Copula Variation in Southern Illinois White Vernacular English

Douglas S. Bigham
Capn002@aol.com
University of Texas – Austin
SECOL LXXII – North Carolina State University
April 7th, 2005

1. Introduction

1.1. This study considers variation in the behavior of the *be* verb in Southern Illinois white vernacular English (SoIVE).

    1.1.1. SoIVE *be* occurs in two distinct forms: a suppletive form (Generic IS[1]) and an active/eventive form (Main Verb BE).

    1.1.2. SoIVE Generic IS shows contraction and deletion[2]

    1.1.3. SoIVE Main Verb BE takes regular tense morphology and also appears to be semantically distinct from Generic IS forms.

1.2. Variation of the *be* verb has been shown for other non-standard dialects.

    1.2.1. AAVE has been shown to have a copula that allows contraction/deletion (IS) as well as a second "nonfinite" *be* verb (be_2) that indicates some kind of "habituality" (Green 1994).

    1.2.2. Several Southern white varieties of English have been shown to have patterns for contraction/deletion IS and nonfinite BE similar to AAVE (Bailey & Maynor 1985, etc.).

    1.2.3. Several other Southern varieties of English (white Carolinian speakers, Lumbee speakers) have been shown to have BE in the finite form "bes" (Montgomery & Mishoe 1999, Dannenberg & Wolfram 1998), apparently acting as a main verb.

1.3. Becker (2004), proposes that, in American English, there are actually two copulas.

    1.3.1. The first of these, BE, acts as a verb and triggers an eventive predicate reading

    1.3.2. The second of these, IS, is only an Infl head

    1.3.3. Becker uses data from Standard American English, supported with child-acquisition English and AAVE.

1.4. My analysis of SoIVE copula forms will provide further support to Becker's analysis as well as provide further evidence of a tensed BE form acting as a main verb in a modern English dialect.

2. Background

2.1. Southern Illinois

    2.1.1. Southern Illinois ("Little Egypt") consists of the lower-most 16 counties of Illinois; roughly Illinois below I-64.

    2.1.2. Southern Illinois is economically depressed and is generally middle to lower-working class.

    2.1.3. The dialect of Southern Illinois has not yet been fully explored; but it appears that Southern Illinois is part of a dialect transition region.

    2.1.4. Most towns in Southern Illinois are predominantly white.

---

[1] IS stands in for AM, IS, and ARE

[2] The variation between IS and 0 may be deletion, which implies an underlying copula, or it may be alternation with a null form, which does not imply an underlying copula.

2.2. My Speakers & Data
    2.2.1. Henry (1995) points out that studying the syntax of non-standard varieties of language is difficult. Speakers tend towards Negative Overreporting "indicating that structures are ungrammatical when in fact the speaker actually uses them". Henry advocates only using syntactic judgements from speakers who actually use the structure under investigation.
    2.2.2. My speakers/judges: 2 older males, 2 older females, 2 younger females, 1 younger male, and my own judgements (I am a native Southern Illinoisan). All are white. All are working ~ lower middle class.

3. Data
While SoIVE copula shows both an interesting Main Verb BE and contraction/deletion variation with Generic IS, the Main Verb BE will be my focus here. Generic IS will be mentioned only briefly as supporting data.

3.1. Naturally Occuring BE Data
Examples (1) – (8) are forms which I heard in natural conversation from one of the eight speakers/judges listed above[3]. Following Montgomery & Mishoe (1999), I have categorized the utterances into PUNCTUAL and NONPUNCTUAL readings.

    3.1.1. NONPUNCTUAL:
(1) Either he doesn't be stoned, or he doesn't be my boyfriend.
(2) That cop just bes sitting there—waiting to pull someone over.
(3) I always be red. [when we play board games]
(4) Why does he still be your friend?
(5) Why do you stay with him when he always bes mean to you?
(6) Nikki always bes on time.

    3.1.2. PUNCTUAL:
(7) If we have the house be sold by fall, then you can do your study abroad while I move home for a semester.
(8) When I be there, it will be six (people you've slept with).

3.1.3. Also, for Montgomery & Mishoe's analysis, their data show a distinction between a finite and non-finite "bes". My data show no such distinction.
3.1.4. Finally, note how the examples above fit into the following categories (again, as in Montgomery & Mishoe 1999):

NEGATIVE: (1)
INTERROGATIVE: (4), (5)
CONDITIONAL: (1), (7), and possibly (8)

---

[3] While I do have more naturally occurring data, I chose to remove it for two reasons. (a) I did not have background information on the speakers producing these other forms; (b) I could not elicit judgements from these speakers. However, none of the data I have left out would change my analysis.

3.1.2. Preliminary Findings:
Already, we see from these data that BE:

> occurs after an adverbial[4] [as in (2), (3), (4), (5), and (6)]
> can take do-support [as in (1) and (4)]
> does not host negation [as in (1)]
> will take the regular tense morpheme –s in 3^{rd}sg [as in (2), (3), (5), and (6)]
> will take the regular tense 0 morpheme in other forms [1st sg (8), 1st pl (7)]
> will remain bare-nonfinite in questions [as in (4)] and negatives [as in (1)]

3.2. Syntactic Judgement Tests[5]
[Judgements are rated as either FINE (√), BAD (*), MARGINAL (?), or AMBIGUOUS (??) (that is,
> AMBIGUOUS judgements had different ratings within one speaker's 'interview').]

3.2.1. First Semantic Test: PUNCTUALITY
SoIVE BE has a NONPUNCTUAL interpretation for most speakers.

> (9) Nikki always bes Santa Claus for Halloween.
> > JUDGEMENT: fine for most speakers, marginal for some older speakers
> (10) Nikki sometimes bes Santa Clause for Halloween.
> > JUDGEMENT: bad for older speakers, fine for younger speakers
> (11) Nikki bes Santa Clause for Halloween just this year.
> > JUDGEMENT: bad for all speakers

However, when given sentence (12), and instructed to paraphrase, it was interpreted as
> NONPUNCTUAL (i.e. habitual or continuous, "is always") by all speakers.
> (12) Nikki bes on time.

3.2.2. Second Semantic Test: ACTIVENESS[6]
One speaker offered (unprompted) the following comparison:

> (13a) *Anne always bes naked for Halloween.
> (13b) √Anne always bes something slutty for Halloween.

The speaker said that this was because "someone can't *be* naked. Naked isn't a thing. But 'something
> slutty'... that's a thing you're being." I then asked her about example (5), which she was fine
> with. She suggested it was because 'mean' in (5) reminded her not of an attitude, but of the
> whole gamut of acts that comes with the 'mean' attitude: drunk, throwing things, angry, violent,
> etc.

The judgements for (13a, b) were shared by most speakers. For the one speaker who judged (13a) as
> fine, he said, "Oh look! There she is! Naked again!" His "oh look" paraphrase seems (weakly)
> to point towards an eventive reading, even here.

---

[4] But whether the adverbial is required or not is unknown at this time.

[5] Although most of the sentences presented here have a 3rd sg subject, BE can occur will all subjects with regular tense marking. The exclusion of plural and 2nd person forms was an accident of the data collection (error on my part). cf. (i) √They always be together. (ii) ?*They always bes together.

[6] This could also be considered Eventive or possibly Inchoative.

3.2.3. First Syntactic Test: POSTION wrt ADVERBS

The position of BE with respect to adverbs is the same as that of regular main verbs.

> (14) Nikki always bes Santa Claus for Halloween.
>> JUDGEMENT: fine for all speakers
>
> (15) Nikki bes always Santa Clause for Halloween.
>> JUDGEMENT: bad for most speakers, ambiguous (? ~ *) for one speaker

3.2.4. Second Syntactic Test: PAST TENSE:

SoIVE BE will take regular morphology, even in past tense. Again, although this test was not presented to all speakers, example (16) was fine for all three (younger) speakers to whom it was presented.

> (16) Nikki always be-ed Santa Claus for Halloween until she got her Easter Bunny outfit.

3.2.5. Fourth Syntactic Test: DO-SUPPORT, QUESTION INVERSION, NEGATION, TAGS

For all speakers, even those who gave ambiguous or marginal readings on earlier examples, BE with do-support (in both interrogatives, tags, and negatives) was judged as fine. Further, note that BE occurs in situ, not in raised position (as IS would).

> #### 3.2.5.1. Do-Support for Negation
> (17) When doesn't it be windy in Chicago?
> (18) *When [ben't it / bes it not / bes not it / be not it] windy in Chicago?
> (19) Either he doesn't be stoned, or he doesn't be my boyfriend.
>
> #### 3.2.5.2. Do-Support for Questions/Non-inversion
> (20) Why does he still be your friend?
> (21) *Why do he still bes your friend?
> (22) Does he still be your friend?
> (23) *Bes he still your friend?
>
> #### 3.2.5.3. Do-Support in Tag Questions
> (24) Nikki always bes Santa Claus for Halloween, doesn't she?

3.3. Summary of BE data

3.3.1. BE seems to function exactly as if it were a main verb.

3.3.2. It cannot come before adverbs.

3.3.3. It must take do-support for questions, negation, and tags.

3.3.4. It does not raise in questions.

3.3.5. It will take regular morphology (both present and past forms).

3.3.6. Dannenberg & Wolfram (1998) also argued that BES in Lumbee English acts like a main verb.

3.4. Generic IS Data

3.4.1. Speaker judgements show Generic IS in SoIVE following the same pattern as described in Bailey & Maynor (1985).

3.4.2. IS forms can delete most commonly with ARE, less commonly with IS, and never with AM

3.4.3. The "heaviness" of the following predicate will increase the acceptability of a null form.

3.4.4. Preceding deictics will increase the acceptability of a null form.

3.4.5. The predicate hierarchy (*gonna*, Ving, nominals, adjectivals) shows considerable variation except that a *gonna* environment is always the most acceptable form.

4. Analysis

4.1. As stated above, Becker's (2004) analysis claims that *be* is split in English into the verb BE and the Infl host IS. Becker's analysis is derived from the following facts:

    4.1.1. BE follows negation like main verbs, while IS precedes negation:
        (25) Arlin does (*like) not (√like) bananas.
        (26) Kevin will (*be) not (√be) late.
        (27) Mark (√is) not (*is) here.

    4.1.2. BE can delete under identity with BE but not with IS (Becker's examples:).
        (28) John slept, and Mary will [sleep] too.
        (29) *John is here, and Mary will [be] too.

    4.1.3. BE takes the regular verbal participial morphology –*en* and –*ing*, but IS does not.

4.2. Two problems Becker points out for her analysis are:

    4.2.1. Standard American English BE does not take –*s* or –*ed*.

    4.2.2. Standard American English BE does not take do-support.

4.3. Becker's claim is further supported by SoIVE data then, in that:

    4.3.1. SoIVE BE must follow the adverb (14, 15, simplified here as 30), while IS must precede it (31):
        (30) Nikki (*bes) always (√bes) Santa Claus for Halloween.
        (31) Jackie (is) always (*is) ready.

    4.3.2. SoIVE data, at this point, is ambiguous towards Becker's point about deletion under identity[7].

    4.3.3. SoIVE BE takes both –*s* and –*ed* where appropriate.

    4.3.4. SoIVE BE takes do-support.

4.4. One further problem, as mentioned in Dannenberg & Wolfram (1998), in Lumbee English, BE cannot occur with modals[8].

    4.4.1. SoIVE BE has not been tested with modals.

---

[7] PARALLEL AGREEMENT / VP IDENTITY:
For some speakers, the occurrence of "be" in a second clause will make the reading of a sentence like (9) "better". So, for those who found (9) marginal, (16) is "better".
    (16) Nikki always bes Santa Claus for Halloween, why can't I be?

Also, although I was only able to test for ellipsis with two speakers, their judgements confirm that BE shares VP identity with "bes" (17) and not "is" (18) [see discussion of Becker (2004), below]:
    (17) Nikki always **bes** Santa Claus for Halloween, why can't I [be]?
    (18) *Nikki**'s** always Santa Claus for Halloween, why can't I [be]?
    (19) *Nikki always bes Santa Claus for Halloween, isn't she? (cf. 24)

4.4.2. However, with the highly regular patterning of SoIVE BE, (32) would be ambiguous between the SoIVE BE and the SAE BE.

(32) Nikki may be on time, but I still love her.

5. Summary and Future Directions

5.1. The variation seen in Southern Illinois white vernacular English forms supports Becker's analysis of split-*be* for English.
    5.1.1. However, part of Becker's analysis implies that dialects which shows IS deletion should also show variable verbal concord. I currently have no data on SoIVE verbal concord.
5.2. SoIVE BE is acting as a regular main verb.
    5.2.1. It is more extreme than other BE varieties (AAVE, Southern white Englishes, Lumbee English) in that it accepts the full range of regular verbal morphology (*-en, -ing, -s, -ed*).
5.3. SoIVE BE could provide evidence for Montgomery & Mishoe's hypothesis that this BE was once a more widespread phenomena in the South, which was slowly "pushed out" by the current standard usage.
    5.3.1. However, I have not yet looked closely at the settlement patters of Southern Illinois to see if this link is historically valid.
5.4. Currently, the data sample is limited, and the speakers' who provided judgements represent a very limited "corner" of Southern Illinois. Future work will investigate how widespread the phenomenon is in Southern Illinois as a whole.
5.5. Finally, the semantics of SoIVE BE, SoIVE Generic IS, and *be* forms in other dialects has not been given a full treatment.
    5.5.1. First, a possible semantic link should be investigated for dialects that use these BE forms.
    5.5.2. Next, the semantic developed for the dialectal forms should be compared to Standard English forms.
    5.5.3. This linking of semantics may help to explain the microvariation noted in this and related studies.

REFERENCES

Bailey, Guy & Marvin Bassett. 1986. "Invariant Be in the Lower South". in *Language Variety in the South*. Michael Montgomery & Guy Bailey (eds.). pp. 158-179. University of Alabama Press.

Bailey, Guy & Natalie Maynor. 1985. "The Present Tense of *Be* in White Folk Speech of the Southern United States". *English World-Wide*. 6.2. pp. 199-216.

Becker, Misha. 2004. "Is Isn't Be". *Lingua*. 114. pp. 399-418.

Bernstein, Cynthia. 1988. "A Variant of the 'Invariant' *BE*". *American Speech*. 63.2. pp. 119-124.

Dannenberg, Clare. 1999. "Grammatical and Phonological Manifestations of Null Copula in a Tri-Ethnic Contact Situation". *Journal of English Linguistics*. 27.4. pp. 356-370.

Dannenberg, Clare & Walt Wolfram. 1998. "Ethnic Identity and Grammatical Restructuring: *BE(S)* in Lumbee English". *American Speech*. 73.2. pp. 139-158.

Green, Lisa. 1994. "Study of Verb Classes in African American English". *Linguistics and Education*. 7. pp. 65-81.

Henry, Alison. 1995. *Belfast English and Standard English: Dialect Variation and Parameter Settings*. Oxford UP.

Montgomery, Michael & Margaret Mishoe. 1999. "'He Bes Took up with a Yankee Girl and Moved Up There to New York': The Verb *Bes* in the Carolinas and Its History". *American Speech*. 74.3. pp. 240-281.