**The morphophonology of African American Vernacular English copula contraction:**

**The case of i’s, tha’s, and wa’s**

Kobey Shwayder & Brittany McLaughlin (University of Pennsylvania)

**Introduction:** In research on the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) copula, *it, that, and what* as subjects are traditionally considered “don’t count” forms and excluded from variationist analysis because they occur almost categorically as *i*[s], *tha*[s], and *wha*[s] (Labov et al. 1968). Tokens that are traditionally analyzed in studying the AAVE copula show variably present or absent copula, as in (1a-b) (spoken by the same speaker in the same interview, from the Frank Porter Graham Corpus). This is contrasted with the near-categorical copula presence and t-assibilation that occurs on /it, that, what/, as in (2).

1. a) She *isn’t* not mad though.  
   b) No, she’s not mad at you.

(2) Tha’s my daily routine: women.  
(Labov et al. 1968, p.180)

This paper provides an analysis of the distribution and form of *i’s, tha’s*, and *wa’s* in AAVE through a combination of grammatical conditioning on exponent choice and the careful application of phonology dependent on syntactic structure.

**Background on AAVE contraction and deletion:** Labov observes that deletion in AAVE can only occur when Standard English (SE) contraction is possible, and, given the variables’ shared grammatical conditioning (Labov 1969; MacKenzie 2013), concludes that AAVE deletion is an extension of contraction (1969). In both AAVE and SE, subject length, subject animacy and whether the subject is a pronoun affect copula form (Labov 1969; MacKenzie 2013; McLaughlin 2013). The near-categorical copula presence following /it, that, what/ is either excluded from analysis or considered a t-assibilation effect that prevents the copula from deleting (Labov 1969). This works in terms of modularity ordering if copula deletion is purely phonological. However, given recent evidence that copula deletion is also conditioned by subject animacy (McLaughlin 2013), t-assibilation as an explanation would require phonology to apply before allomorphy selection, which does not fit well with modern models of the morphophonological interface.

**Theoretical Assumptions and Background:** Following work in Distributed Morphology (Halle and Marantz 1993), we assume that the syntax produces (cyclic) category-defining heads and that (at least some) of these heads cause phonological spell-out (Marvin 2002; Embick and Marantz 2008; Embick 2010; Marvin 2002). We make two assumptions:

1. Merging category defining heads (or at least *n*) causes phonological spellout of their complements. (Following Embick 2010)
2. Pronouns and expletives (or minimally "it, that and what") are not full noun phrases, meaning they are not immediately dominated by a cyclic head

Under this framework, we propose that pronominal subjects are able to have a close phonological relationship with a following copula because there is no intervening category-defining head (3b), and thus they will be spelled-out in the same cycle. Full noun phrase subjects, on the other hand, are dominated by their *n* head and will be spelled-out before coming in contact with the copula (3a). Strict Cyclicity (à la Chomsky 1973), will ensure that the spelled-out noun phrase cannot be changed by the later addition of the copula.

**Analysis:** Following MacKenzie’s (2013) analysis of SE contraction as having two allomorphs (full and contracted), we propose that AAVE has three allomorphs of the singular copula (morphosyntactic *IS*):

(4) Three allomorphs of copula in AAVE:  
   a) *IS* $\rightarrow$ [z]  
   b) *IS* $\rightarrow$ [z]  
   c) *IS* $\rightarrow$ φ

The choice of allomorph is conditioned by the factors of animacy, pronoun subject, etc., as discussed above. In SE, pronominal subjects condition the choice of contracted allomorph at near ceiling levels (98%)
We propose that pronominal subject conditioning in AAVE is also sensitive to animacy. For inanimate pronominal subjects (that is, /it, that, what/) we propose similarly near-ceiling levels of contracted allomorph selection. Animate pronominal subjects, on the other hand, must have a more even conditioning split between the contracted and null variants (we find a 55%–45% split). This grammatical conditioning accounts for the lack of null or full allomorphs with /it, that, what/, but the variation seen with /he, she/.

To account for the surface forms i[s], tha[s], and wha[s], we propose a phonological process of t-assibilation for AAVE (see 5) that works in combination with existing voicing assimilation and geminate reduction processes.

(5)  /t/-Assibilation: /t/ →[s] / _ s

We propose that this process is general across AAVE, as part of the general tendency of cluster reduction, but that it only applies in close phonological situations. As discussed above, full NP subjects ending in /t/ will not be affected by this rule due to Strict Cyclicity, but pronominal subjects ending in /t/ will.

To summarize, inanimate pronominal subjects /it, that, what/ condition insertion of the contracted copula allomorph and the phonological process of t-assibilation applies to these pronouns because they are spelled-out in the same cycle as the copula, resulting in a close phonological relationship.

Consequences: For the study of copula contraction and deletion in AAVE, our analysis provides the theoretical framework to explain the existence of the forms i[s], tha[s], and wha[s]. We hope that variationists will be able to use this framework to begin including these forms in their analyses. We have proposed that contraction and deletion are different allomorph choices, and thus argue against a deletion-as-contraction model. We suggest that Labov’s (1969) findings on similarities in contraction and deletion are instead a finding about the distribution of the full allomorph.

In other words, the t-assibilation rule does not maintain copula presence in /it, that, what/. Instead, copula presence in /it, that, what/ is maintained by an interaction of subject type and animacy effects, and the surface form results from a phonological rule that applies at spellout. Further exploration of these typically uncounted tokens will contribute to an increasingly comprehensive theory of AAVE grammar and variation.

For the theory of morphophonology, our analysis provides a case study in the intricate relationship between syntactic structure and phonological closeness, suggesting that (lack of) intervening morphosyntactic cyclic heads play a role in the structure of phonological domains and the application of phonological processes.

References: