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To be or not to be: An insight into the relationship between standard English and non-standard varieties of English

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Abstract

This paper has two objectives; firstly, to contribute to research on the variation between full and contracted forms of inflected copula/auxiliary be in conversations among native speakers of English and secondly to test whether generalities and inferences made in the late 1960s to 1980s by Labov, the 'father' of secular linguistics in this area, and then Rickford and Wolfram can still hold its own in relation to some data collected by the writers in the 1990s. Work in this area of sociolinguistics was initiated by Labov (1969), who analyzed copula/auxiliary contraction and deletion in Vernacular Black English (VBE). Labov found that is and are deletion are possible in VBE only in environments where contraction is possible in SE. He also showed that contraction and deletion in white speech (that is, SE) favor the same grammatical categories in the following complement.Following Labov's work, a number of other studies have compared deletion and contraction in VBE with white non-standard (WNS) contraction (Labov et al. 1968; Wolfram 1969; Fasold 1972; Wolfram 1974; Rickford 1988. Few studies to date have specifically compared VBE with SE, hence the use of classic references in this paper. An exception is the paper by Fasold and Nakano presented in 1989. The copula/auxiliary is an important feature in such a comparison because of its use as evidence in the divergence hypothesis, which asserts that VBE is a decreolized creole currently developing separately from white SE (Rickford 1988:2). The findings for this paper include the suggestion that the phonetic environments examined appeared to have little or no effect on copula/auxiliary contraction, and the same was true of following constituent environments. Preceding constituent environments, by contrast, clearly had an influence on copula/auxiliary contraction. The findings indicate that the inferences made by pioneers in the field can still claim their own in relation to research done in the 1990s.

Introduction

This paper has two objectives; firstly, to contribute to research on the variation between full and contracted forms of inflected copula/auxiliary be in conversations among native speakers of English and secondly to test whether generalities and inferences made in the late 1960s to 1980s by Labov, the 'father' of secular linguistics in this area, and then Rickford and Wolfram can still hold its own in relation to some data collected by the writers in the 1990s. Work in this area of sociolinguistics was initiated by Labov (1969), who analyzed copula/auxiliary contraction and deletion in Vernacular Black English (VBE). Labov found that is and are deletion are possible in VBE only in environments where contraction is possible in SE. He also showed that contraction and deletion in white speech (that is, SE) favor the same grammatical categories in the following complement.Following Labov's work, a number of other studies have compared deletion and contraction in VBE with white non-standard (WNS) contraction (Labov et al. 1968; Wolfram 1969; Fasold 1972; Wolfram 1974; Rickford 1988. Few studies to date have specifically compared VBE with SE, hence the use of classic references in this paper. An exception is the paper by Fasold and Nakano presented in 1989. The copula/auxiliary is an important feature in such a comparison because of its use as evidence in the divergence hypothesis, which asserts that VBE is a decreolized creole currently developing separately from white SE (Rickford 1988:2). The findings for this paper include the suggestion that the phonetic environments examined appeared to have little or no effect on copula/auxiliary contraction, and the same was true of following constituent environments. Preceding constituent environments, by contrast, clearly had an influence on copula/auxiliary contraction. The findings indicate that the inferences made by pioneers in the field can still claim their own in relation to research done in the 1990s.

Effective comparison of SE and VBE, thus, necessitates complete descriptions of both varieties. In describing some of the preliminary results of his study of Black-White speech in the Mississippi Delta, Wolfram (1971) notes that "the investigation of claims about Black-White speech differences must start with the careful analysis of the speech of Whites and Blacks of comparable socioeconomic classes in the deep South" (1971:142). Similarly, in order to compare VBE and SE copula contraction, a systematic analysis of white SE contraction is needed. In Labov's study, "two white peer groups from the Inwood section of upper Manhattan provide a base for comparison with white non-standard English" (1969:715). The VBE data was drawn randomly from twenty-six working class adults in South Central Harlem, but only eight white subjects provided the Inwood data for comparison (1969:730). Our study seeks to augment the rather limited data for SE on which Labov and those following him have based their analyses.

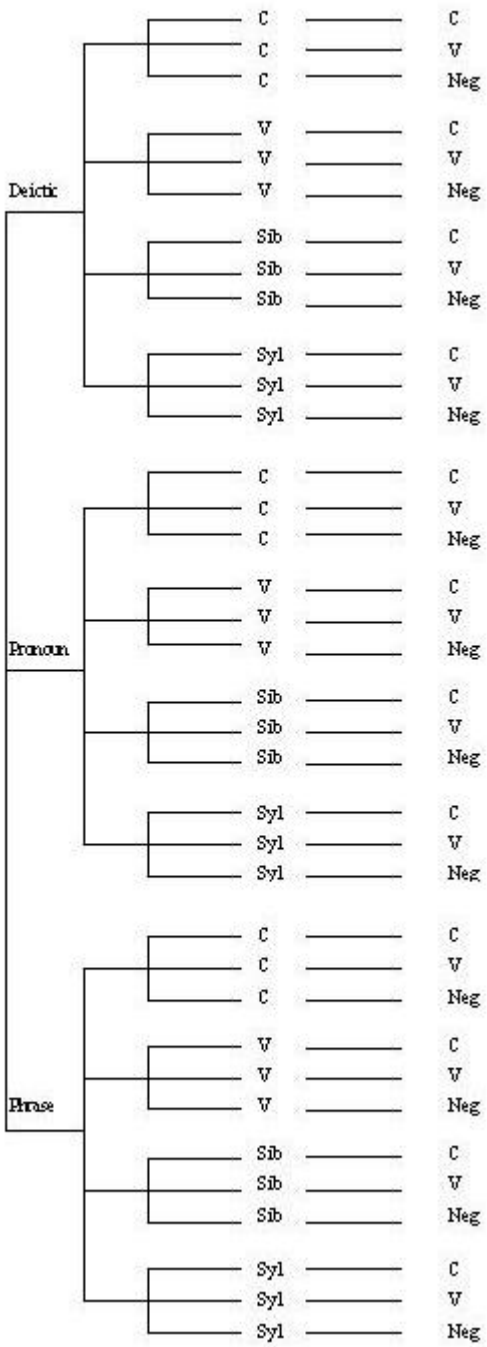
Data Collection and Coding Methodology

The data under study are 391 present tense copula and auxiliary be forms – is and are. Two hundred and eighty-five tokens (285) are instances of contraction while one hundred and six (106) tokens are full forms. The data was gathered from a corpus of seven transcripts which was made available to students in the course entitled Variation Analysis in 1994 as a database for their final project. We gathered data from the first four transcripts, which record the casual conversation of a total of 17 white middle class speakers.

Coding the data was a multi-stage process. The first stage involved dividing the transcripts we selected so that each of us was responsible for coding eight pages of data. In addition, each group member was asked to check the eight pages assigned to another group member as a way of eliminating mistakes in counting. In actuality, then, each of us was responsible for 16 pages.

The next step was initiated by a group member who supplied the group with a form containing a set of preceding constituent environments that might affect the occurrence of contraction. In the third stage, we decided to design a second form that would code phonetic environments separately, as these seemed to be stronger predictors of contraction. We also defined the constituent environments more specifically, and included coding for gender.

After discovering that our initial attempts at coding our data had not taken into consideration the co-occurrence of environments, that is, constituent together with phonetic environments, we re-coded our tokens. Our intention was to create an easier and more consistent method of sorting and counting, which, in turn, would facilitate entry of data into the VARBRUL program. Before re-coding, however, it was necessary to re-analyze our coding criteria. By collapsing several constituent and phonetic categories, and by omitting entirely the group we had previously labeled "formulaic," we devised a new set of three factor groups -- preceding constituent, preceding phonetic, and following phonetic environments. This re-ordering allowed for a total of thirty-six logically possible environments, as illustrated in the cross-product tree below:



The three preceding constituent environment categories were deictics (this, that, these, those, here, there); pronouns (she, he, it, you, we, they, the relative pronoun that, and the relative interrogative pronouns who, when, and where); and phrases. In the preceding phonetic environment we coded for obstruent (C), vowel (V), sibilant (sib), and syllabic (syl). The sibilants coded in this environment were (s, z, sh, ch, j); the obstruent category includes words ending with the English stop phonemes. The syllabic environment does not refer to syllabic function in a strict sense. Instead, we coded as syllabic all instances of /m/, /n/, /1/ and /r/ in the preceding contiguous environment, irrespective of a segment's actual function.

We divided following environments into two constituent environments: negative and non-negative. The negative category shows the occurrences of not, and no following

contraction and n't following a full form (that is, isn't/aren't). Following environments are also divided into two phonetic categories: consonant and vowel. These two categories taken together represent the non-negative following environment, because a following environment coded as negative was not also included in the following consonant category.

In our coding of the conversational data, we noted that some syntactic structures precluded the possibility of variation. Examples include yes/no questions (Is she at home?) and tag questions (He is at home, isn't he?), where contraction does not occur. We therefore removed these tokens from our data base. Our decision is in keeping with observations made in previous studies. Labov notes several environments in VBE in which be occurs in the "overwhelming majority of cases." For instance, was, were and I'm (which we did not include in our original count) as well as some environments in which the finite forms of be – our "full" forms – almost invariably occur. These instances include, among others, yes-no and tag questions (Labov 1972:69). In a more recent study, Rickford et al. also note the necessity of eliminating certain tokens ("don't count" tokens) because they are either "invariant" or "indeterminate" (1989:7).

In the process of coding we also found many expressions of a formulaic nature which consistently included copula contraction, and one type which consistently included full form. Formulaic contractors included: that's right; that's true; that's just; it's just; s/he's just; that's o.k.; that's all right; it's really; what's happenin'; s/he's like; it's like; and they're like. The one type of expression which retained full form was 'the thing is' and its paraphrase ' the points is.' We observed that the full form occurs when the noun precedes the copula, and the contracted forms appear when the pronouns precede. Since these conversations were explicitly selected for their casual nature, we were not surprised that we found so many formulaic expressions. That they all contained copula BE, however, threatened to skew our analysis. Thus, though we recognized their involvement function in the conversations, we removed them from our data base so that we could more clearly discern constraints on the production of copula/auxiliary contraction.

We retained an interest, however, in the occurrence of formulaic expressions across the data and within each conversation. As noted in Tannen's work (1987), pre-patterning in American English conversations does not follow rigid formulaic structuring, but allows for paradigmatic flexibility, seen in pairs such as 'that's true/that's all right' and 'the thing is/the point is.' Further studies might look at variations in the formulaic structures that speakers use in various speaking situations. For instance, does the high number of 'the thing is' occurrences in the data spoken by two men in a telephone conversation occur because the subject matter is computer mail, a more "nouny" situation? Or does it occur because the telephone constraint calls for a more emphatic formulaic expression than the increasingly common 'it's like'? Or is it simply a formulaic expression functioning as a refrain in the personal style of these speakers? In conversations that contained narratives, the incidence of copula deletion went up because of the formulaics in the ____ like paradigm: 'he's like No': 'she's like boom de dash'; 'she's like oh honey.' Would those cues for reported speech be replaced by the more neutral structure 'he said' if the speaker were not in a casual conversation?

We had expected to analyze our data according to the factor groups outlined above. While actually running VARBRUL, however, we found it possible to collapse additional environments. These changes will be discussed in the data analysis.

Data and Data Analysis

Before running the data through VARBRUL, we formulated two hypotheses. The first was that preceding environments are more important than the following environments included this study as possible influences on copula/auxiliary contraction. The second was that the phonetic environment is more important than the constituent environments included in this study as an influence on copula contraction. Table 1 summarizes the data.

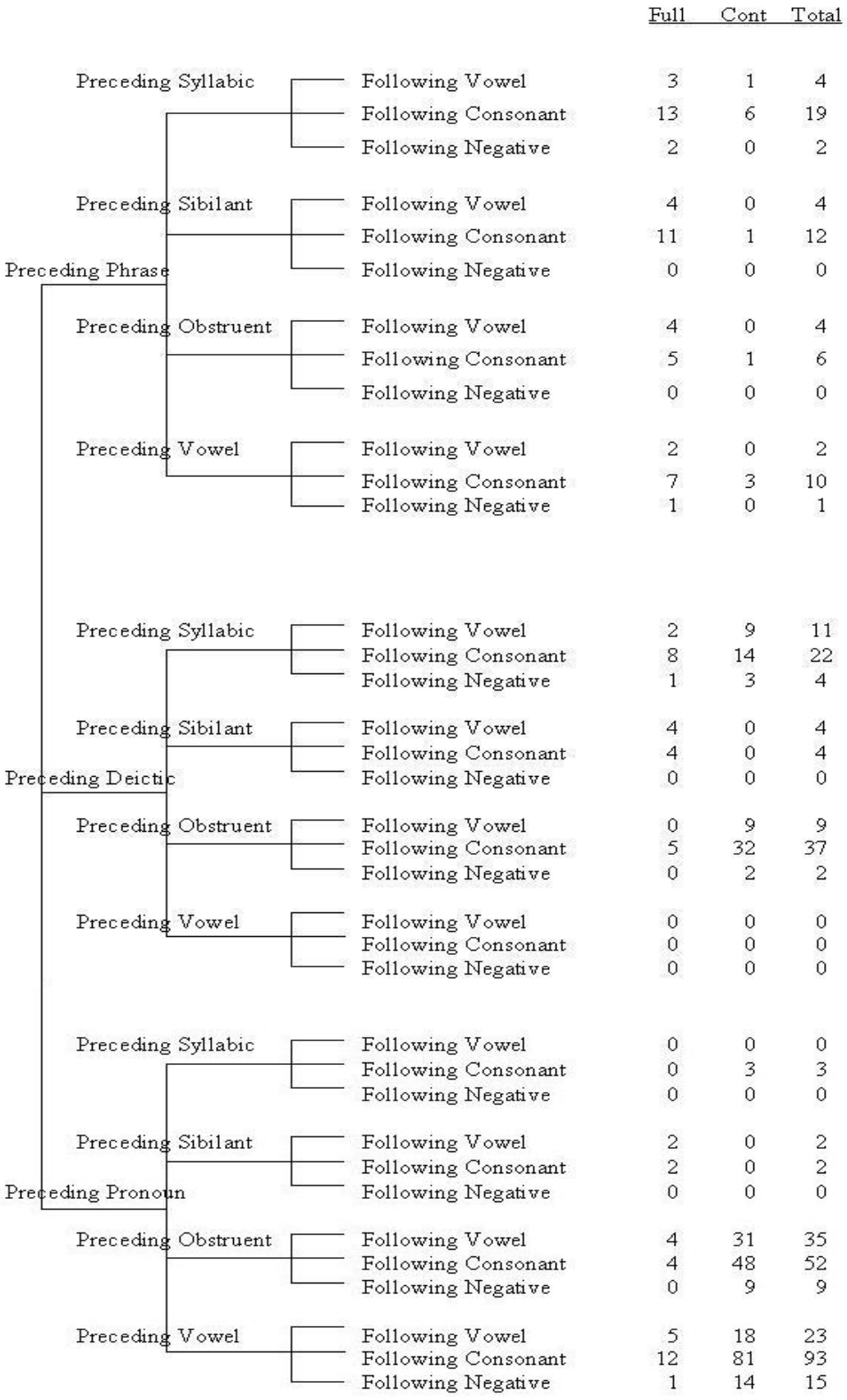


Table 1: Data Summary

Table 1 shows a total of 64 preceding phrases in the data; of these, 25 end in syllabics, 16 end in sibilants, 10 end in obstruents and 13 end in vowels. Table 1 also shows the 93 phonetic environments for copula contraction when a site for contraction occurs after a deictic. Since there are no deictics ending in vowels in English, this category is empty. The only syllabic-final deictic in the data is there, and the only obstruent-final deictic is that. The sibilant-final deictics include this, these, and those.

Table 1 also shows 234 environments of copula contraction occurring after a pronoun. Occurrences of pronouns ending in obstruents are mostly it. There are also a few occurrences of what and that acting as relative or interrogative pronouns. The vowel-final pronouns are all personal pronouns: you, she, he, we, they. The only sibilant-final preceding environment in Table consists of four occurrences of which as a relative pronoun. The only syllabic-final pronoun is the interrogative where.

Sibilants

One conclusion about phonetic influences on contraction can be drawn immediately on the basis of the data presented in Table 1. The preceding sibilant environment occurs a total of 28 times, with only one subsequent copula/auxiliary contraction. The copula is is never contracted following a sibilant. The full form of the copula/auxiliary is maintained in order to prevent its total assimilation into the preceding sibilant. The one occurrence of copula/auxiliary contraction which does occur following a sibilant is in the case of are. From this it is apparent that a preceding sibilant inhibits copula/auxiliary contraction. Because of the strength of this phonetic constraint on copula/auxiliary contraction, the preceding sibilant environment and the copulas/auxiliaries which occur in that environment are not included in the subsequent analysis.

Following Environments

The next step in the analysis was determining whether the environment of a following negative has an effect on contraction. Table 2 presents the data tree used in the VARBRUL analysis. Table 3 contains the results of the analysis.

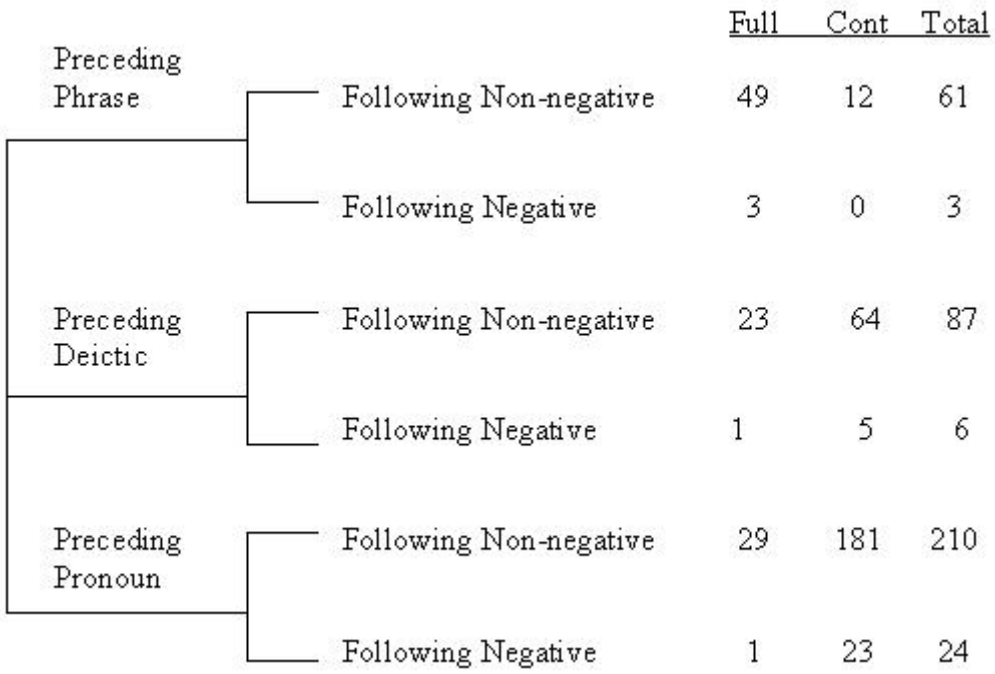


Table 2: Data Summary for Negative Analysis

NUMBER OF FACTOR GROUPS: 2

Preceding Phrase
Preceding Deictic
Preceding Pronoun

Following Negative
Following Non-negative

AND 6 ENVIRONMENTS (CELLS) WITH THE FOLLOWING DISTRIBUTION OF FACTORS:

FACTOR	APPS	TOTAL	PERCENT
Following Negative	28	33	85
Following Non-negative	257	358	72
Preceding Phrase	12	64	19
Preceding Deictic	69	93	74
Preceding Pronoun	204	234	87
TOTAL	285	391	73

CONVERGENCE AT ITERATION: 7

FACTOR PROBABILITIES:

Following Negative = .575
Following Non-negative = .425

Preceding Phrase = .123
Preceding Deictic = .636
Preceding Pronoun = .802

INPUT PROBABILITY = .682

ENVIRONMENT	OBSRVD	EXPECTED	TOTAL	ERROR	FREQ	E/PROB
Preceding PhraseFollowing Negative	0	.870	3	1.225	0.000	.290
Preceding PhraseFollowing Non-negative	12	11.166	61	.076	0.197	.183
Preceding DeicticFollowing Non-negative	64	63.988	87	.000	0.736	.735
Preceding DeicticFollowing Negative	5	63.988	87	.000	0.833	.835
Preceding PronounFollowing Non-negative	181	181.843	210	.029	0.862	.866
Preceding PronounFollowing Negative	23	22.121	24	.446	0.958	.922
CHI-SQUARE	1.777					
LOG LIKELIHOOD	-173.013					

Table 3 : Negative Analysis

The analysis in Table 3 indicates that the actual distribution of the data fits the predicted distribution closely. The highest error value is less than 1.5 and the chi-square is small. The factor probabilities in Table 3 indicate that a preceding phrase inhibits copula contraction. Preceding deictics or pronouns encourage contraction. As the factor probabilities for the following environments hover close to .5, it is apparent that the effect of the following environment is negligible. There is a slight tendency toward copula contraction before negatives. A following non-negative slightly inhibits contraction, but the effect is small compared to that of the preceding environment. Since the occurrence of a following negative does not appear to effect copula contraction substantially, it should be possible to drop the negatives from the analysis. The data in Table 4 was analyzed using VARBRUL in order to test this conclusion.

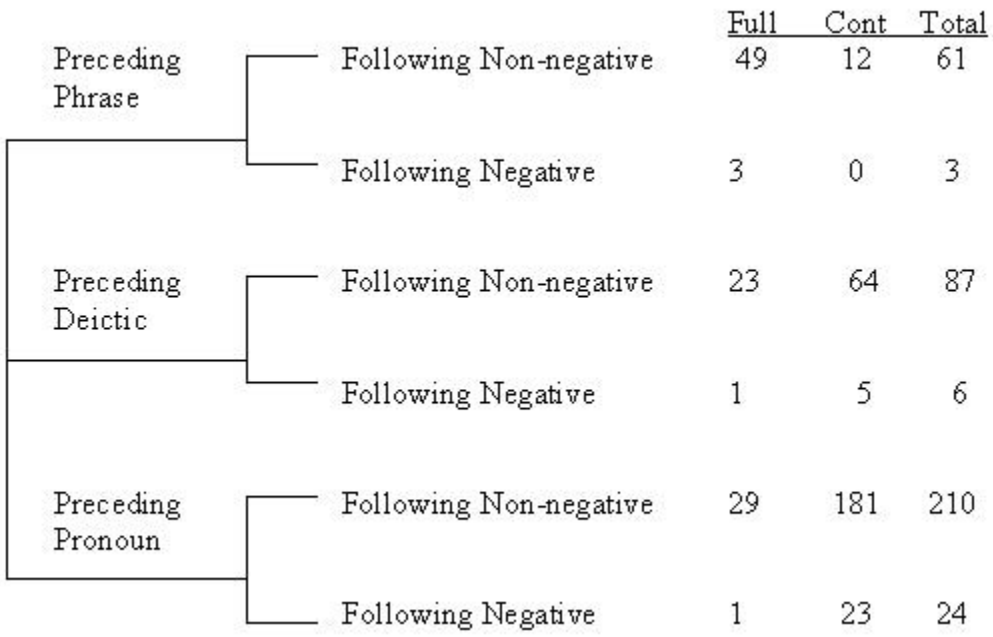


Table 4 : Data Summary Excluding Negatives

NUMBER OF FACTOR GROUPS : 2

Preceding Phrase
Preceding Deictic
Preceding Pronoun

Following Vowel
Following Consonant

AND 6 ENVIRONMENTS (CELLS) WITH THE FOLLOWING DISTRIBUTION OF FACTORS:

FACTOR	APPS	TOTAL	PERCENT
Following Vowel	68	98	69
Following Consonant	189	260	73
Preceding Phrase	12	61	20
Preceding Deictic	64	87	74
Preceding Pronoun	181	210	86
TOTAL	257	358	72

CONVERGENCE AT ITERATION 7

FACTOR PROBABILITIES :

Following Vowel = .452
Following Consonant = .548

Preceding Phrase = .129
Preceding Deictic = .634
Preceding Pronoun = .796

INPUT PROBABILITY = .598

ENVIRONMENT	OBSRVD	EXPECTED	TOTAL	ERROR	FREQ	E/PROB
Preceding PhraseFollowing Vowel	1	2.146	14	.723	0.071	.153
Preceding PhraseFollowing Consonant	11	9.892	47	.157	0.234	.210
Preceding DeicticFollowing Consonant	46	47.698	63	.249	0.730	.757
Preceding DeicticFollowing Vowel	18	16.300	24	.553	0.750	.679
Preceding PronounFollowing Vowel	49	49.621	60	.045	0.817	.827
Preceding PronounFollowing Consonant	132	131.343	150	.026	0.880	.876
CHI-SQUARE	1.753					
LOG LIKELIHOOD	-163.989					

Table 5 : Analysis Excluding Negatives

The error analysis in Table 5 indicates that the actual distribution of the data closely fits that predicted by the probabilities calculated. The highest error value is less than 1 and the chi-square value is also small. As in the analysis presented in Table 3, preceding constituent environments are far more important in inhibiting or promoting contraction than following environments. The exclusion of following negatives as an environment influencing copula/auxiliary contraction has not radically affected the analysis. This is indicated by the fact that the factor probabilities for following vowel and for following consonant are both close to .5 in Table 5, which excludes negatives. The factor probabilities for following negative and for following non-negative were also very close to .5 in Table 3. It is clear that the occurrence of a following negative has no great effect on copula/auxiliary contraction.

The analyses in Table 3 and 5, taken together, indicate that preceding environments are much more likely to influence copula/auxiliary contraction than any of the following environments analyzed in this study. The factor probabilities in Table 3 indicate that the presence or absence of a following negative does not strongly influence copula/auxiliary contraction. The factor probabilities in Table 5 demonstrates this conclusively. They also indicate that whether the following environment is a vowel or a consonant does not greatly affect copula/auxiliary

contraction. For this reason, the environments of following consonant and following vowel may be combined.

Preceding environments

None of the following constituent or phonetic environments examined in this study have a great role in promoting or inhibiting contraction. For this reason, those copulas and auxiliaries which occur before negatives have been excluded from subsequent analysis. Similarly, the distinction between the following phonetic environments has been ersed. The categories of following consonant and following vowel may be combined.

On the other hand, the environment of preceding sibilants has been shown to have a very strong effect in forcing the retention of full copulas/auxiliaries on phonetic grounds. Because of this strong phonetic constraint on copula contraction, it is not necessary to continue to include them in the process of analysis. Therefore those copulas and auxiliaries which follow sibilants have been eliminated from subsequent analysis. Table 6 contains the data tree of the remaining factor groups.

		Full	Cont	Total
Preceding Phrase	Preceding Syllabic	16	7	23
	Preceding Obstruent	9	1	10
	Following Negative	9	3	12
Preceding Deictic	Preceding Syllabic	10	23	33
	Preceding Obstruent	5	41	46
	Preceding Vowel	0	0	0
Preceding Pronoun	Preceding Syllabic	0	3	3
	Preceding Obstruent	8	79	87
	Preceding Vowel	17	99	116

Table 6 : Data Summary of Preceding Environments

NUMBER OF FACTOR GROUPS: 2

Preceding Phrase
Preceding Deictic
Preceding Pronoun

Preceding Obstruent
Preceding Vowel
Preceding Syllabic

AND 8 ENVIRONMENTS (DELLS) WITH THE FOLLOWING DISTRIBUTION OF FACTORS:

FACTOR	APPS	TOTAL	PERCENT
Preceding Phrase	11	45	24
Preceding Pronoun	181	206	88
Preceding Deictic	64	79	81
Preceding Obstruent	121	143	85
Preceding Vowel	102	128	80
Preceding Syllabic	33	59	56
TOTAL	26	330	78

CONVERGENCE AT ITERATION 8
FACTOR PROBABILITIES :

Preceding Phrase = .139
Preceding Pronoun = .770
Preceding deictic = .648

Preceding Obstruent = .583
Preceding Vowel = .459
Preceding Syllabic = .458

INPUT PROBABILITY = .677

ENVIRONMENT	TOTAL	PBSRVD	EXPECTED	ERROR	FACTORS
Preceding PhrasePreceding Obstruent	10	1	3.216	2.250	
Preceding PhrasePreceding Vowel	12	3	2.684	.048	
Preceding PhrasePreceding Syllabic	23	7	5.125	.883	
Preceding DeicticPreceding Syllabic	33	23	25.257	.859	
Preceding DeicticPreceding Obstruent	46	41	38.804	.794	
Preceding PronounPreceding Obstruent	87	79	78.970	.000	
Preceding PronounPreceding Syllabic	3	3	2.568	.504	
CHI-SQUARE	5.349				
LOG LIKELIHOOD	-138.357				

Table 7: Analysis of Preceding Environments

The error analysis in Table 7 indicates a relatively accurate distribution of the data when compared to the expected probability of distribution. In every case except one the degree of error is less than one. The only exception is in the case of the 'Preceding Phrase, Preceding Obstruent' environment where the error figure is 2.25. A high error figure may mean that one of the factors is not independent, but related to another factor. This is probably the case here. The preceding obstruent environment has a high degree of co-occurrence with both the preceding pronoun and preceding deictic environments. The most common pronoun in the data is it, and the most common deictic is that, both of which have obstruents as their final consonant. Final obstruents therefore occur with undue frequency in the preceding pronoun and preceding deictics categories and with relatively less frequency in the preceding phrase category. This would account for the high degree of error in the 'Preceding Phrase, Preceding Obstruent' category.

The analysis in Table 7 indicates that the preceding constituent environment is more likely to either promote or inhibit contraction than the preceding phonetic environment. A preceding phrase quite strongly inhibits copula/auxiliary contraction; a preceding pronoun or deictic is likely to promote it. The effect of the preceding phonetic environment is less likely to promote or inhibit copula/auxiliary contraction. Preceding obstruents may slightly encourage contraction; preceding vowels and syllabics may very slightly discourage it.

It is interesting to note that syllabics differ from consonants in their effect on copula/auxiliary contraction. The most common word-final phoneme classified as a syllabic in this study is the English 'r' sound, as it occurs ina word like 'there'. Syllabics affect copula/auxiliary contraction to a degree similar to that for vowels. However, in the case of all the preceding phonetic environments examined in Table 7, the effect on contraction is so small, compared to the preceding constituent environments, that not much emphasis can be placed on the distinction between preceding obstruents and preceding syllabics.

Further Data Analysis

Having obtained the data analyzed above, we decided to test an additional hypothesis: that following constituent environments might influence contraction or full form use. To test this hypothesis, we coded two preceding environments (pronouns, which most often contract, and phrasals, which mostly co-occur with full forms) and five following constituent environments (adverb, noun phrase, verb phrase, adjective, and locative. In this data we included following negative environments such as the negative in verbals: 'he's not doing them' and in adjectives: 'they're not clear.' For this run we did not feel it was necessary to drop negatives, having previously concluded that a following negative does not substantially affect contraction. Because of the high frequency of occurrence of the pronoun it and the deictic that, we, like Fasold and Nakano, excluded these instances from the data to better discern the effects of following environments. Table 8 summarizes the data.

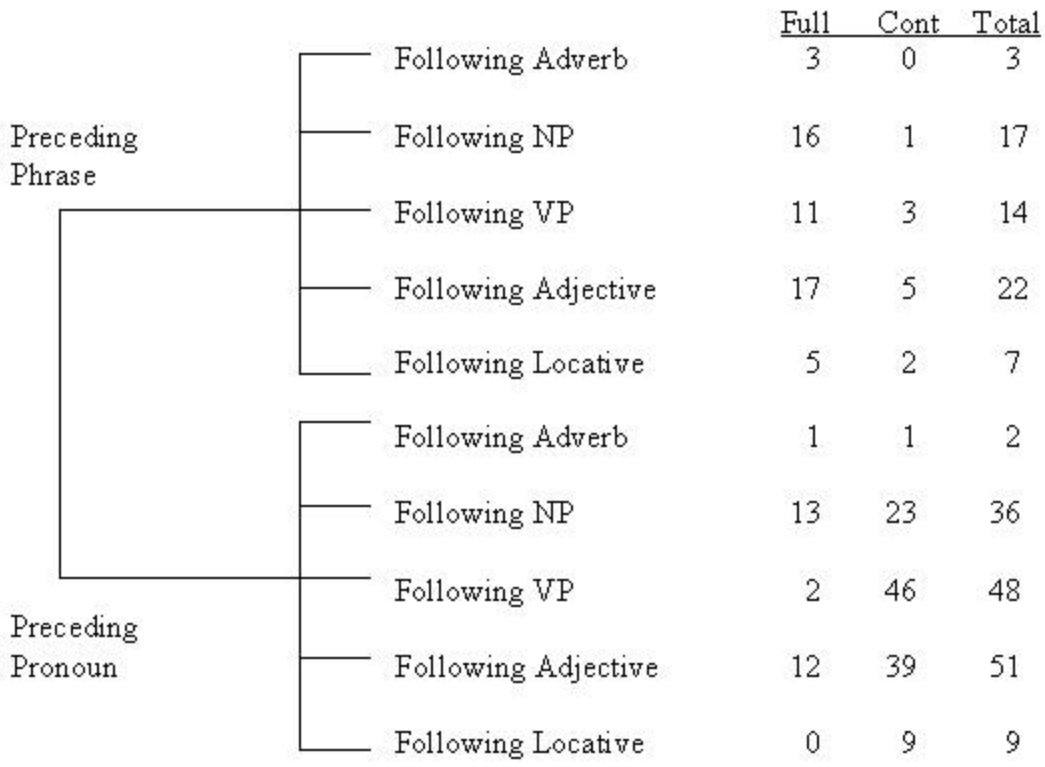


Table 8: Data Summary of Following Constituent Environments

NUMBER OF FACTOR GROUPS : 2

Preceding phrase
Preceding pronoun

Following adverb
Following noun phrase
Following verb phrase
Following adjective
Following locative

AND 10 ENVIRONMENTS (CELLS) WITH THE FOLLOWING DISTRIBUTION OF FACTORS:

FACTOR	APPS	TOTAL	PERCENT
Preceding phrase	11	63	17
Preceding pronoun	118	146	81
Following adverb	1	5	20
Following noun phrase	24	53	45
Following verb phrase	49	62	79
Following adjective	44	73	60
Following locative	11	16	69
TOTAL	129	209	62

CONVERGENCE AT ITERATION 7

Preceding phrase = .161
Preceding pronoun = .839

Following adverb = .168
Following noun phrase = .299
Following verb phrase = .755
Following adjective = .501
Following locative = .789

INPUT PROBABILITY = .442

ENVIRONMENT	OBSRVD	EXPECTED	TOTAL	ERROR	FREQ	E/PROB
Preceding phraseFollowing adverb	0	.090	3	.092	0.000	.030
Preceding phraseFollowing noun phrase	1	1.037	17	.001	0.059	.061
Preceding phraseFollowing verb phrase	3	4.475	14	.715	0.214	.320
Preceding phraseFollowing adjective	5	2.914	22	1.722	0.227	.132
Preceding phraseFollowing locative	2	2.537	7	.178	0.286	.362
Preceding pronounFollowing adverb	1	.911	2	.016	0.500	.456
Preceding pronounFollowing noun phrase	23	22.980	36	.000	0.639	.638
Preceding pronounFollowing adjective	39	41.091	51	.548	0.765	.806
Preceding pronounFollowing verb phrase	46	44.512	48	.684	0.958	.927
Preceding pronounFollowing locative	9	8.453	9	.583	1.000	.939
CHI-SQUARE	4.540					
LOG LIKELIHOOD	-90.662					

Table 9: Analysis of Following Constituent Environments

Table 8 shows the factor tree, indicating two factor groups (preceding phrases and preceding pronouns) and five following environments (adverb, noun phrase, verb phrase, adjective, and locative). Table 9 shows the VARBRUL results from the constituent run. Applications indicate contractions of the copula or auxiliary BE. Confirming earlier results, preceding pronoun strongly favors contraction with a probability of .839. Preceding phrase inhibits application of the rule with a probability of .161 for contraction. The figures indicate that the preceding environment more strongly governs the rule than the following environment. For example, following locative and following verb ohrase strongly favor application of the rule when preceded by a pronoun (.789 and .755, respectively). The error analysis in Table 9 shows that in all but one case the degree of error is less than 1.0. Only in the environments of preceding phrase – following adjective is the error greater, 1.722. We

conclude that our hypothesis is wrong; based on these 129 applications in the 209 total sites, our chosen constituents do not appear to constrain the expected contraction with preceding pronouns, nor do they change the tendency of preceding phrases to co-occur with full copula or auxiliary BE forms.

Conclusion

We tested two hypotheses with our data. The first was that preceding environments are more important than following environments as influences on contraction. This hypothesis has been confirmed. The following phonetic environments which were examined appeared to have little or no effect on copula/auxiliary contraction, and the same was true of following constituent environments. Preceding constituent environments, by contrast, clearly had an influence on copula/auxiliary contraction.

The second hypothesis was that the phonetic environment is more important than the constituent environments included in this study as an influence on contraction. This hypothesis has been largely disproved. The presence of a preceding pronoun or preceding noun phrase is much more likely to promote or inhibit copula/auxiliary contraction than whether that phrase or pronoun ends in a consonant, vowel, or syllabic. The only time phonetic environment overrides constituent environment is when the preceding phrase ends in a sibilant.. In this case, contraction of the copula/auxiliary is is always prohibited.

To conclude, though we thought it would be interesting to consider the influence of suprasegmentals and number of syllables in preceding and following constituent environments, we determined that we could not now run such a study with the data as coded by our group. This failure to have the data coded for a maximum number of possible uses made us aware of the benefits of a pilot or pre-study for the successful running of a group project. As our appendices indicate, we made several trials at coding the data before we found that the 3 x 5 card system was the most flexible.

As Lesley Milroy noted in her Belfast network study (1987), training of the group through completion of a pilot study helps to standardize the format, but more importantly helps the group to know what issues are significant and feasible for analysis. In the process of our group work we narrowed our data base by removing deictics and yes/no interrogatives and eliminating analysis of gender differences. In the case of deictics, contraction almost always occurred and in the case of yes/no interrogatives full forms occurred, showing no interesting variation.

In looking at formulaic expressions, which included copula/auxiliary deletion or full forms, we noted “local” contextual influences on the formulaic structures which indicate that data coding for immediate constituents may be too simplified when it does not take into account the larger chunks of discourse around the site. For instance, pre-patterning in conversations can be quite local. Consider the discourse context around the contraction in this data from two women talking about one of their daughters. The interlocutor Bev not only repeats the other speaker’s words, but reverses the polarity and adds quantifier duplication. The repetition, the intensification and the tag question are involvement tactics noted especially in work by Tannen.

1. Pat : She's too heavy
2. Bev : She's not too, too heavy is she?

That these features insert neatly into the paradigm of POC' as already given utterance gives credence to the flexible, yet formulaic nature of patterns in talk.

Though we were curious about male/female differences, we discovered that in order to do a proper gender study we needed much more data. While in the process of study , we also noted other investigations which we think could be conducted. For instance, all our data was drawn from casual conversations among friends. We now are curious about the uses of contraction in different speaking situations, and have considered that contraction might change if we had these same speakers in more formal speaking situations, for instance at their places of employment. Would we then find a continuum of lessening contraction with preceding pronouns?

Our ability to outline these questions and to define the methodological problems associated with the pursuit of answers is a result of our participation in this initial study. We emerge from the work with one substantiated hypothesis, one hypothesis which must be rejected, and a greater sophistication with regard to the process of variation analysis.

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