

Ling 566  
Dec 5, 2011

Variation in the English Auxiliary System

# Overview

- AAVE copula absence
- Why it's not phonological deletion
- Alternative syntactic analyses
- The winner: An empty element (!)
- Reflection on syntactic argumentation
- Reading questions

# Linguistic Argumentation

- The available data usually underdetermines the analysis (cf *to*)
- Sometimes appeals to naturalness can help
- Further constraints come into play when we try to make interacting analyses consistent
- Still, just about everything could be done differently if we're willing to change assumptions
- Data underdetermines the theory; difficult to argue that something must be analyzed a certain way

# An Unusual Case

- The verbless sentences in Chapter 15 provide a rare example where the data seem to force a particular kind of analysis
- Specifically: an empty element
- And we tried **very** hard to avoid it

# Notes on African American Vernacular English

- aka Ebonics, Black English, and various other things
- All natural languages are systematic
- This is just as true of stigmatized varieties as of prestige dialects
- The claim that AAVE has “no discernible rules” (columnist William Raspberry) is blatantly false
- This is not to deny the social and economic value of using a prestige dialect
- But prestige is not correlated with systematicity

# Missing *be* in AAVE

- Some AAVE sentences:

*Chris at home*

*We angry with you*

*You a genius*

*They askin for help*

- Like SAE sentences with a form of *be* missing
- Analogous sentences occur in many languages

# AAVE Also Allows Sentences With *be*

*Chris at home*

*Chris is at home*

*We angry with you*

*We're angry with you*

*You a genius*

*You are a genius*

*They askin for help*

*They're askin for help*

# Labov's Deletion Account

- Copula absence comes about when contracted auxiliaries (*'s* and *'re*) are deleted altogether
- Predicts that copula absence is only possible where contraction is: (strong claim)

*You got to be good, Rednall!*

*\*You got to  $\emptyset$  good, Rednall!*

*Be nice to your mother!*

*\* $\emptyset$  Nice to your mother!*

*It ain't a flower show, is it?*

*\*It ain't a flower show, 's it?*

*\*It ain't a flower show,  $\emptyset$  it?*



# Counterexamples to Labov's Account

*How old you think his baby is*

*\*How old you think his baby 's*

*How old you think his baby Ø*

*Tha's the man they say is in love*

*\*Tha's the man they say 's in love*

*Tha's the man they say Ø in love*

- The relevant examples here are with fully contracted 's
- These examples show that copula absence can't depend on copula contraction

# Our Challenge

- Provide a precise analysis of AAVE copula absence within our theory
- Account for all of the facts covered by the deletion account
- Deal with the counterexamples to the deletion account

# Two Possible Analyses

1. Add another initial symbol which is [HEAD [PRED +]], not [HEAD *verb*]:

$$\left[ \begin{array}{l} \text{HEAD} \\ \text{VAL} \end{array} \left[ \begin{array}{l} \begin{array}{l} \text{pos} \\ \text{PRED} \quad + \end{array} \\ \begin{array}{l} \text{SPR} \quad \langle \rangle \\ \text{COMPS} \quad \langle \rangle \end{array} \end{array} \right] \right]$$

2. Write a special grammar rule for verbless clauses:

$$\left[ \begin{array}{l} \text{phrase} \\ \text{SYN} \\ \text{SEM} \end{array} \left[ \begin{array}{l} \begin{array}{l} \text{HEAD} \left[ \begin{array}{l} \text{verb} \\ \text{FORM} \quad \text{fin} \end{array} \right] \\ \text{VAL} \left[ \begin{array}{l} \text{SPR} \quad \langle \rangle \end{array} \right] \\ \text{MODE} \quad \text{prop} \\ \text{INDEX} \quad \boxed{2} \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right] \rightarrow \left[ \begin{array}{l} \boxed{1} \text{NP} \\ \text{CASE} \quad \text{nom} \\ \text{AGR} \quad \text{non-1sing} \end{array} \right] \left[ \begin{array}{l} \text{SYN} \\ \text{SEM} \end{array} \left[ \begin{array}{l} \begin{array}{l} \text{HEAD} \left[ \begin{array}{l} \text{PRED} \quad + \end{array} \right] \\ \text{VAL} \left[ \begin{array}{l} \text{SPR} \quad \langle \boxed{1} \rangle \end{array} \right] \\ \text{INDEX} \quad \boxed{2} \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right]$$

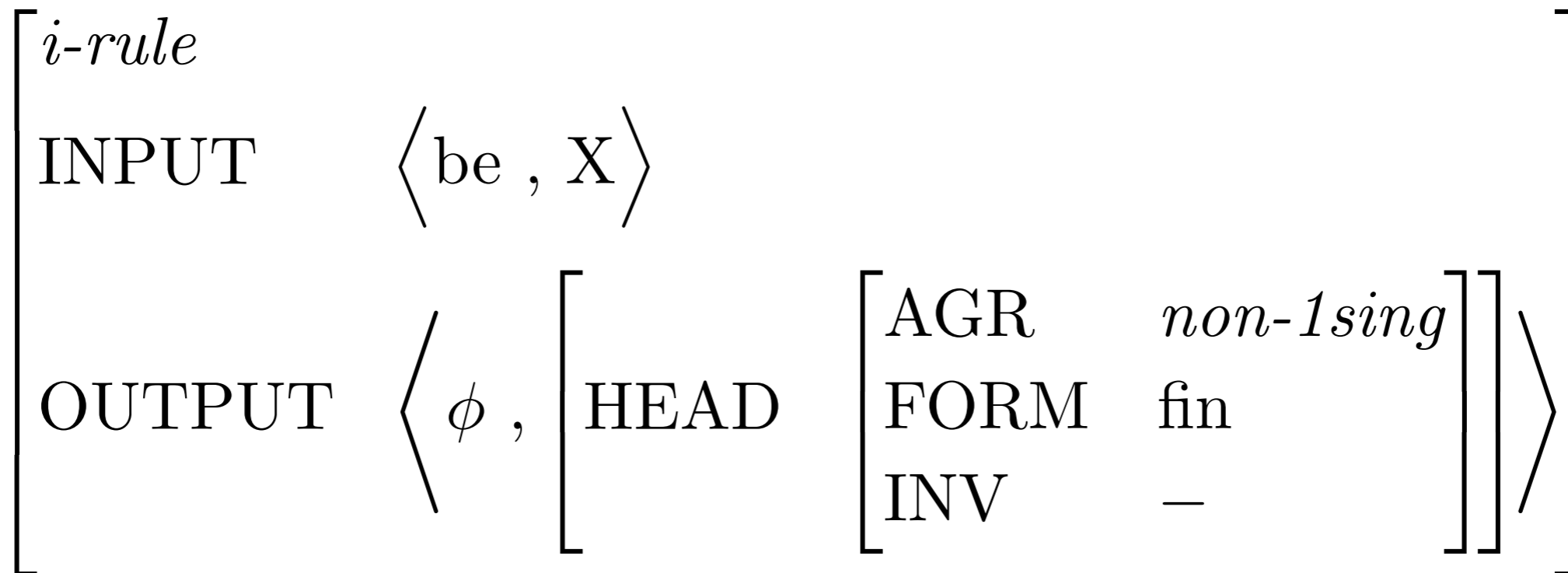
# A Counterexample to Both:

*How old you think his baby  $\emptyset$*

- LDDs require that a non-empty GAP list be licensed by a lexical head that is missing an argument
- Neither the initial symbol analysis nor the grammar rule analysis posits a lexical head corresponding to *is* that would license the gap
- If we posit a silent variant of finite forms of *be*, we solve this problem

# The Silent *be* Analysis

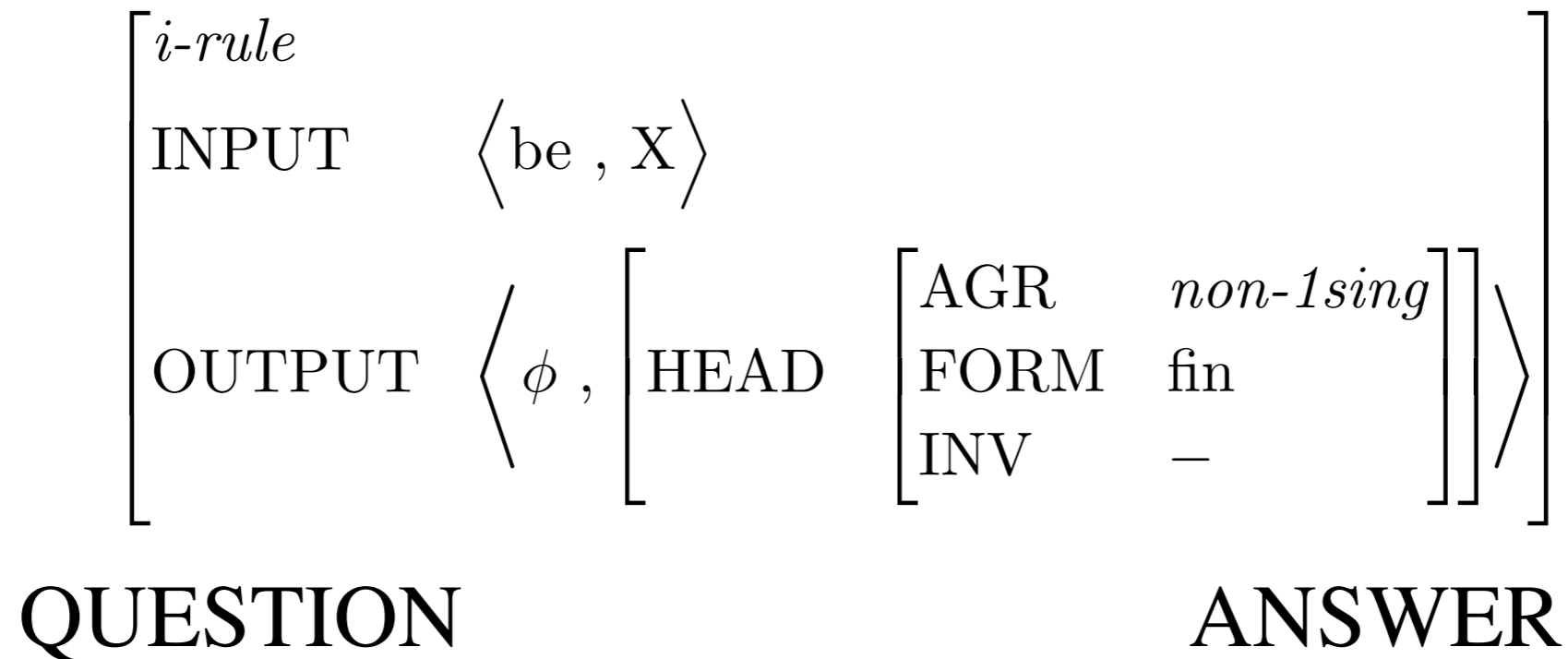
## Silent *be* Lexical Rule



- This is a highly specialized lexeme-to-word rule (i-rule)

# Some Questions About This Rule

## Silent *be* Lexical Rule



Which lexemes does it apply to?

Those spelled *be*

Why is the output [FORM *fin*]?

\**You got to Ø good*

Why is the output AGR *non-1sing*?

\**I Ø hungry.*

Why is the output [INV —]?

\**It ain't a flower show, Ø it?*

# How does this account for LDDs?

Silent *be* Lexical Rule

$$\left[ \begin{array}{l} i\text{-rule} \\ \text{INPUT} \quad \langle \text{be}, X \rangle \\ \text{OUTPUT} \quad \langle \phi, \left[ \text{HEAD} \left[ \begin{array}{ll} \text{AGR} & \text{non-1sing} \\ \text{FORM} & \text{fin} \\ \text{INV} & - \end{array} \right] \right] \rangle \end{array} \right]$$

Answer: The usual way. That is, the output of this rule (silent *be*) can have a non-empty GAP list. The fact that the verb is not pronounced doesn't matter.

# A Possible Objection

- Earlier, we touted the WYSIWYG character of our theory: everything justified by something observable.
- Doesn't positing an inaudible verb undermine that claim?
- Response
  - A word with no phonology is just the shortest possible word
  - Positing one such word, with restricted distribution is qualitatively different from allowing multiple "empty categories" that can appear in many places



# Conclusions

- Studying a variety of languages and dialects is important to discovering what formal devices are necessary to account for natural language
- Formulating a precise theory of grammar allows us to investigate in detail the differences between dialects and between languages
- We were able to make the argument for a silent verb because our analyses were precise, and the consequences could be worked through

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# Reading questions

- If we're going with an empty element now, why not use one for imperatives?
- Why isn't the [PRED +] thing the licensing head for the gap in those examples?

# Reading questions

- What's the solution to (26) on page 464? Do we make some NPs predicative or add a new feature?
- You wrong. CASSIUS CLAY  
Mohammed Ali
- Are there other "silent" lexical rules or phonology-less elements? Are these required for other languages or does AAVE appear to have a unique requirement?

# Reading questions

- How would the word *ain't* be treated in an analysis of AAVE? Any differently from *isn't* in SAE?
- What are pidgins and creoles?
- Is the only difference Labov's theory and the Silent Be Lexical Rule the predictability claim based on contraction?

# Reading questions

- So if we have a sentence like "*We be ok.*" Is the plan to just make lexical entries for *be* that says don't worry about agreement?
- For silent words in language variation, could we simply posit a feature named SILENT +/- that would treat it like the particular expected word is there, but it really isn't as to prevent a lot of grammar changes?

# Reading questions

- "The differing behavior of main verb 'have' across dialects can be captured with different specifications of one feature." But I don't think that this extra lexical entry of "have" could easily be accepted by an adult who doesn't already have it, and would make it seem like there's a larger difference here than we're mentioning.