

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

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 \emptyset good, Rednall!*

Be nice to your mother!

** \emptyset 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, \emptyset 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 Ø

Tha's the man they say is in love

**Tha's the man they say 's in love*

Tha's the man they say Ø 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*]:

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

2. Write a special grammar rule for verbless clauses:

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

A Counterexample to Both:

How old you think his baby \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

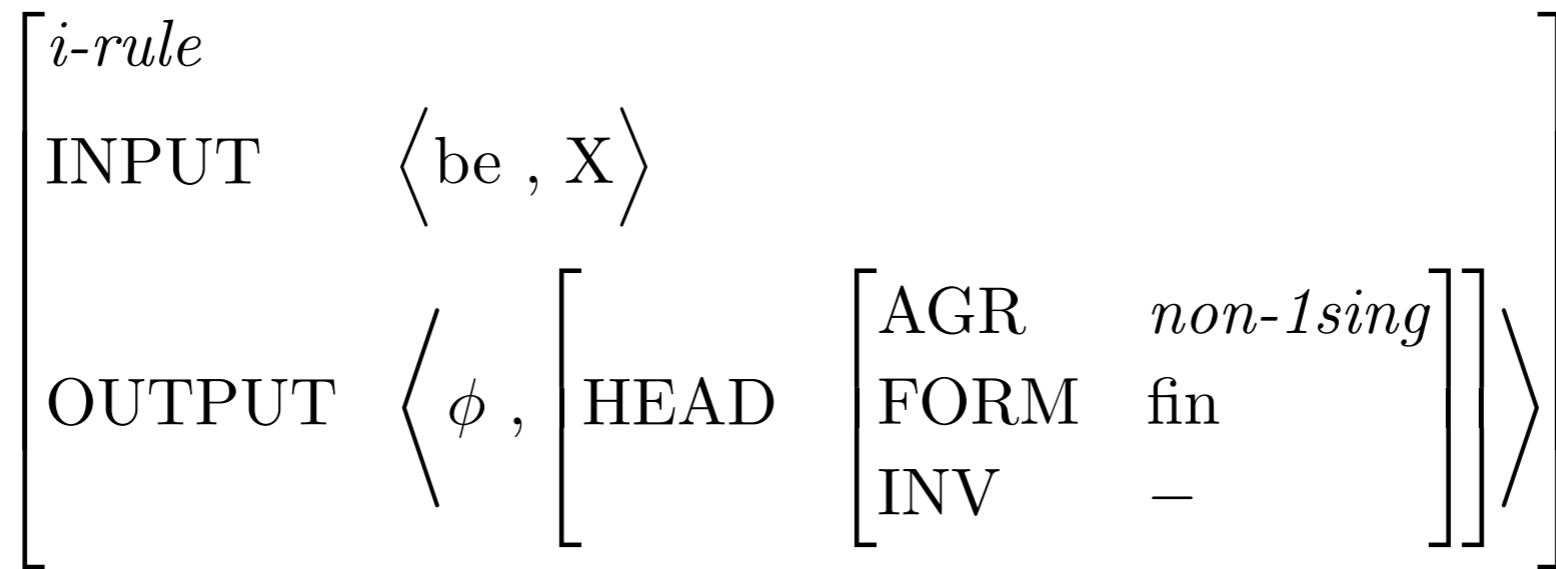
Silent *be* Lexical Rule

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

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

Some Questions About This Rule

Silent *be* Lexical Rule



QUESTION

ANSWER

Which lexemes does it apply to?

Those spelled *be*

Why is the output [FORM *fin*]?

**You got to Ø good*

Why is the output AGR *non-1sing*?

**I Ø hungry.*

Why is the output [INV –]?

**It ain't a flower show, Ø it?*

How does this account for LDDs?

Silent *be* Lexical Rule

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

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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