Ling 566
Dec 5, 2023

Variation in the English Auxiliary System

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Overview

Reminder:
Course evals!

- AAL 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

W RE: Data underdetermines theory, your current sense of syntactic analyses:

One right answer, we might not have found it yet

If we only look at grammaticality/paraphrases, always underdetermined

Could be that different speakers have internalized different analyses

Not sure that grammars are modeling wetware

None of the above

Total Results: 0

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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 Language

- aka AAE, AAVE, 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 AAL 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

Further readings on AAL

- Rickford, J.R. & R.J. Rickford. *Spoken soul: The story of black English*. John Wiley & Sons Incorporated, 2000.

- Lanehart, Sonja, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of African American Language*. Oxford University Press, 2015.

- Mufwene, Salikoko S., et al., eds. *African-American English: structure, history, and use*. Routledge, 2021.

Missing *be* in AAL

- Some AAL sentences:

    Chris at home

    We angry with you

    You a genius

    They askin for help

- Like GAE sentences with a form of *be* missing

- Analogous sentences occur in many languages

AAL 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

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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 AAL 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:

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

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
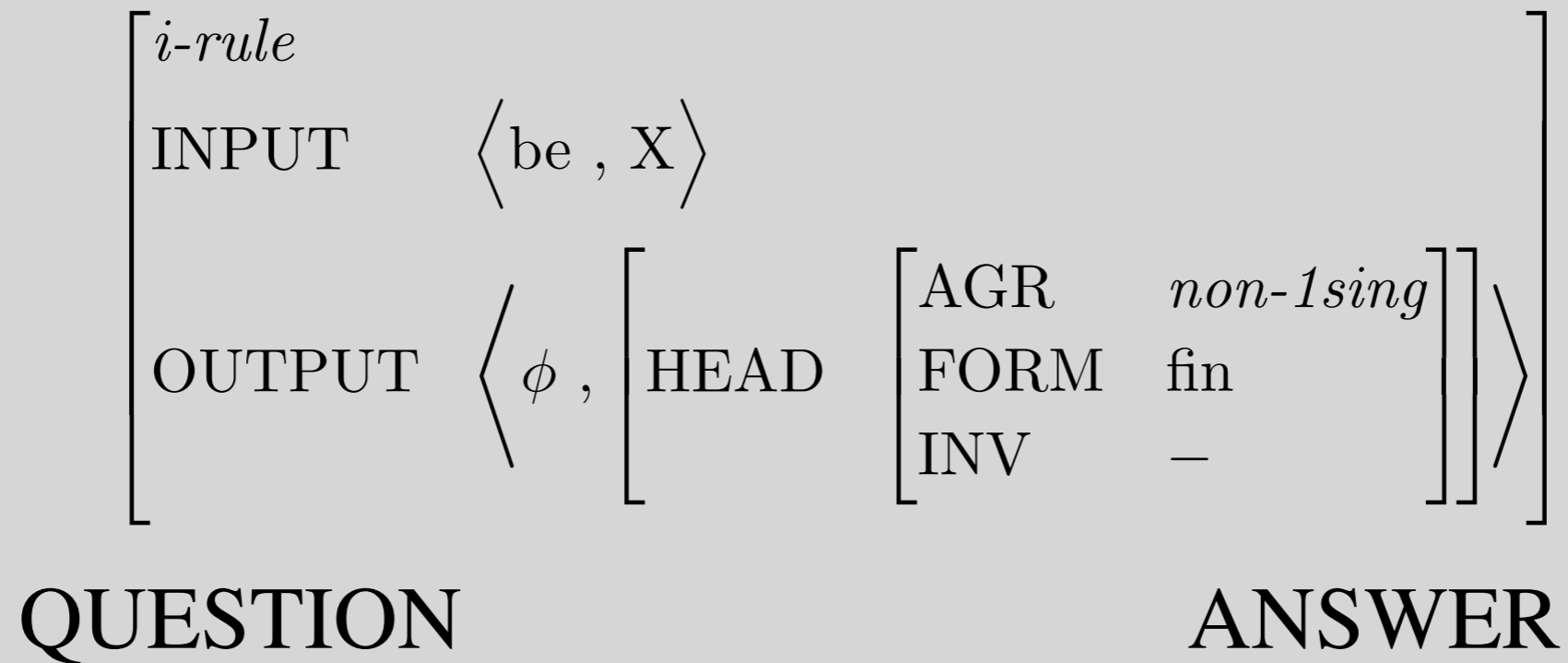
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The Silent *be* Analysis

Silent *be* Lexical Rule

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

- 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 $\varnothing$ good
Why is the output AGR *non-1sing*?	*I $\varnothing$ hungry.
Why is the output [INV –]?	*It ain't a flower show, $\varnothing$ it?

How does this account for LDDs?

Silent *be* Lexical Rule

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

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

W What do you think about empty categories?

Any/all okay. Empty categories are cool!

Traces of movement seem more plausible than a silent verb

A silent verb seems more plausible than traces

Don't like them

Total Results: 0

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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RQs: Data collection

- How were the grammaticality judgments gathered for this chapter? Were they taken from British English/AAVE speakers within or outside of academia, and would the opposite have made a difference, in your opinion?

RQs: Silent verbs

- Why couldn't we posit the same thing for the imperative rule, where there is a silent second person pronoun? Or any other non-branching rule? Does the silent copula only make sense since it's only silent in non-1sing contexts?

- What is the difference between the silent be lexical rule analysis and Labov's deletion account? Is it that the latter is purely a phonological null variant of the copular be? Whereas the former allows some feature specifications of the phonologically null 'be'?

RQs: *non-1sing*

- I'm curious about the *non-1sing* as a proposed AGR type in AAVE. Based on the text, it seems ot would require a restructuring of the current person-number hierarchy for SAE, since—although it sounds like it should include all non-first person singular combinations—it excludes third person. Would this mean that *1sing* and *non-1sing* now exist at the same level in the hierarcy? How would this affect the way the *agr-cat* functions for other purposes, such as subject-verb agreement?

RQs: Language change

- What're some examples of properties which we should treat as essentially accidental? What qualifies it as being accidental?

RQs: Language change

- How do you comment on the apparent quasi-standardization of certain features of AAVE within SAE as used in everyday by great numbers of non-African-American youths? (For example the use of uninflected copula in the progressive: "I be doing..." (Admittedly rare) and especially in constructions with like: It/I be like...). There is ample historical evidence of popular culture affecting language change (e.g. the spread of Copenhagen phonology in Denmark). In a sense, this incorporated AAVE has become an internal prestige dialect for a large group of people). Could we eventually see major AAVE features fully incorporated into SAE?

RQs: Language change

- At what stage in the development of a new language or dialect is it meaningful to start forming grammar rules for analysis? I can imagine AAVE would originally would have been influenced by speakers of other languages - in some ways like Singaporean English (albeit with a very different history), or varieties of European languages in colonized countries. AAVE has been established for generations now and it makes sense that rules would hold and sentences can be judged for grammaticality by native speakers, even with individual variations. What about newer dialects like "Miami English"? I imagine there might be so many irregularities that it would be hard to find patterns. But maybe that's the beauty of HPSG, that it can be used to form experiments even on brand new varieties of languages?

RQs: Modeling variation

- How are the boundaries between one dialect and another defined? Page 456 mentions that while there is considerable variation within AAVE, it also has many general properties that legitimise treating it as one dialect. Is there any consensus on what kind of properties should variations have in common in order to be considered a dialect?

RQs: Modeling variation

- In our grammar, are we trying to cover every part of English, or are we focused on a specific variety? Furthermore, does the grammar matrix specify different varieties or is it a mix of everything?

RQs: Modeling variation

- When syntacticians set out to formalize a language, how do they bound it? Would one devise a grammar that describes both SAE and AAVE? Could you attempt to create an even more general representation of English? If you do, where does it begin to break down due to differences in dialects?

RQs: Modeling variation

- Let's say you wanted to build a grammar that licenses grammatically acceptable phrases in AAVE. Let's say you have already painstakingly defined a gramma for SAE. Would you build a brand new grammar distinct from SAE (but porting over common rules)? Or, would you attempt to account for it in the SAE grammar?

RQs: Modeling variation

- Let's say you wanted to describe two similar/related languages in the same grammar (e.g., SAE and AAVE). Would you specify that certain constraints only apply when in a certain context?

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RQs: Modeling variation

- How standardized a variation of language has to be to get treated as one dialect? For example, people who speak Hong Kong English sometimes omit 3sing -s, which is considered "incorrect", but it seems like this happens often enough to be a pattern. Do we just need new grammars for all dialects? When do we consider ungrammatical phrases not covered by some grammar, if we can create new grammar for this possibly new dialect?

RQs: Modeling variation

- When building a corpus from the web, it may be difficult to know which dialect of English is being used. How do maintainers of these systems accept or reject text that doesn't meet their criteria? Is that all done with human verification before making it into the system?
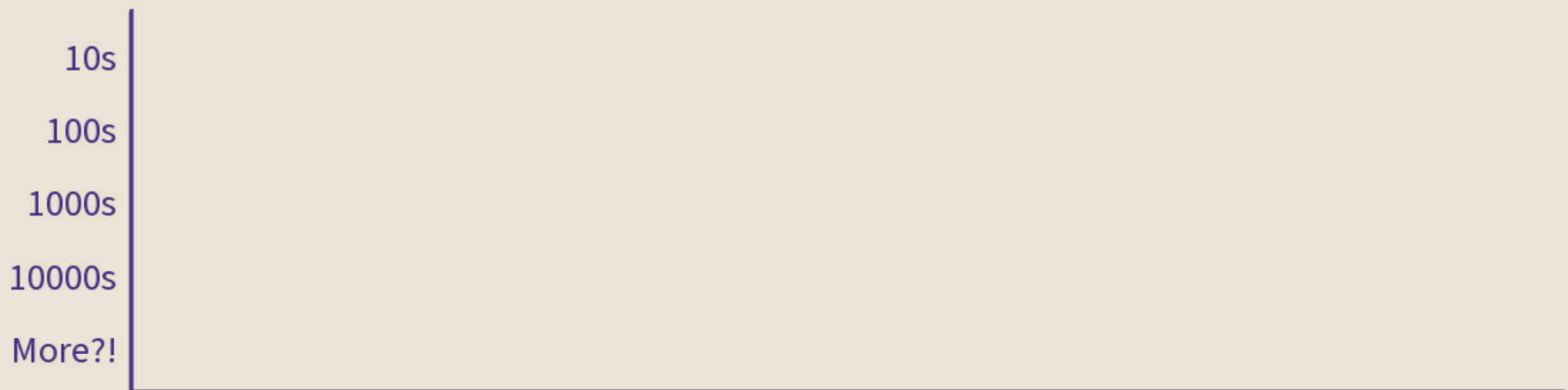
RQs: Crosslinguistic applicability

- Whenever we encounter or discover new phenomena other than the current English version of HPSG, we would need to rely on extra rules that HPSG does not handle for now. If this is the case, I am curious about the limitation of the multilinguality of HPSG.

How many more analyses of interacting phenomena do you think we'd need to get to broad coverage of English?

10s

100s

1000s

10000s

More?!

Total Results: 0