Event Arguments and 'Be' in Child African American English

Lisa Green
University of Massachusetts

Toya A. Wyatt
California State University

Qiuana Lopez
University of Texas

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1 Introduction

This paper builds on previous sociolinguistic descriptions of the distribution of the copula and auxiliary *be* in African American English (AAE) and Becker's (2000) analysis of *be* forms in child mainstream American English. An event argument analysis is proposed to account for the high occurrence of Ø auxiliary *be* preceding V-*ing* and *gon* V in child AAE. The event argument, which is based on work by Kratzer (1995), is similar to the one associated with aspectual *be* constructions (Green 2000). One advantage of the analysis is that it formalizes the observation that Ø auxiliary *be* is linked to the -*ing* on the verb following the auxiliary. Finally, we raise questions about the extent to which the account of auxiliary *be* in AAE can be extended to the copula.

2 Syntactic and Phonological Accounts of *Be* Forms in AAE

The copula and auxiliary *be* in AAE have been discussed from theoretical and descriptive approaches, and they have been addressed in sociolinguistic/variation theory frameworks. In her syntactic account of overt and Ø *be* in AAE, Déchaine (1993) argues that present Tense in AAE is null, that is, it has no morphological content. Given the morphological inventory of AAE, the copula and auxiliary *be* do not occur superficially in AAE. Under this account, the overt *be* forms that occur in questions, emphatic constructions, as well as with first person singular and non-animate pronouns must be explained separately. According to Déchaine, the copula and auxiliary *be* are inserted in questions and emphatic constructions to host a question and emphatic morpheme, respectively; they are not tense markers. In that analysis, the -*'s* that occurs with the forms *it's*, *what's*, and *that's* is argued to be a type of inanimate agreement. Also, *I'm* is analyzed as a special form of 1st person singular, not as the contracted form of *I* and *am*.

An overwhelming majority of the research on the copula and auxiliary *be* in AAE is in the framework of variation theory, in which the goal is to describe the phonological and syntactic constraints on the variable occurrence of the *be* forms (e.g. Baugh 1980, Labov 1969, Rickford, Ball, Blake, Johnson, and Martin 1991, Wolfram 1969). In such analyses, Ø *be* is a result

of a phonological process that involves contraction and deletion. Walker (2000) gives a prosodic account of the distribution of the *be* forms, in which the claim is that the form of the copula, that is, Ø, contracted, or full, is determined by the prosodic complexity of the construction. In other words, Ø and contracted forms of the copula are used as a way of reducing the prosodic complexity of sentences.

While research on *be* forms in child AAE is limited, some studies have been concerned with the distribution of developmental *be* in AAE. Studies on *be* forms in child AAE have focused on their occurrence in the environments of preceding and following grammatical and phonological constraints identified in adult AAE (Kovac 1980, Kovac and Adamson 1981, Steffenson 1974, Wyatt 1991, 1996). Wyatt (1991, 1996) also broadened the context of study of *be* forms to include an analysis of possible contributing semantic (content category) and pragmatic (speech act) influences. Kovac (1980) provided data to show that the distribution of forms of the copula in child AAE should also be considered from a syntactic point of view—not just from the point of view of phonological processes that were associated with the copula in adult AAE.

3 Participants in the Study

The data for the study are based on speech samples from 3- to 5-year-old developing AAE-speaking children in a child development program in southwest Louisiana. The eleven participants (identified by age in Table 1) in this study are part of a larger database of 120 developing AAE-speaking children and their age-matched southwest Louisiana Vernacular English-speaking peers. "AAF" stands for African American female and "AAM" stands for "African American male":

3 years	4 years	5 years
A117, AAF; 3;4	Z091, AAM, 4;5 (young)	R013, AAF, 5
J011, AAF, 3;6	T035, AAM, 4;7	R093, AAF, 5;2
D034, AAM, 3;10	Z091, AAM, 4;8, 4;11 (old)	Z126, AAM, 5;2
T130, AAM, 3;11	R093, AAF; 4;8	T127, AAF, 5;7
	B036, AAF, 4;9	

Table 1: Participants by Age

A necessary condition for classifying participants as developing AAE-speaking children is community. All of the participants are from AAE-speaking communities. Given the limited research on developmental AAE, it is difficult to use feature diagnostics to classify developing AAE speakers.

For instance, if AAE speakers acquire tense-aspect markers between 4 and 5 years, we cannot use such markers as diagnostics for 3-year-old developing AAE speakers. Also, given the pattern of the copula in developing main-stream English-speaking children, it may not be immediately clear to what extent copula patterns in child AAE speech is developmental or a feature of adult AAE.

4 The Data for the Study

The copula (be_{cop}), auxiliary *be* (be_{aux}), and aspectual *be* (be_{asp}) in the speech of 3- to 5-year-old developing AAE speakers are considered for this study. The data are from children's narratives, which were based on the picture book *Good Dog, Carl*, spontaneous speech samples, and utterances during comprehension tasks for older participants on the development of the tense-aspect markers remote past *BIN* and aspectual *be*.

The be_{aux} constructions were analyzed according to the following verbal element: __*gon/gonna* V, __*finna/about to* V, V-*ing*, where "∅" indicates that *be* is covert or null, as in the following examples (1):

(1)   a. The baby ∅ laying down and he ∅ not sleeping. (A117)
       b. They're going to do this. (R093)
       c. He ∅ gon, he ∅ gon sit down on him. (T130)
       d. I'm gon swing on some trees. (Z091-older)
       e. Then we ∅ gon do this. (T127)
       f. I'm finna call the station. (B036)
       g. I ∅ bout to pick my dinosaur. (T035)
       h. They ∅ bout to go to the store. (R093)

In this study, environments for past copula and auxiliary *be* forms were also analyzed. Examples of these constructions are given below:

(2)   a. When I was twisting, I had did a flip. (Z091-older)
       b. Me and my mama was going fishing. (D034)
       c. It was at my house. I BIN had it at my house. (B036)
       d. I had hit myself on the motorcycle, and then R had, was
          crawling on me and he had bust it. (R093)
       e. Then and then he was trying to put that thing on his back.
          (Z126)

The graph in Figure 1 summarizes the results for the present auxiliary *be* forms, which precede *gon*/gonna 'going to,' finna/bout to 'fixing to, about to,' and V-*ing*, and the past auxiliary *be* form.
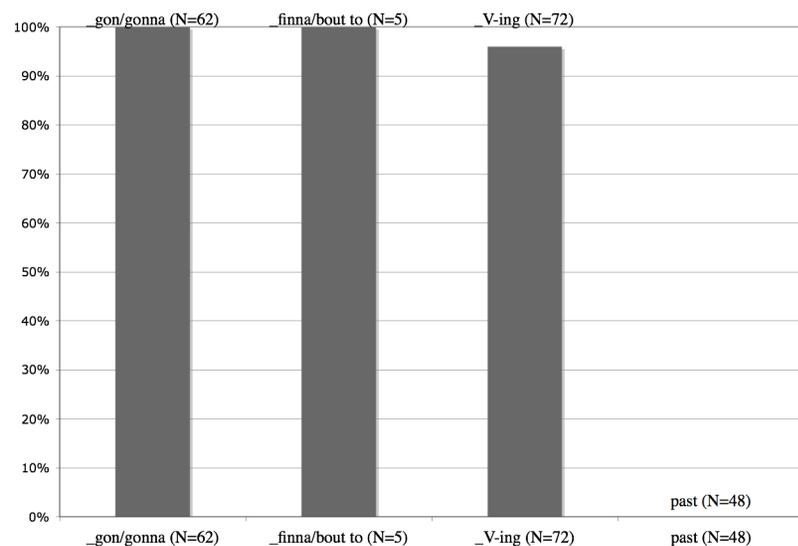

Figure 1: ∅ Auxiliary *Be*

The instance of ∅ *be* forms preceding *gon/gonna*, *finna/bout to*, and V-*ing* is high. In comparison, there are no ∅ *be* past forms; they are all overt. The developing AAE-speaking children in this study use ∅ be_{aux} at a rate of 100% preceding *gon/gonna* and 96% preceding V-*ing*. The participants uniformly mark past tense on *be* (including be_{aux} and be_{cop}) at a rate of 100%.

5 Production of *Be* in Child and Adult AAE

The production of *be* forms in child AAE has been compared to the production of *be* forms in adult AAE. Kovac (1980) found that 3-, 5-, and 7-year-old Black middle class speakers showed higher auxiliary presence accompanied by high auxiliary deletion and that deletion in the speech of black working class children stayed high. In a later study, Kovac and Adamson (1981) found that constraints on contraction were in place for child AAE speakers, but the constraints for deletion were not. For instance, ∅ be_{cop} preceding predicate adjective was more prevalent than ∅ be_{aux} in the speech of 7-year-

old black working and middle class children. Wyatt (1996) found that the occurrence of $\varnothing$ be_{cop} preceding adjectives and locatives was higher than its occurrence preceding nouns.

Benedicto, Abdulkarim, Garrett, Johnson, and Seymour (1998) consider the copula in presentational and predicational contexts and link its occurrence to a situation argument. The major impetus for their analysis of the copula in presentational and predicational contexts is their claim that the account of the copula in earlier work, in which it is argued that the contracted copula in *it's*, *what's*, and *that's* is retained due to phonological processes, does not account for actual data in their corpus. For example, they claim that one of the reasons for being skeptical about a phonological rule that is responsible for the retention of *-'s* in *it's*, *what's*, and *that's* is simply that, in their data, these forms can occur without the copula in predicational contexts, as in their examples in (3):

(3)   a. It lotion.
        b. It a can. (*ibid*:53)

However, Benedicto et al. note that in some contexts, copula *-'s* does indeed occur consistently in conjunction with *it*. That is, *-'s* occurs in present tense presentational contexts, such as the following:

(4)   a. It's girl.
        b. Huh! Here's her shoes.
        c. It's ice outside. (*ibid*:52)

Presentational sentences introduce an entity into the discourse, such as *a girl*, *her shoes*, or *ice outside* in the sentences in (4). One advantage of the Benedicto et al. analysis is that it offers an alternative to the phonological account of the retention of *-'s* in *it's*, *what's*, and *that's*. As a result, they have a story for the sentence in (5a), in which the *-'s* is not retained, in spite of the purported phonological process:

(5)   a. What her name?
        b. Here's her shoes.

In essence, Benedicto et al. report cases in which the copula does not appear in contexts in which it is predicted to appear under a phonological account (5a), and they also present cases where it occurs although it is predicted to be covert (5b). Given such data, according to Benedicto et al., copula occurrence and absence splits down the line of predicational (5a) and presenta-

tional (5b) contexts. Although their analysis overcomes some seeming short-comings of the phonological account, a number of questions still remain about whether the analysis can be extended to account for the broad range of copula data that has been addressed in the literature. For instance, it is not clear whether the fact that significant copula retention in presentational contexts is due to the fact that many of the sentences are introduced by *that's* and *it's*, a likely phonological environment for copula retention. Their analysis would predict different results for *It's the teacher* (predicational) and *It's a teacher* (presentational), such that the copula form in the former (predicational) would be predicted to be absent (i.e. *It the teacher*), and the latter would be predicted to be overt (i.e. *It's a teacher*). Unfortunately, the data they provide do not clearly delineate the *it's/that's* predicational and presentational examples. Such examples are necessary to rule out the phonological analysis in favor of the predicational/presentational account. Secondly, in previous analyses, copula and auxiliary *be* forms are treated as one category, but it is not clear whether the Benedicto et al. analysis has anything at all to say about auxiliary *be*.

6 The Event Argument Analysis

The analysis proposed in this paper focuses on auxiliary *be*, but it can be extended to the copula. In this analysis, the occurrence of *be* forms is linked to an event argument. The event argument, which is along the lines of the spatio-temporal argument in Kratzer (1995), is associated with stage-level predicates or predicates indicating temporary properties (e.g. *run*, *dance*) and not individual-level predicates or predicates indicating more permanent properties (e.g. *be a girl*). The event argument is associated with V-*ing* and *gon* V constructions. Given that event arguments are associated with stage-level predicates expressed by the verbs, be_{aux} is not required to occur on the surface in these constructions. For this reason, there is a high occurrence of Ø be_{aux} preceding *gon/gonna*, *finna/bout to*, and V-*ing*, as indicated in Figure 1.

The event argument analysis has a number of advantages. The first is that the analysis accounts for the high ranking of Ø be_{aux} in environments preceding V-*ing* and *gon* that has been consistently reported in the literature. For instance, virtually all of the previous analyses of the copula/auxiliary *be*—starting with early analyses, such as Labov (1969), and moving to later research, such as Rickford et al. (1991)—agree that be_{aux} occurs in its Ø form most often preceding V-*ing* and *gon* V. Another advantage of the event argument analysis is that it formalizes the observation in Labov (1972) that be_{aux} does not have to occur on the surface because it is redundantly related

to the -*ing* that occurs on the following verb. Labov observes, "Here we find restored in part the distinction between the copula and the *be* of the progressive, and it seems likely that the deletion of that *be* (in its finite forms) is connected with its redundant relation to the following -*ing* form" (1972:113). One way of capturing this relation is by linking the absence of overt be_{aux} in the environment preceding V-*ing* to the presence of the event argument that is associated with the verbs in those constructions. In this way, the claim is that be_{aux} does not have to occur on the surface when there is an event argument, which is sufficient to indicate the "event" status of the activity indicated by the verbs in the construction.

A third advantage of the event argument analysis is that it also accounts for the occurrence of aspectual *be* (be_{asp}) with certain predicates. Be_{asp} indicates that an eventuality recurs. It always occurs in its uninflected form (*be*), and it precedes a range of predicates: verbs, nouns, adjectives, prepositions, and adverbs. Unlike be_{aux} and be_{cop}, be_{asp} occurs obligatorily with predicates; there is no Ø be_{asp}. Consider the example sentence from a developing AAE-speaking child:

(6)   I be riding my bike. I be going fast. (Z091, AAM, 4.5)
        'I generally ride my bike. I generally go fast (on my bike)'

Be_{asp} forces predicates to take an event argument, which can cause the predicate to have a stage-level interpretation. This is the case with the verb *knowing*, when it occurs with be_{asp}. Consider the following two sentences:

(7)   a. *She's knowing the answers.
        b. She be knowing the answers.
        Literally: Generally, she does something to show that she knows the answers when she is asked (e.g., gives the right answers, raises her hand, etc.).

The first sentence (7a), in which *know* is in the progressive (be_{aux} V-*ing*) construction, is ungrammatical. Note that a major difference between the two sentences is that state verbs (e.g. *know*) can occur in the -*ing* form in be_{asp} constructions (7b) but not in be_{aux} constructions (7a).

The Be_{asp} Principle illustrates the relation between be_{asp} and the event argument:

(8) Be_{asp} Principle: Be_{asp} [e], *Ø be_{asp}

The principle in (8) states that be_{asp} itself introduces an event argument [e] into the sentence. Furthermore the sentence is ungrammatical when the marker does not occur in be_{asp} constructions. Given the event argument analysis, it is possible to explain why be_{aux} is optional but be_{asp} is obligatory. Be_{aux} does not have to occur on the surface when an event argument introduced by the predicate is present. On the other hand, be_{asp} actually introduces the event argument into the sentence, so it will always be present when an event argument is present.

The event argument analysis has a number of advantages; however, some questions are raised about possible shortcomings of the account. Firstly, it is not clear that the analysis always makes the correct predictions about be_{aux} V-*ing* constructions. That is, the proposed analysis predicts a Ø *be* form in environments preceding V-*ing*, as in *It raining*, given that an event argument would be associated with the predicate *raining*. The problem is that although the event argument that is present in V-*ing* contexts 'supports' Ø *be*, the contracted form *it's* generally occurs across the board; -*'s* is (near) obligatory in constructions in which *it* is the subject. Secondly, it appears that the analysis does not directly address be_{cop} constructions.

At first glance, these two issues might seem to be problems for the event argument analysis, but we show that they are not. The fact that the contracted form -*'s* is retained in *it's* V-*ing* contexts may, in fact, have more to do with the environment that precedes it than the following V-*ing*. The contracted form *it's* is pronounced as [ɪs] in different contexts, not just in contexts preceding V-*ing* (e.g. weather *it* in (9a)), and this pronunciation indicates that a phonological process has taken place between the *t* and *s* in *it's*. The pronunciation [ɪs] also occurs in existential constructions (9b), as well as with 3rd person pronominal *it* preceding categories other than V-*ing* (9c):

(9)   a. It's raining.
        b. It's a radio right there
        c. Don't sit in that chair. It's broken.

In all of these cases, the -*'s* is near obligatory, and, as has been argued in early research on AAE, the retention of the contracted *be* form may be due to a phonological process between *t* and *s* (see Labov 1969). If the retention of contracted -*'s*, as in [ɪs], is due to a phonological process, then no syntactic/semantic analysis will be able to give a sufficient account of the behavior of the copula and auxiliary *be* in the environment of *it's*. In this case, [ɪs] is out of the scope of syntax/semantics accounts, such as the event argument analysis and the analysis proposed in Benedicto et al. (1998).

The second issue for the event argument analysis, which is related to the (non)treatment of copula *be* constructions, may not be a concern at all. Although the event argument analysis proposed in this paper targets 'events' directly, it automatically makes predictions about states in be_{cop} constructions. This issue is addressed in the next section.

7 Extending the Event Argument Analysis to Be_{cop} and States

The event argument analysis accounts for Ø *be* preceding V-*ing* by appealing to the event argument [e] that relaxes the occurrence of an overt auxiliary *be* in that environment. In such an account, events would be at one end of the spectrum and non-events at the other. The model is represented in Figure 2.

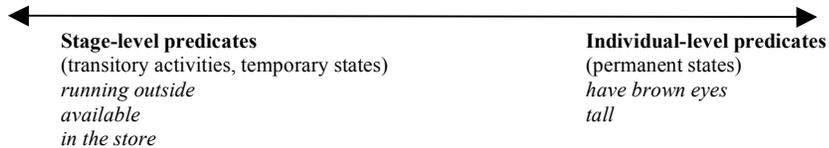|	
Stage-level predicates	**Individual-level predicates**
(transitory activities, temporary states)	(permanent states)
running outside	*have brown eyes*
available	*tall*
in the store	

Figure 2: Events and States/Stage-Level and Individual-Level Predicates

The diagram in Figure 2 features stage-level predicates on one end and individual-predicates on the other. Stage-level predicates indicate more transitory and temporary properties, and individual-level predicates indicate more permanent properties. While there is some relation between states and individual-level predicates, it is not the case that all states are individual-level. That is, not all states are permanent. For instance, the states of having blue eyes and being dead are permanent properties; however, the state of a person *being available* is temporary. Now that the characterizations stage-level and individual-level have been brought into the discussion, it is necessary to explain how the event argument relates to states. Given that the stage-level predicates indicate more temporary properties, particularly those denoted by verbs, then it is clear that an event argument is associated with those predicates. On the other end of the spectrum, the individual-level predicates indicate more permanent properties and do not have an event argument associated with them; they are not events. This raises the question about the link— if there is one—between temporary states, such as *be available*, which are not permanent, and the event argument. A case can be made that transitory states also have an event argument associated with them, which distinguishes them from individual-level predicates. What the stage-level and individual-level characterization shows us is that the split between the categories events

and states does not allow for a fine distinction between different types of states in the states class because such a characterization lumps events into one group and all states into another. The question that the stage- and individual-level distinction raises for us is whether the data so far suggest that type of state, transitory or permanent, has any bearing on the occurrence of the *be* form. That is, is be_{cop} in its Ø form more often preceding predicates indicating transitory states, which are argued to have event arguments associated with them, than when it precedes predicates indicating permanent states?

Because the focus of this paper is on verbal elements, further research from children should be gathered to determine whether be_{aux} and be_{cop}, respectively, pattern similarly in constructions with V-*ing* events and temporary states, as predicted by the event argument analysis. That is, the claim of the event argument analysis is that the event argument is sufficient, so be_{aux} does not have to occur on the surface. The prediction, then, is that be_{cop} would also be less likely to occur in the environment of a predicate that indicates a transitory state.

Data in previous research on adult AAE suggest that a distinction should be made among states. For instance, in previous analyses of the copula/auxiliary *be*, researchers agree that the copula is retained preceding NPs at a higher rate than it is retained preceding states indicated by adjectives and prepositional phrases (e.g. Labov 1969, Baugh 1980, Rickford 1998). Such results show that NP states behave differently from adjectival and prepositional states. That research also suggests that it might be beneficial to consider specific types of adjectives more carefully, especially because researchers do not always agree about whether the environment preceding adjectives or that preceding prepositions favors Ø be_{cop} more often. Perhaps if adjectives naming transitory states and those naming permanent properties were separated into different groups, it might be possible to determine whether the two types behave differently, such that those naming transitory states have a higher occurrence of Ø be_{cop} due to an event argument. That is, those predicates indicating permanent properties would be more likely to occur with overt be_{cop}. In this way, be_{cop} preceding adjectives indicating permanent properties would pattern with be_{cop} preceding NPs indicating permanent properties.

We have already shown that this event argument analysis has a number of advantages, especially the advantage of being able to account for observations about the copula and auxiliary *be* in early literature. In addition, this analysis is in line with Becker's (2000) observation that the variable copula in child mainstream English is also linked to its occurrence with stage- and individual-level predicates.

8 Summary and Further Research

The event argument analysis accounts for the Ø be_{aux} patterns in child AAE, in which it is argued that be_{aux} may be more likely to occur in its Ø form due to the presence of an event argument, which is associated with predicates indicating more temporary/transitory properties. This analysis is also able to account for the occurrence of overt *be* forms that are required to mark past tense. In past tense contexts, the *be* form is required to host past tense morphology. To the extent that predicates range from stage-level to individual-level, it is possible to extend the event argument analysis to account for variation in the occurrence of be_{cop} forms. Finally, this account does not require any new additions to the grammar; the event argument [e] is also associated with the stage-level reading of predicates in be_{asp} constructions.

More research in linguistics on the systematic use of *be* forms in child AAE could provide information on the acquisition path children follow in developing patterns in the AAE verbal system. Additional research on be_{aux} and be_{cop} could help to answer questions about the acquisition of variation, especially those that are related to access to multiple grammars and choice of variants as part of the syntactic system (Roeper 2006). Further analysis of *be* in child AAE will yield results that can be compared to the development of *be* in other languages, as reported in Becker's (2000) work on the stage-level and individual-level split and the acquisition of the copula in mainstream American English. Such research would help to shed light on questions about whether children from different language groups show similar patterns in developing *be* forms.

The *be* forms that were used as data for the event argument analysis in this paper are from declarative sentences, but copula and auxiliary *be* patterns in yes-no and *wh*-questions will help to provide insight into the way auxiliary inversion works in child AAE and the effect that processes in these constructions have on the distribution of *be* (and other auxiliaries). Some preliminary research on *wh*-questions produced by 3- to 5-year-old developing AAE-speaking children shows that, at first glance, there seems to be a strong tendency for retention of *be* in *wh*-inversion contexts. Some examples of *wh*-questions are below:

(10) a. What's that on your book? (A117)
      b. Where is the fishing pole? (B036)
      c. How many is the prices is? (B036)
      d. Why he putting that on his head? (Z126)
      e. What they said on my phone? (R013)
      f. Why he was doing that? (Z126)

The type of *wh*-questions the children produced are summarized in Figure 3.
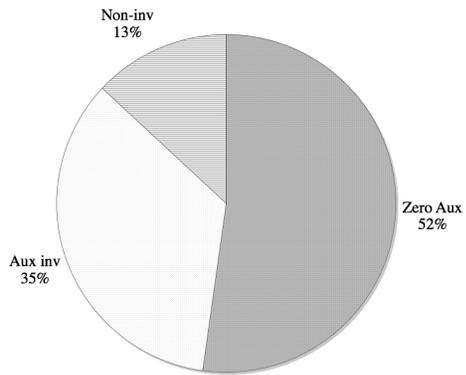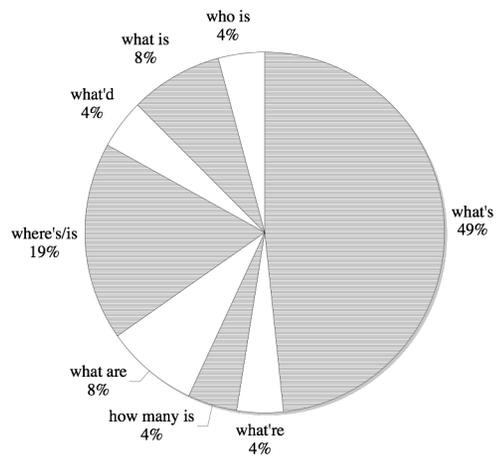

Figure 3: *Wh*-Questions

Figure 4: Inversion in *Wh*-Questions

The majority (52%) of *wh*-questions in the sample are like (10d), in which there is no overt auxiliary. Auxiliaries occur in the remaining 48% of the questions although not all of them actually have the inversion structure. For instance (10f) includes an auxiliary that is not inverted; it remains in the position following the subject (*he*). Once we look closely at the auxiliary inversion cases, what we see is that the high percentage (35%) is due in large part to the retention of *be* forms in contracted *what's wh*-questions. Figure 4 gives a breakdown of the *wh*-question inversion forms.

The contracted form *what's* accounts for 49% of the retention of auxiliaries in *wh*-questions, which may be due to the phonological process discussed above in relation to *t* and *s* in *it's* constructions.

Data from child AAE questions can give us more information about the types of constructions that should be considered in the study of factors, phonological processes and syntactic/semantic triggers, such as the event argument [e], that influence the distribution of verbal elements, especially the copula and auxiliary *be*.

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Department of Linguistics
University of Massachusetts
Amherst, MA 01003
lgreen@linguist.umass.edu

Department of Speech Communication
California State University, Fullerton
Fullerton, CA 92834
twyatt@fullerton.edu

Department of Linguistics
University of Texas
Austin, TX 78712
asllopez@sbcglobal.net