Chapter 15

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
• Questions about HW 8
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’s*

*Tha’s the man they say ’s in love*

*Tha’s the man they say ’s 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. The initial symbol is [HEAD [PRED +]], not [HEAD verb]:

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

2. Write a special grammar rule for verbless clauses:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{phrase} & \quad \begin{bmatrix}
\text{HEAD} & \begin{bmatrix}
\text{verb} \\
\text{FORM} \text{ fin}
\end{bmatrix} \\
\text{VAL} & \begin{bmatrix}
\text{SPR} \langle \rangle 
\end{bmatrix} \\
\text{SEM} & \begin{bmatrix}
\text{MODE} \text{ prop} \\
\text{INDEX} \text{ 2}
\end{bmatrix}
\end{bmatrix} \\
\rightarrow & \begin{bmatrix}
\text{ INDEX 2}
\end{bmatrix}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{syn} & \quad \begin{bmatrix}
\text{HEAD} & \begin{bmatrix}
\text{PRED} + 
\end{bmatrix} \\
\text{VAL} & \begin{bmatrix}
\text{SPR} \langle 1 \rangle 
\end{bmatrix} \\
\text{SEM} & \begin{bmatrix}
\text{INDEX} \text{ 2}
\end{bmatrix}
\end{bmatrix}
\end{align*}
\]
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

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

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

Silent *be* Lexical Rule

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

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

Silent *be* Lexical Rule

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

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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