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Auxiliary Contraction in English: Syntactic and Prosodic Constraints in a Large Set of Data

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Auxiliary contraction (AC) is a frequently employed, optional process in English that causes certain auxiliary verbs to lose syllabicity and attach to material in their surrounding environment. It displays a wide array of environments in which it is ungrammatical and still others where acceptability is degraded. Previous work has focused on finding syntactic or prosodic constraints to explain patterns of blocked AC, but has thus far focused on narrow subsets of existing data. This paper investigates a much wider array of data for blocked AC and evaluates various syntactic and prosodic accounts. It ultimately provides theoretical support for syntactic over prosodic constraints in general, and extends a previous account—that of Kaisse (1983)—to explain the wider range of data investigated. It does so in consideration of theoretical stances on the nature of AC—as enclisis or proclisis, phonological reduction or suppletive allomorphy. The theoretical space is broadly divided into patterns that vary by auxiliary and by surrounding environment, reiterating past consensus on phonological constraints for bi-auxiliary variation and supporting a view of AC as suppletive allomorphy. Consideration of surroundings is subject to a thorough investigation and typology of data found in previous work on AC. Several prosodic accounts are presented and limitations are discussed. Syntactic accounts appealing to the notion of government are also evaluated and concerns with these views are presented. A word-order account—that of Kaisse—is presented as the most promising, and is extended to make it compatible with the wide array of data investigated. Finally, lingering concerns are addressed with an eye toward future improvement upon views presented here.