

Counting the “don’t count” forms: allomorphy in AAVE copula

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In this paper we present a reframing of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) copula variation, explaining the near-categoricity of the traditional "don't count" forms *it*, *that*, and *what* as predictable from known conditioning factors.

Background: In research on the AAVE copula, *it*, *that*, and *what* as subjects are traditionally excluded from variationist analysis because they occur almost categorically as *i[s]*, *tha[s]*, and *wha[s]* (Labov 1969; Rickford et al. 1991; Blake 1997). However, Shwayder and McLaughlin (2013) analyze these forms as contracted allomorphs with a special morphology-phonology interaction to account for the surface phonology. Given that these forms are now "countable", in that they should be treated as underlyingly contracted forms, the factors conditioning copula variation for other subjects should also be applicable.

Labov (1969) analyzes AAVE copula absence as a phonological extension of contraction. Following MacKenzie's (2013) analysis of Standard English (SE) contraction as allomorphic variation, we claim that AAVE copula has similar allomorphic variation with an additional null allomorph (1). The variation in selection of these allomorphs is conditioned by subject type (pronoun vs. non-pronoun), and subject animacy (human vs. non-human).

Previous work found subject-type conditioning such that pronouns prefer null copula while non-pronouns (NPs) prefer overt copula (Labov 1969; Rickford et al. 1991). However, by not counting *i[s]*, *tha[s]*, and *wha[s]*, every pronoun token was animate while NPs were a mix of animate and inanimate tokens. Taking animacy into account, McLaughlin (2013) demonstrates that animate pronouns have the same conditioning as animate noun phrases for "overt" and null allomorphs. By treating each allomorph separately rather than collapsing full and contracted into overt, we can explain the high rates of contraction in *it*, *that*, and *what*.

Data & Results: Data is taken from the Frank Porter Graham Corpus of child AAVE speakers in North Carolina. We unpack McLaughlin's (2013) "overt" category into the two allomorphs, full and contracted, coding each allomorph (full, contracted, and null) separately.

Given that we can now count inanimate pronouns, this paper takes into account both animacy and pronoun status. 141 pronoun subject tokens and 54 NP subjects were coded for contraction and animacy. We find that, in pronouns, animate subjects prefer the deleted allomorph and disprefer the full allomorph (2), and that preliminary NP subjects trend in the same directions.

Conclusion: Previous analyses exceptionalized *it*, *that*, and *what*. We combine the following known conditioning factors to unexceptionalize these cases: 1) pronoun subjects condition higher rates of contraction in AAVE; 2) animate subjects condition higher rates of contraction in SE; 3) animate subjects also condition higher rates of the null allomorph in AAVE. Because inanimates disprefer deletion and pronouns prefer contraction, it is not strange that, as inanimate pronouns, *it*, *that*, and *what* are at ceiling levels of contraction.

(1) Allomorphs of 3sg. copula in Standard English and AAVE:

Standard English (MacKenzie 2013)	AAVE (Shwayder and McLaughlin 2013)
a) IS ↔ [ɪz] "full"	a) IS ↔ [ɪz] "full"
b) IS ↔ [z] "contracted"	b) IS ↔ [z] "contracted"
	c) IS ↔ ∅ "null"

(2) Percentages of allomorph tokens with pronoun subjects by animacy

	Null	Contracted	Full
He/she (n=50)	60%	26%	14%
It/that/what (n=91)	4%	95%	1%

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