Predicting variation in African American English
Shared morphosyntactic conditioning in verb inflection and copula deletion

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The status of 3rd singular –s, or verbal –s, in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) has been debated since the start of AAVE linguistic analysis. Contemporary AAVE usually has a null form instead of –s, with the average percentage hovering around 70% (Wolfram 1969 & Labov 1972). Previous studies reporting conditioning effects have focused on Early AAE speakers and their descendants outside of the USA, and, for example, have found aspectual effects (Poplack & Tagliamonte 2004, among others). Investigations of verbal –s in contemporary AAVE have yielded only social conditioning effects such as formality (Rickford & McNair-Knox 1994). No phonological or morphological conditioning has been found, leading to the theory that verbal –s is not in the underlying grammar of Modern AAVE but is instead the result of hypercorrection (Labov et al. 1968). With regard to another common AAVE variation, copula deletion, previous studies have attributed copula deletion entirely to its similarity to copula contraction in Mainstream American English (MAE) in terms of structural conditioning (Labov 1969). Examples of verbal –s variation (1a-b) and copula variation (2a-b) are given below; all are from the same speaker in one interview.

This corpus study demonstrates that subject verb agreement is influenced by subject animacy in AAVE, providing evidence that verbal -s variation is partially the result of a probabilitistic grammatical rule. Furthermore, it connects the variation in verbal –s to previously unobserved animacy conditioning in copula deletion.

The data are a subset of the longitudinal Frank Porter Graham Corpus of African Americans from age 1 to 18 in Chapel Hill, NC. The data was coded for subject, verb, verbal –s presence, and subject animacy; auxiliaries were excluded. 155 total speakers are included, with 456 null forms and 416 overt –s forms. Additionally, 272 noun phrase subjects in copular contexts were coded for animate versus inanimate. Noun phrase subjects were isolated in order to avoid the confound of pronouns, which are already known to prefer null copula (Labov 1969), as well as MAE contraction (MacKenzie 2012).

A mixed effects regression model was fit to the verbal –s data with random intercepts for speaker and verb, as well as predictors for age and subject animacy. Animacy was a significant predictor, but in the opposite direction than would be expected from previous research on animacy markedness (Comrie 1981), such that animate subjects significantly prefer the null form. Adding pronominal status as a predictor to the model does not lessen the animacy effect, and the effect is still significant when the model is run only on noun phrase subjects. In fact, more extensive coding of noun phrase subjects (following the three level system in Edwards 1985), an animacy hierarchy becomes significant. Animate noun phrases continue to prefer the null form, while inanimate but tangible noun phrases disprefer the null form, and inanimate and intangible noun phrases disprefer the null form to an even greater extent (each a significant factor in the model). In contrast, animate subjects in Standard Persian, for example, trigger overt verbal number agreement (Sedighi 2003). In Liberian English and Nigerian Pidgin, animate noun phrases favor overt plural marking as opposed to null marking (Tagliamonte, Poplack & Eze 2000).

Even more interestingly, copula deletion also follows this pattern. When a mixed effects regression model was fit to noun phrase subjects in copula constructions with random intercepts for speaker, animate subjects were significantly more likely to have deleted copula than inanimate subjects. This is clear even without the statistical model: animate noun phrase subjects occurred with a null copula 50% of the time (48 of 96 total tokens), while inanimate noun phrase subjects occurred with a null copula only 21% of the time (37 of 176 total tokens).

The main findings of this study, that subject verb agreement and copula deletion in Modern AAVE are influenced by animacy, demonstrate that verbal –s variation in AAVE is not random, and that copula deletion is not predicted by grammatical context alone. In fact, instead of being independent phenomena, the two variations share a conditioning factor, indicating that they may be encapsulated under a larger variable, such as subject verb agreement. Future research will investigate the source of this connection and whether a historical causality can be determined, and how this model of variation can inform other animacy hierarchies and language differences.

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1) Verbal –s variation
    a. […] as long as he stay∅ out of my way.
    b. She was like by school but before September end**s**.

2) Copula variation
    a. She ∅ not mad though.
    b. No she**'s** not mad at you.

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