Ling 566
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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

Reading Question (interlude)

- Why are standard dialects considered "better"/"smarter"? I was thinking that maybe people view the normative grammar as "better" because it is more detailed-perhaps more formal? Could varieties which remove / simplify / omit unnecessary bits be seen as "lazy"?

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 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 ∅ good, Rednall!

  Be nice to your mother!
  *∅ 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, ∅ 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*]:

$$
\begin{bmatrix}
\text{HEAD} & \begin{bmatrix} pos \\ \text{PRED} & + \end{bmatrix} \\
\text{VAL} & \begin{bmatrix} \text{SPR} & \langle\,\rangle \\ \text{COMPS} & \langle\,\rangle \end{bmatrix}
\end{bmatrix}
$$

2. Write a special grammar rule for verbless clauses:

$$
\begin{bmatrix}
phrase \\
\text{SYN} \begin{bmatrix} \text{HEAD} \begin{bmatrix} verb \\ \text{FORM} & \text{fin} \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{VAL} \begin{bmatrix} \text{SPR} & \langle\,\rangle \end{bmatrix} \end{bmatrix} \\
\text{SEM} \begin{bmatrix} \text{MODE} & prop \\ \text{INDEX} & \boxed{2} \end{bmatrix}
\end{bmatrix}
\rightarrow
\boxed{1}\text{NP} \begin{bmatrix} \text{CASE} & \text{nom} \\ \text{AGR} & non\text{-}1sing \end{bmatrix}
\begin{bmatrix}
\text{SYN} \begin{bmatrix} \text{HEAD} \begin{bmatrix} \text{PRED} + \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{VAL} \begin{bmatrix} \text{SPR} & \langle\, \boxed{1} \,\rangle \end{bmatrix} \end{bmatrix} \\
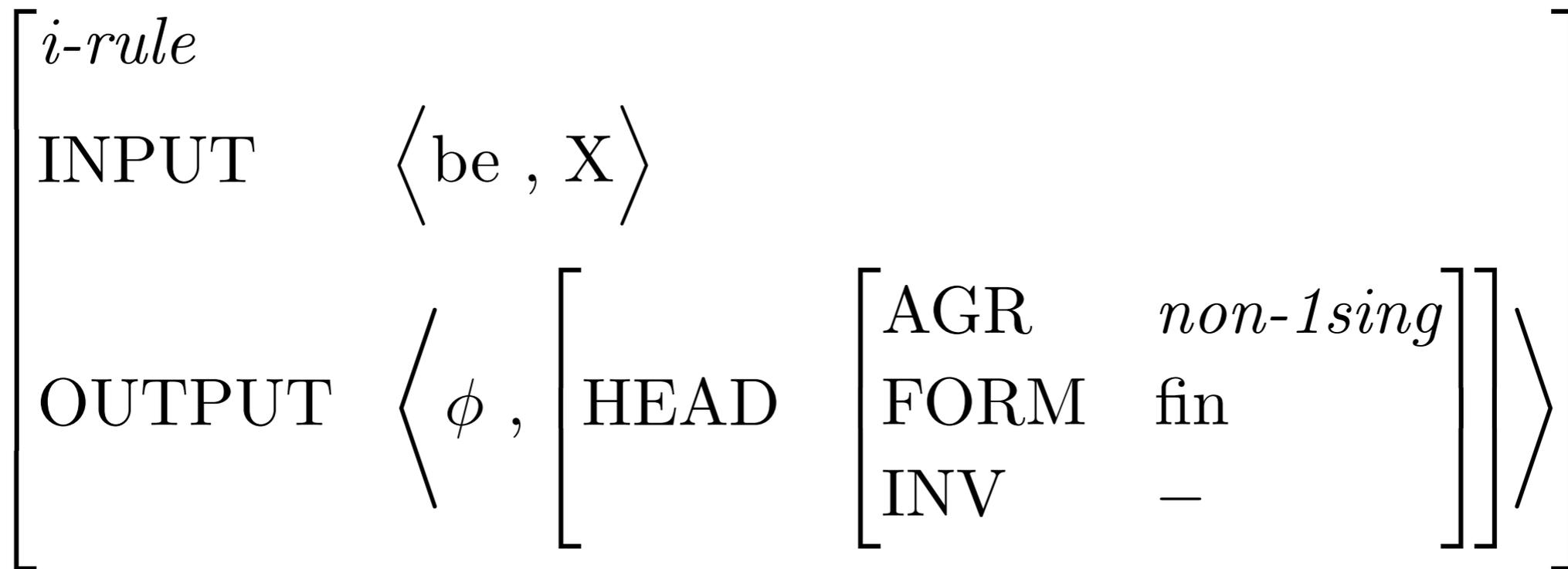\text{SEM} \begin{bmatrix} \text{INDEX} & \boxed{2} \end{bmatrix}
\end{bmatrix}
$$

A Counterexample to Both:

How old you think his baby ∅

- 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

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

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

Some Questions About This Rule

Silent *be* Lexical Rule

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

QUESTION	ANSWER
Which lexemes does it apply to?	Those spelled *be*
Why is the output [FORM fin]?	*You got to ∅ good
Why is the output AGR *non-1sing*?	*I ∅ hungry.
Why is the output [INV –]?	*It ain't a flower show, ∅ it?

How does this account for LDDs?

Silent *be* Lexical Rule

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

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

- I'm also a bit confused why we're attempting to use our grammar to describe a phenomenon in AAVE, after the footnote on p. 456 claiming that linguists place little stock in language/dialect distinction. If we wouldn't try to adapt our grammar to describe French, why would we modify our grammar, which we've formulated to describe SAE, to describe other varieties of English?

Reading Questions

- Isn't our grammar supposed to represent Standard American English? Why do we need to account for variations occurring in other dialects? At the beginning of the chapter, this explanation is given: "Variation is interesting in its own right, but studying it also helps us to ascertain which properties of our grammar we should formulate as or deduce from general principles." I don't see how the examples in this chapter have helped us in our description of SAE.

Reading Questions

- How many new rules/entries are we allowed to make before a dialect warrants its own grammar? How different must a dialect/ variety of a language be before it is fundamentally different enough to justify having its own distinct grammar? Not to say that AAVE is that different from SAE, just wondering where the line gets drawn.

- What are some examples of variation in other languages?

Reading Questions

- How could an HPSG analysis account for words that combine borrowed stems with native affixes, like *stylowat*, *glasnosts*, and *krautest*?

Reading Questions

- If there are words that have no silent form and words that have silent and non-silent forms, what stops us from positing that there is an entire class of words with only silent forms?

- Why does 'be' alone get the rights to the null "sound"?

- Is there a systematic way to find the position of invisible word in the sentence?

Reading Questions

- We made very strong claims about only following the surface form of an utterance -- does the silent copula have other theoretical ramifications beyond this narrow scope? Would we require such silent words for other languages (Arabic, Greek, ASL) where zero copula occurs, too?

Reading Questions

- Could a new initial symbol for missing copula sentences say that FORM fin is defeasible, in addition to adding a new phrase structure rule that only allows it in certain situations?

- Can a grammar have more than one initial symbol?

Reading Questions

- Did we ever come up with a way, in SAE, to account for optionally deleted "that" in a complementizer phrase (e.g. "That's the book I was talking about" vs. "That's the book that I was talking about")? Could this also be dealt with as a "silent word"?

Reading Questions

- I was a little surprised that this chapter didn't have anything to say about when be does appear in AAVE: to denote a recurring state. e.g., "Coffee be cold" means the coffee is typically cold versus "Coffee $\varnothing$ cold" means the coffee happens to be cold as the time of utterance. In order to add that form of be to the lexicon, do we simply need to add a semantic relation for "recurring"? The inflection also happens to be different, though I'm not sure whether this applies only the copula or to other verbs, too.