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Tense and discourse in African-American English

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1. Introduction¹

A commonly-observed fact about African-American English (AAE) is that past tense marking in AAE is optional in many contexts (Labov, 1969, 1972; Wolfram, 1969; Dillard, 1972). A verb which carries no past tense morphology may be interpreted as being in the past tense, particularly if it is clear from the surrounding context that the state of affairs being described is in the past.

- (1) He stood there and he thinkin'.
"He stood there and he was thinking." (Dillard, 1972:42)

In the context of the preceding overt past tense in "he stood there," the situation described in the second clause in (1) ("he thinkin'") is interpreted as taking place in the past, overlapping the past situation described in the first clause. In isolation, however, "he thinkin'" can only be interpreted as being in the present tense, as illustrated in (2):

- (2) He thinkin'.
"He is thinking."

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The preceding past context in (1) is playing a clear role in fixing the interpretation of the unmarked clause following it. In the absence of such a context, the bare form can only be interpreted as being in the present tense, linked to utterance time, as in (2).

This paper will explore the question of what is responsible for licensing the past interpretation of bare verbs in AAE, and what contexts it is felicitous in. Specifically, it will pursue the hypothesis that past tense interpretations for bare verbs are licensed by the bare verbs' being linked to previous overtly-marked past discourse (Dechaine, 1993, 1995). This past discourse provides the tense value for the bare stem, and makes the past-tense interpretation felicitous. Evidence will be provided from adult judgments suggesting that bare verbs must be closely linked to preceding past discourse in order to receive a past interpretation. Results from a study looking at the acquisition of past interpretations for bare verbs among AAE-speaking children will also be presented. These results show that the presence of preceding overt past-tense marking plays a large role in determining whether a bare verb stem is interpreted as being in the past tense, contrary to previous claims that absent/deleted past tense morphology arises for morphological or phonological reasons (Labov, 1969; Wolfram, 1985). Taken together, this evidence suggests that discourse structure is playing an important role in the grammar and acquisition of AAE distinctive features, as has been suggested independently for phenomena such as null copula use (Johnson, 1997).

The remainder of the paper will proceed as follows. Section 2 will summarize some previous descriptions of absent past tense in AAE, and also provide some adult judgments regarding the felicity of absent past tense in several contexts. It will also lay out the hypothesis sketched above in more detail. Section 3 will report a study designed to examine children's acquisition of absent tense. Section 4 will discuss the implication of the study's results, both for the analysis of absent/null tense marking in AAE and its development. A summary and conclusion will follow in section 5.

2. Absent (null) tense in AAE

2.1 Previous descriptions

From the very first descriptions of AAE, researchers looking at absent past tense have typically focused on the phonological and morphological factors conditioning its appearance. Labov (1969, 1972) and many others have argued that the environments in which past tense marking is deleted/absent in AAE are best characterized in phonological or morphological terms. For example, regular past tense inflection is more commonly absent than irregular past tense inflection. The regular verb stems in (3) are more likely to appear without an overt past tense marker than the irregular ones in (4).

- (3) a. "kissed" [kɪst] >> [kɪs]
 b. "raised" [rezd] >> [rez]

- (4) a. "had" [haed] >> [haev]
 b. "rode" [rod] >> [raid]

Whatever is responsible for past tense being absent thus appears to be sensitive to morphological conditions. The absence/deletion of past tense also appears to be sensitive to phonological considerations. Past tense marking is often absent or reduced in cases where phonological cluster reduction is likely to apply in AAE. The morphologically simple cluster [st] in [Ist] is often reduced to [s], just as [kIst] is likely to be reduced to [kIs] (5a-b).

- (5) a. "list" [Ist] >> [Is]
 b. "kissed" [kIst] >> [kIs]

Past tense reduction is also less likely to apply if there is no parallel case of cluster reduction. [kIst] is thus more likely to be reduced to [kis] than [rezd] is to [rez], since there are no morphologically simple [zd] clusters in AAE which are normally reduced.

Based on these and similar data, Labov (1969, 1972), Dillard (1972), Wolfram and Fasold (1974), Poplack and Tagliamonte (1987) and others concluded that the absence of past tense marking is conditioned primarily or exclusively by morphological or phonological factors. (Wolfram, 1985, makes similar arguments for tense marking patterns in L2 learner varieties.) However, such approaches provide no direct explanation for the contrast in (1) and (2), in which a bare form is interpreted as having past-tense interpretation in the presence of a preceding past tense marker but is not when no such marker is present. The surface content of the bare forms is the same in both cases -- it is only the preceding context that determines whether they receive a past interpretation. This fact suggests that there is an additional factor at play in determining whether a bare stem can be understood as having a past-tense interpretation.

(6) Discourse constraint on absent past tense

In order to receive a past-tense interpretation, a bare stem must be related to a salient time in preceding discourse which is consistent with/supports that interpretation.

(See Dechaine, 1993, 1995 for a similar constraint on the interpretation of bare verb stems and null tense morphology in AAE and a number of other languages.) The condition in (6) explains the contrast in (1) and (2) directly. In (1), in which a bare form is conjoined with an overtly-marked past tense form, the bare form is related to the salient preceding past-tense form and is therefore interpreted as having past reference. In (2), where there is no preceding past tense, the bare form is anchored directly to the utterance time and therefore receives only a present-tense interpretation. For the moment, we will leave aside how this relation and the semantic contribution of the bare form are to be represented formally -- we will return to this question in section 4 below.

The discourse constraint also makes two predictions regarding the interpretation of bare verbs in AAE:

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- (i) A bare verb can be interpreted as having past reference iff it is preceded by and linked to another element in the discourse which has past reference.
- (ii) A past tense element will determine the temporal reference of a bare stem following it.

The first prediction will be tested by looking at adult judgments presented in section 2.2 below. The second prediction will be tested in the study presented in section 3.

2.2 Adult judgments regarding absent past tense

The first prediction is borne out by adult judgments regarding the acceptability of absent past tense examples. A bare verb can be interpreted as having past reference if it is preceded by a past tense, but only if it is particularly closely linked to that past tense. Bare verbs with past reference are marginal or unacceptable in normal discourse contexts in which past tense has been marked in preceding discourse.

- (7) Yesterday, John went to the store.
#He buy some apples.
#He walk home.
- (8) When John was little, he hated oranges.
?? He like apples.

The eventive predicates in (7) are completely out, though the stative predicate in (8) is somewhat better. (This improvement may be due in part to the possibility that adults can read "like" as present tense, without agreement marking, if forced to. This option is not available for the eventive predicates, since eventives cannot appear in the simple present in AAE, just like in Standard American English.) Bare verbs are also marginal or unacceptable when they co-occur with a past-referring adverbial:

- (9) #Yesterday, John go to the store.
- (10) ?(?) When he was a kid, he like apples.

Here again, the stative is better than the eventive. The past-referring adverbial is not sufficient to license a past-tense interpretation of the bare verb -- the bare verbs are marginal/ungrammatical when they combine with the past-referring adverbial, suggesting that they are being interpreted as present tense and are hence ineligible to be modified by a past-referring adverbial.

Judgments for absent past tense improve considerably in other contexts, however. In conjoined contexts, the sentences are fully acceptable or almost fully acceptable. (There is some speaker variation regarding the acceptability of these structures.) The example in (11) is taken from a database of language samples from AAE-speaking children compiled as part of the NIH African-American English project at the University of Massachusetts.

- (11) He took his spears and push on his hand and then take it off with a...
(ACR, NIH database)

"push" and "take" are both interpreted as past, since they are conjoined with the overtly-marked "took." (Given that they appear to be conjoined at the VP level, it is possible that the bare verbs are within the scope of the tense operator associated with the overtly-marked past tense.) Further, as Mike Terry (p.c.) points out, absent past tense is fully acceptable in questions, as illustrated in (12) and (13):

- (12) A: Your father left just before you got here.
B: Where _ he go?
- (13) [In the context of a fight with a friend]
What _ I do?

In both these cases, the context which is being questioned is in the past. As a result, the past tense interpretation for the bare stem is licit.

Another context in which a past tense interpretation for a bare verb is licensed is certain clefted constructions. Past-tense clefts which are embedded under an imperative actually force a bare verb to have a past-tense interpretation. This is illustrated in (14) below.

- (14) When they were little, these little kids used to ride tricycles.
Now that they're big kids, they ride bikes instead.
- a. Tell me what it was they ride. TRICYCLES
b. Tell me what it is they ride. BIKES

The responses in capitals indicate what adult AAE speakers' judgments are regarding the correct response to the questions in (14a-b). When it is embedded under the past tense "what it was," the bare verb "ride" is interpreted as "rode," with the cleft picking out the thing that the kids used to ride. Under the present tense "is," however, "ride" is interpreted as present tense. For adult AAE speakers, the presence of the preceding past tense forces the bare stem to be interpreted as past. For adult Standard American English (SAE) speakers, "ride" can only be interpreted as being in the present tense. For SAE speakers who find this construction acceptable, the response to both clefts is BIKES, what the kids in the story currently ride.

The situation is slightly different when the past-tense cleft is not embedded. There, AAE and SAE speakers both interpret the bare verb as being in the present tense:

- (15) {same context as (14)]
What was it they ride? AAE: BIKES
SAE: BIKES

In (15), the past tense marking seems to be related to the speech act of the preceding storytelling context, rather than the states of affairs described in the story. As a result, it does

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not enforce a past-tense interpretation on the following bare verb. There must be something about the imperative which blocks this connection and forces the past-tense cleft in (14a) to be interpreted as involving "real" past tense. We will return to the question of how this connection is blocked in section 4 below.

The adult judgments above suggest that bare stems can receive a past-tense interpretation in the context of preceding past discourse/a preceding past marker, if they are closely linked to the preceding past marker/discourse. This confirms the first prediction of the discourse constraint in (6) above. In fact, certain contexts seem to force a past-tense interpretation on a bare verb, as illustrated in the clefting constructions in (14). The study in section 3 below will focus on these clefted constructions, examining how they are acquired by AAE-speaking children.

3. Experiment

Recall the second prediction of the discourse constraint in (6):

- (ii) A past tense element will determine the temporal reference of a bare stem following it.

This is what we saw in the case of the embedded clefted constructions above. The past tense in "Tell me what it was..." forces the bare verb stem following it to have a past-tense interpretation for adults. We conducted a study to determine whether the same is true for children, and to see whether there was any maturation or development of children's comprehension of tense in these clefted constructions.

3.1 Design

3.1.1 Materials

Six stories were designed, three involving regular past tense verbs such as "like" and three involving irregular past tense verbs like "have." The three regular verbs were "like," "play," and "rollerblade," and the three irregular verbs were "wear," "have," and "ride." Each of the stories was accompanied by a series of three pictures, and each was followed by a question. The stories all involved two characters (Bob and Ray), who were pictured at two different times: a past time (their youth) and the present moment (now). Each of the stories depicted two situations, one at the past moment depicted and the other at the present time. Both situations involved the same verb. An example story is found in (16) below.

- (16) "This is Bob and Ray. Bob and Ray have always had weird pets. When they were little, they had one of these. Do you know what this is? Can you say that word?"

[PICTURE 1: B. and R. with elephant]

Now that they're big kids, Bob and Ray have a different pet. Do you know what that animal is? Can you say its name?

[PICTURE 2: B. and R. with kangaroo]

"OK, now I'm going to ask you to say one of those words again. Are you ready?"

[PICTURE 3: B&R with elephant; B&R with kangaroo]

Q1: "Tell me what it was they have."

Q2: "Tell me what it is they have."

Q3: "What was it they have?"

Two of the stories were followed by Q1, two by Q2, and two by Q3. The two factors -- regular vs. irregular verb and question type -- were fully crossed and counterbalanced across the stories.

3.1.2 Procedure

Each child was presented with all 6 stories, with each story followed by a question. The stories were presented in the same order to all subjects. The task was presented as a game to see how well children could pronounce the words involved, in order to distract them from the nature of the task. Children were always told that the answer they gave was the correct one.

3.1.3 Subjects

10 5- and 6-year-old African-American children from a kindergarten class in Hartford, Connecticut. All subjects were productive users of AAE, exhibiting productive use of such features as habitual be, null/absent copula, and cluster reduction.

3.2 Results

Before presenting the results, let's briefly review the predictions of the discourse constraint in (6) regarding children's responses to the three question forms. The constraint predicts that a past tense marker will determine the reference of a bare verb following it. Therefore, it predicts the following pattern of results for the three questions:

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- Q1: "Tell me what it was they have."
-- "have" here should be interpreted as "had," picking out the pet the characters had in the past (the elephant)
[Equivalent to "Tell me what it was they had" in SAE]
- Q2: "Tell me what it is they have."
-- "have" should be interpreted as present tense, "have," picking out the pet the characters have now (the kangaroo)
[Same interpretation as in SAE]
- Q3: "What was it they have?"
-- If subjects are interpreting "was" as referring to the preceding storytelling context, giving a speech-act reading to the past tense, "have" will be interpreted as present tense (picking out the kangaroo, the present pet)
[Same interpretation as SAE speakers and adult AAE speakers]
-- If subjects are interpreting "was" as having genuine past reference (referring to states of affairs), "have" will be interpreted as "had," picking out the past pet (the elephant)
[Equivalent to SAE "What was it they had."]

Whenever the preceding past tense has genuine past reference (Q1, possibly Q3), the following bare verb will have a past-tense interpretation. They should therefore give a past-tense response, picking out the pet the characters used to have. Whenever there is no preceding past tense (Q2), or the preceding past tense is a "dummy" marker, in some sense (possibly Q3), the bare verb will be interpreted as present tense. Subjects should in this case pick out a present-tense response, naming the pet the characters now have.

The phonological/morphological approach to absent past tense makes a different set of predictions. It claims that past tense marking is absent when phonological and morphological conditions permit its deletion/reduction. Under such an approach, subjects will assign a past-tense interpretation to a bare verb iff they believe that past-tense deletion/reduction has applied to it. Assuming that past-tense deletion applies only or more often to regular verbs, subjects will assign a past-tense interpretation only/more often to the regular verbs than to the irregular verbs. The presence of a preceding past tense form should therefore make no difference to whether a bare verb is interpreted as having deleted/reduced past tense morphology. Thus, in its strongest form, the phonological/morphological approach predicts that question type should not make a difference for how often the bare forms are assigned a past-tense interpretation. Subjects should base their decision on whether to assign a past-tense interpretation to the bare verb on the verb type -- regulars should permit a past-tense interpretation, since they license past tense deletion for morpho-phonological reasons, while irregulars should not. Even in a weaker form, one which admits that the preceding past tense may have an effect, the phonological/morphological approach still predicts that the regular forms will be more likely to receive a past-tense interpretation than irregular ones.

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Let's now turn to the actual results. The overall means for past-tense responses are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1

	<u>Q1</u>	<u>Q2</u>	<u>Q3</u>
Proportion of past-tense responses	0.833	0.278	0.722

Analyses across subject and item means were conducted. The data for one subject was discarded because s/he did not understand the task. The basic effect is clear: subjects gave a past-tense response more often when there was a preceding past tense (Q1 and Q3) than when there was not. There was a reliable main effect of question type: subjects gave more past-tense responses to Q1 (past cleft) than to Q2 (present cleft), $F(1, 8) = 12.000, p = 0.009, F(2(1, 5) = 28.645, p = 0.003$. There was no reliable difference between Q1 (past cleft) and Q3 (clefted question), however: $F(1, 8) = 1.333, p = 0.282, F(2(1, 5) < 1$.

Turning now to a comparison of regular and irregular verbs, the data are summarized in Table 2.

TABLE 2

	<u>Q1</u>	<u>Q2</u>	<u>Q3</u>
Regular	0.889	0.444	0.667
Irregular	0.778	0.111	0.778

There was no reliable effect of verb type (regular vs. irregular) -- subjects were no more likely to give a past-tense response for the regular verbs than they were for the irregular verbs. There was no effect at all for either Q1 (past cleft) or Q3 (clefted question), $F(1, 8) < 1, F(2(1, 5) < 1$ for both Q1 and Q2. There was a hint of an effect of the regular vs. irregular contrast for Q2 (present cleft), $F(2(1, 5) = 4.500, p = 0.101$.

Analyses were also performed looking at age as a factor determining past-tense interpretations. The data for the different age groups is presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3

	<u>Q1</u>	<u>Q2</u>	<u>Q3</u>
5 years	0.833	0.500	1.000
6 years	0.833	0.250	0.500

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There was no reliable effect of age for either Q1 or Q2 ($F_1, F_2 < 1$ in both cases). There was a hint of an effect for Q3, however -- Q3 seemed to elicit fewer past-tense responses for 6-year-olds than for 5-year-olds, $F_2(1, 5) = 2.333, p = 0.170$.

3.3 Discussion

There is a clear effect of preceding past tense marking on how a following bare verb is interpreted. In cases where there is a preceding past tense, the following bare verb is almost always interpreted as past. This shows up most clearly for the past cleft case, Q1 ("Tell me what it was they have"). Across both verb types and age groups, subjects are regularly choosing the past-tense interpretation for Q1. AAE-speaking children are interpreting these structures the same way that AAE-speaking adults are, differently from how SAE-speaking adults interpret them. This effect provides clear support for the discourse constraint on AAE bare-verb interpretation in (6) above.

The effect of a preceding past tense also showed up for Q3, the clefted question condition ("What was it they have?"). Subjects behaved differently from AAE-speaking adults in this respect -- adult dialect speakers give the present-tense response to this question. There was some decrease from age 5 to age 6 in how often children provided the past-tense response for Q3, however: 5-year-old subjects gave a past-tense response 100% of the time while 6-year-olds gave past-tense responses only 50% of the time. (This decrease was not fully reliable.) There was no decrease at all from 5 to 6 for Q1, though, suggesting that Q1 and Q3 are represented and treated differently. Children seem to be undergoing some sort of maturation process in their interpretation of Q3: they are giving more adult responses (present tense) at age 6 than they are at age 5. We will return to what could be the cause of such an effect in section 4 below.

There was no effect of regular vs. irregular verbs in the proportion of past-tense responses children gave. For both Q1 and Q3, there was no reliable difference between regular and irregular verbs in how often they elicited past-tense responses. In fact, for Q3, the irregular verbs elicited numerically more past-tense responses than the regulars. The absence of such an effect is surprising for a phonological/morphological approach to past tense deletion/reduction. In its strong form, such an approach predicts that subjects should assume past-tense deletion/reduction has applied only in cases where it is phonologically/morphologically likely to apply, in the regular verb cases. This pattern is not what was found -- subjects assigned a past-tense interpretation when there was a preceding past tense, regardless of whether the bare verb was regular or irregular. In its weak form, which admits some influence of preceding past tense on subjects' interpretations, the phonological/morphological approach still predicts that subjects will be more likely to assign a past-tense interpretation to regular verbs than irregular verbs in the past conditions. But again, this is not the pattern that was found. It appears that subjects' interpretation of the bare

verbs was determined primarily by the presence of a preceding past marker, without reference to the morphological class or phonological properties of the bare verb.²

4. Discussion and implications

4.1 Representation of absent past tense in AAE

The data above and the observations in the literature on AAE all suggest that a bare verb stem can be interpreted as having past-tense reference. (We will return to the specific environments that license this interpretation in section 4.2 below.) The question that now arises is how this interpretation is represented. Do bare verbs interpreted as having past reference have a null or phonologically reduced past-tense marker, or do they lack a tense marker entirely, instead getting past-tense reference by being linked to preceding discourse? The phonological/morphological approach to past-tense deletion either explicitly or implicitly assumes the first option: past tense markers are underlyingly present, though they do not surface in the production/pronunciation of the sentence, for phonological or morphological reasons. The approach to absent past tense sketched in this paper adopts the second option: the bare verb is associated with no tense markers or temporal quantifiers at all. It simply introduces a temporal variable into the semantic representation of the sentences containing it (Partee, 1973, 1984). Since there is no tense marker associated with the sentence, the temporal variable will be free in the absence of an adverbial quantifier or some other quantifier to bind it.³ The variable will then get its value from context. This process is what is responsible for a bare verb receiving a past-tense interpretation in the context of a preceding past-tense marker. If it can be successfully linked to the past-tense interval associated with the preceding past-tense marker, it will receive a past-tense interpretation. If it cannot, then it will be linked to the utterance time as a sort of default, giving rise to a present-tense interpretation.

² The data do provide some evidence that phonological/morphological factors may be at play, however, at least in the present-tense cleft case (Q2). The proportion of past-tense interpretations was higher for regular verbs than for irregular ones. (This difference was not fully reliable, however.) If this trend is genuine, it suggests that subjects are more likely to assume that the past-tense marker has been reduced (and is covertly present) if morphological and phonological factors would permit its deletion/reduction. This evidence would suggest that the morphological and phonological factors are interacting with the discourse constraint in some way, with the discourse constraint "winning out" in the cases where a preceding past is present. For reasons of space and simplicity, I will not consider this possibility further here.

³ This approach faces at least one serious problem. If temporal adverbials introduce quantifiers over times (Kusumoto, 1996), it is unclear why they would not bind the bare verb's temporal variable and give rise to a past-tense reading. The same problem should arise if adverbials introduce restrictions on the temporal variable's denotation which would force it to have a past-tense reading (e.g., if "yesterday" forces the temporal variables in its scope to pick out times contained within the past interval preceding the day containing utterance time). I have no explanation for this, except to note that it is also a problem for any account of tense in languages like Japanese, which have bare verb-like elements which can have a past denotation when embedded under past-tense attitude verbs but cannot combine with past-tense adverbials (Kusumoto, 1996; Ogihara, 1996). It may also be worth noting that there are a number of arguments against treating adverbials as introducing temporal quantifiers; see Dowty (1979), among others, for discussion.

Dechaine (1993, 1995) has argued for a similar approach to absent tense in AAE and other languages. The sketch of how such instances of bare tense would be interpreted above is admittedly very informal, but it hopefully provides some idea of how the discourse constraint in (6) would be implemented. (We will leave the task of providing a genuine formalization for (6) for further research.) However, the mechanism above and the discourse constraint in (6) do make at least one concrete prediction. A bare verb must be successfully linked to a preceding past tense (more specifically, the past interval associated with a preceding past tense) in order to receive a past-tense interpretation. If a bare verb cannot be linked to such a tense, it will not receive past-tense reference. This prediction will shed some light on the environments in which bare verbs receive a past-tense interpretation, discussed below.

4.2 Licensing absent past tense in AAE

Bare verbs can receive a past-tense interpretation in some environments but not in others. The experiment above illustrates that that they can receive such an interpretation in clefting structures, and the adult intuitions described in section 2.2 above show that they can also receive such an interpretation in question contexts. They may also be able to receive such an interpretation in coordination contexts. However, bare verbs cannot receive a past-tense interpretation in normal discourse contexts, nor can they get one in sentences with temporal adverbials. The approach to absent tense sketched in this paper predicts that bare verbs will be able to receive a past-tense interpretation iff they can successfully be linked to a preceding past tense. The question contexts and clefting constructions do provide a particularly close connection to preceding context that the other contexts do not: they both involve *focus*. Prince (1981, 1986), Atlas and Levinson (1981) and many others all argue that clefting constructions in English and other languages involve focusing of the clefted constituent and backgrounding of the other material in the cleft. Similarly, Hamblin (1973), Prince (1986), von Stechow (1994) and others all argue that questions involve focus, with the questioned constituent being focused and the rest of the question being backgrounded. It is this focus-and-backgrounding structure that provides the sufficiently strong connection to preceding context to license the past-tense interpretation. It is the absence of such a connection in the other contexts that fails to license a past-tense interpretation.

The specific way that this close connection ties the bare stem to the preceding past discourse is related to the structure of clefting and question constructions and the focus operators associated with them. Some possible representations for these constructions, taken from Prince (1986), are given in (17) and (18) below:

- (17) Tell me
 what_t it was t_i [they have O_i]
- (18) A: Your father left just before you got here.
 B: Where_t [he go t_i]

These representations are adopted for the sake of convenience and ease of illustration; nothing crucial hinges on them. The bracketed constituents are open propositions (Prince, 1981, 1986) or constituents which are the basis for the generation of sets of propositions which will satisfy the semantic requirements of focus and/or question operators (Hamblin, 1973; Rooth, 1992; von Stechow, 1994):

- (17) [_i he go t_i] >> the set of propositions such that
"he go somewhere"
- (18) [they have O_i] >> The set of propositions such that
"they have something"

Both of these open propositions contain bare verbs. Therefore, the temporal variables introduced by the bare verbs will be within the scope of the focus operator, which operates over the sets picked out by the open constituents (Rooth, 1992, von Stechow, 1994). Following Rooth (1992) and von Stechow (1994), I assume that the focus and question operators introduce contextually sensitive variables which help restrict the domain over which they are quantifying. In these cases, only propositions picking out contextually relevant locations ("he go somewhere," (18)) or contextually relevant objects ("they have something," (17)) are considered when fixing the sets of propositions the question and focus operators are quantifying over. The "was" in the cleft in (17) and the preceding past tense context in (18) provide the value for the contextually sensitive focus/question variable. This process has the effect of restricting the set of propositions in the question or alternative set to ones in the past tense (i.e., the set of propositions such that "he went somewhere" and the set such that "they had something"). The bare verb's temporal variable is therefore contextually restricted to having only a past-tense interpretation, since the set of possible interpretations from which it is choosing (the alternative set for focus, the question set for questions) contains only past tense propositions. This forces a past-tense interpretation for the bare verb, and gives rise to the effect seen in the study in section 3 and the adult judgments in section 2.

This same effect does not hold for normal discourse contexts. Normal discourse contexts lack a focus or discourse operator, and the contextually-defined variable associated with them. The temporal variable introduced by the bare verb is not bound by any operator and is therefore simply free. The normal narrative connection between sentences in discourse is insufficient to provide a past-tense value for the variable, however, perhaps because anchoring the variable to speech time (providing a present-tense interpretation) is always a salient possibility. This possibility may provide competition for the past-tense interpretation and make it dispreferred as a result. In the case of focus and question contexts, however, this option is not available -- the focus/question operator and its contextually-sensitive variable conspire to provide the bare verb with only past-tense possible values/denotations. Therefore, it faces no competition from a possible present-tense interpretation. The past-tense interpretation is consequently available and strongly preferred in question and clefting contexts.

The past-tense interpretation is not equally available in all clefting contexts, however. As can be seen in the adult judgments and in the preferences of 6-year-olds in the study,

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clefted questions ("What was it they like?") are more likely to give rise to present-tense interpretations for the bare stems than past-tense interpretations. (6-year-olds give present-tense interpretations 50% of the time, and adults give uniform present-tense interpretations.) The imperative involved in the other past cleft examples ("Tell me what it was they like") must be contributing to the past-tense interpretation found in these structures. This fact is borne out further for simple clefts involving past tense, as illustrated in (19) below:

- (19) John and Mary used to like apples.
 Now they like bananas.
- a. It was bananas they like.
 b. #It was apples they like.

The clefts in both (19a) and (19b) contain a past tense, but the past-tense response in (19b) -- in which the bare verb should be interpreted as having past-tense reference -- is unacceptable. In the absence of an imperative, the bare verb can or must have a present-tense interpretation.

Assuming that the focus operator and contextually-sensitive focus variable constrain the possible value assigned to the bare verb, as discussed above, the simple cleft and clefted question cases must not be constraining the bare verb's interpretations to only past-tense values. One possible reason for this is that the past tenses in these cases can be construed as semantically empty, in some sense. That is, the past tense in the cleft in these constructions may refer to the preceding storytelling context, rather than the actual states of affairs in the story. These uses of the past tense would then be akin to that found in (20) below (due to Angelika Kratzer, p.c.):

- (20) [John is talking to Mary at a party. She has told him her name,
 but he's forgotten it.]
- John: What was your name again?

Here, the past tense refers to/is licensed by the speech act of telling in the preceding context, much as was suggested for the clefted question examples in section 3 above.⁴ The presence

⁴ Klein (1994) and Musan (1995) discuss similar cases, in which the preceding past context licenses the use of a past tense. Musan (1995), for example, notes that what she calls "lifetime effects" -- cases in which a past tense will trigger an inference that the subject of the past-tense sentence is dead -- are cancelled in the presence of a preceding past tense:

- (i) a. John had blue eyes. >> John is dead
 b. I met John and Mary on a
 windswept beach 8 years ago.
 John had blue eyes. >/> John is dead

In (i.b), the past tense on "had" does not have genuine past tense reference, which would force the inference that the subject who has the individual-level property of having blue eyes no longer has it, and is therefore dead. Instead, it is licensed by the fact that the time under discussion in the immediate context is in the past.

of an imperative cuts off this possibility -- embedding the clefts under an imperative forces the embedded tense to be genuine, rather than being a speech-act past of the sort discussed here. In the presence of the imperative, therefore, the past tense of the cleft ("Tell me what it *was* they have") can refer only to states of affairs, and therefore constrains the value of the bare verb embedded underneath it to genuine past tense only. The exact reason why the imperative would block the connection to preceding discourse required to license a speech-act past tense is unclear. Perhaps it is related to the fact that imperatives are islands for extraction:

- (21) a. Tell me [what_i you want t_i]
 b. *What_i tell me [you want t_i]

Or, it may be related to the denotation of imperatives -- their denotations may pick out a set of possible worlds/situations different in kind from that picked out by normal declaratives (cf. Portner, 1992), one which cannot be directly intersected with the preceding set of possible worlds in the discourse/common ground. This may prevent the necessary connection. We will not explore either of these possibilities further here.

If this approach to the difference between clefted questions ("What was it they have") and embedded clefts ("Tell me what it was they have") is correct, it provides an interesting explanation for the behavior of 5-year-olds. Recall that 5-year-olds in the study treated clefted questions the same way as embedded clefts -- they gave past-tense responses in both cases. 6-year-olds behaved more like adults in giving a much higher percentage of present-tense responses. If speakers must make the connection to the preceding storytelling context in order to understand a past tense as being a speech-act past tense, then 5-year-olds must be unable to make the connection to the preceding discourse. This story seems intuitively appealing -- it would not be surprising if children were fairly late in developing such sophisticated narrative comprehension strategies.

The description of the licensing and interpretation of absent past tense in this and the previous section has been highly informal. However, it hopefully provides some rough view of how and why a bare stem might be interpreted as having past-tense reference in the particular contexts it is. These issues require a more detailed treatment and more serious semantic attention, however, and we fully intend to return to them in future work.

4.3 Connections to the licensing of other AAE features

The approach to absent past tense being advocated here claims that this feature of AAE is conditioned in large part by discourse factors. Bare verbs can get a past-tense interpretation when they can be linked to a past-tense interval provided by the preceding context. Johnson (1997) has argued that similar discourse factors are at play in the use of the null copula by AAE-speaking children. Looking at naturalistic language samples collected from 5- and 6-year-old AAE speakers, she notes that within a given discourse segment, once an overt copula is used in describing a given relationship (e.g., one of possession) subsequent descriptions of the same relationship use a null copula. The null copula thus seems to pattern like absent past tense in requiring or being facilitated by the presence of overt marking of the

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same feature in preceding context. Whether the same mechanisms can be used to account for both patterns remains an open and interesting question.

5. Conclusion

Discourse factors appear to play an important role in the licensing of past-tense interpretations for bare verb stems, as suggested in the discourse constraint in (6) above. These discourse factors seem to play a role over and above any morpho-phonological factors conditioning the appearance of absent past tense, as illustrated in the study presented here. Children provided past-tense responses when a bare verb was preceded by a past tense, regardless of whether that bare verb was regular or irregular. Further, it appears that focus and question operators -- which provide a particularly close connection between preceding context and the current sentence -- are important in establishing a sufficiently strong link to preceding past discourse to license a past-tense interpretation for a bare verb. The particular structural character of these constructions, as well as their low frequency, may be why they have previously gone unnoticed in the literature on absent past tense in AAE. While much work remains to be done, these kinds of structures appear promising for the development of diagnostic tools for speech pathologists trying to distinguish deficit-related deletion of past-tense morphemes from dialect-driven assignment of past-tense interpretations to bare verbs.

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