed in mainstream dictionaries as well as its relation to one of the less prototypical verbal meanings (i.e., “To persuade or convince someone of something”).³ As stated in Wiktionary, this specific verbal meaning came into being as a generalization of *red pill*.

Red pill carries four nominal meanings:

- 1n. Something that enables or compels a person to overcome illusion and perceive harsher reality.
- 2n. (more specifically) Something that causes someone to believe in gynocentrism in modern society.
- 3n. (by extension) The subculture of men who share a belief in the gynocentrism of modern society; manosphere.
- 4n. Used other than figuratively or idiomatically: see *red*, *pill*.

Verbal meanings correspond to 1n and 2n, and thus to *red pill* someone means to enable or compel them to overcome illusion and perceive harsher reality, or more specifically to cause someone to believe in gynocentrism in modern society. At first *red pill* was used canonically as a combination of adjective and noun, and then underwent conversion into a compound verb to *redpill* someone. From here, the process of change was set into motion and as it was gaining momentum the productivity of *pill* as head of a compound increased exponentially. Constructional schema was created and subsequently spawned several sub-schemas. These schemas provided a framework for new elements to be added to the lexicon by means of analogical reasoning. *Pill* started losing its compositionality and gradually turned into a very productive (at least in the discourse of the manosphere) derivational affix with the two roles (the nominal and the verbal) co-existing, as, for instance in *a blackpill* and *to blackpill someone*, *to be blackpilled*, *blackpilling* etc.

¹ <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=pill> accessed 23/01/2023

² <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/pill> accessed 6/02/2025

³ Interestingly, there also seems to be some relation between new, non-prototypical meanings of *pill* and its nominal meaning marked here as 3n. Taking the x-pill, in the manosphere refers to an, usually, unpleasant realization of a kind that must be accepted and endured. This possible influence across different meanings will not be investigated any further in this paper though.

This unprecedented development can be traced back to one of the most memorable scenes in the 1999 movie *The Matrix* in which Neo meets Morpheus for the first time and is given the following offer:

This is your last chance. After this, there is no turning back. You take the blue pill – the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill – you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes. Remember, all I'm offering is the truth – nothing more. (<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/1158642-this-is-your-last-chance-after-this-there-is-no> accessed 11/03/2023)

Neo chooses the red pill and gains awareness of the reality which had been previously hidden from him. He realizes that what he thought was real is just an illusion, an AI-generated dream, a mere simulation of reality. He takes the red pill and starts to see what is behind the curtain, starts to see the Matrix for what it is. It can be considered a courageous and heroic act, even though from a philosophical point of view the choice between discovering the painful and difficult truth and remaining in ignorant complacency is far from clear-cut (Blackford, 2004). Philosophical considerations aside, the fact is that *redpill* and *bluepill* found their way into dictionaries. For instance, the Online Cambridge Dictionary defines them as follows:

redpill beliefs, choices, or information that allow you to see the world as it really is, even though you would feel safer or happier if you did not⁴

blue pill beliefs or choices that make you feel safe and happy, but stop you from seeing how things really are⁵

The meanings of *pills* referring to gaining awareness or remaining in ignorance have been extended to other metaphorical interpretations. One interpretation of the *pill* metaphor comes from transgender theory and refers to taking the *redpill* as acknowledging one's real self and identity as opposed to taking the *bluepill* and thus remaining in a life that is not real. The metaphor has not been adopted by the transgender community, though. At least not to an extent comparable to the one seen in the so-called manosphere community where *pill* got a new lease of life. The terminology has expanded somewhat suddenly with the adoption of the term as a metaphor for choosing to realize the (alleged) painful truth about the gynocentrism of Western society (taking the *redpill*) or to continue living in ignorance (taking the *bluepill*). In other words, online “to red pill” is to learn that you’ve been defrauded and misled, that you’ve bought into a false and diabolical lie, and that your only way out is to obtain true knowledge about the way the world works”, Read observes (2021). And Tiffany notices, “the

⁴ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/red-pill?q=redpill> accessed 27/03/2025

⁵ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/blue-pill> accessed 27/03/2025

phrase was adopted by other far-right political subcultures and slowly came to mean that a person had been radicalized in some way" (2021).

Interpretations of the symbolism of pills differ significantly and another paper would be required to give any justice to this issue; one thing, however, is undisputed – pills of different colours have been appropriated as metaphors for different levels of knowledge and awareness by members of the manosphere.

3. Methodology and data

This study examines the emergence of a novel derivational affix from the lexeme *pill* within the framework of construction morphology (Booij 2010). I argue that this development can be effectively described as a case of constructionalization (Hünig & Booij 2014), specifically "contentful constructionalization" (Traugott & Trousdale 2014). This perspective offers a flexible and nuanced means of accounting for the rise of new word formation patterns, unconstrained by the traditional limitations of grammaticalization or lexicalization theories.

The study is intended as a theoretical contribution to construction morphology, with the affix *-pill* serving as a case study. The data consists of neologistic compounds incorporating *pill*, which were manually collected from a range of websites from January 2022 to December 2023. The websites include platforms associated with the manosphere as well as more mainstream sites where the usage has begun to spread. This study employed opportunistic sampling, an effective method for capturing emerging linguistic phenomena in dynamic online environments. The procedure was systematic and guided by linguistic and contextual criteria. I targeted platforms where such compounds were likely to occur based on prior knowledge of discourse trends within online communities. Specific search terms, topic threads, and user-generated tags were used to trace relevant compounds, and the selection was informed by the ongoing visibility and recurrence of certain forms. This structured approach ensured that the examples collected were both representative of current usage and varied in their morphological and semantic properties.

Because these neologisms are unlikely to be captured in traditional corpora or dictionaries at this stage, investigating their usage in real-time online discourse provides valuable insight into the early stages of constructional innovation. Online communities, particularly those in the manosphere, are fertile grounds for linguistic change due to their rapid communicative cycles and high degree of creativity. While marginal in terms of mainstream language, the patterns emerging in these spaces often reflect – and sometimes anticipate – broader trends in morphological change. Moreover, despite their marginal origin, the innovations observed align with the theoretical expectations of constructionalization processes described in general language evolution.

4. Constructionalization

The movement of a linguistic element alongside what has been termed a “cline of grammaticalization” (Fischer, Norde & Perridon 2004) – that is, from the more lexical toward the more grammatical end of a continuum – is generally regarded as a case of grammaticalization and is typically examined from a diachronic perspective. However, the transition from a purely lexical, free morpheme to a more functional and bound form, as well as the potential emergence of a new constructional schema, may instead be characterized as constructionalization. While the general principles underlying grammaticalization theory are applicable to what is referred to in this paper as constructionalization, several key distinctions warrant attention. Notably, although constructionalization, like grammaticalization, is analysed diachronically – since it entails a series of changes in the distribution and behaviour of a linguistic item – it is also capable of accounting for more abrupt, and potentially less gradual, developments. For instance, the changes in use of the lexeme *pill* described in this paper have spanned across several decades rather than several centuries (certainly not more than three decades, as the initial applications of *pill* in new contexts cannot predate the release of the first part of *The Matrix* movie trilogy, i.e., 1999). The initial uses of *pill* in new contexts have led to the development of polysemy which further increased the frequency of its use and led to the solidification in the role of head in compound expressions and finally the transformation into an affix. Increases in both type and token frequency (i.e., the increase in the productivity and the distribution of new compounds) have resulted in the creation of a new schema allowing other items to function in a similar capacity by means of analogy. All those changes have occurred in a relatively short period of time and at the beginning still in a relatively restricted environment (i.e., online discourse of specific communities, collectively referred to as the manosphere). All this is in line with “contentful constructionalization” in which, Traugott and Trousdale state, “only minimal local, rather than extensive syntactic, expansion is typically involved”. And “once a contentful schema has come into being the new expressions it sanctions are coined instantaneously rather than gradually” (Traugott & Trousdale 2014, p. 256). A development similar to that undergone by *pill* is observed and described in greater detail in Traugott and Trousdale’s (2014) discussion of the *hood* affix. The affix *hood* originated as a free morpheme and then steadily developed into a compounding element, an affixoid and finally an affix. The accumulation of instances of novel uses then produces a constructional schema spawning even more novel expressions in the process of word formation by analogy.

Traditionally, the emergence of new linguistic elements has been described in terms of either grammaticalization or lexicalization, depending on the methodological perspective adopted (Lehmann 2002; Hopper & Traugott 2003). Hüning and Booij (2014), however, propose the concept of “constructionalization” to better account for the emergence of new derivational affixes from compounding elements. This framework addresses several

limitations inherent in grammaticalization- and lexicalization-based approaches. Importantly, constructionalization does not contradict the principles established by these earlier models; rather, it redirects analytical focus toward aspects of the process that are more relevant to the transition from compounding to derivation.

4.1 Emergence of derivational affixes in light of constructionalization

By foregrounding the transition from compounding to derivation, this framework is especially relevant to the study of derivational – as opposed to inflectional – affixes, whose status remains less clearly defined and more contentious. Derivational affixes often retain visible traces of their lexical origins, may undergo limited or no semantic bleaching, are not necessarily subject to phonetic reduction, and frequently maintain partial syntactic autonomy or continue to coexist with their source lexemes. These features complicate their classification. Unlike inflectional affixes, which serve grammatical functions, derivational affixes participate in the creation of new lexical items. Nevertheless, their development often follows a trajectory that mirrors movement along the grammaticalization cline, from more lexical to more grammatical forms.

Grammaticalization and lexicalization – as well as the related concept of “degrammaticalization” (Trousdale & Norde 2013) – tend to obscure key features involved in the formation of derivational affixes and contribute to terminological and methodological ambiguity in this area (for discussion about the inconsistent status of derivational affixes in the literature see Hüning and Booij (2014). In short, their emergence cannot be explained as a result of lexicalization, as lexicalization leads to the creation of autonomous elements, whereas derivational affixes are bound morphemes. Nonetheless, they function as productive components in the creation of new, autonomous words.

In construction morphology, words are considered constructions, i.e., pairings of form and meaning (Booij 2010). Word formation patterns are abstract schemas that serve as scaffoldings on which new elements are based. These constructional schemas (Langacker 2008, pp. 167–170) come about as a result of abstracting away from numbers of similar patterns (e.g., stem plus affix pairs) and then sanction the emergence of novel elements (or also new subschemas with more specific properties). A constructional schema is schematic in that it allows its slot(s) to be filled with more concrete elements that fulfil the criteria sanctioned by this schema (e.g., the requirement of a slot being filled by a member of a particular word class or semantic category). The development of *pill* from a lexeme, through compounding form to derivational affix results in the creation of a schema of increasing schematicity (first it only admits semantically restricted adjectives as stems for the new affix, then it starts admitting nouns and gradually lifts seemingly all semantic constraints too). This development, however, can also be described as a gradual change in analysability and compositionality parameters in schema-sanctioned neologisms. Analysability and compositionality are two parameters which

serve to measure how advanced the constructionalization process is (for “grammatical constructionalization” and “lexical constructionalization” see also: Trousdale and Norde 2013). In broad strokes, free morphemes tend to possess high degrees of both analysability and compositionality, whereas bound morphemes are, in principle, less analysable and less compositional. Complex morphological structures (e.g., compounds or stems with affixes) vary in their cognitive accessibility, i.e., in how transparent they are based on the recognizability of forms of their constituent parts and the semantic contribution those constituent parts make to the overall meaning. To rephrase, morphosyntactic analysability refers to how recognizable constituent elements are in a compound expression. Semantic compositionality is how predictable the meaning of a whole is from the meanings of constituent parts (Langacker 2008; Bybee 2010; Kardela 2016). Most commonly, linguistic units exhibit varying degrees of the two parameters. Usually, there is a strong correlation between them (the higher the analysability, the higher the compositionality and vice versa), but in principle they are independent from one another. For instance, idioms usually display a high degree of analysability (individual words are easily recognized), at the same time having a low degree of compositionality (the meaning of an idiom is not readily derivable from the meanings of individual words that an idiom consists of). An example of lexical elements with low analysability and high compositionality are suppletive forms – e.g., English past tense forms of the verb to go, or to be (Bybee 2010, p. 45). In compounding forms with *pill* a loss of compositionality can be observed, which testifies to the shift in its role from an independent morpheme, to a dependent derivational affix.

Constructionalization, thus, is the creation of a new schema abstracted away from previous usages of a certain morphosyntactic construct which sanctions the production of novel instances created via analogical reasoning. It seems warranted to say that *pill* as a derivational affix has already gained a high degree of productivity. Once the frequency of use increases, the affix starts to attach to hosts belonging to certain semantic clusters and gradually expands beyond them gaining new semantic territories and new contexts (for a similar discussion on the prefix “post” see Prażmo 2020). Linguistic productivity, however, is understood and defined in various ways. Usually, it is seen as a graded concept (Bauer 2001). Plag defines the productivity of an affix as “the property of an affix to be used to coin new complex words” (2003, p. 55) and claims that some affixes possess this property, some exhibit it only to a certain extent, whereas others do not have it at all. Lehrer, in turn, claims that “the presence of neologisms to be evidence for the contemporary productivity of an affix” (1995, p. 135). Frequently, neologisms created through the attachment of an affix to an unprecedented stem can be accounted for by means of an analogy.

Langacker defines a constructional schema in a following way:

In CG [cognitive grammar], patterns of composition are described by constructional schemas, i.e., schematic symbolic assemblies representing whatever commonality is observable across a

set of symbolically complex expressions. Constructional schemas serve as templates for the construction and evaluation of novel expressions. They are precisely analogous to the expressions that instantiate them, except that some or all of the symbolic structures constituting the assembly are schematic rather than specific. (Langacker 2003, pp. 257–258)

In other words, new linguistic elements can be created by analogy to a most prominent element which then extends to accommodate new instances and results in the creation of a schema.

5. Analysis and discussion

Generally, pills can be divided into the following categories:

- (i) Huepills (e.g., *bluepill*, *redpill*, *blackpill*, *whitepill*, *purplepill*, *pinkpill*, *cyanpill*, *indigopill*, *greenpill*, *brownpill*)
- (ii) Beastpills (e.g., *dogpill*, *birdpill*, *swanpill*, *camelpill*, *wolfpill*, *horsepill*)
- (iii) Bodypills (e.g., *heightpill*, *dickpill*, *breastpill*, *balddpill*)
- (iv) Other pills (e.g., *breadpill*, *JBpill*, *weebpill*, *rapepill*, *racepill*, *jihadpill*, *ironpill*, *siegepill*, *schizopill*, *jewpill*)

The fourth category (other pills) lists examples which mostly pertain to manosphere discourse interests (esp. in advice pills subcategory). Other examples (mostly constituting hapax legomena) concerning general issues, e.g., *Kong-pill* or *truffle-pill*, have been mostly restricted to the “interest pills” subcategory as well as the “unclassified pills” subcategory, both mentioned below.

As mentioned, the original pills, i.e., *red pill* and *blue pill*, have been appropriated by manosphere members. Specifically, these terms were initially borrowed by the users of Reddit and 4Chan online platforms around 2013-2014 when the now banned subreddit r/TheRedPill was created. Around the same time and in these contexts *red pill* and *blue pill* changed both their formal (and in most cases turned into *redpill* and *bluepill* spelt jointly) as well as semantic profile. *Bluepill* started to signify a state of ignorance about the real structure of society. Those who take the *bluepill* effectively choose to remain ignorant about the alleged truth about men being discriminated against and continue to lead the life of a slave and victim of feminism. Taking the *redpill*, in turn, enables one to see the society for what it is and to realize the truth about the misery of men in the modern world and the dangers of feminism. “Feminism, the Red Pill theory tells its mostly young male adherents, is a cruel fabrication that causes personal unhappiness, societal disorder, daily chaos, global strife, and, worst of all, is the reason that you’re not having sex” (Read 2021). *Bluepill* and *redpill* have been thus borrowed from the fiction of the movie to the no less fictional and distorted worldview of an online community. They established a pattern which was followed by other items created by analogy.

At this stage, compound constituents to which *pill* was added were semantically restricted to terms designated colours. They are collectively referred to as *huepills* for this reason.

5.1 Huepills

Probably the most prominent of those new additions to the lexicon is *blackpill* which refers to the fatalistic acceptance of the truth realized through *redpill*. It is defined on the Incels Wiki as “a philosophy that men’s dating problems require systemic rather than personal solutions, if a solution exists at all. It has emerged in opposition to the redpill movement which instead promotes self-improvement and various dating tricks”.⁶ More specifically, *blackpill* refers to a “pessimistic, nihilistic or defeatist version of the redpill, where one accepts the fate nature has bestowed upon them, and resigns themselves to the fact that the world is naturally unfair and will always remain so”.⁷ This semantic cluster of basic colour terms is further extended to accommodate non-basic colour terms as adjectival bases of compounds (e.g., *pinkpill*, *purplepill*, *cyanpill*, *whitepill*, *indigopill*). *Pinkpill* is the female equivalent of the male *blackpill*. However, its “exact meaning remains in flux and as such doesn’t have a strict definition”.⁸ Just like purple can be seen as a mixture of blue and red, so *purplepill* is the mixture of *bluepill* and *redpill* worldviews. Looking for a more exact definition of the *purplepill* one can come across even more interesting morphologically novel creations: “The color purple is a median color on the red-blue continuum. As such, if someone says they’re semibluepilled, they are also purplepilled. Likewise, a semi-red-pilled person is also purplepilled”.⁹ Since cyan is a light shade of blue, the *cyanpill* worldview is a somewhat lighter version of *bluepill*, or falls between *bluepill* and *whitepill*. *Indigopill* is an enlightened version of *bluepill*. Someone *indigopilled* “knows more than you could ever want to or care to know”, but other than that, it is difficult to characterize and define if one is not privy to manosphere’s arcane knowledge.¹⁰ *Whitepill*, in turn differs radically from both *redpill* and *bluepill*. Unlike *redpill*, it rejects any angry attempts to fight the system. It does not recommend denial of uncomfortable truths either. Instead, the *whitepill* philosophy recommends acceptance of the current state of affairs in order to maximize the happiness of an individual. It can be considered a stoic version of *blackpill*. *Whitepill* is the only pill that leaves the possibility of an incel to be happy despite his inceldom open. Finally, the *brownpill* (also referred to as the *diarrheapill*)¹¹ is the most difficult to define as there seems to be no agreement about its meaning even within the incel community. It

⁶ <https://incels.wiki/w/Blackpill> accessed 10/02/2022.

⁷ https://incels.wiki/w/Pill_jargon accessed 5/02/2022.

⁸ <https://incels.wiki/w/Pinkpill> accessed 24/03/2023.

⁹ <https://incels.wiki/w/Purplepill> accessed 24/03/2023.

¹⁰ for more detail see e.g., <https://wykop.pl/wpis/55827895/redpill-greenpill-bluepill-indigopill-whitepill-br/> accessed 25/03/2023

¹¹ <https://incels.is/threads/the-brown-pill-brown-like-shit-the-mockery-of-the-blackpill-that-99-of-incels-believe-in-mostly-youngcels.329192/> accessed 25/03/2023

seems to be related to the notion of brown shirts worn by the Nazis or is juxtaposed with *greenpill* (cf. Read 2021). *Huepills* have been adopted by various communities populating the manosphere and obtained the general meaning of being awakened to facts about a particular problem and subsequently to be radicalized in some way.

5.2 Beastpills

Analogical extension led to the creation of another semantic cluster; this time semantically linked to animal species. Pills in this group are referred to as *beastpills*. Taking *beastpills* creates an awareness of a different sort: incels who take them become painfully aware of the alleged fact that some women would prefer to have a sexual intercourse with an animal, rather than an incel. *Beastpills* include *animalpills*: *dogpill*, *birdpill*, *swanpill*, *camelpill*, *wolfpill*, *gorillapill* and *horsepill*. The idea of the *beastpill* is further extended to include fictional creatures (*dragonpill*)¹² or even inanimate objects (*doorpill*).¹³

5.3 Bodypills

Another semantic cluster refers to *bodypills*. The semantic profile of *pill* in these compounds shifts even further from the prototypical meaning. The element of becoming aware of some uncomfortable fact remains in place, but here the realization concerns the alleged root of the incels' problems. Specifically, taking for instance a *heightpill* means realizing that it is one's height that makes one undesirable to women and causes incelhood. Incels are preoccupied with their height and are certain that short men (whom they refer to as *manlets*) do not stand a chance of being attractive to women. Similar concerns pertain to the size of one's penis (hence *dickpill*) or level of baldness (*baldpill*). There is an extension to this category which concerns the qualities incels find desirable and in fact indispensable in women. In this case the semantic root of the *pill* constituent disappears, as it is no longer linked to a painful realization. Rather, these elements are linked to the *bodypills* mentioned above in the fact that: (i) they refer to body parts, (ii) they refer to body parts which bear special importance for one's attractiveness and desirability. Thus, according to incels, women will never be attractive if they have small breasts (*breastpill*), flat backside (*asspill*) or narrow hips (*hipspell*).¹⁴

5.4 Other pills

Finally, there are other pills which defy clear classification or simply do not form clusters but function as spontaneous, often nonce formations. Some pills shift from diagnosis to prescription. *Dollpill* suggests using sex dolls as coping mechanisms. *Ironpill* philosophy advises men to stop trying to live up to women's ideals and pursue traditional masculine models

¹² <https://incels.is/threads/take-the-dragon-pill-we-are-no-longer-human.459190/> accessed 25/03/2023

¹³ <https://incels.is/threads/take-the-doorpill.326795/> accessed 25/03/2023

¹⁴ <https://incels.is/threads/women-with-small-breasts-shouldnt-exist.98168/> accessed 25/03/2023

instead. Elsewhere we also learn that the *ironpill* “most often refers to lifting weights and working out. Among the extreme right, being *ironpilled* refers to working out in preparation for the impending race war”.¹⁵

They are created via analogy to the existing elements and their meanings overlap with the core meanings of the semantic clusters described above. Those meanings range from becoming aware of some uncomfortable truth, through accepting it, denying it, becoming obsessed or fascinated by something. Some of those creations are low-compositional i.e., their meaning is difficult to interpret even though their analysability (i.e., the recognition of the constituent parts of those compounds) remains high (Bybee 2010, p. 45). For instance, *breadpill* refers to becoming awakened to anarchist and leftist ideology. Here *bread* refers to Peter Kropotkin’s book *The Conquest of Bread* (1892), a classic in political anarchist literature. *JBpill*, in turn, is relatively low on both compositionality and analysability scale. *JB* in this element stands for “jail bait” and *JBpill* is a reference to paedophilia. Another instance, *weebpill* refers to “the embracing of otaku culture by persons frustrated with how much the west has degenerated”,¹⁶ *rapepill* “is a term used within a subset of the incel community whose members identify as ‘rapecels.’ They believe all sexual interaction between men and women is (or should be) coercive”,¹⁷ *racepill* “is a subset of the blackpill which was popularized by various *ethnicens*, wherein they posit that a group of men suffer prejudice over conditions that are inherent to their race/ethnicity”;¹⁸ *jihadpill* refers to “accepting that the only way of accessing sexual and romantic relationships is by becoming a jihadist or committing jihad”.¹⁹

5.5 Pill as a radial category

All the “pills” mentioned above stem from the original, prototypical *redpill* and *blue pill*. Novel creations are formed by analogy to the original ones and serve as centres of new semantic clusters. More instantiations are added to these clusters based on the semantic similarity to central elements forming in this way radial categories. In a radial category, all subcategories are motivated directly or indirectly by the prototype, but there need not be any one characteristic that all of them share. The prototype is a semantically central sub-category that serves to motivate extensions to other subcategories via cognitive mechanisms such as metaphor and metonymy. Furthermore, the prototype tends to belong to the physical domain and is normally connected to more subcategories than any other. It is important to notice that the subcategories within a network are not necessarily discrete, nor must any given example

¹⁵ <https://www.adl.org/blog/the-extremist-medicine-cabinet-a-guide-to-online-pills> accessed 7/02/2022

¹⁶ <https://incels.wiki/w/Weebpill> accessed 7/02/2022

¹⁷ <https://www.adl.org/blog/the-extremist-medicine-cabinet-a-guide-to-online-pills> accessed 7/02/2022

¹⁸ <https://incels.wiki/w/Racepill> accessed 7/02/2022

¹⁹ https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-10/ran_incels_first_scan_of_phenomen_and_relevance_challenges_for_p-cve_202110_en.pdf accessed 21/01/2023

fit into one and only one subcategory. Instead, the subcategories serve as salient nodes in a web of interrelated meanings where any given item may be motivated by multiple subcategories (Nesset, Janda & Endresen 2011, p. 380). Nesset, Janda and Endresen (2011) make use of radial categorization in order to account for the proliferation of meanings of prefixes, in which they echo a well-known paper by Brugman and Lakoff (1988) in which they analyse the meanings of the preposition *over*. Both prepositions and affixes are highly polysemous and their meanings are distributed throughout multiple semantic domains, which makes their classification complex and difficult. Radial categorization proves most useful in accounting for such complex categories. Newly added members can also be accommodated into a radial category without risking methodological confusion. Geeraerts claims that “the radial network model describes a category structure in which a central case of the category radiates towards novel instances: less central category uses are extended from the center” (2006, p. 9). Radial networks are more concerned with “clusters of different senses rather than the structure of a single meaning” (Geeraerts 2009, p. 192). Radial networks are similar to the family resemblance theory of categorization in that their members are linked together by networks of interrelated senses, but do not necessarily share even one common feature (Taylor 2003). This can be clearly seen when comparing different senses of the lexeme *pill*. Thus, different meanings are linked together by networks of overlapping similarities where neighbouring elements share certain features and more distant elements lack a common denominator. In other words, the radial model of the classification of senses emphasizes a number of salient clusters to which other new members may attach as long as they share certain similarity with at least one member of the cluster. However, Geeraerts claims that

The complex and subtle interrelations that are revealed when we look at the features involved are not made explicit, and the whole radial network picture evokes a rather atomistic view of the meanings in a polysemous cluster. The radial network representation suggests that the dynamism of a polysemous category primarily takes the form of individual extensions from one sense to another. This may hide from our view the possibility that the dimensions that shape the polysemous cluster may connect different senses at the same time. (Geeraerts 2009, p. 195)

For this reason, I make use of the radial approach to categorization to account for the interrelated central as well as the newly emergent meanings of the lexeme *pill* (for a similar discussion on the emergent meanings of the prefix -post see: Pražmo 2020a).

Whereas there is no doubt as to the high productivity of this word-formation pattern, what remains unclear is the status of *pill*. Scholars recognize that the fuzziness of boundaries between morphological categories leads to terminological confusion (Mattiello 2022). Due to the fact that *pill* in combining forms is highly productive and appears in varied contexts makes it especially problematic for unambiguous classification. In some contexts, it functions as an outright lexeme – fully independent and semantically transparent. In others it is attached to

other elements forming compounds and thus gradually losing its autonomous status, morphosyntactic analysability and semantic compositionality. Still in other instances this shift from autonomy to dependence and the accompanying loss of both analysability and compositionality is even greater, and thus *pill* can be considered an affixoid. Some morphologists, however, argue that the distinction between an affix and an affixoid is unhelpful (Bauer, Lieber & Plag 2013, pp. 440–441). Others point to the terminological inconsistencies and overlap in the use of certain categories (see for instance Mattiello on splinters, combining forms, and secreted affixes: 2018). In this case, can *pill* be considered an affix?

The most important criterion in distinguishing a compound element from a suffix seems, therefore, its relatedness to a free form. If the constituent in question occurs with the same meaning as a free form, no additional affix should be assumed. If, however, the bound form consistently differs in meaning from the free form, one should assume the existence of an affix. (Bauer, Lieber & Plag 2013, p. 441)

The meaning of *pill* in novel creations certainly differs from the meanings accounted for in dictionaries, even if we take into considerations the prototypical meaning of *redpill* and *bluepill* cited above. Whether it is just a compound constituent, a fully developed affix or a form in transition (Mattiello 2022) is not of critical importance in this paper. What is, is the classification of its mushrooming clusters of meanings described above and graphically represented below:

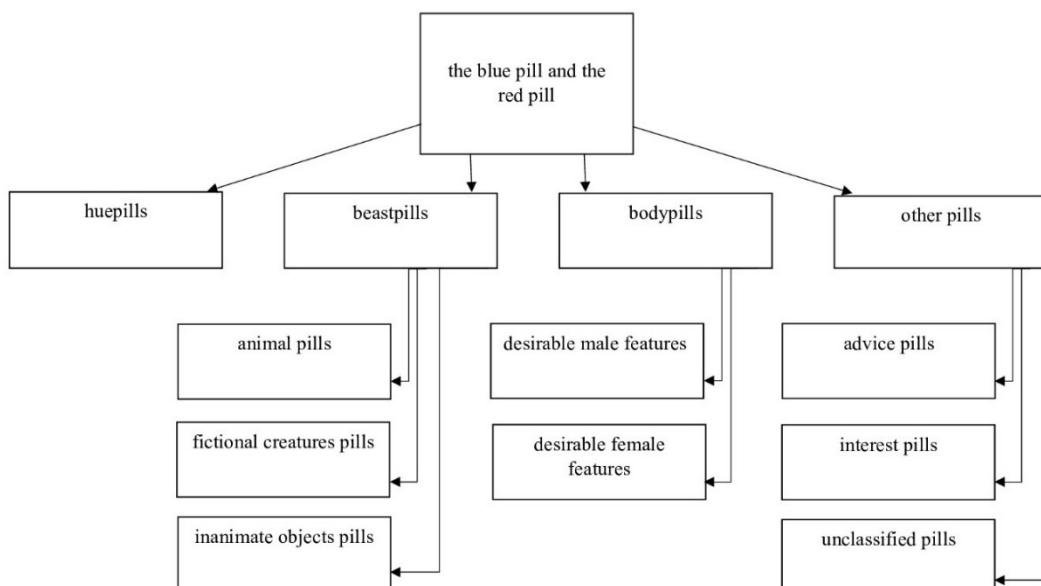


Figure 1. Radial categorization of the semantic clusters of *pill*.

This diagram represents the semantic clusters of the emergent meanings of *pill*. These novel creations form radial categories focused around central, nodal meanings and extended via word formation by analogy. This model is still open and it is more than likely that new senses will emerge and start grouping into new clusters forming more categories and expanding the lexicon of the English language. What later becomes of *pill* remains to be seen and investigated further.

5.6 Appropriation beyond the Manosphere

It is also worth mentioning that there are other instances of pills that appear outside of the manosphere and do not pertain to the themes underlying manosphere discourse. Those also defy clear classification, although they mostly refer not so much to becoming awakened to painful facts, but rather to developing an all-encompassing interest in something. Consider:

If you search pilled on Twitter, you will see people getting playfully radicalized about one thing or another every minute: Rory Gilmore–pilled, an affliction that makes a person want to act like the main character in Gilmore Girls. Or fish oil–pilled, which is nice, because fish oil supposedly has many health benefits. Or Opulent Tips–pilled, which is when you’re obsessed with the invite-only email newsletter about fashion. (Tiffany 2021)

The fact that these kinds of elements are created so readily and frequently points to the fact that “a highly productive word-formation schema often sanctions what are known as hapaxes (short for hapax legomena) or expressions that occur only once” (Traugott & Trousdale 2014, p. 267). Thus, this word-formation schema (*x-pill*) can be considered highly creative. Its increasing occurrence outside of the manosphere shows that *pill* has been already appropriated for the second time, and moved back from the discourse of the manosphere to general – mostly online – discourse. As far as the general semantic contribution of the pill is concerned, it shifted from the passive state or awareness, through the realization of a certain fact, through the active attempt to cope with this realization to even more remote meanings related to, e.g., becoming interested in and passionate about something. *Pill* started losing its sinister connotations and at the peak of its productivity is used ironically. Rather than signifying radicalization and extreme attitudes towards a certain agenda (cf. *siegepill*, *jewpill*) it is mostly used in a self-deprecating and ironic way which serves to distance the speaker from their newly made realizations and discoveries or announce unexpectedly developed passions and interests (Tiffany 2021).

6. Conclusions and prospects for further research

This paper provides an overview of the development of “a funny little suffix that makes all interests and proclivities sound more dramatic” (Tiffany 2021). It shows, that constructionalization is a phenomenon that can (and very frequently does) take place only

locally, i.e., in restricted language communities, at relatively short timespans. The development of new constructions (e.g., new stem-affix combinations) does not necessarily require the heavy machinery of grammaticalization theory and can be described as a sequence of steps that can be traced in a selected discourse over the course of several years. *Pill* as an affix has already marked its place in language and deserves recognition. Whether it will continue spreading further or gradually lose popularity, remains to be seen.

Lately, people have claimed to be pilled on Rihanna’s makeup line, on coziness as a concept, on cats sitting in gardens, on the song “Running Up That Hill,” on Kansas, on red sauce, on the country singer Hank Williams, or on the Peloton instructor Cody Rigsby. Now, pilled is an appropriate substitute for simply “suddenly becoming really into something,” in the same way that gate, in a wink to Watergate, gets attached to every scandal. It appears totally divorced from its radical roots, and is approaching the point where it means almost nothing at all. (Tiffany 2021)

This study has examined the complex semantic and morphological evolution of the lexeme *pill* as it develops from an autonomous lexical item to a bound morphological element exhibiting affixoid or even suffix-like properties. Through the lens of radial categorization, it has been demonstrated that the proliferation of *pill*-based formations is best understood not as discrete, isolated meanings but rather as interconnected clusters of related senses that radiate from prototypical exemplars such as *red pill* and *blue pill*. These prototypes serve as cognitive and semantic centres from which novel instantiations emerge via processes of analogy, metaphor, and metonymy, thereby forming radial networks of meaning that resist traditional, feature-based categorical boundaries.

Morphologically, *pill* displays a gradient transition: in some contexts it retains full lexical independence with clear semantic transparency, while in others it integrates more tightly into compound formations, gradually losing analysability and semantic compositionality. This shift challenges the conventional binary distinction between free lexemes and affixes, suggesting a continuum wherein *pill* assumes affixoid characteristics. Functionally, this evolution reflects the increasing productivity and specialization of *pill* in contemporary discourse, where it frequently operates as a formative element signalling ideological, cultural, or conceptual nuances.

Semantically, the clustering of meanings around central prototypes highlights the dynamic, network-like structure of polysemous categories. The radial model effectively accounts for the fuzzy boundaries and overlapping similarities that characterize the semantic field of *pill*, enabling the accommodation of emergent uses without methodological confusion. This approach foregrounds the role of cognitive mechanisms in category extension, revealing how new senses are motivated both directly and indirectly by the prototypical core.

The development of *pill* as a derivational affix and as part of a productive constructional schema may be the most spectacular example of linguistic innovation emerging from the manosphere. What underscores its unprecedented success is its spread beyond the relatively limited community into mainstream media and even into other languages, as documented cases of borrowings and loan translations – such as those in Polish (2021) – demonstrate.

However, this phenomenon is not isolated. Similar processes of new affix formation through compounding and constructionalization can be observed across the manosphere and its various subgroups.

For instance, in the jargon of incels, the *-cel* component of the lexical blend *incel* (involuntary celibate) has been extended by analogy to form a highly productive constructional schema, arguably even more productive than that of *pill*. This schema has generated a wide range of types of incels, including *arabcel*, *beancel*, *lackcel*, *currycel*, *francel*, *hapacel*, *italiancel*, *persocel*, *redcel*, *ricecel*, *turkcel*, *whitecel*, *mentalcel*, *autistcel*, *spergcel*, *disabledcel*, *manchildcel*, *stuttercel*, *acnecel*, *baldcel*, *chancel*, *cutecel*, *dickcel*, *eyecel*, *fatcel*, *framecel*, *haircel*, *heightcel*, *nosecel*, *thincel*, *uglycel*, *wristcel*, *earcel*, *oldcel*, *youngcel*, and many others.

Incels are preoccupied with being *mogged* – that is, intimidated by other men – through different types of intimidation, which mostly relate to physical appearance but also extend to other attributes. These types include *agemogging*, *buttmogging*, *dickmogging*, *harmogging*, *heightmogging*, *IQmogging*, *jawmogging*, *skinmogging*, *skullmogging*, *torsomogging*, and *voicemogging*. To counteract being *mogged*, incels engage in a variety of practices aimed at maximizing their potential in terms of appearance and other qualities, such as *looksmaxxing*, *gymmaxxing*, *moneymaxxing*, *statusmaxxing*, *surgerymaxxing*, *whitemaxxing*, among others (for a detailed description of these affixes see Prażmo 2024b) these efforts fail, they may experience a loss of *lifefuel* (motivation to live) and perceive their misery as *suicidefuel* or, more specifically, *ropefuel*.

As observed, *cel*, *mog*, *maxx*, and *fuel* have become integral parts of constructional schemas, some of which are more affix-like than affixoid-like. The products of these schemas display varying degrees of analysability and semantic compositionality and often arise through complex word-formation processes such as blending, clipping, or acronymization. These cases – and many others continually emerging in the discourse of the manosphere and online communities more broadly – deserve closer scholarly attention.

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