

A Fresh Look at Habitual Be in AAVE
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1. Introduction¹

In this paper, I will describe the use of agentive *be* in informal American English, basing my analysis primarily on my own intuitions (I-language) and sentences that I have found on the Internet. I will show that agentive *be* has largely the same syntactic behavior as habitual *be* in AAVE. Based on these similarities, I will conclude the paper by raising a number of questions about the origin of habitual *be* in AAVE.

Consider the contrast between (1b) and (2b):

- (1) a. If you are not careful, you will be caught.
b. If you don't be careful, you will be caught.

- (2) a. If you are not seen, you will escape.
b. *If you don't be seen, you will escape.

The fact that (2b) is ungrammatical while (1b) is not seems related to the fact that one can be deliberately careful, but it is less likely that one can be deliberately seen (especially in the context of an escape). In other words, there seems to be a particular verb *be* whose semantics implies deliberateness. Henceforth, I will call this agentive *be* in order to distinguish it from other uses of *be*.

The acceptability of (1b) is surprising in light of the fact that *be* does not normally permit do-support. The reason for this is that *be* normally raises to Infl, if Infl is not occupied by a modal auxiliary. The classical paradigm that illustrates this point is given below (see for example, Pollock 1989: 398):

- (3) a. John isn't happy.
b. *John doesn't be happy.
c. John shouldn't be happy.

Sentence (3a) illustrates that the auxiliary verb *be* moves to Infl, raising over negation. The fact that *be* can move to Infl accounts for the unacceptability of (3b) under the assumption that do-support is a Last Resort mechanism, used only when necessary. Lastly, if Infl is filled by the modal auxiliary *should* as in (3c), *be* cannot undergo movement to Infl (since Infl is already filled).

In section two of this paper, I will present a range of examples of agentive *be* in different contexts. In section three, I will show that agentive *be* cannot have any overt

¹ I would like to thank Arthur Bell, Richard Kayne, Wayne Harbert, Eric Potsdam and John Whitman for comments on earlier drafts of this paper. By e-mail correspondence, Lisa Green gave me valuable advice on certain aspects of habitual *be*. I would also like to thank two reviewers who suggested some important references on AAVE, and whose insightful comments have helped me to improve the paper.

inflection. In section four, I will distinguish agentive *be* from the imperative and subjunctive. In section five, I will discuss how agentive *be* fits into a theory of verb movement. In section six, I will discuss the syntactic similarities and differences between habitual *be* in AAVE and agentive *be*. In section seven, I outline one way in which agentive *be* could have influenced the development of habitual *be* in AAVE.

2. The Distribution of Agentive *be*

Since judgments involving agentive *be* are insecure for some people, and since the construction is definitely informal, I have performed internet searches (from May 2000 to January 2005) in order to find examples and to present a fuller picture. I used various search engines, including Google and Fast. In doing the internet searches, the basic methodology is to search for a phrase such as “if you be careful” (and variants such as “if you don’t be careful”, “if he doesn’t be careful”, etc.). The search engine then produces a list of web pages where this phrase is found. Next I analyzed each page to find the first occurrence of the phrase (such as “if you be careful”) on that page. For reasons discussed below, I exclude all pages that deal with archaic English (e.g., early modern English, biblical English, or even the English from the writings of Charles Dickens) or AAVE (African-American Vernacular English). The sentences I found on the internet are all acceptable or nearly acceptable in my personal dialect of informal English. In doing these searches, I noticed that the number of examples found for any given search (e.g., “if you be careful”) goes up from one time to the next. Furthermore, URLs become inactive frequently, perhaps in part due to the informal nature of the internet sites where the examples are found. Therefore, I have not included any URLs for the examples given in the paper. Most of the URLs are still active, and to find them, the reader just needs to enter the example into Google.

I give the examples that I found on the internet in (4) through (30) (except (20), which was provided to me by Wayne Harbert). I have retained the punctuation found on the web pages (including lower case letters, where upper case letters are expected and vice versa) to give a flavor for how informal the construction is. The first group of examples illustrates the range of adjectival predicates found with agentive *be*. I do not claim that this group of adjectives is an exhaustive list. These examples also illustrate that agentive *be* can be found with or without negation. When there is negation, there is do-support (see (5)):

- (4) If you be careful, it’s neat to ride in the rain. Old lady thought I was nuts!!!
- (5) If you don’t be careful and vigilant, that person they talk to one day could be you.
- (6) The salamanders will ignore you if you be quiet and just watch.
- (7) If you be nice to people they’ll be nice back.
- (8) BUT, if you be honest, and be strong-people will respect you for your decisions.
- (9) But if you be like that, you won’t get the chance to see one of the best comics that I’ve ever seen!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
- (10) You will get nowhere if you be mean.
- (11) Perhaps if you be more specific in describing this problem...

The second group of examples shows how agentive *be* appears with first person and third person subjects (as well as the second person subjects seen in the above group of examples):

- (12) If I don't be careful, I am going to know the words to YPIMP by heart. :)
- (13) If we don't be careful, we're gonna be the angriest and then we won't be happy anymore.
- (14) I keep telling him that he is going to be in a wheelchair if he doesn't be careful.

Agentive *be* is also possible in when-clauses:

- (15) Be nice day is when you be nice to a lot of people.
- (16) When you be careful enough to check during the install procedure...
- (17) I find it usually only happens when we be nice and activate the phone in the store.

It is possible (perhaps marginally) to find agentive *be* in matrix declarative clauses:

- (18) We be nice, we be nice, we be nice; then we kill them.
- (19) Used to be that i thought i only be nice to those who deserve it.
- (20) We be nice when we're trying to impress the teacher.
(Wayne Harbert, personal communication).

Agentive *be* can also be found in the past tense (with the auxiliary verb *did*):

- (21) If he didn't be careful, he would almost feel like he was falling in love with her.
- (22) I showed them some fish that could hurt them if they didn't be careful.
- (23) "And did you be nice?" Santa asked sharply.²

Lastly, agentive *be* can be used with DP predicates:

- (24) Did you be yourself, or did you change your voice to fit the characters?
- (25) Successful leaders exude confidence, which can only happen when you be yourself.
- (26) if i be myself, people get upset, cry, get pissed off or leave me.
- (27) "Please? Do it again, I just want to figure out how you did that," meaning how did you *be* my friend.
- (28) If you be a good boy and go back to Havana, we'll see what kind of aid you get.
- (29) How do you be a model for your kids?
- (30) How do you be a good Catholic parent when society pushes away religion?

² See Becker (2003: 404) for a similar sentence drawn from her own dialect. She notes that the question "Did you be good today?" is less acceptable than "Were you good today?" but more acceptable than "Did you be smart today?" I agree with these judgements.

The adjectives that can be used with agentive *be* are the type that can be interpreted eventively and agentively, as shown by their use in the progressive, which forces an agentive interpretation (see Partee 1977: 32):

- (31) a. I am being careful, vigilant, nice, quiet, honest, strong...
b. Why are you being like that, mean, so specific...

In fact, it is reasonable to assume that the agentive *be* found in the examples in (4-30) is the same as the active *be* discussed by Partee in connection with the progressive³. The predicate nominals that are used with agentive *be* above can also be found in the progressive:

- (32) a. I am just being myself.
b. I am just being your friend.
c. I am being a good boy.
c. I am being a model for my kids.
d. I am being a good Catholic parent.

Subjects and predicate adjectives that are not consistent with an agentive interpretation cannot be used with agentive *be*.

- (33) a. If you be noisy, you will bother your sister.
b. *If the party be noisy, it will bother your sister.
c. You are being noisy. (agentive, active interpretation only)
d. *The party is being noisy.

- (34) a. If you be careful, you will not fall.
b. *If you be tall, you will be able to reach the top shelf.
c. You are being careful. (agentive, active interpretation only)
d. *You are being tall.

3. The Overt Inflection Constraint

The following example with a third person singular subject is unacceptable to me.

- (35) a. *If he be careful, ...
b. *If he be 's/bes/bees careful, ...

³ Green (2000: 15) analyses a sentence such as “Richard is being nice” as having “event argument associated with stage-level predicates”. Additionally, on my analysis, the subject is interpreted as the agent (and not, for example, the theme) of the event argument. In other words, “Richard is being nice” cannot mean that Richard is becoming nice, which would also be an eventive interpretation.

A search of the internet yielded results consistent with the grammaticality judgments in (35). A search of “If he doesn’t be careful” turned up the following example among others (for example, (14) above):

- (36) "If he fights, it's out of desperation. If he doesn't be careful, he's going to get hurt in the ring."

On the other hand, a search of “if he bes careful” (spelled b-e-s) or of “if he bees careful” (spelled b-e-e-s) or of “if he be’s careful” (spelled b-e’-s) turned up no results at all. A search of “if he be careful” turned up around 10 results, but all of them were in archaic language (e.g., Dickens's Dictionary of London, by Charles Dickens), and so represent the formal subjunctive (see section 4 below).

The sentence in (35a) is unacceptable, because the subject is third person singular, and the third person singular agreement morphology has not been spelled-out (compare “John runs” versus *”John run”)⁴. (35b) seems to be ruled out because the verb *be* inflected for third person singular⁵ must be spelled out as *is* not *bees*. The relevant constraints are the following:

- (37) a. [Infl be [+3sg, +Pres]] → [Iz] (morphological spell-out)
 b. [be [3sg, present]] → [Iz] (morphological spell-out)
 c. The inflected *is* must occupy Infl

According to (a), the auxiliary verb or copula, if it occupies Infl, must be spelled out as [Iz] (if it has the features [+3sg, +Pres]). I will call (b) the Overt Agreement Constraint. The difference between (a) and (b) is that (b) does not specify that the verb is in Infl, so that the features [be [+3sg, +Pres]] could have been formed as the result of affix hopping where Infl lowers to V, and we have the structure [_V V Infl]. I will assume that dialects for which *bees* is not possible have the more general constraint in (b) instead of (a). On the other hand, dialects for which *bees* is possible (see (39), (40) below) have only (a). Lastly, I will assume that all dialects obey (c).

That fact that *I*, *you*, *we*, and *they* can appear as subjects with agentive *be* shows that constraints similar to (37b) do not exist for these person/number combinations. This in turn might suggest that for these person/number combinations, there is no affix-hopping (see Kayne’s 2000: 198). However, such an account would then lose a simple explanation for why there is do-support (in contexts of negation and inversion) for all persons and numbers (do-support is needed because affix-hopping is impossible). I propose instead that the reason agentive *be* can be used with non-third singular subjects is because these affixes are not spelled out at all after they undergo affix hopping. For example, since the features [+1sg, +Pres] are not spelled out after affix hopping (e.g., “I

⁴ I assume that the lack of agreement with modal verbs (“John would/*woulds run”) is related to the fact that they are in Infl (e.g., modals never follow negation). Since Modal-s would not involve affix hopping, the lack of Modal-s suggests that it is only necessary to spell-out [+3sg, +Pres] as *-s* when there is affix hopping (see also Kayne 2000: 198 who gives a more general condition).

⁵ Kayne (2000: chapters 10, 11) presents several arguments that *-s* is number agreement (singular).

run”), the unit [_v be [+1sg, +Pres]] is not subject to phonetic spell-out. Rather, only the uninflected verb *be* is spelled out.

Similarly, the agentive *be* cannot be inflected for tense. The judgments in (38) represent my I-language, I have done no internet searches on this issue:

- (38) a. *If you beed nice...
b. *You beed nice?

Therefore, agentive *be* can take no overt inflection (neither third person singular nor past tense). I call this constraint the Overt Inflection Constraint (OIC).

Partee (1977: 38) reported the following sentence produced by the child of one of her colleagues⁶. This sentence involves agentive *be*:

- (39) I don’t like him. He always be’s mean.

Partee’s sentence shows that for the I-language of the child who uttered (39), the Overt Inflection Constraint does not hold (in other words, the child only has (37a) and not (37b)). In addition, in a query posted to the Linguist List (5.550, May 1994), Andrew Carstairs-McCarthy reported the following two examples of agentive *be* from New Zealand:

- (40) a. So Andrew stands on his desk, and be’s Alexander the Great.
b. If he be’s good, he’ll get to go out tonight.

To me both of the examples discussed by Carstairs-McCarthy are unacceptable, but it is fairly obvious that he is discussing the agentive *be* that is the topic of this paper. These examples from Child English and New Zealand English show that *bees* should not be ruled out in general. Rather it seems that in the colloquial, informal American English that I am describing in this paper, we must simply stipulate (37b) as a morphological constraint.

4. *Be in the Imperative and Subjunctive*

Clauses with agentive *be* are similar to imperatives with *be*. For example, both kinds of *be* require do-support with negation:

- (41) a. Don’t be too careful! (imperative)
b. *Not be too careful!
c. *Be not too careful!
d. If you don’t be careful,... (agentive *be*)
e. *If you not be careful,...
f. *If you be not careful,...

⁶ See also Matthew Dryer’s FUNKNET postings, on April 5 and 8, 1997. Dryer gives an important argument that this feature of his child’s speech is not the result of AAVE influence.

Another similarity is that agentive *be* often seems more acceptable in the context of an implicit command. For example, the sentence “If you don’t be careful, you will be caught” implies the command “Be careful!” Note that in both “if you be careful” and “if you don’t be careful” the implicit command is “Be careful!” Furthermore, the subject of an imperative clause and the subject of a clause with agentive *be* are interpreted agentively. Lastly, both agentive *be* and imperative *be* can be followed by a deleted constituent, just like *be* following a modal auxiliary (see section 6 below):

- (42) a. Don’t be! (in response to the sentence “I may be late”)
 b. If you be careful, you will be OK,
 If you don’t be, you will be in trouble.
 c. I won’t be (in response to the command “Don’t be late!”)

However, clauses involving agentive *be* are different from the imperative in that there are contexts where agentive *be* is found that do not allow null subjects (e.g., in conditionals):

- (43) *If __don’t be careful...

In addition, imperatives are restricted to matrix clauses, whereas agentive *be* can appear in a variety of embedded clauses. Furthermore, we saw that the past tense sequence “didn’t be” (see 21, 22, 23) occurs with agentive *be*, but such a sequence never occurs in the imperative (*“Didn’t be careful!”). Lastly, while the imperative allows a verb to be in the progressive (“Don’t be giving me those lame excuses”, “Be studying your Spanish when I get home!”), see Akmajian et. al. 1979), this does not seem to be possible with agentive *be* (see section 6 below). Given these differences with agentive *be*, I will assume that clauses with agentive *be* are not imperatives. It may in fact be the case that the *be* used in the imperative is sometimes agentive *be*.

It is tempting to analyze clauses with agentive *be* as subjunctives, given that the subjunctive also uses uninflected *be*. Furthermore, the examples of agentive *be* often involve an implicit command, just as the subjunctive does (“I would prefer that you not do that” implies the command “Don’t do that”). Now consider the following examples (examples from Quirk et. al. 1985: 1012).

- (44) a. Congress has voted that the present law be maintained.
 b. It is essential that a meeting be convened this week.
- (45) a. If any person be found guilty, he shall have the right of appeal.
 b. Whether she be right or wrong, she will have my unswerving support.
 c. Though he be the president himself, he shall hear us.

Putting aside the past subjunctive (“were”) and formulaic examples (“be that as it may”), the above examples represent the main categories of the subjunctive in English. The examples in (44) illustrate the mandative subjunctive which occurs as the complement of predicates expressing demand, recommendation, etc. The examples in

(45) show that the subjunctive *be* can also occur in concessives and conditionals in formal English.

There are many reasons why clauses with agentive *be* cannot be analyzed as subjunctives. First, agentive *be* necessarily occurs with do-support in the presence of negation (see 1b) (compare *‘‘if you not be careful’’), but do-support is not in general possible in the subjunctive (see Potsdam 1996: 96). An example of the subjunctive without do-support is given below:

- (46) The Senate has decreed that such students not be exempted from college dues.
(Quirk et. al. 1985: 156).

Potsdam (1996: 96) explains the lack of do-support in subjunctives by postulating a null subjunctive modal which is not an affix. The null modal occupies Infl and blocks do-support.

Second, most examples of the subjunctive in conditionals and concessives (45) are restricted to formal written English. This contrasts with agentive *be* which has a very informal colloquial flavor.

For these reasons, I will not unify the use of the formal subjunctive *be* and agentive *be*. There is a type of informal subjunctive where the use of *be* may be more closely related to agentive *be*, illustrated in the following example:

- (47) a. I suggest that you don’t be late next time. (informal)
b. I suggest that you not be late next time . (formal)

Sentences such as (47a) may also be related to the use of *be* with do-support in why-questions:⁷

- (48) Why don’t you be nice to your sister (careful, vigilant, quiet, honest, strong, like that, mean, more specific, yourself, my friend, a good boy, a model for your kids, a good Catholic parent)?

I will put aside the informal subjunctive and do-support with why-questions for further research.

In doing the internet searches, I eliminated the examples that were potentially formal subjunctives. I could most easily do this by eliminating pages that dealt with the Bible, Shakespeare (and other pages from early modern English), and Dickens.

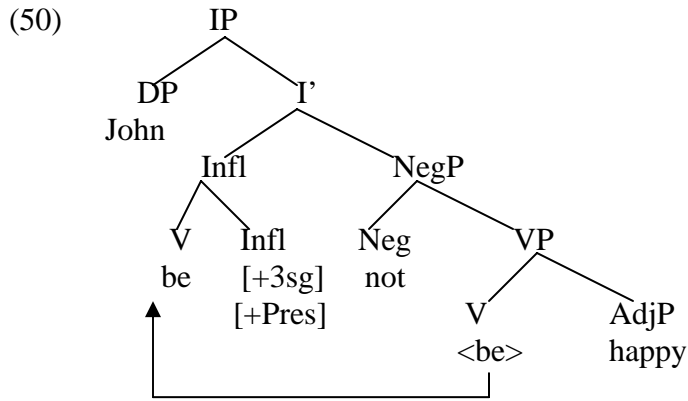
5. Agentive *be* and Verb Movement

I assume that the structure of the clause is the following (see Collins 1997, among many other sources):

- (49) [CP Comp [IP Subj [Infl Infl [NegP Neg vP/VP]]]]

⁷ See for example, Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 114).

VP stands for a verb without an external argument (in the case at hand the copula *be* or auxiliary verb *be*), and vP stands for a verb with an external argument. Given this structure, consider the analysis of “John is not happy”:



The verb moves to adjoin to Infl (the notation <...> indicates a copy left by movement). Then, at Spell-Out, the combination of *be*+Infl is realized as *is* (see (37a)).

Given (49), the only way that a verb can appear before the negation is if it raises to Infl. As the following sentences show, this is impossible for agentive *be*:

- (51)
- a. If you are not careful, you will be caught.
 - b. If you don't be careful, you will be caught.
 - c. *If you ben't careful, you will be caught.
 - d. *If you be not careful, you will be caught.

Although the finite verb *are* can appear before negation (a), agentive *be* can never appear before negation (whether or not the negation is contracted). Similarly, agentive *be* never appears before the subject, as shown below:

- (52)
- a. We be nice when we're trying to impress the teacher. (see 18, 20)
 - b. *Be we nice when we're trying to impress the teacher?

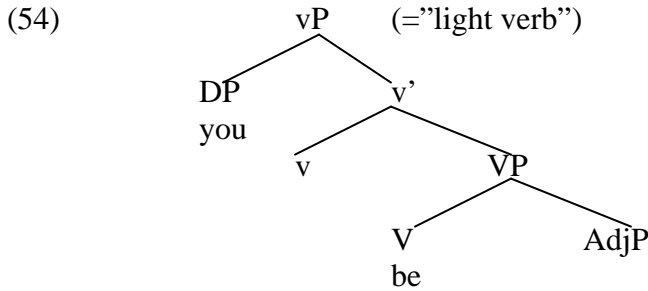
This shows that agentive *be* does not raise to Comp.

How can we explain why agentive *be* does not undergo verb movement (to Infl or to Comp)? Chomsky (1995) argues the movement of auxiliaries in English is forced by the fact that they are semantically vacuous. Chomsky's approach implies the following generalization:

- (53) If a verb is not semantically vacuous, it will not be able to undergo overt raising to Infl (in English)

Putting aside the technical details of Chomsky's account, it follows from this generalization that agentive *be* should not undergo raising, and this is exactly what we find in examples such as (1b). In other words, agentive *be* is behaving like a non-auxiliary lexical verb. More specifically, I propose that the agentive component of

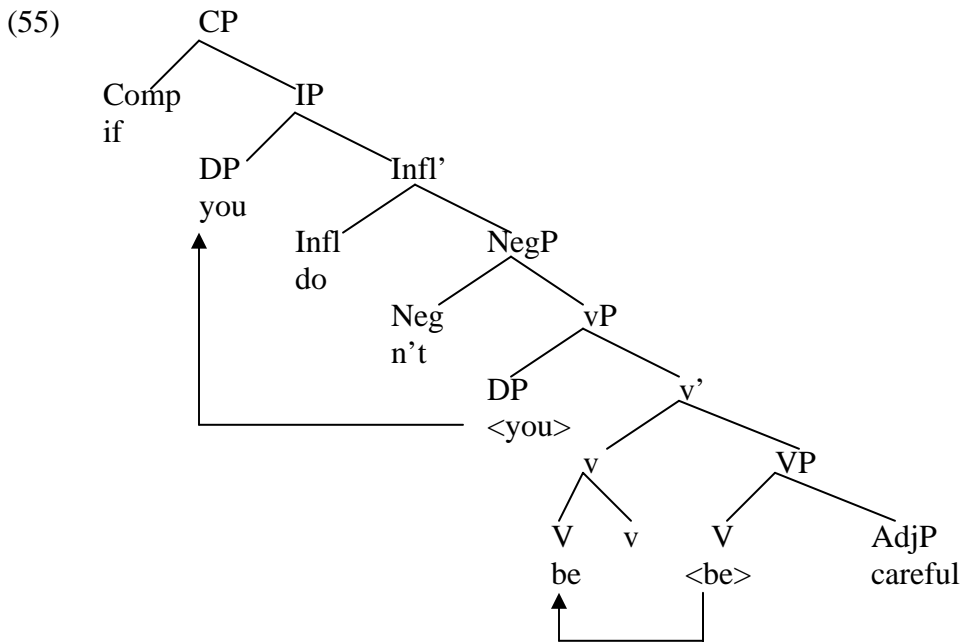
agentive *be* is contributed by *v* (little *v*, or “light verb”) (see Chomsky 1995, Collins 1997). Therefore, the example in (1b) with agentive *be* have the following structure:



In this structure, *v* (“light verb”) contributes the agentive meaning to the verb. The verb *be* raises and adjoins to *v* before Spell-Out. Since *v* is not semantically vacuous, it does not raise to Infl. Furthermore, I assume that *V* cannot move directly to Infl (by skipping over little *v*) because of Relativized Minimality (see Rizzi 2001).

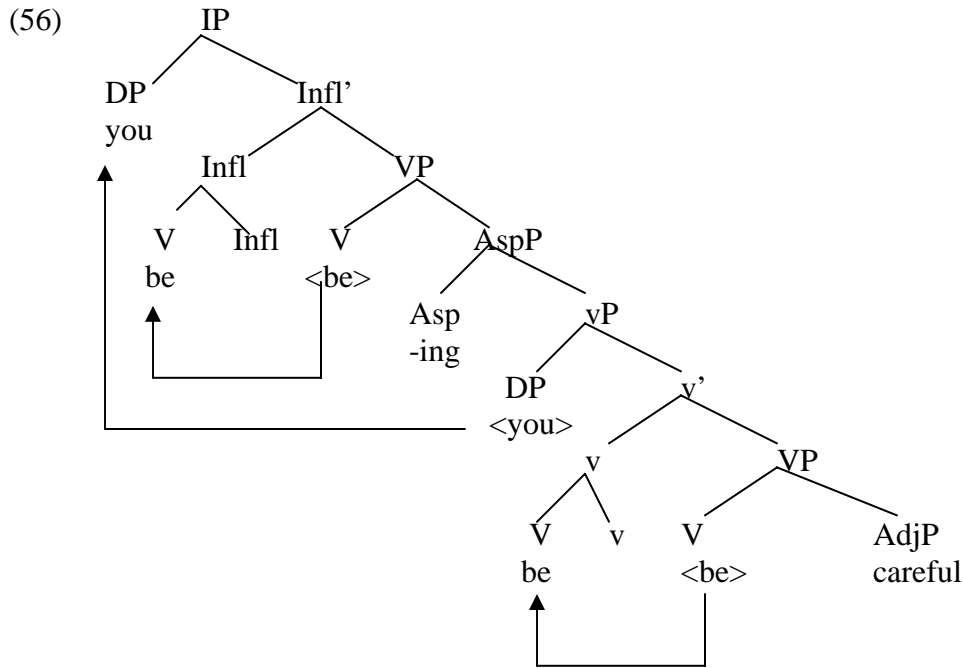
A technical issue comes up with respect to the theta-role of the DP *you*. Assuming that in order to receive a theta-role from the adjective, the DP *you* occupies Spec AdjP (as well as Spec vP), the question is whether there is a control or movement relation between the DP in Spec vP and the DP in Spec AdjP. I will not take up this question here for reasons of space.

The full structure for “if you don’t be careful” is the following:



Consider now the problem of why “if you don’t be careful” must have an agentive interpretation. If vP were not generated, *be* would be forced to move to Infl (since do-support is a Last Resort operation), yielding “If you are not careful”.

A related problem is why “you are being careful” must have an agentive interpretation. Consider first the structure of “you are being careful” on the agentive interpretation⁸:



If “you are being careful” had a non-agentive interpretation, the complement of Asp would be VP headed by *be* (not little vP). I suggest that this is impossible because the verb *be* by itself is semantically vacuous. Therefore, it is impossible for it to be the complement of Asp, which minimally needs a verb that has an event variable. In (56), little v contributes the event variable.

At the beginning of the paper (see (3)) I gave the following standard paradigm:

- (57) a. John isn't happy.
 b. *John doesn't be happy.
 c. John shouldn't be happy.

The unacceptability of (57b) is the result of several factors. First, agentive *be* is more acceptable in the context of an implicit command (which is why it is more frequent with if-clauses and second person subjects). Nothing about (57b) suggests that it is an implicit command. Second, agentive *be* is only possible where the subject is acting agentively. Unlike *careful*, *quiet*, and *nice*, the adjective *happy* is less natural with an agentive interpretation (note the awkwardness of “I am being happy” compared to “I am being careful”). Since agentive *be* is not possible, the copula must raise to Infl, and do-support is ruled out.

⁸ I assume that -ing lowers from Asp to v in the progressive (affix hopping).

6. Habitual *Be* in AAVE

Consider the following examples (from Green 1998: 39, see also McWhorter 1998, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1998 for background information and Green 2000 for a detailed semantic analysis):

- (58) a. She always be a clown on Halloween.
“She always dresses as a clown on Halloween”
b. The children be at school when I get home.
“The children are usually at school when I get home”
c. He can’t find his mail because it be here.
“He can’t find his mail because it is always here”

As Green (1998: 56,57) shows, habitual *be* does not undergo any type of movement.

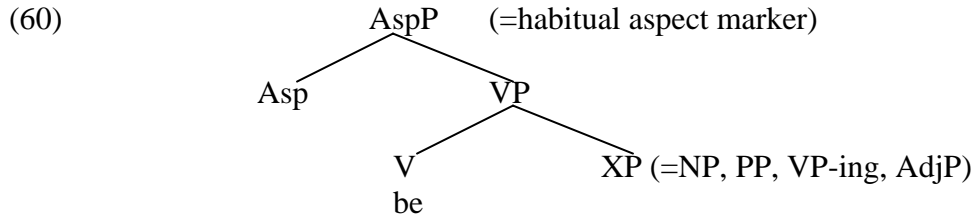
- (59) a. Becky be watching the basketball games.
b. Do Becky be watching the basketball games?
c. *Be Becky watching the basketball games?
d. Becky don’t be watching the basketball games?
e. *Becky be not/ben’t watching the basketball games.

The example in (59c) shows that habitual *be* does not raise to Comp in yes-no questions. The example in (59e) shows that habitual *be* does not raise to Infl (moving to the left of negation). Similarly, Labov (1998: 120) notes that habitual *be* follows the negation and requires do-support (see (59d)).

Habitual *be* and agentive *be* share many properties. First, both agentive *be* and habitual *be* are uninflected. Second, both agentive *be* and habitual *be* require do-support in the presence of negation (unlike the formal subjunctive in English see (46)). Third, neither agentive *be* nor habitual *be* appear to the left of negation. Fourth, neither agentive *be* nor habitual *be* can appear to the left of the subject (see (59c)). Fifth, both agentive *be* and habitual *be* can occur without a preceding auxiliary (59a) (unlike the uninflected *be* in sentences like “I will be nice”). Sixth, habitual *be* in finite clauses seems to require⁹ overt subjects just like agentive *be* (and unlike the imperative).

I propose that habitual *be* heads a VP taking an XP complement, where XP can be any category. This proposal is closely related to that of Green (1998) who proposes that aspectual *be* heads a PredP, which takes a wide range of complements (VP, PP, NP, AdjP).

⁹ I make this claim on the basis of the examples I have seen. I have not verified this property of habitual *be*.



In this structure, habitual *be* can take a complement of any category (NP, PP, VP-ing, AdjP (see for example, Green 2000: 19), just like (non-habitual, non-agentive) *be* in standard English. Asp (aspectual marker) contributes the habitual meaning to the verb (on which, see Green 2000).

Suppose that *be* does not raise to Asp in (60). Then by Relativized Minimality (Rizzi 2001), it will be impossible for *be* to raise to Infl (skipping over Asp). Now suppose that the verb *be* raises and adjoins to Asp before Spell-Out. Since Asp is not semantically vacuous, it does not raise to Infl (see principle (53)). In neither case can *be* raise to Infl. See the discussion following (76) for more on the issue of whether *be* raises to Asp.

Standard English does not have a null Asp head taking a VP complement for habitual interpretations (“The children are usually at school”). If it did, the Asp head should block *be* movement to Infl, yielding an uninflected *be*.

In the remainder of this section, I will discuss a number of differences between agentive *be* and habitual *be*. First, compare the structure of agentive *be* in (54), where the subject is underlyingly in Spec vP, with (60) where the subject does not occupy Spec AspP. It follows from my theory that the subject of habitual *be* does not have to be interpreted agentively. The following sentences (provided by a reviewer) show that this is the case: “Those parties be long”, “Those papers be long”. In fact, habitual *be* can occur with subject expletives: “If it be snowing, I’m not gon’ jog.”.

Another difference is that agentive *be* never appears with a following progressive participle (cf., (59a)).

- (61) a. *If you be running,
b. *If you be smiling,

I propose that this constraint is related to the fact that the progressive participle of *be* cannot be followed by a progressive participle (see Akmajian et. al. 1979: 19):

- (62) a. You are noisy.
b. You are being noisy.
c. You are smiling.
d. *You are being smiling.
e. *You are being running.
f. *You are being giving me excuses.

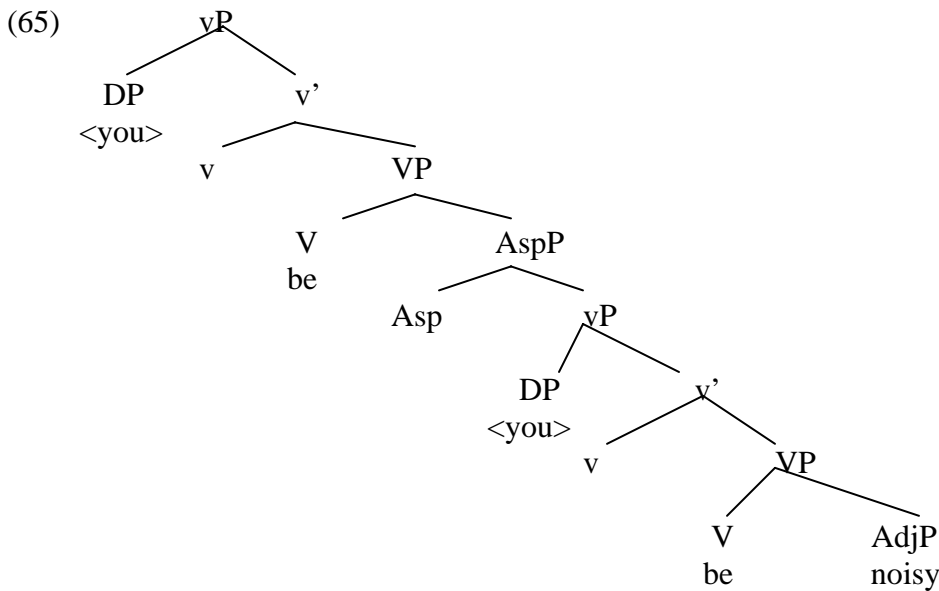
Furthermore, even though *noisy* can occur with agentive *being* in the progressive (62b), the agentive *be* cannot be followed by the progressive participle *being*.

- (63) a. *If you be being noisy (agentive *be*, agentive *being*)
 b. *When we be being nice,
 c. *Did you be being nice?
 d. *How do you be being a model for your kids?

Earlier I claimed that agentive *be* raises to the head of vP (see (54)). Therefore, (63a) involves two agentive vPs (one for uninflected *be* and one for *being*, see (56)). I suggest that this sort of vP recursion is impossible:

- (64) Each vP must be dominated by a distinct IP

The structure of the vP for (63a) is the following:



In this structure, there are two vPs which are not separated by an IP. If verbs like *smile* and *run* also involve vP, then the ungrammaticality of (61a,b) will be given the same explanation. Since habitual *be* in AAVE is not dominated by vP (see (60)), habitual *be* followed by V-ing in (59a) does not violate (64).

A third difference between habitual *be* and agentive *be* is the use of *bees*. The use of *bees* in AAVE is a complicated issue (see McWhorter 1998: 147 on some sociolinguistic considerations, and see Poplack and Tagliamonte 2005 for a comparison of the factors that influence the usage of verbal *-s* in Samaná English and Devon English, see Kayne 2000: 207 on Newfoundland English *bees*). Some examples are given below (from Bailey and Maynor 1985: 208) :

- (66) a. ...because they bees watching you when you didn't think they was.
 b. ...because they bees together all the time.
 c. The cabbage bees the kind they have now.
 d. In the evening, it bees hot on this porch.
 e. She don't bees there.

The fact that *bees* in these examples appears with both singular and plural subjects shows that it is not a third person singular agreement suffix. Furthermore, the fact that it appears with do-support (66e) suggests that it is not an inflectional suffix (originating in Infl) at all. In fact, Labov (1998) claims that “there is no third singular /s/ in AAVE” and furthermore that “though various suggestions have been made for a functional or semantic interpretation of *bees* vs. *be*, no clear evidence to support this view has emerged” (fn. 15). Therefore, I suggest that *bees* in AAVE does not violate the Overt Inflection Constraint, because verbal *-s* in AAVE is not inflection for person/number (see (37)).

As for habitual *be* in other English dialects, Crystal (1997: 338) notes for Hiberno-English: “Copula and auxiliary *be* are used in distinctive ways, chiefly expressing contrasts of habitual action and continuity: *be* found with forms of *do* (it does be colder at nights) and also, especially in the north, with an *-s* ending (I be walking, She bees walking).” The latter sentence indicates that the Overt Inflection Constraint does not hold for one variety of habitual *be* in Irish English.

I will now compare an aspect of habitual and agentive *be* that appear to differ, although much more empirical work is needed. Green (1998) discusses the fact that habitual *be* cannot license a following deleted constituent:

- (67) a. Bruce be singing and I do, too.
 b. Bruce be singing and I be singing, too.
 c. *Bruce be singing, and I be, too.

The same pattern extends to adjectival complements of habitual *be* (Lisa Green, p.c.):

- (68) a. *Bruce be happy, and I be too.
 b. *Bruce be nice, and I be too.
 c. *Bruce be late, and I be too.

When negation is introduced, the judgments are murkier (Lisa Green, p.c.):

- (69) a. *Bruce be happy, and I be too.
 b. *Bruce be happy, but I don't be.
 c. ???Bruce be happy, but you don't never be.

- (70) *Bruce be running, but I don't be.

According to Lisa Green, (69a,b) are both bad, but (a) is worse. Furthermore, (69c) is even a little better than (69b), and may be acceptable to some people. On the other hand, (70) with V-ing, is out.

Consider now deletion following agentive *be*¹⁰.

¹⁰ I would like to thank Eric Potsdam for pointing out to me the difference between deletion following agentive *be* with and without do-support. In Potsdam's thesis (1998: 77), he gives the Licensing Condition on VPE: An elided VP must be c-

- (71) a. If you be careful, you will be OK,
but if you don't be ____, you will be in trouble.
b. If you don't be careful, you'll end up in the hospital but
*if you be ____, you'll be ok. (Eric Potsdam, p.c.)
c. If you don't be careful, you'll end up in the hospital but
?if you do be ____, you'll be OK. (Eric Potsdam, p.c.)

In this respect, agentive *be* is like the *be* found in imperatives, why-questions and the informal subjunctive, which also allow deletion following *be* when there is negation and do-support:

- (72) a. Don't be!
(e.g., "don't be late!")
b. *Be!
c. Why don't you be?
(e.g., "why don't you be nicer to your sister?")
d. I suggest that you don't be.
(e.g., I suggest that you don't be late)

Consider now the fact that agentive *be* does not license deletion when in the progressive (Akmajian et. al. 1979: 24):

- (73) a. I will be nice, and John will be __ too.
b. *I am being nice, and John is being __ too.

This fact cannot be explained by reference to agentive *be*, since clear cases of non-agentive *be* show the same constraint (see Akmajian et. al. 1979: 24):

- (74) a. John was being watched by the FBI, and Bill was ____ too.
b. *John was being watched by the FBI, and Bill was being ____ too.

Akmajian et. al. (1979) explain the possibility of deletion in (74a) by postulating an obligatory rule of Be Shift, which moves the verb *be*. The remnant VP (with a null head) can then be deleted. The analysis is shown below¹¹:

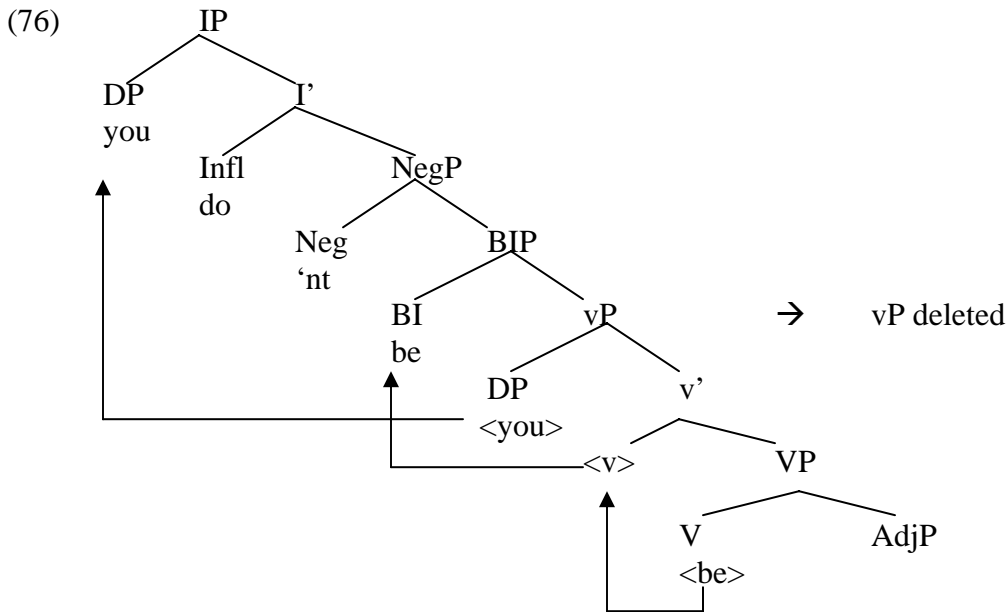
commanded by an overt, non-affixal inflectional head within the same s-projection. In other words, if Infl is empty, deletion is not allowed. This condition explains why deletion following agentive *be* is better if there is negation with do-support. I give a different analysis below.

¹¹ Akmajian et. al. (1979: 30) claim that Be Shift is a restructuring rule.

- (75) a. [VP be nice] → Be Shift
 b. [VP be [VP <be> nice]] → Merge *will, John*
 c. [IP John [Infl' will [VP be [VP <be> nice]]]] → VP deletion
 d. [IP John [Infl' will [VP be [VP _____]]]]
 (deletion of the remnant VP is possible)

According to Akmajian et. al. (1979), the impossibility deletion following the progressive (74b) follows from the lack of Be Shift in the progressive¹².

I will extend Akmajian et. al.'s Be Shift analysis to the case of agentive *be* following do-support. Suppose that when Infl is filled with *do* (because of the presence of negation) or a modal auxiliary, it licenses an extra functional category between Infl and vP (the position of agentive *be*). This extra functional projection can be called BI, for bare infinitive. In other languages, such as French, the infinitive in an analogous position would show up with overt morphology (e.g., V-er, for the *-er* verbs in French). When BI is present, agentive *be* moves to it, and the vP complement of BI can be deleted (71a,c). This is illustrated in the following diagram (of “you don’t be”):



When BI is absent (because Infl does not contain *do*, or a modal auxiliary), *v* remains in-situ (occupied by *be*), and deletion following *be* is not possible (71b).

Consider now the impossibility of deletion following habitual *be* in AAVE (67-70). Suppose that *be* does not raise to Asp in AAVE (see (60)). From this it follows immediately that *be* cannot raise to BI (by Relativized Minimality). Therefore, deletion following habitual *be* would be impossible. Suppose on the other hand that *be* raises to Asp, but that Asp (as opposed to *v*) never raises to BI. If we made the further assumption that the VP complement of Asp cannot be deleted, it would follow that the constituent

¹² According to Akmajian et. al. (1979: 32), main verb *have* also undergoes shifting (“...but he will have ___ soon”).

following habitual *be* could not be deleted. I leave as an open question how to distinguish these two possibilities.

Lastly, consider the status of (69c). It may be that *be* can raise to Asp and Asp can raise to BI as a marginal option. In this case, the AspP complement of BI could be deleted. Clearly much more empirical work is needed (e.g., to what extent is Be Shift and deletion possible following other modal auxiliaries in AAVE).

The above account of deletion following agentive *be* raises the following question. Consider again (53): If a verb is not semantically vacuous, it will not be able to undergo overt raising to Infl (in English). I used this principle to explain why agentive *be*, just like main verbs (*run, see*) does not raise to Infl. But note that main verbs do not undergo Be Shift: *"I will seem happy and John will seem too". Thus only *be* (and *have*) undergo Be Shift to BI, not main verbs. In other words, agentive *be* cannot raise to Infl, but it can raise to BI, and main verbs cannot raise to either Infl or BI. I have no explanation for this asymmetry between movement to Infl and movement to BI for the moment.

To summarize, agentive *be* and habitual *be* share a number of properties that can be attributed to the use of a null head, which is *v* in the case of agentive *be* and Asp in the case of habitual *be*. There are, however, a number of differences between the two. First, the specifier of *v*P, but not Asp, is a theta-position. Therefore, agentive *be* cannot be used with an expletive subject. Second, habitual *be*, but not agentive *be*, can be used with a following progressive participle. Third, habitual *be*, but not agentive *be* can take the form *bees*. Fourth, the constituent following agentive *be*, but not habitual *be*, can be deleted.

7. The Source of Habitual *be* in AAVE

Bailey (1982) proposed that habitual *be* in Irish English was the source of habitual *be* in AAVE. The hypothesis is discussed extensively by Rickford 1986, who rejects it. Rickford (1986: 261) points out that *be* (by itself) is not used as a habitual marker in any Caribbean creoles. Rickford (1986: 266) proposes a decreolization theory of the development of habitual *be* in AAVE that takes into account the creole data, while also allowing a role for the influence of Irish English dialects (Rickford 1986: 272). In this theory, there are four stages, illustrated below (Rickford 1986: 267):

- | | | | | | |
|------|----|----|------|----------|---|
| (77) | a. | He | (d)a | quiet | |
| | b. | He | does | quiet | (<i>d(a)</i> → <i>does</i>) |
| | c. | He | does | be quiet | (<i>quiet</i> reanalyzed as adjective) |
| | d. | He | — | be quiet | (deletion of <i>does</i>) |

In stage one, a habitual marker (*d)a* is used in creoles. This (*d)a* “represents convergence between English habitual *do* and similar West African forms” (Rickford 1986: 269) (e.g., the verbal suffix *-na* in Ewe). In stage two, unstressed *does* replaces (*d)a*. In stage three, *be* is introduced following *does* either as a replacement for the creole copula *de*, or preceding adjectives. In stage four, *does* is deleted (due to phonological reduction processes), leaving *be* as a habitual marker.

While I think that Rickford's analysis is attractive, I would like to consider a scenario where the presence of agentive *be* played a role in the development of habitual *be* in AAVE. I suggest the following stages:

Stage one: language learners hear ambient dialects of English some of which (maybe most) contain agentive *be*. The presence of agentive *be* in informal American English, New Zealand English (see (40) in section 3) and British English (p.c., Paul Elbourne) suggests that agentive *be* is a widespread feature of English around the world, and raises the possibility that it existed in the relevant contact dialects (Irish English dialects, British English dialects, American English dialects) during the development of AAVE.

Discussion of the geographical distribution of agentive *be* raises the question of whether there is any relationship between the presence/absence of agentive *be* and the presence/absence of habitual *be* in a dialect? For example, it is striking that informal English has agentive *be*, but not habitual *be*? Does AAVE have agentive¹³ *be*? Do the dialects of Irish English that have habitual *be*, have agentive *be*? Does New Zealand English have habitual *be*? If a language had both habitual *be* and agentive *be*, a sentence with non-inflected *be* would be potentially ambiguous. Are there dialects of English with such ambiguous sentences? A much wider survey of English dialects is needed to even begin addressing this question.

Stage two: Language learners analyze the syntax of uninflected *be*. The relevant syntactic features include lack of inflection, the position following negation, negation with do-support, the presence of a subject, and lack of subject-auxiliary inversion. By virtue of Universal Grammar, they know that these properties of uninflected *be* are the result of the combination of *be* with a semantically contentful head (e.g., little *v*).

Stage three: Language learners adapt syntax of uninflected *be* (which they learned from exposure to agentive *be*) to express habitual aspect. Crucially, there are many possible ways to express habitual aspect (e.g., as the suffix *-na* in Ewe, or as a free morpheme (*d*)*a* for Carribean creoles), but only uninflected *be* was chosen in AAVE. The simplest hypothesis is that a language learner would keep same phonological form, and syntactic features of agentive *be*, but analyze its syntax in terms of AspP (yielding a habitual interpretation) instead of *v*P (yielding an agentive interpretation).

I do not think my proposal is inconsistent with Rickford's proposal. In particular, Rickford proposed that in his stage 4, habitual *does* is deleted, leaving uninflected *be*. But perhaps another way of saying the same thing is that the language learners replaced overt *does* with covert Asp. In part this replacement would have been possible because of the model that agentive *be* (involving a null head) provided of uninflected *be*.

Consider an alternative where agentive *be* played no role in the development of habitual *be*. Assume that the learner wants to express the habitual as a null head Asp. Furthermore, the learner knows that there is an uninflected *be* (from constructions like "I will be happy", "I want to be on time", "Be on time!") in the ambient dialects of English. So the learner simply projects the null aspect head with the uninflected *be* (Merge(Asp,

¹³ More generally, I have not looked into imperative *be*, informal subjunctive *be* (see (47a)), agentive *be* (1) or why-question *be* (see (48)) in AAVE (see Labov 1972: 71 for some examples of uninflected non-habitual *be*). All of these subjects would be extremely interesting to investigate from the point of view of my paper.

VP)) and by principles of UG we get the syntactic facts which define habitual *be*. On this scenario, there is no historical connection between habitual *be* and agentive *be*. They share the same syntax because both of them involve a functional projection with a null head (AspP and vP), that takes a VP complement (headed by *be*).

The question is what counts as sufficient evidence for the language learner to postulate the presence of a null habitual head (instead of an overt suffix, or no head at all, for example). Is it sufficient that there is no overt habitual head in the surrounding dialects of English for the language learner to motivate a null head? Or is it also necessary that they see a similar null head (the head of vP) being used with similar syntactic properties? This is a question which I am unable to answer now.

In this paper, I have not brought forth any new data on habitual *be* in AAVE. The “fresh look at habitual *be*” referred to in the title consists in (a) pointing out its similarities with agentive *be* in informal English, and (b) raising a series of questions about the diachronic relationship between habitual *be* and agentive *be*.

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