

Contraction beyond the copula

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While the variable contraction of the English copula has been the subject of much sociolinguistic work (beginning with Labov, 1969), the same cannot be said for the contraction of other auxiliaries. Where other auxiliaries have been examined (McElhinny, 1993), contraction has been defined narrowly as the attachment of a consonant with no intervening schwa, forming a single syllable with its host: thus monosyllabic *you'll* is considered a contraction, but not *it'll* or *Joe [ə]ll*. This simplification has resulted in much data being omitted.

This paper uses data from the Switchboard corpus to examine all realizations of several different auxiliaries. In addition to providing new empirical work on this variable, we address the broader question of how this process is best represented in the grammar: is contraction best represented as an auxiliary-specific rule? Or is there a single, unified rule of contraction that operates regardless of auxiliary?

We find that surface differences in contraction rates across the auxiliaries are in fact reducible to phonological or other factors, leading to the hypothesis that there is a morphosyntactic rule of contraction whose effects are sometimes obscured by subsequent phonological processes. For instance, Figure 1 shows the rate of contraction of two auxiliaries after pronoun subjects. They behave comparably, apart from the higher frequency of variant 2 for *will*, easily attributable to the phonotactic necessity of schwa-insertion after *it*. After noun phrases (Figure 2), as well, surface differences may not necessarily imply auxiliary-specific contraction rules. The higher frequency of variant 2 for *have* may be due to a separate /h/-deletion rule elsewhere in the language (Labov, 1972), compounding the effects of contraction.

Examining contraction beyond the copula, then, not only provides us a clearer picture of this process, but also addresses broader questions regarding how it may be situated in the grammar.

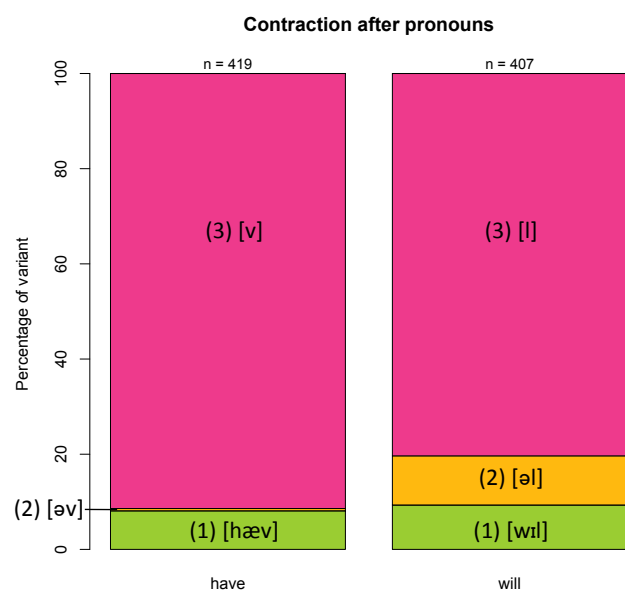


Figure 1

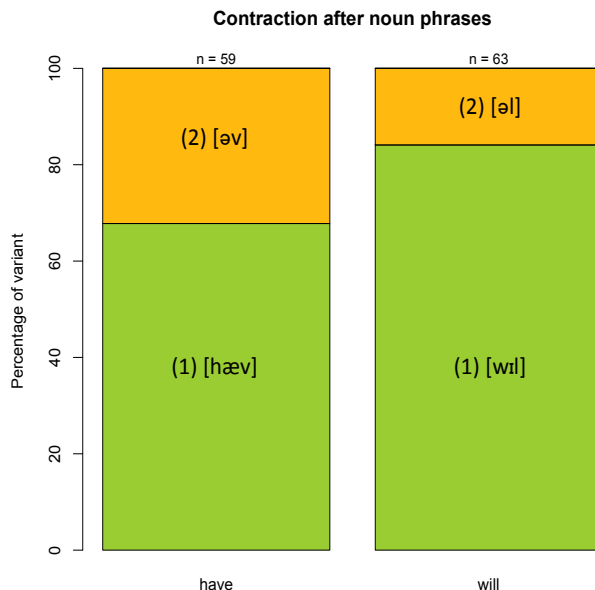


Figure 2

References

Labov, William. 1969. Contraction, deletion, and inherent variability of the English copula. *Language* 45:715–762.

Labov, William. 1972. *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular*, chapter 3: Contraction, deletion, and inherent variability of the English copula, 65–129. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

McElhinny, Bonnie S. 1993. Copula and auxiliary contraction in the speech of White Americans. *American Speech* 68:371–399.