

Chapter 15

# Variation in the English Auxiliary System

# Linguistic Argumentation

- The available data usually underdetermines the analysis, e.g.  
*Why don't we call infinitival *to* a preposition?*
- Sometimes appeals to naturalness/intuitiveness can choose among analyses
- Some further constraints come in when we try to keep all of our analyses consistent, e.g.  
*We want infinitival *to* to be a verb so it can be [AUX +]*
- Still, just about everything could be done differently, if we're willing to change certain assumptions
- Therefore, the available data also underdetermines the theory
- It's very difficult to argue that something must be analyzed in a particular way.

# An Unusual Case

- The verbless sentences discussed in Chapter 15 provide a rare example of a case where the data force a particular kind of analysis
- Specifically, the analysis of such sentences requires positing empty elements
- And we tried **very** hard to avoid it!

# Aside 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 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 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

# One Possible Analysis

The initial symbol is [HEAD [PRED +]], not [HEAD *verb*]:

$$\left[ \begin{array}{l} \text{HEAD} \\ \text{VAL} \end{array} \left[ \begin{array}{l} \textit{pos} \\ \text{PRED} \quad + \\ \text{SPR} \quad \langle \rangle \\ \text{COMPS} \quad \langle \rangle \end{array} \right] \right]$$

What's wrong with this analysis?

# Problems with the Initial Symbol Analysis

- AAVE verb absence is not limited to main clauses:

*If you Ø alone, watch out!*

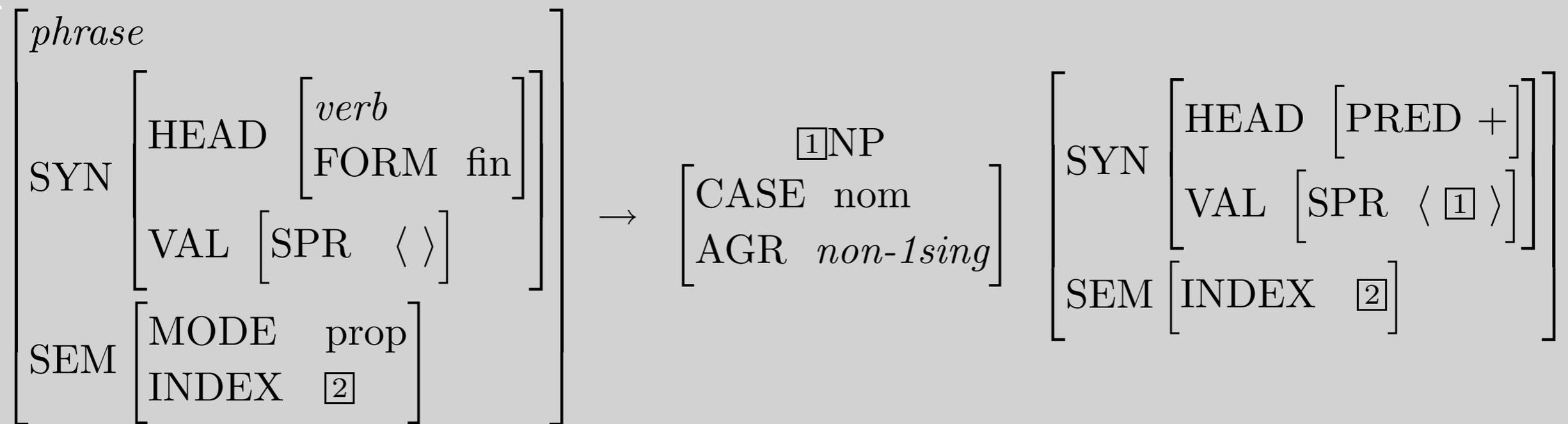
*The man she Ø lookin for ain't here.*

- LDDs in sentences without copulas would not be covered:

*How old your baby?*

# Another Possible Analysis

Write a special grammar rule for verbless clauses:



# Assessment of the Grammar Rule Analysis

- Does it handle the embedded examples?

Yes: the rule can apply anywhere a finite  $S$  can occur.

- Does it handle the LDDs?

No: It still doesn't handle

*How old you think his baby  $\emptyset$ ?*

# The Crucial Example

- Why won't the grammar rule analysis license *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
- The grammar rule analysis of the AAVE zero copula doesn't have 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

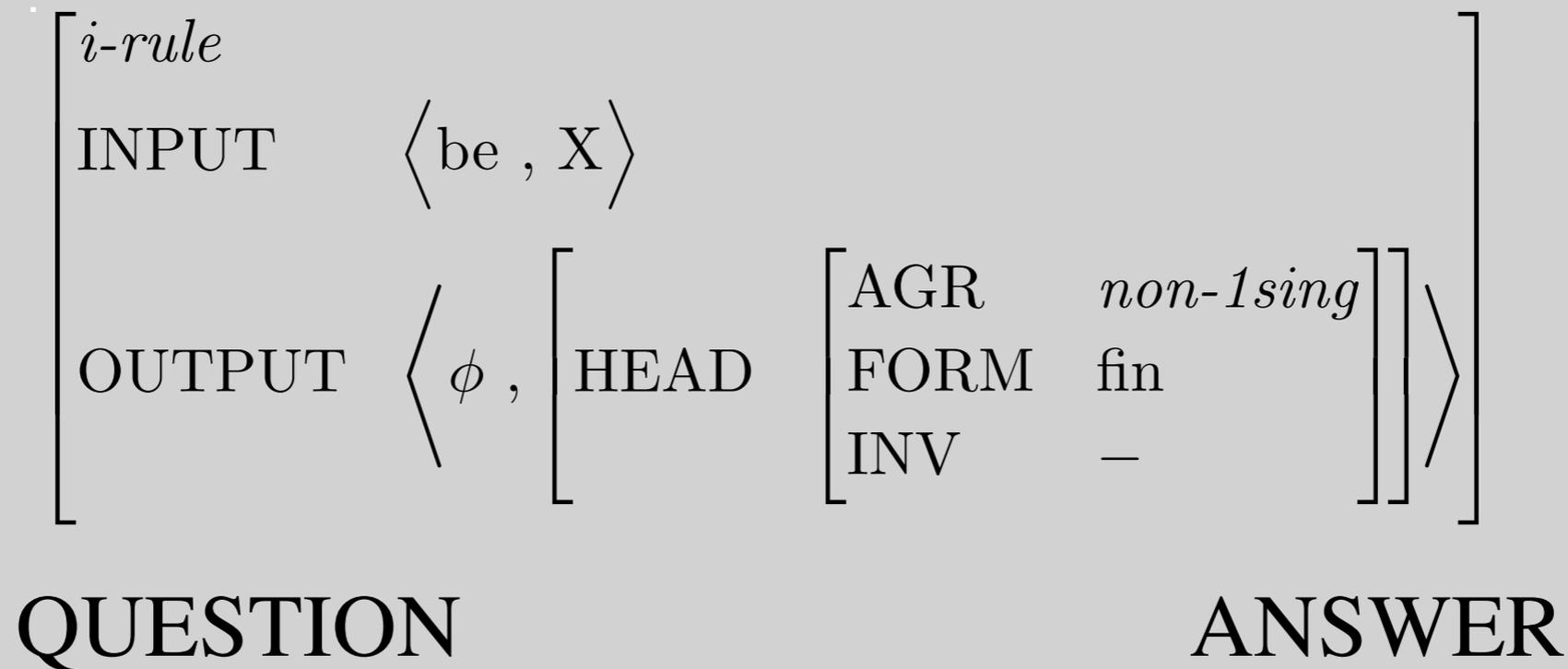
## Silent *be* Lexical Rule

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

- This is a highly specialized lexeme-to-word rule (i-rule)
- A similarly specialized rule would be used to account for *am*

# Some Questions About This Rule

## Silent *be* Lexical Rule



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 AGR [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