

Defectivity and auxiliary syncretism: diachronic aspects

Kallulli (2008: 286) observes the following paradigm in Modern Standard English:

- (1) a. There are students in the room.
- b. *There is students in the room.
- c. There's students in the room.

To which we can add:

- (2) a. Are/*is there students in the room?
- b. There aren't/*isn't students in the room.

Kallulli suggests that 's is really a reduced form of *has*, comparable to French *il y a*, Spanish *hay*, etc. Here we propose that 's is a neutralized auxiliary, with an optional LOC(ative) feature, while non-neutralised HAVE-auxiliaries have an obligatory LOC feature (Benveniste 1960, Freeze 1992, Kayne 1993/2000). Non-contracted *is* is unambiguously a form of *be* and as such lacks a LOC feature. Following a large body of research that crucially takes *there* to be the subject of predication (Jenkins 1975, Williams 1994, Hazout 2004, Kallulli 2008, a.o.), we can then account for the paradigm in (1) as follows: (1a) involves ϕ -agreement between *there* and *are*; (1c) involves LOC agreement between *there* and neutralized 's, and (1b) involves neither, leaving the root node unlabelled leading to ungrammaticality.

While 's might be the only neutralized HAVE/BE auxiliary in Modern Standard English, non-standard *ain't* is clearly syncretic for *have* and *be* and as such has an optional LOC feature:

- (3) a. I/you/he/we/they ain't got no money.
- b. I/you/he/we/they ain't going nowhere/no students/bothered what you think.

Ain't is best synchronically analysed as a negative auxiliary with no Person/Number specification and an optional LOC feature. In this variety, then, (4) would have the same analysis as Standard English (1c):

- (4) There ain't no students in the room.

Here then *ain't* has a LOC feature. Modulo the restriction to negative auxiliaries (clearly linked to contracted negation; see the diachronic account below), (4) is equivalent to (5):

- (5) a. Il y a des étudiants dans la salle.
- b. Hay estudiantas en la sala.

Diachronically, *ain't* was initially a contraction of BE (see Cheshire 1982, and Wikipedia on *ain't*, which the following dates are taken from where not otherwise acknowledged). *Amn't* as a contraction of *am not* is known from 1618, later written *an't*, appearing in print in 1695. *Aren't* as a contraction for *are not* first appeared in 1675, written as *an't* first in 1696. Like the contracted forms of modals, which first appear in the 17th century (Lass 1999: 180), a phonological rule deletes the final voiced continuant consonant of the auxiliary, with lengthening of the vowel (Lass 1999: 103f., 180): *shall* > *shan't*, *can* > *can't*, *will* > *won't* (the latter based on an older *wol-* stem; Lass 1999:178). *Amn't* > *an't* and *aren't* > *an't* fall into this general pattern. *Isn't* > *in't/en't* obeys the same rule; *an't* appears for *isn't* in Swift 1710–13. Lengthening and diphthongisation of /a/ give *ain't*, first attested in writing in 1749. Following the same phonological rule *han't/ha'n't* for *has not* and *have not* appear from 1675. Vowel-lengthening, diphthongisation and /h/-dropping give *ain't*, which first appeared as a contraction of *have not* in print in 1819. Hence phonological processes cause the two forms of the negative auxiliaries to converge as a single neutralised auxiliary by the early 19th century.

Cennamo (2010) observes neutralized HAVE-BE auxiliaries in Italo-Romance. In the pluperfect in certain Campanian and Molisan dialects, where the HAVE-BE alternation in the perfect is typically controlled by person (Loporcaro 2016, Manzini & Savoia 2005, II: 649-654;

III: 1-34), a form *seva* appears, often alternating with HAVE and/or BE, with unaccusatives, in passives and in copular constructions:

- (6) a. sevə natə/partutə (unaccusative)
I-SEVA born/left
“I had (been) born/left”.
- b. sevə statə vistə (passive)
I-SEVA been seen
“I had been seen.”
- c. karlə sevə bbəllə (copular)
Carlo SEVA handsome
“Carlo was handsome.” (Arzano dialect of Campania; Cennamo 2010:213-5)

In the dialect of San Benedetto del Tronto (Ascoli Piceno) *seva* can also appear as the auxiliary with unergatives and transitives:

- (7) sɔvə dormitə/viʃtə
I-SEVA slept/seen
“I had slept/seen.” (Cennamo 2010: 220)

Cennamo (2010: 220-3) argues that *seva* is a form of HAVE “with the incorporation of the initial consonant (*s-*) of the present indicative of *be*” (220). We treat *seva* as a neutralized auxiliary resulting from *s*-incorporation into the original HAVE forms, which led to an optional LOC feature being associated with this form. Following Freeze (1992), Kayne (1993/2000), we assume the following structure for locative/possession constructions:

- (8) [_{TP} ... [_{VP} BE [LOC [_{XP} Location/Possessor [X Theme]]]

Where LOC incorporates to BE a HAVE auxiliary results and the Location/Possessor raises out of XP (because XP is unstable for labelling). Where LOC is realized as a Preposition or an oblique Case the Location/Possessor argument can stay in-situ (see Saito 2016). Where (8) generalizes to XP = PrtP we get the familiar split-auxiliary patterns found in Standard Italian and elsewhere (Kayne 1993/2000). The fact that *seva* appears variably with unaccusatives, passives, copular constructions, and unergatives and transitives shows that the original LOC (later EA) feature is optional on this element.

A final point: Benveniste (1960: 170) points out that “the development is from ‘*mihi est*’ to ‘*habeo*’ and not the reverse”. Why? In *mihi est* the LOC feature is on the Locative/Possessor *mihi* and therefore doesn’t contribute to labelling; in *habeo*, LOC is associated with T and so, in conjunction with the right kind of element merged to it, can contribute to labelling. We see that labelling drives change; see also Dadan (2019), van Gelderen (2022).

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