

# Chapter 14

## Variation in the English Auxiliary System

### 14.1 Lecture notes

#### Chapter 14

##### I. English auxiliaries over time

- The English auxiliary system has a long history of change that is extremely well documented. It makes a nice case study of syntactic change.
  - More to the point, it is still changing, as reflected by variation in the modern language.
  - One change is that all verbs used to exhibit negation and inversion while now only some do. [Slides:1]
  - In our grammar, we use the feature AUX to encode the class of verbs that exhibit these and other NICE properties. ‘AUX’ is mnemonic for auxiliary, but the class of [AUX +] words doesn’t exactly coincide with the intuitive notion of a ‘helping verb’.
- ? What are some examples of the mismatch?
- *To*, a complementizer, is [AUX +] because it can license ellipsis. [Slides:2]
  - Some uses of main verb *have* are [AUX +] in some varieties. [Slides:3]

- Modal uses of *need* and *dare*. [Slides:4]
- This sort of mismatch is characteristic of a linguistic system in transition. These are aspects of the language that seem likely to continue changing for some time.

## II. AAVE

- One dialect of English whose auxiliaries are especially different from what is claimed in Chapter 13 is African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Among the differences:
  - zero copula [Slides:5]
  - *ain't* as the most common negative form of *be*
  - invariant *be* [Slides:6]
  - 3rd singular *-s* usually absent [Slides:7]
  - other aspectual markers (*BIN*, *done*, *fin*)
- Almost nobody but linguists seems to believe that this is systematic and worth studying. But it is (or at least as much so as prestige dialects).
- It is important to separate out the scientific/linguistic issues from the political/economic ones: linguistically, there is no basis for saying one dialect is right and the other wrong; economically, there are powerful reasons for making people learn the prestige dialect.
- So, everyone (including the Oakland School Board) agrees that AAVE speakers should learn SAE (Standard American English).
- The factual issue of pedagogy that came up in the Oakland case was whether the use of the primary dialect in teaching the prestige dialect is a help or a hindrance. The data on this issue are meager (especially when compared to the strength of opinions).
- We're concerned with giving a precise description of certain aspects of AAVE. This has political implications only because so many people think AAVE is just sloppy talk.

## III. Zero Copula in AAVE

- Our analysis of auxiliaries in AAVE only deals with the zero copula.

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- There are five types of analysis mentioned in the chapter:
    - (i) a silent variant of *be*
    - (ii) a syntactic deletion rule
    - (iii) a phonological deletion rule
    - (iv) an additional initial symbol
    - (v) a special grammar rule for generating verbless sentences
  - We could formulate (i) in our theory, but prefer not to on methodological grounds; in addition, there are several empirical arguments against it.
  - Our theory doesn't allow (ii), and it is subject to some of the same empirical counterarguments as (i).
  - Our theory has said nothing about phonology, so (iii) could be compatible with it. But if phonological deletions are allowed, it weakens the claim that we don't allow syntactic deletions.
  - Our theory would allow (iv), but such an analysis would incorrectly predict that zero copula sentences are not allowed as subordinate clauses. (In addition to missing subordinate clauses, an analysis in terms of a new initial symbol would also have a hard time ruling out zero copula with *I*.)
  - So we opt for (v) and posit a special grammar rule for zero copulas. [Slides:8]
    - ? Why is the right hand daughter specified as [PRED +]? (To capture the generalization that the class of elements that can appear in this construction are the same as those that can be the complement of *be*.)
    - ? How does this rule account for both matrix and subordinate zero copula clauses? (The HEAD specification on the left hand side of the rule is the same as in head specifier phrases with finite VPs as heads.)
    - ? The SEM specification on the left hand side of the rule is necessary because the Semantics Inheritance Principle doesn't apply. Why don't we need to do the same thing for the Semantic Compositionality Principle? (Because the SCP applies to phrases licensed by any rule, not just headed ones.)

- One major advantage of this analysis is that it predicts, without any further stipulations, that zero copulas will be impossible in certain places (e.g. emphasis, ellipsis, *wh*-questions).
- The argumentation around the emphasis case is somewhat subtle:
  - A proponent of the deletion account might say that linguists have never observed deleted emphasized copulas because they can't tell that they're emphasized.
  - However, emphasis bears semantic information, so if *is* can be emphasized and then deleted, you should be able to get the meaning of *Allah is god* as one reading of *Allah god*.
  - This isn't the case, so deletion accounts have to say something to prevent emphasized verbs from being deleted.
  - On the present analysis, there never is any verb to emphasize, so the result follows automatically.
- Our analysis also has the advantage that it makes AAVE look like other languages with zero copulas: Labov's deletion account relates AAVE copula absence to copula contraction, but copula contraction is an English-specific property. The zero copula rule does not rely on any such English-specific motivation and therefore could be extended to copula absence in Russian or Hungarian.
- Chapter 14 suggests that Labov's copula deletion analysis might be a good model of what happened historically, even while arguing against it as a synchronic model of AAVE. However, the historical evidence (see Rickford 1998) shows that the change went the other way: from categorical copula absence in early AAVE to variable copula presence in the modern language.