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
- Course evals
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)

  \[ \text{You got to be good, Rednall!} \]
  \[ *\text{You got to } \emptyset \text{ good, Rednall!} \]

  \[ \text{Be nice to your mother!} \]
  \[ *\emptyset \text{ Nice to your mother!} \]

  \[ \text{It ain’t a flower show, is it?} \]
  \[ *\text{It ain’t a flower show, ’s it?} \]
  \[ *\text{It ain’t a flower show, } \emptyset \text{ it?} \]
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 \([\text{HEAD } [\text{PRED } +]]\), not \([\text{HEAD } \text{verb}]\):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{HEAD} &: \text{pos} \\
\text{PRED} &: + \\
\text{VAL} &:
\begin{cases}
\text{SPR} : \langle \rangle \\
\text{COMPS} : \langle \rangle
\end{cases}
\end{align*}
\]

2. Write a special grammar rule for verbless clauses:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{phrase} &:
\begin{cases}
\text{SYN} &:
\begin{cases}
\text{HEAD} &: \text{verb} \\
\text{FORM} &: \text{fin}
\end{cases} \\
\text{VAL} &: \text{SPR} : \langle \rangle \\
\text{SEM} &:
\begin{cases}
\text{MODE} &: \text{prop} \\
\text{INDEX} &: 2
\end{cases}
\end{cases} \\
\text{1NP} &:
\begin{cases}
\text{SYN} &:
\begin{cases}
\text{HEAD} &: \text{PRED } + \\
\text{VAL} &: \text{SPR} : \langle 1 \rangle
\end{cases} \\
\text{SEM} &:
\begin{cases}
\text{INDEX} &: 2
\end{cases}
\end{cases}
\end{align*}
\]
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

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

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

Silent *be* Lexical Rule

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

<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><em>You got to ∅ good</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why is the output AGR <em>non-1sing</em>?</td>
<td><em>I ∅ hungry.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why is the output [INV −]?</td>
<td><em>It ain’t a flower show, ∅ it?</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How does this account for LDDs?

Silent *be* Lexical Rule

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

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

• How does AAVE express tense in copula clauses? Should the Silent be lexical rule add tense information?

• Isn't the overt copula in AAVE be?
Reading Questions

• What does "destructive modification" or "destructive transformation" mean?

• How is the silent copula analysis different from deletion?

• What is the difference between optional and silent?