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Overt Copulas in African American English Speaking Children

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1. The Issue: Distribution of Overt vs Zero Copulas in AAE

The goal of this paper is to suggest a linguistically based principle to account for the distribution of overt vs. zero copulas in African American English. We will propose an approach based on Feature Interpretability and the Principle of Full Interpretation (Chomsky 1995). We suggest that, in Present Tense contexts, the copula is overt in presentational (as opposed to predicational) sentences to support the presence of a situation argument in INFL.

This paper will be concerned with the language stage of a 5 year old population of African American English (AAE) speakers from the New England area, as reflected in the database compiled by the Child Language Research Laboratory (CLRL), under the direction of Prof. Harry Seymour at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

1.1 Introduction

Like other natural languages,¹ African American English (AAE) manifests the presence of zero copula. An example can be found in (1) below:

(1) He big. (JAA, utterance 12)²

Overt copulas can also be found. They appear in Past Tense utterances, as in (2) below:

(2) And da man was in the bathroom. (BRS, utterance 96)

and they are also favored after *-t*, which is known as phonological trigger:

(3) It's ice outside. (SES, utterance 61)

But, is there any principle behind this behavior? In the following section we will consider previous approaches that have been or could be suggested to account, in a principled way, for the behavior of overt/zero copulas in AAE. We will show that they do not actually make the right predictions. Next we will present our own analysis.

1.2 Some potential analyses

One of the first factors to be observed in the literature was that the presence of (3sg present tense) overt copula was favored after a phonological context of a voiceless alveolar (i.e., *-t*, as in (3) above). That lead some authors (e.g., Labov 1969; Wolfram 1969; Wyatt 1991) to postulate that the copula can be phonologically triggered.

However, such phonological environment does not always induce the presence of an overt copula. Contexts like that of (4) consistently produce zero copula:³

(4) What her name? (SHK, utterance 128)

Another line that could be explored is the contrast between Individual Level (IL) and Stage Level (SL) predicates. There has been a number of works in the literature pointing out how those two types of predicates manifest different behavior.⁴ It could be the case that IL predicates use the zero version of the copula, while SL predicates use the overt one, or viceversa. However, according to our database, both types of predicates show up with either overt or zero copula, as in the examples in (5) and (6) below. Consequently, the contrast IL/SL does not seem to be the relevant one for overt/zero copula.

(5) a. He big. (JAA, utt. 12) IL predicates
b. he's big (LOH, utt. 103a)

(6) a. they on the horsies (CHR, utt.435) SL predicates
b. the door is a little open (QUP, utt. 238)

1.3 A New Hypothesis

Our account for the overt/zero copula contrast is based on the following hypothesis:

(7) Overt copula is present to support the presence of a (contentful) feature in INFL.

A possible feature residing in INFL is Past Tense (as in (2) above).. According to (7), then, the presence of a Past Tense feature in INFL would make it an obligatory context for the presence of the overt copula (excepting, of course, the cases where the past copula would not be overt for independent reasons, such as gapping). This can account for the high proportion of overt copulas in past tense contexts: out of 586 cases of past tense copulas found in the our database, 576 were overt copulas. If 'present tense' morphology is considered absence of tense (see Déchaine 1995), then the copula may be \emptyset (if no other feature is present in INFL). Cases of emphatic copula may be

was tallied according to the zero or overt copulas. The past tense utterances were also tallied separately. When the context of an utterance was not clear, the actual transcript was checked for the preceding and following contexts. Interexaminer reliability was conducted for 20% of the material. Cases which were not clear as to which predicate category they would correspond were tallied separately.

3. Results and Discussion.

3.1. Results from the database.

The data were examined across all 24 children. Table 1 depicts the results corresponding to 'present tense' utterances. Table 2 depicts the results for 'past tense'.

In table 1 the results clearly indicate a preference of presentational cases for the overt copula (278 cases of overt copula vs. 8 of zero copula), as predicted by the hypothesis in (7) developed in section 1. As we already mentioned, there is no contrast in the behavior of IL predicates vs SL predicates with respect to the presence of overt/zero copula.¹²

The contrast between zero and overt copula in past tense utterances (Table 2.) clearly indicates the preference for the overt copula in these contexts, again as predicted by the hypothesis in (7).¹³

The results from the database, thus, clearly support the hypothesis in (7), developed in section 1.3.

Table 1. Number of overt and zero copulas distributed by the type of predicates in the language samples of 5 year-old AAE speaking children

	Overt	Zero	
Presentational	278	8	
Predicational (total)	733	254	
Predicational (Stage L):	253	80	
Predicational (Indiv.L):	480	174	
Total	1011	262	1273

Table 2. Number of overt and zero copulas in past tense, in the language samples of 5 year-old AAE speaking children

	Overt	Zero	
Past Tense	576	10	586

3.2. The experiment

A pilot study was designed to elicit the production of overt copulas in presentational contexts. Children were presented with pictures showing an unexpected object in an unexpected situation (e.g., an apple on someone's head instead of a hat).

- (11) The experimenter said: "Look at the lady wearing a hat."
The expected answer was: "No, (that's/it's not a hat) that's/it's an apple!"

The results strongly confirmed the hypothesis presented here, namely that presentational contexts are an obligatory context for the presence of overt copula: given the number of unrelated responses (44) and the number of zero copulas (namely, 0), the cases of overt copulas (60) represent a 100%, which fully confirms our hypothesis.

(12) Results

Total responses	103
Overt copulas	60
Zero copulas	0
unrelated	44

5. Conclusions

In this paper, we have shown that there is evidence for a rule governed approach to the distribution of overt vs zero copulas in AAE: under a general theory of feature interpretability, INFL must be overt when it hosts some sort of contentful feature. In particular, we argued that INFL carries the *situation* argument in presentational sentences, which forces the presence of an overt copula. We also suggested that presentational sentences are a subcase of the more general phenomenon known as *theticity*, and showed how other cases of thetic sentences also manifest overt copula.

More importantly, we have identified a context for the obligatory presence of (present tense) copula, and we have been able to successfully reproduce it with experimental data.

The results and hypothesis presented here will hopefully contribute to set the difference between language disorder and language difference more accurately.

Endnotes

¹A wide variety of languages (among them, Russian, Hebrew, Arabic) have zero copulas. However, the particular distribution of such \emptyset copula varies across languages.

²The information in parenthesis identifies the utterance in the database (the initials refer to the participant; the number corresponds to the particular utterance).

³See also Déchaine (1995) for more arguments why the phonological, and other, hypotheses may not work.

⁴See Kratzer (1988). Roughly speaking, an IL predicate denotes a permanent property, while a SL predicate denotes a transitory or non-permanent property. For instance, having brown eyes is a permanent, characteristic property of me, while wearing a brown sweater (as I do now) is not. The predicate denoting the former is an IL predicate, while the predicate denoting the latter is an SL one.

⁵An example of emphatic copula is (i), from Déchaine (1995), citing Dillard (1972):

i. you IS sick!

⁶Also referred to as *event* argument. Davidson (1967) first introduced it in his analysis of action sentences. Bach (1981) talks about *eventualities* (of which, states and events are subclasses). For the semantic import of the *situation* argument, see Kratzer (1989) (and (1988) where the *event* argument is used to distinguish between Individual Level and Stage Level predicates). I will assume that every predicate has an event or situation argument, a position adopted by Higginbotham (1988) but not in Kratzer (1988).

⁷SAE stands for Standard American English.

⁸Notice that, although (10)a. would also be accounted for by the phonological trigger analysis, (10)b. would not.

⁹Categorical sentences are said to be 'entity' central, while thematic sentences are 'event' central. Categorical sentences involve a predication about the 'entity', while thematic sentences do not involve a predication. Sentences with weather verbs are typically thematic. See Kuroda (1972) and Sasse (1987) for details on the opposition categorical/thematic.

¹⁰This goes against Déchaine's (1995) approach that takes *-s* as an agreement morpheme for inanimate subjects.

¹¹Given that the *situation* argument is not the only contentful element that can appear in (present tense) INFL, there may be other cases with overt copula that do not fall under the 'presentational' or more general 'thematic' label. We will leave this for further research.

¹²There is, however, a high percentage of overt copula in predicational sentences. Although this, by itself, does not invalidate the hypothesis in (7) (since other factors may trigger the presence of the overt copula), this pattern needs further attention.

¹³Eventually, it would be desirable to account for the existence, however small, of those cases of zero copula both in Past Tense and in Presentational cases.

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