

A Familiarity Effect on Copula Contraction in English

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In spontaneous English speech, the copula can be realized in either full or contracted form: She is crazy ~ She's crazy. In African American English (AAE), we also find deletion: She crazy. Studies of both AAE and of white Standard English (SE) have shown that the major constraint on this variation is the grammatical status of the subject. Deletion and contraction are favored by pronouns, full forms by NPs (Labov, 1969; McElhinney, 1993; inter alia). But why should subject status have this effect?

We know that pronouns almost always represent old or familiar information, while NPs tend to represent new information. Speakers prefer to use old entities wherever possible (Prince 1981:245); new entities are a marked category. An analysis of 460 tokens of (is) extracted from a corpus of SE spontaneous speech (Switchboard Corpus), reveals that is the information status of the subject that constrains copula variability. NPs + contracted subject were found to be high on the Familiarity Hierarchy (Prince, 1981), ie were "old", while NPs with full subject were "new".

Full copula is rare and marked in spontaneous speech (in this sample, it occurs only 19% of the time). Its coincidence with entities that are marked informationally points to an interaction of pragmatic and phonological processes. While this interaction remains to be explained on cognitive processing or further pragmatic grounds, it goes some way beyond early sociolinguistic observations of the subject effect.

Key terms: sociolinguistics, pragmatics, quantitative

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