Ellipsis Licensing and Constraints on Copula Optionality in African American English

Tracy Conner
University of Massachusetts Amherst

African American English (AAE) allows two realizations of the copula, an overt form, and a null or zero-marked form (ø), which are often interchangeable (1). Labov’s (1972) early descriptions sparked countless studies evaluating spontaneous speech for possible social, pragmatic, or syntactic environments that may constrain copula variation. Often overlooked, however, is Labov’s observation that zero-marking of the copula, unlike use of full forms (2a), is extremely rare in “absolute” position i.e. at the ends of phrases as in (2b) below.

(1) Kayla is/ø kind and brilliant.
(2) a. We also know that Andrea is kind and brilliant.
   b. *We also know that Andrea’ø kind and brilliant.

At present, no empirical investigations have been conducted assessing this alternation, nor have such constructions been frequent enough in spontaneous speech to draw conclusions. In this talk, I confirm Labov’s observation experimentally with data elicited from AAE speakers from the Mississippi Delta, and I show that the distribution of zero-copula is constrained by requirements for ellipsis licensing.

Quantitative Investigation of Labov’s Observation

In order to investigate the distribution of zero-marked copula in phrase final position, I conducted a sentence repetition task adapted from Potter and Lombardi (1990). In the task, participants listened to a recorded sentence, which they were asked to repeat after a short distractor task. For each recorded item a full copula was used. Half of the items included a full predicate after the copula, while in the other half, the predicate was elided, leaving the copula in phrase final position. An example of both types of item is given below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Full Predicate</th>
<th>After every pageant, Honey Boo Boo Child is obnoxious, and her mother is obnoxious, too.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elided Predicate</td>
<td>After every pageant, Honey Boo Boo Child is obnoxious, and her mother is, too.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distractor</td>
<td>Experimenter says 5 words: pop, French, chicken, cow, region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experimenter then asks: “Was cow in this list of words?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participant answers: Yes/No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetition</td>
<td>Participant asked to repeat the initial sentence.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on Labov’s generalization, I predicted that participants would produce full copula more frequently when in phrase final position, and zero-marking would thus be rare or even unavailable in these environments. Results of 556 tokens elicited from 33 speakers of AAE from the Mississippi Delta confirm this prediction, as participants produced overt copula most frequently phrase finally. Because overt copula were produced in each recorded item, more overt productions were expected. Yet, despite the fact that only 2% of productions in all environments (11 total tokens) contained zero-marked elements, only one zero-marked copula was found phrase finally compared to 347 overt copula. Results of a logistic mixed effects regression show that while participants in this study seemed to prefer overt marking in general, there was an even greater preference for overt marking in the phrase final environment (p<.01). Results of the study support the claim that zero-marked copula are prohibited phrase finally in AAE.
Theoretical Explanation: Ellipsis Licensing as a Constraint on Copula Variation

Having confirmed Labov’s observation experimentally, I outline a theory of ellipsis licensing which explains why only the overt copular form can occur phrase finally, though optionality occurs elsewhere. What Labov called “absolute” position, I propose, is actually the environment preceding verb phrase ellipsis (VPE). Thus, the current study shows that zero-copula cannot precede an ellipsis site. I take verb phrase ellipsis to be PF complement deletion that is licensed by a preceding head, usually a copula or auxiliary, if an appropriate antecedent is available in the discourse. I follow Johnson (2001), among others, in assuming that the copula is an appropriate licensor of ellipsis. However, if we assume that zero-copula are the same as full forms, we do not predict the ungrammaticality of zero-forms preceding an ellipsis site that was seen in the experiment.

To this end, I suggest that the constraint on copula optionality preceding ellipsis follows from two premises: i) ellipsis is licensed in narrow syntax, and ii) zero-copula are clitic elements that only enter the derivation post-syntactically, at PF. On this account, zero-copula cannot be proper ellipsis licensors because they are not available to the syntax when licensing must occur. This timing proposal explains the experimental findings, which show a constraint against zero-marking preceding ellipsis.

My proposal makes predictions about another type of copula that has been analyzed as a clitic: contracted copulas. Labov also noted that contracted copula in Mainstream American English (MAE) share a distribution with zero-copula in AAE, and it has long been known that contracted copula also cannot precede an elided verb phrase (King 1970).

(3) Mykah is/’s a great dancer,
    a. and we also know Tatum is, too.
    b. *and we also know Tatum’s, too.

This parallel leads me to propose that the inability of zero-marked and contracted copula to license VPE is more evidence that these copular forms are not simply phonologically reduced versions of their full counterparts, but instead, they differ from full forms in the time in which they enter into the derivation. Ultimately, I put forth a theory to explain why zero-marked and contracted copulas are not appropriate ellipsis licensors. Namely, Contracted and zero-copula are clitics that are only present at PF, and thus are not present in syntax to license ellipsis like full forms. This distinction between full and clitic forms may have implications for understanding the nature of copula optionality more generally.

References


