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# They Be Taggin, Don't They?: The Acquisition of Invariant Be

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## They Be Taggin, Don't They?: The Acquisition Of Invariant Be

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### Introduction

Does African-American English (AAE) have a separate grammar from Standard American English (SAE)? AAE has a number of distinctive features, several of which have been discussed extensively in the sociolinguistic literature: the variable use of third-person singular *-s*; the absence of plural *-s*; the variable use of the copula; and others. (See Labov, 1966, 1969a, b, and Fasold, 1972 for discussion.) Perhaps the most distinctive feature of AAE is habitual or invariant "be". An example of invariant "be" is found in (1) below.

- (1) a. He be sleeping (AAE)  
("He sleeps repeatedly, at specific points in time, over time.")  
b. He is sleeping (SAE)

Invariant "be" appears to be a feature unique to AAE; no other variety of American English has a similar marker. SAE does not have any direct correlate to invariant "be"; the same meaning can only be expressed through a paraphrase involving adverbials (like the SAE paraphrase of (1a)).

The semantic and syntactic properties of invariant "be" are different from those of "be" in SAE. Semantically, invariant "be" denotes a habitual action or state, as the SAE gloss of (1a) suggests. Syntactically, it does not function as an auxiliary. This is illustrated in (2) below.

- (2) a. He don't be sleeping. (AAE)  
b. He isn't sleeping. (SAE)

If "be" in (2a) were an auxiliary, it would appear to the left of the negation "not" (which appears as the cliticized form "n't" here). If it were an auxiliary, "be" would be negated with "isn't", as in the SAE example in (2b), or by analogy "ben't" (which is ungrammatical in AAE).

This paper reports a study which was conducted to determine whether AAE and SAE speaking children were sensitive to the difference between invariant "be" and other auxiliaries. Children were presented with sentences involving invariant "be" and asked to provide tag question continuations. An example is given in (3):

- (3) Adult: She be sleeping  
Child: She be sleeping, don't she?

The form in (3) ("don't she") represents the grammatical response in AAE. If AAE and SAE have different grammars, then SAE and AAE speaking children should treat invariant "be" differently. AAE speaking children should not treat "be" as an auxiliary (like inflected forms of "be"). They should tag it with "don't," as in (3) above. Since they do not have a separate representation for invariant "be" in their grammar, SAE speaking children should tag it as they tag other forms of "be," with an inflected form, as in (4) below.

- (4) Adult: He be sleeping  
Child: He is sleeping, isn't he?

The tag study reported here was designed to see whether AAE and SAE speaking children would treat "be" as an auxiliary or not. If AAE speaking children have a different grammar from SAE speaking children, one in which invariant "be" is represented differently from auxiliary forms of *be*, they should tag "be" differently from how SAE speaking children tag it. To the extent that SAE and AAE speaking children treat invariant "be" differently in the study, they are showing that they have different grammars.

### Invariant BE

As mentioned above, invariant "be" denotes a habitual action or state. Green (1993) labels invariant "be" "aspectual be" -- she analyzes it as a marker of habitual aspect, which occupies a distinct syntactic position. The gloss in (5) below reflects this aspectual reading. (The example is taken from Smitherman, 1977.)

- (5) My father, he work at Ford. He be tired. (AAE)

"My father works at Ford. He is tired at repeated, specific intervals, over time."  
(SAE)  
(Smitherman, 1977)

Aspectual "be" indicates that the predicate following it ("tired," in this case) holds of the subject at repeated, specific intervals over time, in the past, present, and future.

Invariant "be" always expresses this "timeless" reading. It cannot be used to denote a specific action/state which holds or happens only once, or at the moment of utterance. In order to express such a reading, in which the predicate that holds only at the moment of utterance, an auxiliary (such as an inflected form of *be*) must be used. This is illustrated in (6) below.

- (6) a. She be sleeping. (AAE)

She is sleeping all the time. (SAE)

\*She is sleeping (at the moment).

b. She (is) sleeping. (AAE)

She is sleeping (at the moment) (SAE)

\*She is sleeping all the time.

Invariant "be" can only express the quasi-timeless, aspectual reading, as the ungrammatical gloss in (6a) indicates. Similarly, the auxiliary form "is" (which may optionally be left out in AAE) can only express the momentary reading, as the ungrammatical SAE gloss of (6b) indicates.

Invariant "be's" semantic behavior in AAE distinguishes it from auxiliaries like inflected forms of *be*, such as "is." Its syntactic behavior also separates it from auxiliaries. Green (1993) shows that aspectual/invariant "be" must be in a position below Neg in the syntactic representation. "Be" always appears to the right of negation ("not" or "-n't"), triggering "do" insertion. Auxiliaries, in contrast, must appear to the left of negation. They do not trigger "do" insertion. This is illustrated in (7) and (8) below.

(7) Auxiliary "be"  
a. He (is) sleeping. (AAE)

b. He is not/ain't sleeping.

c. \*He don't be sleeping.

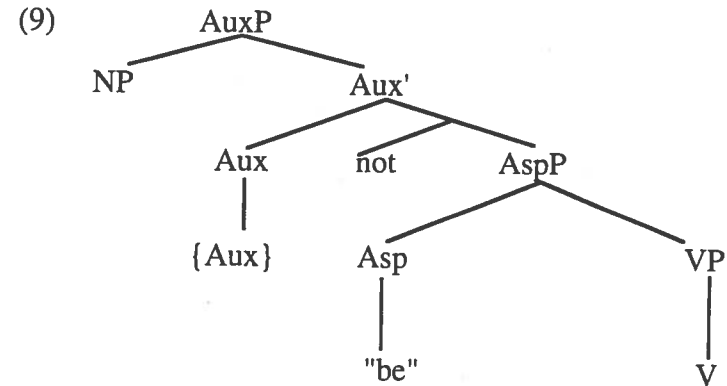
(8) Invariant "be"  
a. He be sleeping. (AAE)

b. He don't be sleeping.

c. \*He be not sleeping.

The inflected "be" auxiliary must move to a position to the left of the negation "not"; it cannot trigger "do" insertion (as shown in the ungrammatical (7c)). Invariant "be" cannot move to a position to the left of "not," however; it must trigger "do" insertion. Again, invariant "be" behaves differently from auxiliaries such as in inflected "be."

There have been a number of analyses of invariant "be" designed to capture its syntactic and semantic behavior (Déchaine, 1993; Green, 1993; Lasnik, 1994). We will adopt Green's analysis which is presented below. As mentioned above, Green (1993) analyzes invariant "be" as an aspect marker. It is generated in the head of an Aspect Phrase, which sits above VP and below Negation. This structure is illustrated in the tree in (9) below.



The fact that "be" is generated below Negation accounts for its syntactic behavior -- it cannot move from the head of AspP, so "do" must be inserted in the Aux head. Auxiliaries, on the other hand, are generated in the head of AuxP, above negation. They appear to the left of negation, in the position where "do" is inserted with invariant "be". Under Green's account, the different syntactic behavior of auxiliaries and invariant "be" stems from the fact that they are generated in different positions.

"Be's" semantic behavior is explained by its position as the head of AspP. Green claims that all aspect markers in AAE (such as "be," "been," and "done") are generated in AspP, which is the locus of aspectual interpretation in AAE. "Be" is the marker for habitual aspect in AAE, and as such, it is generated in Asp and does not move from there. Auxiliaries (such as "is") cannot mark habitual aspect because they are neither generated in nor move to Asp. They are generated in Aux, above Asp, and therefore cannot move to it. No auxiliary will ever be able to express an aspectual reading associated with Asp in AAE (such as habitual aspect), since auxiliaries never occupy the Asp position. Invariant "be" (which is base-generated in Asp) will be able to, since it is base-generated there.

This analysis makes a prediction regarding tag questions. In tag questions, everything below Negation in the syntactic structure (i.e., to the right of "not") is deleted in the tag. This is shown for a tag question involving the modal "can" in (10) below.

- (10) a. She can sleep.  
b. She can sleep, [CP [ca[n't]k]<sub>i</sub> [IP she [I t<sub>i</sub>] [Neg t<sub>k</sub>] Ø ]]]?

If invariant "be" is below Negation, then it should be deleted in the tag portion of a tag question. "Do" will be inserted and invert in the tag. This is illustrated in (11).

- (11) a. She be sleeping.  
b. She be sleeping, [CP [do[n't]k]<sub>i</sub> [IP she [I t<sub>i</sub>] [Neg t<sub>k</sub>] Ø ]]]?

Green (1993) confirms this prediction for adult AAE speakers. Adult AAE speakers tag invariant "be" with "do." If AAE speaking children are making use of the same grammar as AAE adults, they should tag "be" with "do," as well. If SAE speaking children are using a different grammar from the one AAE speaking children are using, they should tag "be" differently. Specifically, if they are using an adult SAE grammar to analyze "be", they will most likely analyze it as an auxiliary, like other forms of *be*. This was the prediction tested in the study presented below.

**Method**

**Subjects**

The subjects were 15 African-American and 15 White fifth graders attending the same western Massachusetts elementary school. The subjects were randomly selected from 2 fifth grade classes. Children receiving special education services for academic or speech/language concerns were excluded from the selection process.

**Stimuli**

Sentences with tag questions were designed based on previous data which indicated that invariant "be" most frequently occurs in conjunction with internal state verbs, adjectives and action plus -ing constructions (Blake, 1993a; Blake, 1993b; Green, 1993). Equal numbers of sentences with action verbs, state adjectives, "size" adjectives, and emotional state adjectives were developed. The following are examples of such sentences:

- Action verbs: He be running
- State adjectives: He be hungry
- Size adjectives: They be big
- Emotional state adjectives: She be happy

Additionally, equal numbers of sentences were developed which included the adverbial phrase "all the time." This phrase was added to further highlight the habitual nature of invariant "be". The following are examples of such sentences:

- She be jumping all the time, don't she?
- She be playing all the time, don't she?

Two puppets and 5 "power ranger" dolls were used in the tasks to provide subjects with referents to the sentences.

**Procedures**

Students were trained on how to make a tag question and several training items were administered to ensure that children could easily perform the task. Training instruction was the same for each subject. The modals "can't" and "won't" were targeted in the training exercise in order to allow for an understanding of tag question formation without biasing subjects toward "do" insertion. For example:

He can run -----> can't he?

Sentences were read to the children who were instructed to repeat the sentence and add a question. Three separate individuals scored the subjects responses simultaneously as the task was presented to ensure a high level of reliability. Each child was tested individually.

**Results**

The results revealed that when presented with sentences containing the invariant form of "be", AAE speaking subjects produced tags with "do" insertion 78.1% of the time, while SAE speaking subjects tagged with "do" insertion only 7.8% of the time. A 1 way ANOVA determined a significant difference between these proportions (Table 1, Figure 1).

**Do Insertion**

	AAE	SAE
% of tags with "do" insertion	78.1%	7.8%

F = 66.054, p = 0.000

(Table 1)

**"Do" Insertion by Dialect**

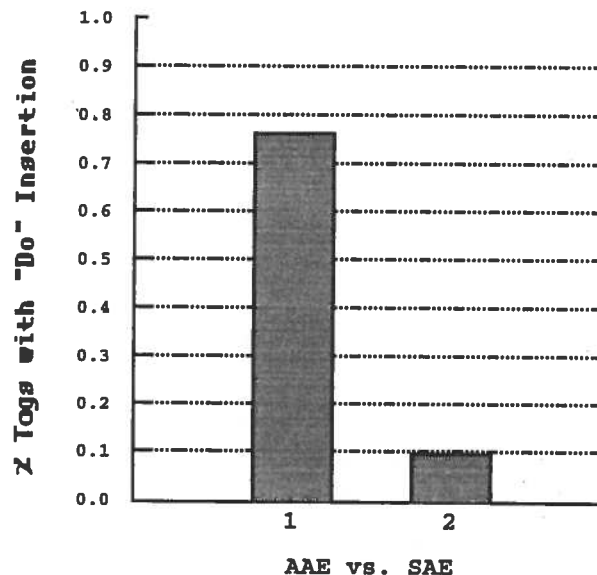


Figure 1

Predicate type (e.g., action, state etc.) also yielded a significant result. Action predicates were more likely to be tagged with "do" than any other type of predicate for both groups (Table 2, Figures 2 & 3).

**Predicate Type**

	Action	Emotion	Size	State
AAE	87.7%	70.4%	72.0%	74.4%
SAE	21.0%	5.5%	5.5%	6.7%

F = 8.514, p = 0.000

(Table 2)

**"Do" Insertion by Predicate Type**

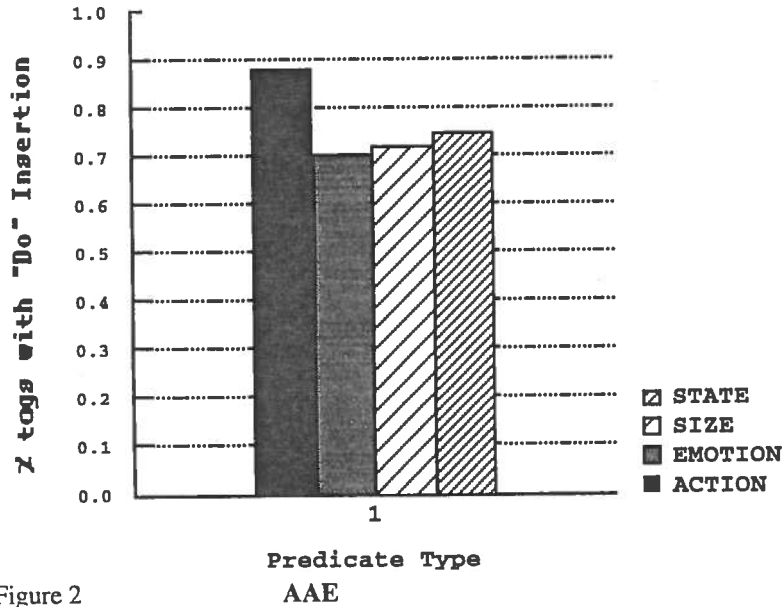


Figure 2

**"Do" Insertion by Predicate Type**

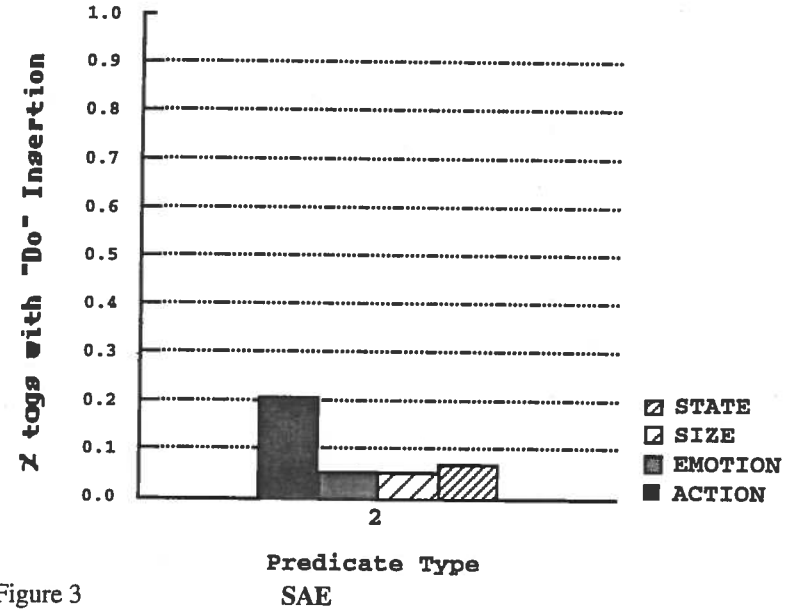


Figure 3

The presence of the adverbial phrase "all the time" was not statistically significant in increasing the likelihood that either SAE or AAE speakers would tag with "do". (Table 3, Figure 4).

**Adverbial Phrase**

	AAE	SAE
No Adverbial Phrase	74.3%	8.3%
Adverbial Phrase	77.9%	11.1%

F = 1.269, p = 0.269

(Table 3)

### "Do" Insertion by Adverbial Phrase

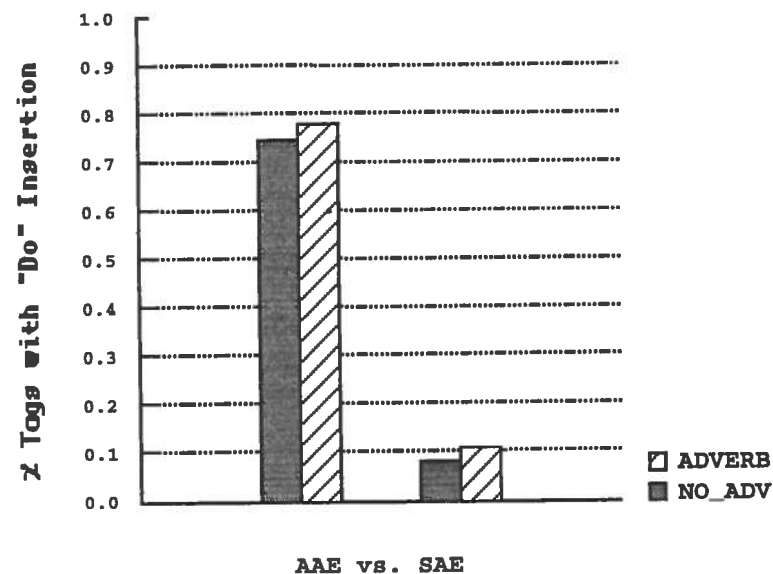


Figure 4

Interaction effects were not significant. The interaction between predicate type and having an adverbial phrase did not significantly increase any of the predicate types likelihood of being tagged with "do". Also the presence of the adverbial phrase did not significantly effect the likelihood that either group (SAE or AAE) would tag with "do". Finally, no significant interaction was revealed between the 2 groups and predicate type. The same pattern of "do" insertion across predicates was present for both groups of children, with action predicates being more likely to be tagged with "do" than any other predicate type.

### Discussion

We have presented evidence for 2 distinct grammars in AAE and SAE. African-American children consistently inserted "do" to tag 'be' sentences, thus treating "be" as if it is below IP, possibly in an Aspect Phrase, as argued by Green (1993). In contrast, White children rarely inserted "do" to tag these sentences, thus treating "be" as if it is within IP.

The lack of an interaction effect among predicates and when an adverbial phrase ("all the time") was added provides further support for two distinct grammars. Since AAE marks habituality with "be", the adverbial phrase is merely redundant. On the other hand, SAE does not mark habituality syntactically, therefore the adverbial phrase cannot make any difference. These results may prove very useful in research and clinical areas where AAE and SAE populations must be clearly distinguished.

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