

## The Grammatical Status of *BÍN* and *be<sub>HAB</sub>* in African American English

Nick Sobin

The University of Texas at El Paso

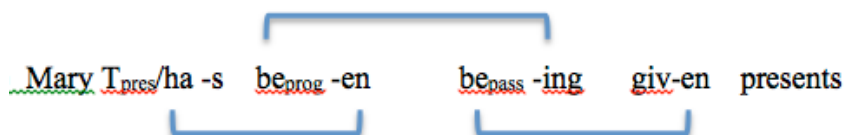
A number of analyses treat the invariant forms stressed remote past *BÍN* (1a) and habitual *be* (*be<sub>HAB</sub>*) (1b) in African American English as single exotic or exceptional elements with dedicated meanings which may occur in a wide array of contexts (e.g. Labov 1998, Green 2002, Harris & Woods 2013, Collins 2006, Zanuttini & Martin 2017).

- (1) a. I *BÍN* treating ‘em like that. (Rickford 1975: 107)  
‘I’ve been treating them like that for a long time’  
b. She *be* telling people she eight. (Green 2002: 48)  
‘She is always telling people she’s eight’

Green (2002) even claims that these lexical forms are not verbs at all, but aspectual markers. The problem for such analyses is that, by failing to take into consideration basic aspects of (i) the distribution of verbal affixes, (ii) the syntactic role that auxiliary verbs play, and (iii) the compositional nature of temporal/aspectual interpretation, they fail to offer any explanation of why the grammatical contexts that these invariant forms can appear in are at all possible.

For example, verbal affixes are generally believed to be assigned to a verb on the basis of the immediately preceding verbal element as modeled in (2).

(2)



If *BÍN* and *be<sub>HAB</sub>* are each single lexical elements, then they would each have to have conflicting affix assigning properties, sometime assigning present participle form, as in (1), but other times assigning past participle form as in (3a/4a), or no affix at all, as in (3b/ 4b).

- (3) a. My hair *BÍN* cut. (Rickford 1975: 111)  
b. He *BÍN* a preacher. (Green 2002: 56)  
(4) a. I *be* told in my sleep to go to church. (Green 2002: 98)  
b. She always *be* a clown on Halloween (Collins 2006: 215)

Further, a claim that *BÍN* and *be<sub>HAB</sub>* are each single lexical elements ignores the syntactic impact of auxiliary verbs. For example, while *BÍN* in (1a) and (3b) appears to behave like progressive *be* or copular *be* respectively in allowing the semantic subject to appear in surface subject position, *BÍN* and *be<sub>HAB</sub>* in (3a/4a) appear to behave like passive *be* in blocking the semantic subject from surface subject position, and instead allowing an object to appear there.

The preceding facts are explained if *BÍN* and *be<sub>HAB</sub>* are not separate lexical items, but forms of any of the three auxiliary verbs progressive *be*, copular *be*, and passive *be*, which AAE is known to possess. More light is shed on this by considering the compositional nature of temporal/aspectual interpretation.

As the literature on compositional interpretation indicates (e.g. Reichenbach (1947), Vendler (1967), Verkuyl (1971), Sobin (1974), Binnick (1991)), temporal verbal elements are not strongly dedicated to specific semantic values, but instead vary considerably in their impact on semantic interpretation depending on the other elements they are combined with. Consider the different possible interpretations of ‘*Mary is leaving*’ in (5).

- (5) (I know that) Mary is leaving (as we speak/tomorrow/early these days).

'*Mary is leaving*' might be interpreted as an event in progress, a single future event, or a habitual action. In (6a), 'have' is present perfect and incompatible with the simple past adverbial '*yesterday*', but compatible in (6b), where 'have' means simple past.

(6) a. Mary has left (\**yesterday*). b. We believe Mary to have left *yesterday*.

A past tense form like '*was*' may indicate a past act (7a), or a doubtful future act (7b).

(7) a. Mary was leaving. b. They said Mary was leaving tomorrow (which I doubt).

Basically, present and past tense forms and the auxiliary verbs *have* and progressive *be* (a form label) have no intrinsic temporal/aspectual meaning. Instead, temporal/aspectual interpretation appears to involve conventional templates which interpret various combinations of elements of the sentence, even including the nature of subject and object arguments. Thus where (8a) most readily refers to a single past act, (8b) most readily refers to a past habit.

(8) a. Mary smoked a cigarette. b. Mary smoked a pipe.

Given the semantically underspecified nature of auxiliary verbal elements, it is even more unlikely that *BÍN* and *be*<sub>HAB</sub> are solo lexical elements with strongly dedicated temporal/aspectual meanings. It looks instead like any of the three auxiliary verbs *be* in past participle form (assigned by '*have*', which often goes unpronounced in AAE) may be given heavy stress, contributing the 'remote past' interpretation to the larger temporal/aspectual interpretation being expressed. Likewise, leaving any of the three auxiliary verbs *be* isolated from finite tense, resulting in the surface form '*be*', lends 'habitual' to the larger temporal/aspectual interpretation.

In sum, the claim that *BÍN* and *be*<sub>HAB</sub> are semantically dedicated isolated lexical items does not explain the possible range of affixation of surrounding verbal elements or the syntactic contexts (e.g. active or passive) in which these elements may appear. The claim that *BÍN* and *be*<sub>HAB</sub> are simply forms of any of the three auxiliary verbs *be* explains both the morphological and syntactic facts, and is consistent with the generally under-specified semantic character of auxiliary verbal elements.

## References

- Binnick, Robert. 1991. *Time and the verb; a guide to tense & aspect*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Collins, Chris. 2006. A fresh look at habitual *be* in AAVE. In Ana Deumert & Stephanie Durrleman-Tame (eds.), *Structure and Variation in Language Contact*, 203-24. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Green, Lisa. 2002. *African American English: A linguistic introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Harris, Alysia & Jim Wood. 2013. Stressed BIN. *Yale Grammatical Diversity Project: English in North America*. <http://ygd.p.yale.edu/phenomena/stressed-bin>
- Labov, William. 1998. Co-existent Systems in African-American Vernacular English. In Salikoko Mufwene, John R. Rickford, Guy Bailey, & Johh Baugh (eds.), *African American Vernacular English*, 110-53. London: Routledge.
- Reichenbach, Hans. 1947. *Elements of symbolic logic*. New York: Macmillan.
- Rickford, John R. & Russell John Rickford. 2000. *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English*. New York: Wiley.
- Sobin, Nicholas. 1974. *Aspects of the temporal interpretation of English sentences*. Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin.
- Vendler, Zeno. 1967. *Linguistics in Philosophy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Verkuy, Hendrik. 1971. *On the compositional nature of the aspects*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Utrecht.
- Zanuttini, Raffaella and Katie Martin. 2017. Invariant *be*. *Yale Grammatical Diversity Project: English in North America*. <http://ygd.p.yale.edu/phenomena/invariant-be>.