

*Is Isn't Be*¹

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Abstract

In this paper I provide evidence that the copula in English, which has both verbal (V) and Infl properties, should be analyzed as having dual categorial status. That is, there are two copulas in English: one is a verb (*be*), while the other is an Infl head and is not raised from a V position (*is*, *am*, etc.). Evidence for this split approach comes from an interpretive difference between the verbal (V) copula and the non-verbal (Infl) copula. The split approach to the English copula is further supported by similar splits found in the English dialects of African American English and child standard English, and in languages such as Irish and Hebrew. Microvariation between these languages in the V/Infl-copula split is discussed.

Key words: copula, *be*, English syntax

1 Introduction

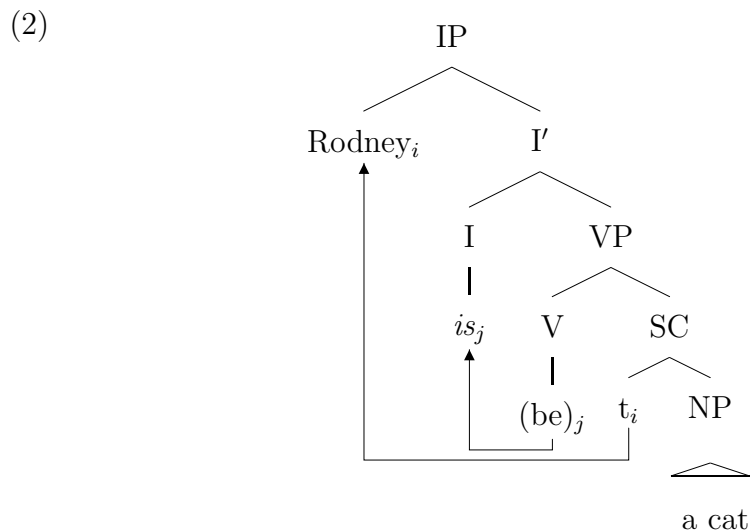
The syntactic category of the copula (*be* in English) is notoriously difficult to determine. If the copula is a verb then it is an unusual verb, displaying syntactic behavior (e.g. raising) and morphological gaps (suppletion in the extreme) that other verbs do not display. This odd behavior is true not only for the English copula, but for copulas in many languages (see Postma (1993) for a

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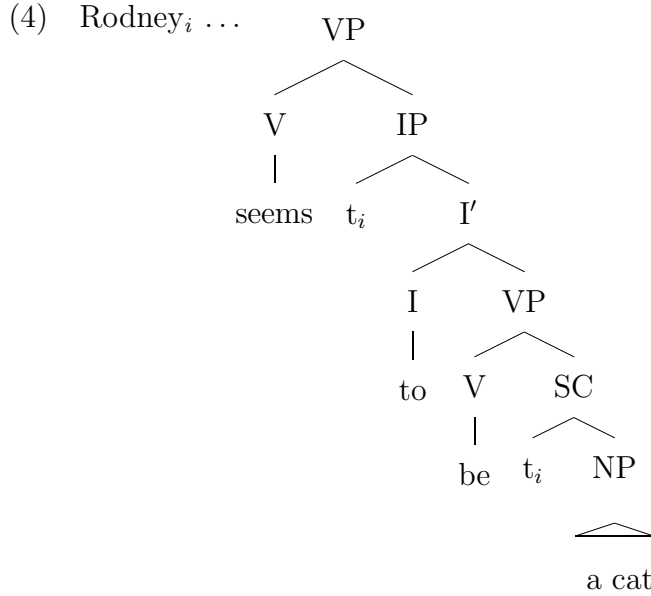
discussion of the morphological gaps in the paradigm of copulas crosslinguistically). Consequently, there has been some discussion in the literature on the categorial status of the copula, and here we will focus on English *be* (Lasnik, 1999, 2000; Roberts, 1998; Schütze, 2001). The prevailing view is that *be* heads a VP projection, and the inflected copula that appears in English main clause predicative expressions, such as that in (1), is the inflected form of *be*. In other words, *is* in (1) has raised to Infl by head movement from a lower V position.

(1) Rodney is a cat.



When the copula appears in nonfinite clauses, such as in (3), it occurs in its (underlying) V position.

(3) Rodney seems to be a cat.



In this paper, I argue that while there is a great deal of evidence that *be* is truly a verb, there is no clear evidence that *is* is a verb and that it is derived from *be*. I argue instead that the inflected copula is generated in Infl as the pronunciation of finiteness features. Thus, I draw a categorial distinction between the nonfinite, uninflected copula *be* and the finite, inflected copula. The evidence from standard American English (SAE) comes from the fact that in certain constructions the presence of an uninflected copula (*be*) forces an eventive or active interpretation of the predicate. This sort of interpretation is not available in those same contexts when *be* is absent, nor is it available in indicative main clause predicatives (e.g. *Rodney is a cat*), which contain an inflected copula. The upshot is that the inflected and uninflected copulas are not morphological variants of the same thing.²

I will also show that in languages that permit a null copula in (indicative) main clauses, the inflected copula alternates with the null copula, not with the uninflected copula.

$$\left. \begin{array}{c} \text{Infl} \\ \left\{ \begin{array}{c} \text{is} \\ 0 \end{array} \right\} \end{array} \right\} \text{be}$$

² An anonymous reviewer points out that there are languages, for example Dutch, in which the infinitive form of the copula (*zijn*) is identical to one of the inflected forms (*wij zijn* ‘we are’). It may be that in Dutch the inflected forms of the copula are syntactically derived from the verbal copula. I do not have an analysis of the Dutch facts.

Before proceeding, let me define what I mean by “copula.” I take a copula to be a grammatical item that takes a non-verbal lexical predicate (NP/AP/PP) and links the predicate to the subject.³ The copula itself may be verbal or non-verbal (what I’ll call “Infl-type”), and languages may have more than one copula.

The existence of multiple copulas in a language is not unusual. For example, it is well known that Spanish and Portuguese have two copulas, *ser* and *estar* (Sera, 1992; Schmitt, 1992). Although I will not characterize the distinction between the two English copulas along the same lines as the distinction between *ser* and *estar*, it is not unreasonable to think that languages might use copulas in different ways or for different syntactic reasons. The linguistic typology of copulas is quite varied, ranging from West Greenlandic-type languages in which the copula is merely a verbalizing affix (it changes a non-verbal predicate into a verbal predicate) (Mey, 1968), to languages like Spanish or Italian in which copulas display the full range of verbal inflectional morphology found on main verbs.

I will show that English is not alone in its distinction between an Infl-type and a V-type copula. As will be discussed in section 3, African American English, child standard English, Hebrew and Irish all give evidence of distinguishing a verbal and a non-verbal (Infl-type) copula, and we find microvariation between these languages in the precise distribution and nature of the two copulas.

In section 4 I will return to standard English and give an analysis of the syntactic structure of predicative sentences based on the arguments made in the paper concerning the syntactic status of the copula. In section 5 I summarize the main points of the paper.

Throughout the paper I will use *be* to indicate only the uninflected/nonfinite/-verbal copula; the inflected/finite/Infl copula is indicated by *is* (meant to cover all inflected forms: *is*, *am*, *are*).⁴

³ My arguments for copula *be* and *is* apply also to auxiliary *be* and *is* (i.e. those forms of *be/is* that take a verbal complement). That is, there is no substantive difference between copula and auxiliary *be/is* for my purposes. I will mainly discuss constructions involving copula *be/is* in this paper.

⁴ I do not assume that the past tense forms of the copula (*was*, *were*) fall straightforwardly under my analysis of *is*, in particular because predicatives with a past tense copula allow an eventive interpretation of the predicate more easily than the present tense finite copula (cf. *John was polite* vs. *John is polite*). The relevance of this fact will become clear in section 2.2. Furthermore, as we will see in section 3.4, the Hebrew past tense copula is arguably a verb (*haya*), while the present tense copula (*hu*) is an Infl item. Please see Becker (2002) for a discussion of these issues.

2 The Data

In this section I will first present the data from SAE (standard American English) showing that the uninflected copula, *be*, has properties of verbs, while the inflected copula, *is*, does not. Then I will present some evidence that this difference should not rest solely on a difference of surface position in the structure, but rather it suggests a deeper difference between the V- and Infl-copulas.

2.1 *Be has morphosyntactic properties of verbs*

There are several fairly obvious ways in which *be* patterns like other verbs, while the inflected copula does not. One is that *be* follows negation (like main verbs) while *is* precedes negation.

- (5) a. John will not be late.
b. *John will be not late.
- (6) a. John does not like bananas.
b. *John likes not bananas.
- (7) a. John is not tired.
b. *John not is tired.

Another piece of evidence that *be* is a verb comes from the rather mundane observation that the participial forms of *be* are like the participial forms of other main verbs: *be* can take the progressive *-ing* affix (*being*) as well as the perfect *-en* affix (*been*). This property of *be* relates to one of the arguments made by Schütze (2001) for analyzing *be* as V: *be* is sometimes inserted simply to support these affixes, as in the following passive constructions.

- (8) a. Susan was being complimented.
b. Susan had been complimented.
c. Susan had been being complimented.

When the aspectual affixes *-ing* and *-en* are present in a structure, they must attach to some verb. Of course, they can attach to a main verb, as in *Susan was complimenting Brian* or *Susan was complimented*. But since a verb can bear only one inflectional affix at a time in English, additional affixes will require additional heads to affix to, and in these cases *be* is inserted. This is what happens in (8a-c). Unlike *be*, the inflected copula cannot occur with these affixes (**is-ing/is-en*).

By itself, these data do not force us to conclude that *is* is not derived from *be*, since they are also accounted for by the traditional raising approach (i.e., *is* precedes negation and fails to take participial morphology because it has raised to Infl where it is higher than negation and too high to bear participial morphology). The point of this section is to show that the distribution of *be* and *is* shows that they occupy two distinct syntactic positions, and this leaves open the possibility that asymmetries between them can be accounted for by an alternative means: namely, by saying that they are two different syntactic entities, not related by movement. In the next subsection, we will see some evidence in favor of the latter account.

Before continuing, I should point out that in accounting for the asymmetries between *is* and *be* by arguing that *is* is not derived from *be*, we leave open a gap in the paradigm of *be*: *be* is now unlike other verbs in that it lacks an inflected form. One response to this problem is to say that either way the asymmetries are analyzed, something special must be said about the paradigm of the copula: either it is unusual in that the V-copula lacks an inflected/present tense form, or it is unusual in that it raises from V to Infl in English. Support for the present analysis (that *be* is unusual in lacking a present tense form) is given in the next section. Moreover, while SAE may be unusual in that its V-copula does not have a present tense form, there is another variety of English in which the V-copula does occur in present tense main clauses (though not in a morphologically inflected form; see section 3.1).

2.2 *Be has interpretive effects*

The morphosyntactic asymmetry between *be* and *is* can be accounted for both by the traditional view, according to which *be* and *is* are derivationally related, and by the view proposed here, namely that they are derivationally unrelated. However, in addition to the morphosyntactic asymmetry there is a semantic asymmetry which points toward a non-derivational relation between *be* and *is* (assuming that the relevant semantic property is a property of the lexical item). We see this difference in (non-main clause) environments in which the copula may be optionally inserted. One such environment is the complement of *make*.

- (9) a. Ben made Sarah polite.
b. Ben made Sarah be polite.

Sentence (9a) means that Ben coached or tutored Sarah and thereby made her into a polite person. Her politeness is now a general property of her. Sentence (9b), instead, means that Ben forced Sarah to act in a polite way. Her polite

behavior may be restricted to that particular occasion (though it need not be).

Another environment in which we see the same kind of interpretive difference between *be* and *is* is the so-called “active *be*” construction (Partee, 1977).

- (10) a. Max is a nuisance/silly.
b. Max is being a nuisance/silly.

The predicate in (10a) denotes a general property of the subject, while in (10b) it denotes a property that applies to the subject at the moment of utterance. It is normally interpreted as indicating the subject’s behavior and can be paraphrased as *Max is acting (like) a nuisance/silly*.

Rothstein (1999) analyzes the semantic difference in these two constructions as resulting from the fact that *be* introduces an EVENTUALITY ARGUMENT and combines with an adjective (e.g. *polite*) that expresses a property of that eventuality.⁵ Thus, the predicate occurring with overt *be* has an “eventive” or “active” meaning and does not denote an inherent property. The predicate occurring without the copula is not eventive and does denote an inherent property.

Thus, both (9a–b) and (10a–b) illustrate constructions in which a clause containing a form of the verb *be* (*be* or *being*, as opposed to *is*) yields an active or eventive interpretation of the predicate.⁶

Another example of the same sort of semantic difference between *be* and the inflected copula is seen in the following pair (E. Flagg, personal communication):

- (11) Why don’t you be my friend? (inchoative)
(12) Why aren’t you my friend? (non-inchoative)

(11) has an eventive or inchoative meaning (why don’t you become my friend?), while (12) asks about a present state of affairs. I would argue that the inchoative interpretation comes from an Event argument associated with *be*. However,

⁵ Rothstein adopts the neo-Davidsonian view that ALL verbs project an Event argument, as opposed to only non-stative verbs projecting this argument, as assumed for example in Kratzer (1995).

⁶ An alternative account of the active *be* construction is that the active interpretation comes from *-ing*, rather than the copula *be*. This is a possibility; however, it would not help us account for the interpretation of *be* in a *make* complement, nor would it help understand the contrast below in (11–12).

as one reviewer points out, it is curious that other permutations of this sentence are not grammatical, e.g. **Why did he be your friend?* More generally, it is curious that *be* does not normally allow *do*-support (**Do you be my friend?*) The issue of *do*-support is difficult; however, according to my own judgment, *do*-support is less awkward in cases where the predicate under *be* easily takes an active or eventive meaning. For example, imagine saying to a child after school *Did you be good today?* While this utterance is clearly worse than *Were you good today?*, it seems “less bad” than *Did you be smart today?* For now I will leave this issue for future work.

If the Event argument is introduced by the verb *be*, and if the inflected copula *is* is derived from this underlying verb, then we would expect the same eventive interpretation to be available when *is* is present in the clause (assuming that the Event argument introduced by a verb remains projected when the verb is inflected). However, the eventive interpretation is not available with *is*.⁷

(13) John is clever. (\rightarrow “John is acting clever”)

There are a couple of alternative accounts for the semantic difference between *be* and *is*. One is that there are two verbs *be*. This was Partee’s (1977) approach to the “active *be*” construction. One could argue that there is a non-active *be* that raises to become *is* in main clauses, and there is a second *be* with an impoverished paradigm (it does not have a tensed form) that has an active or eventive meaning as part of its lexical meaning. This approach does not seem to be advantageous over the split account offered here, since on the “two *bes*” account there are likewise two copulas and likewise a gap in the morphological paradigm of one of them.

A second alternative is to say that the eventive meaning of predicates with *be* (as opposed to *is*) comes not from *be* itself but from some other property of the clause. This alternative receives some support from the fact that the environments in which *be* yields an eventive interpretation of the predicate are environments that tend to prefer an eventive (rather than a stative) verb (cf. (14)).⁸

⁷ As pointed out to me by an anonymous reviewer, the claim that *be* has a semantic effect might clash with the earlier claim (made in section 2.1) that *be* can be inserted as a “dummy verb” to support participial affixes. However, I would point out that my argument is that the interpretive effect of *be* comes merely from *be* being a verb, and consequently, its association with an Event argument (following Rothstein). That is, the eventive meaning of the predicate when it occurs with *be* does not arise because *be* means *act*, but rather from the semantics of the Event argument that is associated with *be*.

⁸ An exception to this tendency is the verb *feel*. *Feel* is a stative verb, yet it is permitted in the complement of *make* (*John made Mary feel sick*) and can occur in

Be does not yield an eventive reading in the complement of *seem* or *consider*. These environments tend to prefer a stative predicate (cf. (15)).

- (14) a. John made Mary be polite/eat bananas/??like bananas (eventive)
b. John is being polite/eating bananas/??liking bananas (eventive)
- (15) a. John seems to be polite/like bananas/??eat bananas (stative)
b. I consider John to be polite/like bananas/??eat bananas (stative)

Thus, the eventivity of predicates with *be* in complements of *make* might come from something in the structure that calls for an eventive verbal predicate (i.e. not from *be* itself). However, we are still left with the problem of why an eventive interpretation is unavailable with *is* in main clauses. Whether this issue can be accounted for by alternative means to those proposed here is a question I leave for future work.

One advantage of the account proposed here (that *is* is not derived from *be*) is that it allows us to unify the behavior of the copula in standard English with the behavior of the copula in other dialects of English (to be discussed in section 3), yielding a more coherent picture of the crossdialectal facts.

2.2.1 Interim Summary

So far we have seen arguments that *be* is a verb:

- it carries verbal morphology
- it follows negation
- its overtness in certain constructions causes an interpretive shift (eventive predicate)

We have also seen that the inflected copula (*is*) does not share these properties. The morphosyntactic difference between *is* and *be* is consistent with the traditional view (*is*—raised to Infl from V—is not in the right position to bear verbal morphology or follow negation).⁹ But the semantic difference between *is* and *be* doesn't follow transparently from the raising view: if *be* can yield an eventive reading because it is a V, and if *is* is derived from *be* (thus underlyingly a V), then we would expect *is* to allow an eventive reading at least in some cases, but it does not.

I follow Rothstein in accounting for the semantic effect of *be* in terms of its being a verb. But I propose that *is* cannot have this effect because it is not

the present progressive in a main clause (*I'm feeling sick*).

⁹ I assume that morphology such as *-ing* and *-en* cannot attach to something as high as Infl.

a verb (it is not derived from *be*). Rather, it is inserted in Infl to spell out finiteness (tense, number or agreement) features of the main clause.

One reviewer has pointed out that if *be* is associated with an Event argument, we might make the prediction that *be* always yields a stage-level interpretation of the predicate, or is compatible only with stage-level predicates. While it is true that “active *be*” and *be* under a *make* complement yield a stage-level interpretation of the predicate (in *John is being polite*, *polite* has a stage-level meaning), it is not clear whether there is a direct relationship between uninflected *be* and stage-levelhood more generally. First of all, there are many stage-level predicates with which *be* does not combine (??*John is being tired*). Secondly, there are many individual-level predicates that *be* does not successfully coerce into having a stage-level meaning (e.g. ??*John is being a teacher*). The set of predicates that uninflected *be* combines with is a small set of predicates which, in the unmarked case, are individual-level but can be easily coerced to have a stage-level meaning; they are predicates that are controllable by the subject (thus, having to do largely with behavior: *good*, *polite*, *friendly*, *helpful*, *unhelpful*, *rude*, etc.). Since the proper characterization of the stage/individual distinction is itself a difficult topic, I will refrain at this point from making a commitment to the relationship between the V-copula and stage-levelhood *per se*.

2.3 Syntax

Not only is there semantic evidence that *be* is a verb (and a lack of semantic evidence that *is* is a verb), there is also support from syntax for the claim that *is* and *be* are distinct entities. This support is found in an asymmetry in VP-ellipsis. As seen in the following examples, main verbs do not require morphological identity (between antecedent and target) in VP-ellipsis, but the copula appears to require it (noted by Warner (1986) and Lasnik (1999, 2000)).

- (16) a. John slept, and Mary will [~~sleep~~] too.
b. * John is here, and Mary will [~~be here~~] too.

Lasnik accounts for this asymmetry by drawing a syntactic distinction between main verbs and auxiliary verbs. He claims that main verbs enter the derivation of a sentence in V and combine with inflectional affixes by Affix Hopping, while auxiliary verbs are inserted already inflected into the structure. Thus, *slept* is related to *sleep* derivationally, so that the deletion of the bare verb *sleep* can take place under identity to the past tense verb *slept*. However, *is* is not a derived form of *be* and so ellipsis cannot take place: there is no deletion under identity because there is no identity.

Note that this asymmetry does not result from a general problem with deleting the uninflected copula under VP-ellipsis. As we see in the following example (based on one from Lasnik (1999, p. 66)), it can be deleted when the copula in the first conjunct is likewise the uninflected copula.

- (17) John will be here, and Mary will too.

Interestingly, Potsdam (1997) points out that the copula doesn't require morphological *identity* if both antecedent and target are non-finite.

- (18) a. John is being examined but Jack really should [~~be examined~~] also.
b. *I am confused about ellipsis and, after reading this paper, you will [~~be confused about ellipsis~~] too.

VP-ellipsis is ungrammatical only if the antecedent copula is *finite*. This is consistent with my argument that finite *is* is not a V (therefore not a possible antecedent for VP-ellipsis), but nonfinite *be*, whether a bare verb or a participle, is a V (therefore a possible antecedent).

2.4 Summary of Section 2

To summarize briefly, we have seen three types of evidence for analyzing *is* as an Infl head and *be* as a verb. The morphological evidence was that while *be* behaves like other verbs in taking participial morphology (*being*, *been*) and following negation, *is* lacks both of these properties. This evidence is consistent both with analyzing *is* and *be* as being derivationally related and with analyzing them as derivationally unrelated (since these asymmetries might follow simply from a difference of syntactic position at Spell-out). However, semantic evidence and syntactic evidence (from VP-ellipsis) argue more strongly in favor of analyzing the two copulas as being not derivationally related. The semantic evidence was that *be*, unlike *is*, can yield an eventive or active interpretation of the predicate in certain contexts (complement of *make*, “active *be*” construction). Facts from VP-ellipsis showed that while main verbs can undergo VP-ellipsis even when the elided form is not morphologically identical to the antecedent, this is not possible with the copula: a nonfinite copula cannot be deleted in the second conjunct when the antecedent is the finite (inflected) copula. The conclusion (similar to Lasnik's) is that the inflected copula is not derived from the uninflected copula, and therefore there is no derivational link (identity) to support the ellipsis.

3 Crosslinguistic support

In addition to Standard American English (SAE), there are other varieties of English and other languages that distinguish V- and Infl-Copulas. In this section we will see evidence from two varieties of English, African-American English and child Standard English, that support the analysis given above for adult SAE. The three varieties of English are not identical in all respects, however, and microvariation among them is discussed. Additional data from two non-English languages (Irish and Hebrew) is provided which extends the analysis beyond English.

3.1 African American English

It is well known that AAE permits the inflected copula to be omitted in main clause predicatives (Labov 1969; Green 1993; Rickford 1999). All of the forms in (19) are grammatical, and the meaning of the predicate does not depend on whether the copula is full, contracted or null (Green 1993, among others).

- (19) a. John (is/'s/0) a doctor.
b. John (is/'s/0) tired.
c. John (is/'s/0) in the yard.

That the meaning of the predicate in (19a–c) does not vary with the form of the copula suggests that the null copula is a morphological variant of the inflected/contracted copula.

In addition to the inflected/null copula, there is an invariant (i.e. uninflected) copula, *be*, that occurs in main clauses. This copula is not a variant of the inflected/null copula, in the sense that it is not in free variation with the inflected/null form. Rather, it yields a different meaning of the predicate. Thus, the sentence in (20) does not mean the same thing as (19b).

- (20) John be tired.

(20) means that John is tired habitually; (19b) does not mean this, rather it means that John is tired at the time of utterance.

That invariant *be* is truly a verb, occupying a V position, can be shown by its position with respect to negation (below, rather than above), and the fact that it takes auxiliary *do* in tag questions, as main verbs do (Green 1993, 2000).

- (21) a. Marcus isn't/ain't tired. (=Marcus is not tired now)
 b. Marcus don't be tired. (=Marcus is not habitually tired)
 c. Marcus don't like cake.
- (22) a. Marcus is/0 tired, isn't/ain't/*don't he?
 b. Marcus be tired, *isn't/*ain't/don't he?
 c. Marcus like cake, *isn't/*ain't/don't he?

Green (2000) accounts for the distinction between the uninflected copula and the inflected/null copula in the following way. Invariant *be* projects an Event argument that is bound by a Habitual operator, which yields the habitual meaning. Crucially, *be* can project an Event argument because it is a verb. The unavailability of the habitual interpretation with the inflected/null copula is predicted if that copula is not a verb and therefore does not project an Event argument.

In both Standard American English and African American English there appear to be two copulas: a V-copula and an Infl-copula. We find microvariation between the two dialects, however. In AAE the Infl-copula can be null in main clauses, and the V-copula can occur in main clauses. Neither of these options is grammatical in SAE:

- (23) John tired. ($\sqrt{\text{AAE}}/\text{*SAE}$)
 (24) John be tired. ($\sqrt{\text{AAE}}/\text{*SAE}$)

As for (23), the existence of a null variant of the Infl-copula in AAE but not SAE is predicted if the Infl-copula is simply a spell-out of finiteness, given that main clauses in AAE can occur without finiteness marking on the verb (e.g. *John know the answer*).

As for (24), the difference in interpretation between the V-copula in SAE and in AAE can be accounted for by their occurrence in main vs. embedded clauses in the following way. Both Green's analysis of the habitual interpretation of the AAE V-copula and Rothstein's analysis of the eventive interpretation of the SAE V-copula hinge on the V-copula introducing an Event argument that is then bound by an operator. It is reasonable to think that the Habitual operator is associated with the matrix clause: even in SAE, bare eventive verbs receive a habitual interpretation in main clauses (*John runs* = John runs habitually; \neq John is running), but an eventive interpretation in untensed embedded clauses (*I saw John run* = I saw John in the act of running; \neq I saw John run habitually). In support of this idea, when the V-copula in AAE occurs in an untensed embedded clause it has an eventive, not a habitual interpretation: *John made Mary be polite* means the same thing in AAE as in SAE, namely,

that John forced Mary to act in a polite way (not that John coached Mary and made her a habitually polite person) (M. Terry, personal communication).

Thus, the habitual interpretation of the V-copula in AAE but not in SAE is due to the ability of this copula to occur as a bare verb in main clauses in AAE, and therefore to be bound by the main clause Habitual operator.

3.2 *Child Standard English*

Child standard English is another “variety” of English in which there is evidence in main clauses that *is* and *be* are not related in the way that finite and nonfinite forms of main verbs are. Like in adult AAE, there is a stage of child SAE in which the copula may be omitted in main clauses (around age two; see Becker (2000)). This stage is a substage of the often-reported “root infinitive” stage, in which children’s main verbs may lack inflectional morphology in main clauses, e.g. *Eve sit floor* (Brown, 1973; Rizzi, 1994; Wexler, 1992; Weverink, 1989). During this same stage, children’s main verbs are sometimes inflected (e.g. *she cried*). Thus, children’s main verbs alternate between an uninflected form and an inflected form. In children’s copular constructions, however, the copula is *always* inflected when it is overt. That is, the copula, unlike main verbs, can be either overt and inflected, or null in a main clause, but it does not occur in an overt, uninflected form.

Infl	V
is	sits
0/*be	sit

Some examples of children’s null- and overt-copula utterances are given in (25)–(27).¹⁰ Utterances such as (28) are virtually unattested. As seen in Table 1, utterances like (28) make up less than 3% of children’s utterances that contain an overt copula (less than 1% for 3 of the 4 children examined here).

- (25) a. He’s a dog. (Nina 2;0.24)
 b. I big boy. (Adam 2;7)
- (26) a. this is orange. (Peter 2;3.3)
 b. this empty. (Peter 2;3.3)

¹⁰ The children whose speech is examined here are Nina (Suppes 1974), Peter (Bloom 1970), Naomi (Sachs 1983), and Adam (Brown 1973), from the CHILDES database (MacWhinney and Snow, 1985). The number after the child’s name indicates the child’s age at the time of the utterance; age is given in years;months.days.

- (27) a. a lady's on it. (Nina 2;0.24)
 b. I in the kitchen. (Nina 2;1.15)
- (28) @ He be a dog

As mentioned above, what is remarkable about children's use of the copula is that in contrast to main verbs, the copula is always inflected when it is overt. The proportion of inflected occurrences of the copula in children's speech (out of utterances containing an overt copula) is shown in Table 1.¹¹

Table 1
 Children's Production of the Inflected Copula

Child	% Inflected Copula	(N)
Nina	100	(231)
Peter	100	(577)
Naomi	99.7	(338)
Adam	97.3	(299)
average	99.3	

The child English data show that at a stage of development in which children produce both finite and nonfinite main verbs in matrix clauses (*cry/cries*), they do not produce *be* as the nonfinite form of *is*. Rather, they use a null copula as the nonfinite counterpart of *is*. This fact supports the view that like in adult AAE, in child SAE the finite and null copulas are variants of each other, but neither is a variant of the uninflected copula. Moreover, a recent finding by Schütze (2002) shows that in the few cases where children do produce contexts where the copula must be uninflected (e.g. with *will* or the semi-modals *gonna*, *hafta*, etc.), children do not omit *be*, just as they do not generally omit main verbs.

3.3 Irish

We have seen two cases of microvariation in the syntactic typology of the copula in English: both adult AAE and child SAE, like adult SAE, have both an Infl-copula (*is* or a null form) and a V-copula (*be*). In contrast to adult SAE, in AAE and child SAE this distinction between the two copulas is visible in main clauses: in AAE *be* can occur, uninflected, in main clauses and yields a different meaning of the predicate than does *is* or a null copula in main

¹¹ N = the total number of copular utterances with an overt copula. Thus, Adam produced 299 expressions containing an overt copula, and in 97.3% of them the copula was inflected.

clauses. In child SAE, children do not produce an uninflected copula as the nonfinite counterpart of *is*, even during the stage in which they produce both inflected and uninflected variants of main verbs (*she cry/cries*). Moreover, while children at this stage (around age 2) omit the Infl-copula sometimes, they do not appear to omit the V-copula (Schütze, 2002).

Now let us take a somewhat wider stance and look at languages other than English that appear to make a very similar division between a V-copula and an Infl-copula. Doherty (1996) notes that there are two lexical items in Irish that function as copulas in predicative constructions. One he calls a copula (*is*), and the other he calls a ‘substantive verb’ (*tá*). They differ from one another in the Case marking on the subject (with *is* the subject bears Accusative), the type of predicate they occur with (*is* occurs only with individual-level predicates), their position in the structure (*is* occurs in Infl while *tá* is in V), and the word order of other elements in the sentence (*is* occurs with VOS order, while *tá* occurs with VSO order).

- (29) a. Is dochtúir é
 cop doctor him-Acc
 “He is a doctor.”
 b. Tá sé ar meisce
 is he-Nom drunk
 “He is drunk.”

Doherty argues that the copula (*is*) is an I^0 , not a verb, based on a number of criteria. For example, *is* can be omitted (e.g. (*Is*) *as Carrraig Airt é* ‘He (is) from Carrigart’), and it is morphologically different from verbs in that it inflects only for past/conditional (*ba*) or present/future (*is*), rather than having separate forms for all four tense/mood distinctions (as verbs do).

Another property of the copula that *tá* does not share is that in interrogative, negative or subordinate clauses the copula is replaced by a complementizer or negation marker. Such a marker normally combines with Inflection, “giving rise to complex forms which include a tense morpheme” (Doherty 1996, p. 9). Thus, in the subordinate clause in (30), the copula is not spelled out separately from the complementizer particle, *gur*.

- (30) Dúirt siad gur dhochtúir é.
 said they comp-cop-past doctor him-Acc
 “They said he was a doctor.”

Tá does not share any of these properties of *is* and instead behaves like a verb in all relevant respects (A. Ahlqvist, personal communication).

An interesting fact about nominal predicative sentences, noted by Henry and Tangney (1999), is that while they are grammatical only with *is*, they may be used with *tá* if the preposition *i* ‘in’ is used with the predicate, as in the following example.

- (31) a. Is múinteoir é.
 cop teacher him-Acc
 “He is a teacher.”
 b. Tá sé ina mhúinteoir.
 Be he in-his teacher
 “He is a teacher.”

In (31a) the sentence has the expected meaning, i.e. that the subject’s profession is that of a teacher. The meaning of (31b), however, is stage-level, so that the subject is asserted to be a teacher “now”. This shift in the meaning of the predicate is compatible with the shift caused by putting a normally individual-level predicate in an “active *be*” construction (*John is polite* (in general) vs. *John is being polite* (now)). Thus, the verbal copula seems to have a similar effect in these constructions in the two languages.¹²

3.4 Hebrew

In addition to Irish, Modern Hebrew appears to show a distinction between a V-type and an Infl-type copula. There is a rich literature on the syntax of the Hebrew present tense “pronominal” copula (Doron 1983; Rapoport 1987; Rothstein 1987; Greenberg 1994; Rothstein 1995, among others). Unlike past and future tense predicatives, which contain a verbal copula (*h.y.y*), in Hebrew present tense predicative constructions there is no verbal copula. The item that functions as a copula, referred to as Pron, is identical in form to the 3rd person pronoun (*hu* in masculine singular). Here I will discuss evidence that just as English *be* is a verbal copula and *is* is an Infl-copula, Hebrew *h.y.y* is a verbal copula and *hu* is an Infl-copula.

That the two Hebrew copulas (verbal and non-verbal) differ from each other syntactically can be seen from the fact that *h.y.y* occurs lower in the structure than the present tense pronominal copula (e.g. below Negation, as in (32)-(34) (these and the following data are from Greenberg (1994)).

¹² The function of the V-copula in the two languages might not be identical. As one reviewer points out, *John is being a teacher* is hardly acceptable in English. However, *I made John be a teacher* does seem (to my own judgment) to have the meaning “I forced John to be a teacher right now”.

- (32) a. Dani (hu) lo more
 Dani (3m.sg) neg teacher
 “Dani is not a teacher.”
- b. *Dani lo hu more
 Dani neg 3m.sg teacher
- (33) a. Dani lo haya more
 Dani neg be-past teacher
 “Dani was not a teacher.”
- b. *Dani haya lo more
 Dani be-past neg teacher
- (34) a. Dani lo roce banana
 Dani neg want banana
 “Dani doesn’t want a banana.”
- b. *Dani roce lo banana
 Dani want neg banana

A further difference between the verbal copula and Pron is the fact that the verbal copula, *h.y.y*, like other main verbs, can precede the subject. Pron cannot do this.

- (35) a. ha-yom roce Dani banana
 the-day want Dani banana
 “Dani wants a banana today”
- b. ha-shana haya Dani more
 the-year was Dani teacher
 “Dani was a teacher this year”
- c. *ha-shana hu Dani more
 the-year 3m.sg Dani teacher

A further difference between Pron and the verbal copula is that, like in both adult AAE and child SAE, the Infl-type copula (i.e. Pron) has a null variant, but the V-type copula does not. Thus, *hu* may be omitted as in (36a) but *h.y.y* cannot be omitted, as in (36b).

- (36) a. Dani (hu) more
 Dani (3m.sg) teacher
 “Dani is a teacher”
- b. Dani *(haya/yihye) more
 Dani *(be-past/be-fut) teacher
 “Dani was/will be a teacher”

Following Doron (1983), Rapoport (1987) and Rothstein (1995), Greenberg analyzes Pron as the realization of agreement features in Infl. She claims that “...when the main predicate of the sentence is not verbal, the agreement features remain ‘unattached’ in Infl. In this case Infl contains no specification for [tense] or [past] (as in present tense sentences), and realizes as Pron,” (Greenberg 1994, p.10).¹³

3.5 Summary

In each of the languages just examined there is a copula that displays properties of verbs, and there is another copula that doesn’t share these properties and instead is an element of Infl. In all of these languages, too, the verbal copula does not appear to be simply the uninflected counterpart of the Infl-copula. In grammars in which the copula may be null in main clauses (i.e. in each of these languages except adult SAE), the inflected copula alternates with a null copula, not an uninflected copula.

We saw that there is (micro)variation between standard American (adult) English (SAE) and the other languages reviewed here in two respects:

- (1) In AAE, child English, Hebrew and Irish the Infl-copula has a null variant; in SAE it does not.
- (2) In AAE and Irish the V-copula occurs in (present tense) main clauses; in SAE it does not without auxiliary/modal support (in Hebrew it does not occur in present tense clauses at all).

The microvariation among the varieties of English appears to hinge on restrictions on main clause tense (e.g. SAE obligatorily expresses tense where tense morphology is available; tense is not always expressed in child SAE or adult AAE (*John like cake*)). Both of these dialects also allow the Infl-copula to be null in main clauses. As for the ability of the V-copula to occur in present tense main clauses, it is unclear why this is possible only in AAE, and that the V-copula cannot occur as a bare verb in main clauses in SAE. I leave this issue for future work.

4 The Structure of Predicatives

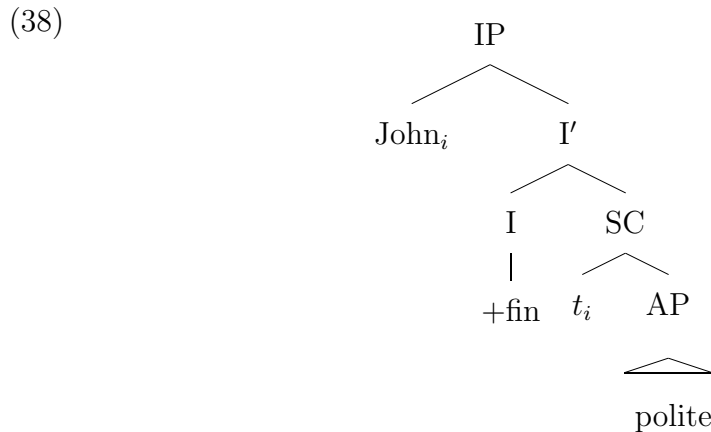
The main argument of this paper is that *be* and *is* are different copulas in English. *Be* is a V-type copula, heading a VP projection, and *is* is an Infl-type

¹³ See Greenberg (1994) for arguments that Pron is not a nominal element, i.e. it is not a true subject pronoun.

copula, heading IP. Now let's look more carefully at what this would mean for the syntax of copular constructions in (standard) English. Let us start with the assumption that in clauses without *be* or another verb no VP is projected. This would be the situation for a main clause like (37).

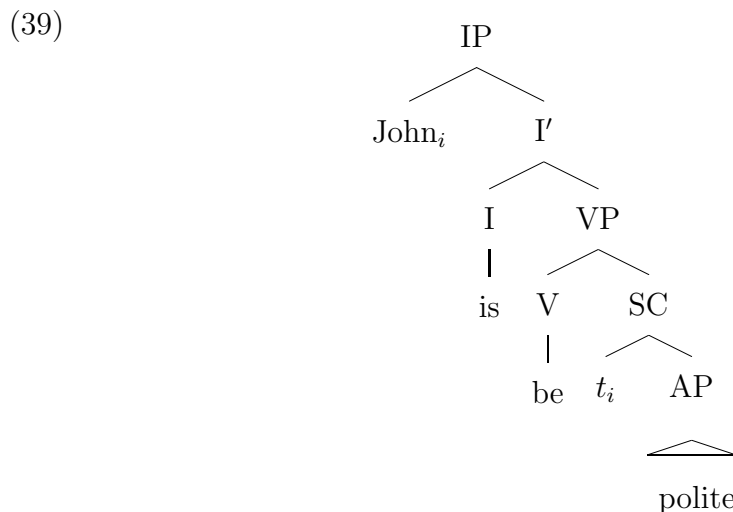
(37) John is polite.

Assuming no verb is projected in this clause, the structure of (37) would be that in (38).



A [+fin] Infl node is pronounced as the inflected copula if no main verb is present in the clause (this lets us keep cases of *do*-support separate).

If we accept the foregoing arguments for *is* and *be* being separate syntactic entities and not derivationally related, what prevents (37) from having a structure in which both *is* and *be* are projected? In other words, what rules out (39)?



Certainly we do not want to claim that the structure in (39) is illicit for any subcategorization incompatibility. IP can of course select a VP complement, as is the normal case in main clauses with main verbs ([IP John [VP left]]).

Instead, we can turn to the observation that *is* never precedes a bare verb. Whenever *is* precedes a main verb, that verb is a progressive or passive participle (thus: *John is *run/running*). So whatever rules out **John is run* should also rule out **John is be polite*.

5 Conclusions

In this paper it was argued that there are two copulas in English: an Infl-copula (*is*) and a V-copula (*be*). The evidence for this view was taken from asymmetries between *is* and *be* in morphosyntactic, semantic and syntactic behavior (VP-ellipsis). In each of these regards, *be* behaves like other verbs while *is* does not—it behaves like an Infl element. In particular, *be* was shown to yield an active/eventive interpretation of its predicate in certain constructions (the “active *be*” construction and the complement of *make*). The asymmetry in VP-ellipsis provided further support for the idea that *is* is not derived from *be*.

Support for the split analysis of the copula was found in varieties of English other than adult standard English, namely, African-American English and child standard English. The copula *be* in AAE is clearly a verb, as it takes *do*-support in interrogatives and tag questions. Moreover, it yields a habitual meaning of the predicate when it occurs in (present tense) main clauses without auxiliary support. Green (2000) has analyzed the habitual meaning as resulting from the Habitual operator which binds the Event argument contributed by the verb *be*. We saw evidence in child English that during the stage in which children produce both inflected and uninflected main verbs in main clauses (*she cry/cries*), they do not produce *be* as the uninflected counterpart to *is*; rather, they simply omit the copula in nonfinite main clauses (*he a dog* instead of *he be a dog*).

Looking beyond English, we saw further evidence from Irish and Hebrew for a V/Infl split between copulas. As argued by Doherty (1996), Irish has a verbal copula (*tá*) and an Infl-copula (*is*). Like *be*, *tá* shares properties of other verbs, while Irish *is*, like English *is*, lacks these verbal properties. In Hebrew, the “copula” in present tense is an Infl head that is a pronominal form. The verbal copula appears only in past and future tenses, and it resembles other verbs in its morphosyntactic properties.

Some problems with the analysis proposed here were discussed in section 2. For

instance, the fact that *be* does not normally trigger *do*-support is problematic for the claim that *be* is a verb and does not raise to Infl in tensed clauses (although *be* does appear to be able to occur with *do*-support in certain limited constructions, such as that in (11-12)).

Two alternative accounts to the one offered here for the interpretive asymmetry between *be* and *is* were offered in section 2.2. While I believe one of these alternatives (the idea that the eventive meaning, where present, comes from some other aspect of the clause, rather than from *be* itself) seems promising, it remains to be seen whether it can account for why the eventive interpretation is not available with *is*. Moreover, the advantage of the account offered here is the crosslinguistic and crossdialectal link between standard English, African-American English, child standard English, Hebrew and Irish in the behavior of the uninflected and inflected copulas.

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