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*  
*We angry with you*  
*You a genius*  
*They askin for help*

*Chris is at home*  
*We’re angry with you*  
*You are a genius*  
*They’re askin for help*
Labov’s Deletion Account

- Copula absence comes about when contracted auxiliaries (’s and it ’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 Ø good, Rednall!

  * Be nice to your mother!
  * Ø 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, Ø 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 ∅

Tha’s the man they say is in love
*Tha’s the man they say’s in love
Tha’s the man they say ∅ 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]`:

   
   \[
   \begin{array}{c}
   \text{HEAD} \\
   \text{VAL}
   \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c}
   \text{pos} \\
   \text{PRED} + \\
   \text{SPR } \langle \rangle \\
   \text{COMPS } \langle \rangle
   \end{array}
   \]

2. Write a special grammar rule for verbless clauses:

   
   \[
   \begin{array}{c}
   \text{phrase} \\
   \text{SYN} \\
   \text{SEM}
   \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c}
   \text{HEAD} \\
   \text{VAL}
   \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c}
   \text{FORM} \text{ fin} \\
   \text{SPR } \langle \rangle \\
   \text{prop}
   \end{array} \quad \rightarrow \quad \begin{array}{c}
   \text{1NP} \\
   \text{SYN} \\
   \text{SEM}
   \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c}
   \text{CASE} \text{ nom} \\
   \text{AGR} \text{ non-1sing}
   \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c}
   \text{HEAD} [\text{PRED } + ] \\
   \text{VAL} [\text{SPR } \langle 1 \rangle ]
   \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c}
   \text{INDEX} \text{ 2}
   \end{array}
   \]
A Counterexample to Both:

How old you think his baby Ø

• 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

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

- This is a highly specialized lexeme-to-word rule (i-rule)
Some Questions About This Rule

Silent *be* Lexical Rule

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTION</th>
<th>ANSWER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Which lexemes does it apply to?</td>
<td>Those spelled <em>be</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why is the output [FORM  fin]??</td>
<td>*You got to ∅ good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why is the output AGR non-1sing?</td>
<td>*I ∅ hungry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why is the output [INV −]??</td>
<td>*It ain’t a flower show, ∅ it?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How does this account for LDDs?

Silent *be* Lexical Rule

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{i-rule} \\
\text{INPUT} & \quad \langle \text{be}, X \rangle \\
\text{OUTPUT} & \quad \bigg\langle \phi, \bigg[ \text{HEAD} \bigg[ \begin{array}{c}
\text{AGR} \\
\text{FORM} \\
\text{INV}
\end{array}
\bigg] \begin{array}{c}
\text{non-1sing} \\
\text{fin} \\
-
\end{array} \bigg] \bigg\rangle
\end{align*}
\]

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.