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
- 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	*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:

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

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

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

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

Some Questions About This Rule

Silent *be* Lexical Rule

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

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

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

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

- What does the silent be look like in a parse tree? Do we preserve the surface representation of the string by omitting the leaf for be, like we do with the missing subject NP for the Imperative Rule, or do we somehow include the silent be as an "invisible" leaf?

- The textbook states, "We would expect any given language to have relatively few silent words"; are there other silent words in any variety of English?

Reading Questions

- If it is possible for a language to have silent words, could a language have silent morphemes?
- Considering the amount of languages that omit different parts of full sentences (Japanese, some Romance languages, etc) , could it be that a requirement of full specification as in English is just one case among other equal possibilities? Doesn't the insistence on a surface-oriented grammar make analysis of other languages more complicated? Is there a standard way to deal with omissions in HPSG or is it the rule?

Reading Questions

- I am wondering how a parser would handle silent words. How can it determine, given an arbitrary utterance, whether or not a silent word may be present before ruling it out as ungrammatical? Are silent words rare enough that it is not a large problem to check for those edge cases where they may be present?

- Are there parsers that guess at the dialect in question before including or excluding rules for grammar?

Reading Questions

- Might it be useful in some applications to have something like features for dialect-restricted lexical entries and rules, for instance [BRITISH +], [AMERICAN -] in the entry for have shown in (2)? It seems like that would be good for dialect detection, grammar checking, and maybe natural language generation.

- It makes sense that it is easier to just add new LRs to our standard English grammar to handle variations such as AAVE. However, don't we want a feature that identifies such LRs as members of specific dialects? Unless you are familiar with the speech traits of each dialect, there isn't an easy way to distinguish them is it?

Reading Questions

- What does "defective" mean when applied to lexical entries? It looks like a defective entry is a lexical entry that's missing some sort of information- whether it's semantic, syntactic, or phonologically. What's the "standard" for a lexical entry to have to not be defective?

- “Jackendoff (2002:131–132) [...] argues that lexical entries can be ‘defective’ in various ways. Some, like the dummy it (see Chapter11), have empty semantics. He argues that exclamations like *ouch* are syntactically defective, in that they cannot combine with other words into phrases. A silent word is phonologically defective.”

Reading Questions

- How are missing copula treated in other languages such as Russian and Hungarian? Is the silent copula analysis usually the best analysis for languages that have this phenomenon, like we saw for AAVE?

- At the end of the chapter, we conclude that the best analysis for the missing copula in AAVE is to treat it as present but silent. This works for AAVE since it is a dialect of English, but how would we approach the analogous phenomena in other languages? Say, in Arabic where the copula "be" isn't dropped because it doesn't exist in Arabic in the first place. In this case, I assume the grammar rules will be fundamentally different between languages, and we wouldn't try to explain a phenomena in language X in terms of language Y?

Reading Questions

- Also, do you think it's important to describe variants of English like AAVE in terms of a few, simple changes that will align well with our current analysis of SAE? Or do you think it's more important to take a perspective of building these kinds of variant analysis more or less from scratch, to not let our conceptions about Standard English influence our grammar fragment?

- Since AAVE is different than SAE, I don't think that the best grammar for AAVE would come out of adapting SAE rules to AAVE, but rather creating rules that fit how AAVE works. And how AAVE works, is like most other languages that have implicit copula, it doesn't assume there's a "hidden be" in between words, but rather have rules that license two parts to be joint together in a copula-less sentence, and you would deal with "How old you think his baby" by further changes in the rules, i.e licensing "his baby" as a a sentence fragment that can bind with think.

Reading Questions

- Pg. 453: "...studying [variation] also helps us to ascertain which properties of our grammar we should formulate as or deduce from general principles, and which ones we should treat as essentially accidental."

- As I interpret this sentence, a grammatical property which varies systematically across varieties should be described with general principles rather than specified in lexical entries. In contrast, a property that does not vary systematically across varieties of English is accidental and therefore should be treated as a special case. Is this correct?

Reading Questions

- Are sentences that do contain a copula, for example "He is wild" considered ungrammatical in AAVE? More generally, are there sentences that are grammatical in SAE but not in AAVE, and how would you test for this? The difficulty I see is that if a speaker of AAVE says that "He is wild" is grammatical, could that just be because they also speak SAE and its grammatical in that dialect?

Reading Questions

- Footnotes 9 and 14 note that perhaps some seeming inversion environments that allow silent copulas are not INV+ after all. Footnote 9 includes several examples where it is unclear where the copula should appear. What is going on in these examples?

  How old your baby?

  When your birthday?

  What they found there?

Reading Questions

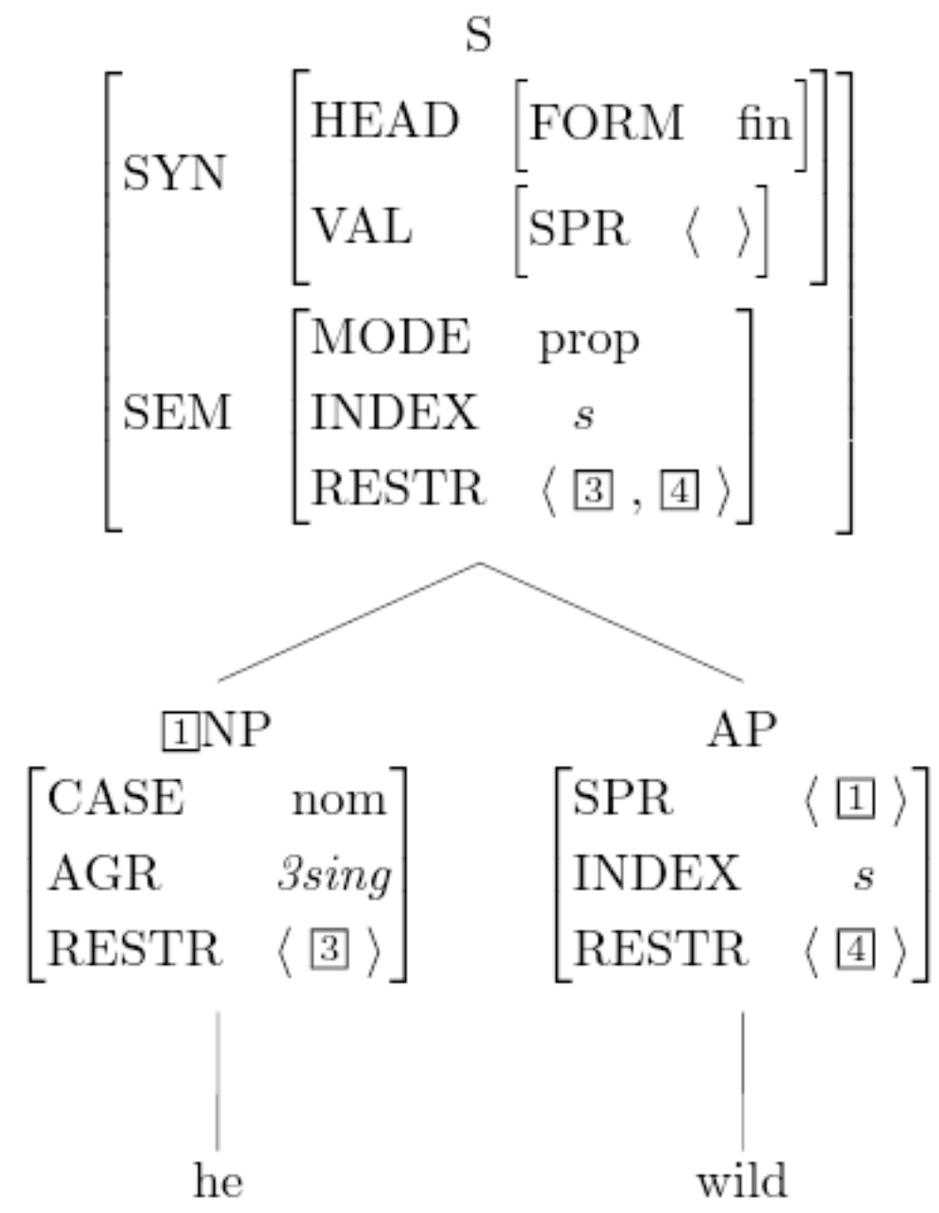
- I was surprised to see the text say "we want to allow strings like those in (13) as well-formed constituents in SAE"? Is that right? If so, why, as they don't fit my intuitions about grammatical SAE.

(13) a. It wild.
b. You in trouble.
c. Leslie the boss.
d. Somebody coming to dinner.
e. Jean interviewed by a reporter.

Reading Questions

- In the tree drawn in (21), S branches out to NP and AP. Typically, S has been branching out to NP and VP, where VP is considered to be the head. In the case of S -> NP AP, is AP considered to be the head?

(21)



Reading Questions

- I understand how using the silent be lexical rule solves the issues proposed by the other two methods in the chapter, but I don't really understand how one would know that a lexical rule is being used in order to make the sentence grammatical in AAVE. Wouldn't the lexical rule still need to be combined with some sort of grammar rule in order to know when the lexical rule can and cannot be used?

Reading Questions

- The Zero Copula Rule was posited to be incomplete because of the Long distance dependency analysis. From my understanding, the Long distance dependency requires a selecting head, and we would need an extra rule or number of rules to dovetail our current Long distance analysis to the now head-less phrase with subject and PRED+. Is it possible to write a rule that says the PRED+ could act as the head in copula-less phrases to get our Long distance analysis to work?

How old you think his baby?