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Syntactic Variation

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Introduction

This chapter considers the syntax of dialects of English from a view that incorporates issues in dialectal variation and syntactic theory. Variation in dialects of languages such as Italian, German, Dutch, and Flemish has been analyzed in a model of microparametric variation, which takes into consideration the distribution of syntactic variables in geographical areas and formal analyses of syntactic properties (Barbiers, Cornips, and van der Kleij 2002). On the other hand, research on dialects of American English has focused mainly on morphosyntactic, phonological, and, to some extent, syntactic variables in the context of social factors, linguistic constraints, and variation and change. The focus on questions about origins has led to comparative analysis of dialects and English in early periods. By and large, the topic of variation and change in American English dialects has been the domain of sociolinguistics.

Because one of the goals of sociolinguistics is to understand the correlation between social factors and linguistic variation and ordering of linguistic constraints with respect to variability of rules, variation theory is an integral part of the research paradigm. On the other hand, syntactic theory is not always incorporated in variation analyses, although it is clear that sociolinguists are concerned with theoretical notions of the scientific study of language. Along these same lines, there has not been a tradition of incorporating approaches to variation into syntactic theory (Wilson and Henry 1998).

There have been at least three types of approaches to syntactic variation. The variable rule approach accounts for variability by allowing variable rules to apply in different contexts at different probability levels. Another approach has been to determine the parameters that account for differences among languages and dialects of a single language (Henry 1995, Kayne 2000). In the multiple grammars/competing grammars approach, variability is due to the selection of different grammars (Adger and Smith 2005, Roeper 2006). Under this approach, the view is "that there is more than one system of grammatical knowledge in the head of the native speaker, and variation boils down to the decisions that the speaker makes about which grammatical output to choose" (Adger and Smith 2005:164). Under both the parametric variation and multiple grammars approaches, speakers

make choices about particular constructions. On the other hand, the variable rule approach assumes that variability is part of a single grammatical system.

Studying syntactic variation presents a good opportunity to bring together syntactic theory and approaches in sociolinguistics to provide descriptive accounts of American English dialects – how they differ from each other, how they differ from the mainstream variety, and the type of variation that is allowed within them. In addition, child speakers learn the linguistic variation in their speech communities, so studying syntactic variation also provides an opportunity to consider acquisition paths for variable syntactic structures.

Incorporating variation in syntactic theory

The different goals of syntactic theory and sociolinguistics have led to different approaches to the study of language. For instance, questions have been raised in the sociolinguistics literature about the claim that linguistics should be concerned with the "ideal speaker-listener in a completely homogeneous speech-community" (Chomsky 1965:3), which seems to ignore the inherent variation associated with language. The difference is that syntactic theory has been concerned with the description of language as a property of the human brain and principles that can account for the grammatical constructions of a language in a homogeneous speech community. In this way, there has not been a long-standing tradition of the incorporation of variation in syntactic theory, so it is no surprise that only a limited amount of research on syntactic properties of dialects of American English has been in syntactic frameworks. However, more recently the theoretical frameworks of Optimality Theory (OT) and the Minimalist Program (MP) have been characterized as being well-suited for dealing with variation.

Sells, Rickford, and Wasow (1996) use OT to account for the alternation between negative inversion and non-inversion constructions in African American English (AAE) on the basis that the two structures have no differences in meaning or affect. Negative inversion constructions (1a) are declarative sentences which are characterized by an initial negated auxiliary (e.g. *don't*) followed by an indefinite noun phrase (NP) (e.g. *nobody*), and the corresponding non-inversion constructions (1b) begin with a negative indefinite NP followed by a negated auxiliary. Both sentences give rise to negative concord readings because the two negative elements (*don't*, *nobody*) are interpreted as a single negation, as indicated by the glosses.

(1) (a) Don't nobody want no tea.
        "Nobody wants tea" or "There isn't anybody who wants tea"
    (b) Nobody don't want no tea.
        "Nobody wants tea"

OT is a theory of generative linguistics, which proposes that languages have their own rankings for the set of violable universal constraints, and different rankings

lead to different patterns which result in variable constructions. Given that the theory can accommodate variation such as the different order of the negated auxiliary and the negative indefinite NP (as in 1a, b), it can be naturally extended to accounts of dialectal variation. OT is argued to have advantages over other syntactic approaches because of the principled way in which it is able to account for the occurrence of both (1a) and (1b) – why it is possible for the negated auxiliary to be sentence initial and why there is also an option for the negative indefinite NP to occur at the beginning of the sentence in some contexts. It is possible to derive (1a) and (1b) by ranking constraints that will generate the negated auxiliary in the initial position or the indefinite negative subject at the beginning of the sentence, but the two constructions must be assumed to have the same semantic features.

The MP includes general syntactic operations, and variability is connected to features of lexical items. Adger and Smith (2005) explain that the MP also has a way of accounting for variation. They illustrate this with morphosyntactic variation in *was*/*were* alternation and *do* absence in negative declaratives in English in Buckie, Scotland. For instance, *was*/*were* alternate in environments in second person singular *you*, first person plural *we*, existential *there*, and NP plural constructions (2a, b), but not in third person plural pronoun *they* constructions (2c).

> (2) (a) Buckie boats were a' bonny graint.
>   "Buckie boats were all nicely grained"
>   (b) The mothers was roaring at ye comin' in.
>   "The mothers were shouting at you to come"
>   (c) They were still like partying hard.
>   "They were still partying hard" (2005:156)

The claim is that the MP can account for *was*/*were* variation in the appropriate contexts as well as for the categorical occurrence of *were* in the environment of *they* subjects. Adger and Smith explain that the source of variation is in the features associated with the lexical items *was* and *were*. That is, *was* and *were* are specified for different morphological features, but they have the same semantic features; so they can be used interchangeably and the meaning remains constant. The morphological features are sensitive to the subject (pronoun or full NP), so the features of the subject interact with those of *was* and *were*. *Be* is spelled out as *was* or *were*, depending on the interaction between its features and those of the subject. This means that the features for *they* and the *be* forms are specified such that only the *be* form that is spelled out as *were* is compatible with *they*, and this accounts for the categorical occurrence of *were* with *they*. Only this *be* and *they* are compatible because the person features on *be* that are spelled out as *was* and the person features associated with *they* do not agree. Along these same lines, variable *was* and *were* will arise in instances in which a particular subject can combine with either *be*; that is, the subject will be compatible with the features of both *be*'s.

Given that in the OT approach the grammar is taken to be a set of ranked constraints, speakers of varieties in which sentences such as (1) are produced have access to different grammars that will generate such sentences. Along these same lines, the MP approach allows for options in the grammar because lexical items can have the same semantic features but different grammatical features. These theoretical syntactic models allow for different outputs that are semantically equivalent; however, unlike some sociolinguistic variation models, they do not incorporate probability and frequency of occurrence of variables into the framework.

Henry (1995) presents a model within syntactic theory that can account for variation within Belfast English (BE) and differences between that variety and Standard English. She explains that the differences within dialects of BE and Standard English are due to different parameter settings or choices between possible structures. For example, according to Henry, the parameters in BE are set such that the verb can occur in the position to the left or right of the subject in imperatives, and certain positions are available to the subject:

(3) (a) Go you away./You go away.
     (b) Read you that./You read that. (1995:45)

Henry reasons that the different parameter settings make possible a number of different grammars, and speakers have the task of selecting from the limited number of possible grammars made available by Universal Grammar that will accommodate the data for imperatives. Henry's approach, along with the OT analysis in Sells *et al*. (1996) and the MP analysis in Adger and Smith (2005), allows for options in the grammar. While the incorporation of variation in syntactic theory is a relatively new enterprise, some progress has been made, and this approach may be useful in answering questions and making predictions about the possible ways dialects can vary and the limitations for options in the grammar.

Dialectal variation and features: questions and negation

Questions and the *Q* feature

Subject–auxiliary inversion in yes-no and *wh*-questions occurs in Mainstream American English (MAE) as well as in non-standard varieties, and there is considerable variation in question inversion in these varieties. Hendrick (1982) discusses reduced yes-no and *wh*-questions in MAE. He reports the following types of examples of grammatical reduced yes-no questions (4b, 5b), which occur without auxiliaries:

(4) (a) Did you see Mary (yesterday)?
     (b) You see Mary (yesterday)? (1982:804)
(5) (a) Were you (ever) bit by a dead bee?
     (b) You (ever) bit by a dead bee? (1982:805)

Table 2.1 *Yes-No questions in AAE and MAE*

	Type 1 (aux+tns-subj-V)	Type 2 (Ø aux+tns-subj-V)	Type 3 (subj-V+tns)	Type 4 (subj-aux-V)
AAE	✓(6a)	✓(6b)	✓(6c)	✓(6d, e)
MAE	✓(4a, 5a)	✓(4b, 5b)	✗	✗

Hendrick argues that the process responsible for reduced yes-no questions in MAE is syntactic rather than phonological deletion. The process is sensitive to the tense structure and the recoverability condition, which states that the deleted material can be recovered from information remaining in the reduced question, so the initial auxiliary need not occur.

The type of reduced yes-no questions (4, 5) that Hendrick reports also occurs in non-standard varieties of American English, such as AAE (6b). In addition, there are two other types of yes-no questions in AAE, as in (6c, d):

(6) (a) Do you want to read this book?   (Type 1, aux+tense-subject-verb)
     (b) You want to read this book?   (Type 2, Ø aux+tense-subject-verb)
     (c) You saw my book (yesterday)?   (Type 3, subject-verb+tense)
          "Did you see my book yesterday"
     (d) You can see my book?   (Type 4, subject-aux-verb)
          "Can you see my book?"
     (e) How she's doing?   (Type 4, subject-aux-verb)
          "How is she doing?"

As shown in (6a) and (6b), AAE allows subject–auxiliary inversion and reduced questions, respectively, in which the inverted tensed auxiliary (*do*) is omitted (i.e. zero (Ø) auxiliary occurs). In addition, Ø auxiliary questions are allowed in AAE in which tense is indicated on the main verb (6c, *saw*). The question in (6c) is a true yes-no question; it is not a rhetorical question. Finally, in AAE auxiliaries can occur in their original positions following the subject in questions (6d, e), giving rise to non-inversion. It should be noted that yes-no questions in AAE may also be produced with final level or falling contours (Foreman 1999, Green 1990), another property that might interact with inversion and the occurrence of auxiliaries. The question alternatives for these varieties are summarized in Table 2.1.

As Table 2.1 indicates, Ø auxiliary (reduced) questions occur in AAE and MAE. The difference in question variation for the two varieties is not just one of frequency, such that more reduced questions are produced in AAE than in MAE, which may also be the case. A broader range of reduced yes-no questions occurs in AAE. Types 2 and 3 are represented as two separate types of questions,

but one way to look at Type 3 (6c) is as a present perfect form in which the auxiliary *have* is deleted because the information can be recovered from the verb form, especially given the fact that AAE, like some other varieties of American English, does not distinguish morphologically between the past and participial verb forms. However, one reason to argue against deriving (6c) from *Have you saw my book*? is that given the adverbial *yesterday*, that question is simple past, not present perfect. The sentence *You saw my book before* may be derived from *Have you saw my book before*?, so it may be a Type 2 example.

In some syntactic analyses, a question feature (*Q*) is said to attract the auxiliary to the position preceding the subject in subject–auxiliary inversion exemplified in Type 1 questions. The *Q* feature can be used to characterize the similarity and difference between yes-no questions in AAE and MAE. In both AAE and MAE, *Q* can attract an auxiliary to the position preceding the subject (Type 1), and in both varieties this auxiliary can remain unpronounced (Ø) under certain syntactic conditions (Type 2). The difference is that in AAE there is also the option in which *Q* does not attract an auxiliary (Types 3, 4). In these latter questions, *Q* can be construed as identifying the construction as a question that can be signaled by question intonation. It does not need to attract an auxiliary to it; that is, there is no requirement for subject–auxiliary inversion.

Wh-questions, which begin with *wh*-words *who*, *what*, *why*, *when, where*, and *how*, also share similarities in AAE and MAE. In characterizing reduced *wh*-questions in MAE, Hendrick (1982) notes that three restrictions are placed on them: (1) they seem to be unacceptable with deleted *will* or *do*; (2) they are unacceptable when the subject is first or third person singular; and (3) they are unacceptable when the main verb *be* is deleted. He argues that they are different from reduced yes-no questions in that reduced *wh*-questions are the result of phonological deletion of the auxiliary. The diagnostics he uses are based on Labov's (1969) observation that an auxiliary can delete wherever it can contract, and it cannot delete in environments where it cannot contract.[1] In effect, in all instances in which the auxiliary can delete in *wh*-questions in MAE, it can contract in those environments. Hendrick gives the following examples, in which (7a, b) have grammatical reduced *wh*-question counterparts (a′, b′):

(7) (a) Why're you sitting here?
     (a′) Why you sitting here?
     (b) Who've they been insulting tonight?
     (b′) Who they been insulting tonight?
     (c) Why's she sitting here?
     (c′) *Why she sitting here?
     (d) Who's he been insulting tonight?
     (d′) *Who he been insulting tonight? (1982:811)

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[1] Labov made this observation in his account of the absence of the copula and auxiliary *be* in AAE.

Table 2.2 Wh-*questions in AAE and MAE*

	Type 1 (wh-aux+tns-subj-V)	Type 2 (wh-Ø aux+tns-subj-V)	Type 3 (wh-subj-aux+tns-V)	Type 4 (wh-subj-V+tns)
AAE	✓(8a)	✓(8b)	✓(8c)	✓(8d)
MAE	✓(What did you say?)	✓(with person, number restrictions (7b′))	✗	✗

The reduced *wh*-questions in (7a′, b′) are predicted to be grammatical because the auxiliary can contract and thus delete; (7c′, d′) are predicted to be ungrammatical because the subjects are third person singular.

The following examples from AAE show that there is some overlap in the inventory of *wh*-questions in AAE and MAE:

(8) (a) What did you say?   (Type 1, *wh*-aux+tense-subject-verb)
    (b) Who he/they been insulting tonight?
                          (Type 2, *wh*-Ø aux+tense-subject-verb)
    (c) How she was doing when you saw her?
                          (Type 3, *wh*-subject-aux+tense-verb)
      "How was she doing when you saw her?"
    (d) What he said yesterday?
                          (Type 4, *wh*-subject-verb+tense)
      "What did he say yesterday?"
    (e) What you ate yesterday?
      "What did you eat yesterday?"

Again, if we only looked at subject–auxiliary inversion (8a) and reduced questions (8b), then we might conclude that there is no substantial difference between the inventory of *wh*-questions in AAE and MAE, and that the only difference is that AAE has fewer restrictions on reduced *wh*-questions, so third person singular pronouns can also occur as subjects in reduced *wh*-questions. However, the example in (8c) shows that in *wh*-questions in AAE, the auxiliary can also remain in the position following the subject (subject–auxiliary inversion), and it can be omitted and tense can occur on the main verb (8d, e). The inventory of *wh*-questions in AAE and MAE is summarized in Table 2.2.

While it is possible to say that AAE also has a rule of phonological deletion of the auxiliary in *wh*-questions, not all questions can be accounted for by a phonological rule. For instance, the Type 3 *wh*-question cannot be generated by auxiliary deletion, so a syntactic analysis accounting for the auxiliary in its original position in *wh*-question structures is also necessary. The *Q* feature can also be used in the characterization of *wh*-questions. In both AAE and MAE, a

Q feature can attract an auxiliary to the position preceding the subject (Type 1), and the auxiliary can be deleted by a phonological rule (Type 2) (Hendrick's reduced *wh*-question analysis). Of course, in MAE phonological deletion must adhere to restrictions, which may not hold in AAE. As in yes-no questions in AAE, the *Q* feature does not obligatorily attract an auxiliary to it in *wh*-questions. The auxiliary may remain in its base position below the subject (Type 3), or tense may be expressed on the main verb in the absence of the auxiliary (Type 4).

Matrix yes-no questions and embedded questions in MAE have different requirements where subject–auxiliary inversion is concerned. It has been argued that there is no subject–auxiliary inversion in embedded clauses in MAE, but at least some MAE speakers produce subject–auxiliary inversion in embedded clauses in informal registers. Some speakers allow embedded subject–auxiliary inversion, a question introduced by the verb *wonder* in the following example in brackets (e.g. *She wondered* [*would he come back*]). The embedded inversion example, in which the auxiliary *would* is in the initial position (preceding the subject) in the embedded clause, may be used in what Emonds (1976) refers to as semi-indirect speech. Embedded inversion occurs freely in non-standard varieties of English in direct speech, in BE (Henry 1995), Hiberno English (HE) (McCloskey 1992), Appalachian English (AppE) (Wolfram and Christian 1976), and AAE (Green 2002). In these varieties, and in Mainstream English (ME), embedded questions can also be introduced by the complementizers *if* or *whether* (e.g. *She wondered* [*if he would come back*]). Some of these varieties place stronger restrictions on embedded subject–auxiliary inversion than others. For instance, in HE embedded inversion is introduced by certain types of predicates, but in BE a wider range of different predicates can introduce embedded inversion. While both varieties allow the sentence in (9a) with *ask* in the matrix clause, only BE allows the one in (9b), with *establish* in the matrix clause:

(9) (a) Ask your father [does he want dinner]. (✓BE, ✓HE)
     (b) The police couldn't establish [who had they beaten up]. (McCloskey 1992) (✓BE, ✗HE)

Regardless of whether the varieties place constraints on the type of predicates that can introduce embedded auxiliary inversion, they all require either an auxiliary or the complementizer *whether* or *if* to introduce the embedded question. Henry gives the following examples for BE (1995:114, 117):

(10) (a) I asked if/whether they were leaving.
      (b) I asked were they leaving.
      (c) *I wondered if had they read the book.
      (d) *I asked they were leaving.

The sentences in (10a, b) are grammatical because in each case either a complementizer or auxiliary introduces the embedded clause. The sentence in (10c) is ruled out because the embedded clause *[*if had they read the book*] is introduced by two elements (*if*, *had*) in its initial position, when there is only room for one.

Table 2.3 *Summary of auxiliary to satisfy* Q *in AAE matrix and embedded questions*

	Matrix yes-no	Embedded yes-no	*Wh* (matrix and embedded)
Aux to satisfy *Q*	Optional (11)	Obligatory, unless *Q* is satisfied by a complementizer (13)	Optional (12, 14)

(10d) is ungrammatical because there is no complementizer or auxiliary at the beginning of the embedded clause. Instead of having inverted to the position before the subject (*they*), the auxiliary (*were*) is still in its original position following the subject. In descriptive terms using the *Q* feature, English varieties such as BE, HE, AppE, and AAE all require the *Q* feature that signals questions in embedded clauses to be satisfied either by an auxiliary or a complementizer. Satisfaction of this *Q* feature is also obligatory in embedded clauses in MAE; however, in MAE a complementizer introduces the clause. As a specific case in point, it has been shown that in AAE, auxiliary inversion is optional in matrix questions, but it is obligatory in embedded clauses if there is no initial complementizer.

Now compare matrix yes-no (11) and *wh*-questions (12) and embedded yes-no (13) and *wh*-questions (14) in AAE:

  (11) (a) Did they bring my car in?
        (b) They brought my car in?
  (12) (a) What did they bring in?
        (b) What they brought in?
  (13) (a) Go over there and see [did they bring my car in]. (Green 2002:87)
        (b) Go over there and see [if they brought my car in].
        (c) *Go over there and see [they brought my car in].
  (14) (a) Go over there and see [what did they bring in].
        (b) Go over there and see [what they brought in].

Subject–auxiliary inversion is optional in matrix yes-no and *wh*-questions and in embedded *wh*-questions; however, it is obligatory in embedded yes-no questions if there is no complementizer, which explains the ungrammaticality of (13c). These observations are summarized in Table 2.3.

Question data from different varieties of English help to show the extent of variation in subject–auxiliary inversion and the requirements that must be met in questions.

The *Q* feature can be used to describe the attraction of the auxiliary to the position preceding the subject. Because children grow up in communities in which there is variability in the way questions are formed, especially in the placement of the auxiliary, questions should also be considered from the perspective of child language development. Knowledge about variation must be part of what

child speakers acquire in learning mechanisms that are necessary to produce grammatical questions that are in line with the variety of language they acquire. One of the major issues in the study of early questions in MAE concerns the stages during which child speakers produce subject–auxiliary inversion. It has been shown that MAE-speaking children begin to produce subject–auxiliary inversion once they acquire auxiliaries (Stromswold 1990, Guasti 2002). On the other hand, AAE-speaking children continue to use Ø auxiliary and non-inverted yes-no and *wh*-questions even after they have the competence to produce subject–auxiliary inversion. The following examples are from 3- to 5-year-old developing AAE-speaking children:[2]

(15)   yes-no questions
   (a) I be saying, "Mama, can I bring my bike to you?" (R113, 5)
      "I always say, 'Mama, can I bring my bike to you?'"
   (b) Do this phone go down or up? (J025, 5)
      "Does this phone go down or up?"
   (c) You a pour me some juice? (J003, 3;8) (where *a* can be taken to be a reduced form of *will*, *will*→'*ll*→*a*)
      "Will you pour me some juice?"
   (d) You want to hear me spell my name? (R113, 5)
      "Do you want to hear me spell my name?"
   (e) Y'all BIN having y'all basketballs in? (J015, 4)
      "Have you (pl.) had your basketball in (the store) for a long time?"

(16)   *wh*-questions
   (a) Now what is this? (D007, 3;11)
   (b) Int: Ask them the price of their cereal.
       L031: How much is the price of cereal? (L031, 5)
      "How much is cereal?"
   (c) And who this is? (Z091, 4;5)
      "And who is this?"
   (d) What they said on my phone? (R013, 4)
      "What did they say on my phone?"
   (e) How she broke her leg? (T127, 5;7)
      "How did she break her leg?"
   (f) Where her brother? (R093, 5;4)
      "Where is her brother?"

In the speech of 3- to 5-year-old developing AAE-speaking children, we find that some questions are produced with subject–auxiliary inversion (15a, b, 16b), and we find an overwhelming number of questions without auxiliaries (Ø auxiliary) (15d, e, 16d, e, f) and non-inversion (15c, 16c), where the auxiliary is present but it is not inverted (i.e. it is in the position following the subject, not preceding the

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[2] These examples were produced in spontaneous speech and elicitation tasks in research supported by an NSF grant (BCS-0214388) to the author (2002–2005).

subject). (Note that the main verb (copula) *is* has auxiliary properties. Like the other auxiliaries in questions in AAE, it can invert (16b) or not (16c).) At first glance, the high rate of Ø auxiliary and non-inversion might suggest that developing AAE-speaking children stay in the question developmental stage much longer than their MAE-speaking peers. What is important to note about the child question data is that the AAE-speaking children develop canonical subject–auxiliary question inversion, and they must also develop the grammatical variation in forming questions, which also involves non-inversion and Ø auxiliary questions, that is an option in their language community. The AAE developmental stages are not simply paths to subject–auxiliary inversion, in which *Q* attracts an auxiliary; they must be paths to the range of options for forming questions in the variety.

Negation and the *NegFoc* feature

Features such as the *Q* feature can be useful in describing the requirements that must be met to derive variable structures in which the auxiliary is inverted or not, or in which it is present or not. In addition to the *Q* feature, a Negative Focus (*NegFoc*) feature may be used in a descriptive account of two types of negation structures that also occur in varieties of American English. The *NegFoc* feature is associated with negative inversion (NI) constructions that were introduced earlier in the discussion of Optimality Theory and syntactic variation. While these constructions occur in American English varieties AAE (Labov, Cohen, Robins, and Lewis 1968, Martin 1992, Sells *et al.* 1996, White 2006), Alabama English (AlE) (Feagin 1979), and AppE (Montgomery and Hall 2004, Wolfram and Christian 1976), they have not been reported for other varieties of English spoken outside of the US. For instance, Henry, Maclaren, Wilson, and Finlay (1997) note that NI does not occur in BE and Bristol English (BrE). As already noted, NI constructions begin with a negated auxiliary that is followed by a negative indefinite NP:

(17) (a) Can't nobody tell you it wasn't meant for you.
            "Nobody can tell you it wasn't meant for you"
            (Green 2002:78; AAE)
      (b) Didn't none of us ever learn that. (Feagin 1979:235; AlE)
            "None of us ever learned that"
      (c) Didn't nobody get hurt or nothin'. (Wolfram and Christian 1976:113; AppE)
            "Nobody got hurt or anything"
            [I have added the glosses for (17b, c.).]

There are different analyses of these constructions in the literature (in addition to Sells *et al.* 1996) that try to account for the order of the negated auxiliary and negative indefinite NP (subject), that is, the alternation between (17) the inversion structures and (18) the non-inversion structures, in which the negated subject precedes the negated auxiliary:

(18)   (a) Nobody can't tell you is wasn't meant for you.
         (b) None of us didn't ever learn that.
         (c) Nobody didn't get hurt or nothin'.

Feagin (1979), Green 2002, Labov *et al.* (1968), and Wolfram and Christian (1976) consider the alternation between (17) and (18) to be one of a type of inversion, such that (17) is derived from (18) by a mechanism in which the negated auxiliary inverts to the position preceding the negative indefinite NP. This process is similar to auxiliary inversion in questions, but a *Q* feature does not trigger it. Both types of constructions (17, 18) are available, and they have the same truth conditions. That is to say that both (17a) and (18a) mean roughly "Nobody can tell you it wasn't meant for you." Labov *et al.* (1968) suggest that the sentences in (17) are affective; however, this issue has not been resolved. These sentences can certainly be affective, but it is not clear that the ones in (18) cannot, so it is not clear that affect is always the characteristic that distinguishes (17) and (18). Emphasis may play a role in distinguishing these two sentence types, but further research must be conducted on the types of pragmatic environments and situations in which they occur to determine whether they are used to highlight or convey meaning in ways that the sentences in (18) are not. While there is no general consensus about whether the negative inversion construction is more affective or emphatic than the non-inversion counterpart in (18) or whether they have different pragmatics, both constructions have the same general meaning and truth conditions. This is certainly the type of issue that is the topic of discussion in Romaine (1984), in which she raises the question about the extent to which techniques used in phonological variation can be extended to syntactic variation, especially given the necessity of taking into consideration semantic and pragmatic equality of the "syntactic variables." In effect, the truth conditions of the constructions must be the same, a point also addressed in Weiner and Labov (1982). That issue bears heavily on characterizing (17a, b, c) and (18a, b, c), respectively, as variants. Feagin (1979) suggests that sentences such as (17) and (18) can be used in the same contexts. She reports that one of her informants began to produce the inverted construction but self-corrected by restarting "his sentence with a negated subject followed by the negated auxiliary" (1979:236).

The sentences in (17) can be described as requiring a negated auxiliary in the initial position due to a *NegFoc* feature which attracts the negated auxiliary and is responsible for its being stressed. In this way, NI constructions may be emphatic. This feature would be sufficient to distinguish sentences in (17) from those in (18). While NI sentences (19a, b) have a *NegFoc* feature, the question (19c) has a *Q* feature which attracts the auxiliary:

(19)   (a) *NegFoc*Didn't nobody come to your party.
         (b) *NegFoc*Didn't anybody come to your party.
         (c) *Q*Didn't anybody come to your party?

Table 2.4 *Negative inversion and related constructions in English varieties*

	AlE	AppE	AAE	BE	BrE
Neg concord	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Neg Inv	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗
Exp	✓	✓	✗	NA	NA

It is important to include (19b), in which the indefinite form *anybody* can also be used by some speakers in NI, as noted by Wolfram and Christian (1976). In the case of (19a, b), the auxiliary hosts the accent encoded in the *NegFoc* feature, so the auxiliary should be stressed. On the other hand, the *Q* feature encodes different types of information about the question force of the sentence. The sentences in (19b, c) are distinguished from each other by the type of feature that attracts the auxiliary. Studying NI and non-inverted negative sentences provides a good opportunity to consider variation in syntactic structure in American English dialects, and it also provides an opportunity to address the issue of whether a certain type of pragmatic meaning is associated with one related structure or the other.

American English varieties such as AlE and AppE differ from AAE in that they also allow an expletive to occur with NI constructions, such as the ones in (17).[3] The expletive in (20a, b) is *they* (argued to be a form of expletive *there*):

(20) (a) I mean, back in them days, *they didn' nobody* live up there. (Feagin 1979:238)
      (b) *They didn't none of us* ever get snakebit, but some of the work animals did. (Montgomery and Hall 2004:lxiv)

Given that a *NegFoc* feature occurs in structures in which the negated auxiliary is in sentence or clause initial position, the sentences in (20) would not be derived by a *NegFoc* feature attracting an auxiliary to it. Instead in these sentences the expletive *they* is in the initial position (subject position) of the clause (20a) or sentence (20b). Given the data, sentences such as (17), (18), and (20) are possible in varieties that allow multiple negative elements to indicate a single negation; however, varieties will differ in the extent to which they allow negative inversion constructions. If we consider AlE, AppE, AAE, BE, and BrE, we can make the following observations (as seen in Table 2.4).

All of the varieties allow negative concord (multiple negative elements construed as a single negation), but only the American English varieties, AlE, AppE,

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[3] AAE also allows expletives to occur with negative constructions as long as there is some *be* form (e.g. *It wasn't nobody in the classroom*).

and AAE, allow negative inversion. AlE, AppE, and AAE can be characterized as having a *NegFoc* feature that attracts a negated auxiliary, but only AlE and AppE allow the subject position of these negative concord constructions to be filled by either a negative indefinite NP or an expletive. In AAE, the subject position of these negation constructions with auxiliaries other than some form of *be* (that is, *can't*, *didn't*, *shouldn't*, *wouldn't*, *haven't*) can only be filled by a negative indefinite NP, not an expletive. Neither BE nor BrE has a *NegFoc* feature that triggers inversion of a negated auxiliary in negative concord constructions such as (18).

It should be noted that a limited number of similar expletive negative constructions (such as those in (20)) have been identified in ex-slave narratives and in the work of early twentieth-century African American author Charles Chesnutt. These examples suggest that earlier varieties of AAE may have allowed expletives in these negative concord constructions, but more historical research must be conducted on recorded ex-slave narratives. Research may shed some light on language change and variation and the availability of this construction in some varieties but not in others and on the question about whether NI constructions (e.g. 17) are historically related to expletive constructions such as (20).

Variation in negative concord constructions raises important questions about the acquisition path for the development of NI and non-inversion constructions. Henry *et al*. (1997) explain that while children acquiring BE and BrE both acquire negative concord, the children acquiring BE develop it later than those who develop BrE negative concord. Developing AAE-speaking children also acquire negative concord, and they produce these constructions and comprehend them as having a single negative meaning (Green 2005):

(21)   (a) They don't have no training wheels. (T085, 4;6)
             "They [those bikes] don't have training wheels"
       (b) I can't uh ride my bike without no training wheels. (D007, 5)
             "I can't ride my bike without training wheels"

However, there is no evidence that developing 3- to 5-year-old AAE-speaking children produce NI constructions. In conclusion, while NI constructions may be superficially similar to question inversion, they are not acquired as early as questions, nor is it clear whether or not they are acquired right at the period during which the child begins to develop negative concord. Syntactic theory cannot shed much light on the social factors that may contribute to the stages of acquisition of NI; however, syntactic theory may be useful in an account of the structure and may help to answer questions about why NI appears later in the developmental stage. If research supports the claim that the negative focus is linked to pragmatic or emphatic properties of NI, then the *NegFoc* feature could be used in descriptions and explanations of the development of variation in production of NI and non-inversion.

Syntactic variation and language development

Labov (1969) maintains that an approach to the study of language that encompasses variable rules and constraints on the application of rules could help to answer questions about the acquisition of rule systems and the way "norms of the speech community" are acquired (1969:760). Henry (2002), based on data from acquisition of BE, explains that children do not just acquire a single grammar, they acquire "variable forms at an early age" (2002:278), and they "have learned the statistical distribution of forms at an early age" (2002: 279).

Just as there is a division between syntactic theory and sociolinguistic models, which incorporate methods for determining variability and probability, there is also a divide between research on child language development and the acquisition of variation. That is to say that variation in child language has been considered from the sociolinguistic perspective, and this is especially due to the association of variation with social meaning and style. On the other hand, acquisition research that is concerned only with linguistic factors has focused on the development of categorical features. Given the focus on obligatory occurrence or categorical features and the development of the adult grammar, there has not been much consideration of the role variation plays in language development in research on general stages of acquisition. Also, as Roberts (2002) notes, one of the challenges of studying child language variation is that it is not easy to distinguish developmental variation from that which is socially motivated.

Here I would like to place the development of the copula and auxiliary *be* in AAE, a well-studied morphosyntactic feature, in the context of syntactic variation. The copula refers to forms of *be* preceding nouns, adjectives (e.g. *He is nice*), and prepositions, and the auxiliary *be* precedes verbs in the *-ing* form (e.g. *He is running*). To answer questions about the developmental stages, it is necessary to have specific information about the copula and auxiliary *be* patterns in AAE as well as general developmental patterns for children acquiring the copula and auxiliary *be* in other varieties such as MAE. It is commonly reported that in varieties of AAE in the US, the production of the copula and auxiliary *be* depends, in large part, on the preceding and following linguistic environments, which may effect phonological deletion. In adult and adolescent AAE, the *be* form is said to occur (near) categorically with the first person singular pronoun (*I'm*). It occurs with increasing frequency preceding *gonna*, V-*ing*, locative (as in prepositional phrases), adjective, and NP, with fewer overt occurrences preceding *gonna* and more preceding NPs.[4]

The research on *be* forms in the acquisition of MAE has considered different types of environments. For instance, in her work on the acquisition of the copula in MAE-speaking children, Becker (2000) notes that the copula occurs with varying frequency, depending on whether it occurs in the environment of a predicate that

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[4] This description is simplified in that it does not discuss full and contracted *be* forms separately, and there are also questions about the extent to which *be* forms occur before locatives and adjectives.

indicates a permanent property (i.e. state that lasts permanently, such as the state of being a female) or a temporary property (i.e. event or state that is temporary, such as running or being angry). While the copula is omitted frequently in the environments preceding locatives (e.g. [*is*] *in the store*) and adjectives referring to temporary properties (e.g. [*is*] *hot*), it is retained more often in the environments following deictic *there* (e.g. *there is the milk*), *that* (e.g. *that is a book*), existential *there* (e.g. *there is a bird in the cage*), and nominal predicates (e.g. *she is a doctor*), or those indicating permanent properties (e.g. *is a girl*). According to Becker, *be* is obligatory in constructions with predicates indicating permanent properties due to the need for an overt tense marker because the constructions do not include any other temporal marker or feature. On the other hand, predicates indicating temporal properties "contain an intrinsic temporal feature, which provides temporal reference for the utterance" (2000:113–14), so there is no need for an overt tense marker, copula *be*.

Copula omission is common in the development of MAE, not just in the development of non-standard varieties such as AAE; it shows non-uniformity given its propensity to occur in certain environments but not in others. Because the overt copula is generally obligatory in adult MAE, children acquiring that variety are expected to produce Ø forms with a certain level of frequency in developmental stages but overt forms beyond that. On the other hand, children acquiring non-standard varieties of English (e.g. AAE) with Ø *be* forms are expected to produce Ø forms with a certain level of frequency in developmental stages and in the adult grammar. However, research on the acquisition path for the development of *be* in non-standard varieties of American English is limited.

Given the influence of Labov 1969, much of the subsequent research on the AAE copula and auxiliary *be* replicated that study. As a result, some of the research on child AAE approached developmental *be* patterns from the angle of adult AAE variable rules and raised questions about the extent to which adult models could be extended to the child language. Kovac (1980) and Kovac and Adamson (1981) looked at the occurrence of *be* and the preceding and following environments and constraint rankings reported in Labov (1969). Kovac (1980) concluded that developmental and sociodialectal processes are interconnected, so it may be impossible to separate them in descriptions of *be* patterns in child language. In addition, she noted that, based on the data in her study, it may not be possible to extend an adult model of contraction and Ø *be* forms to child language. Along these lines, Kovac noted that Ø *be* forms in child AAE may be a result of a syntactic process, rather than the phonological process, that has been posited for adult AAE. Kovac and Adamson (1981) concluded that not all *be* absence could be characterized as developmental; some must be due to deletion that is a result of the sociodialectal process. However, the diagnostics that Kovac and Adamson used to distinguish developmental Ø *be* from sociodialectal Ø *be* are not clear. Wyatt (1996) found that preschool AAE speakers also developed similar variable use of the copula to that associated with adult AAE; however, in broadening the contexts, she noticed that Ø copula was also governed by additional

pragmatic constraints in early AAE. Previous research shows that developing AAE speakers systematically produce Ø *be* forms along with overt *be*, which is in line with the variable occurrence of the copula and auxiliary *be* in adult AAE. However, research on adult AAE has considered the process responsible for Ø *be* to be phonological, and there is limited discussion about the syntactic (but note Kovac's [1980] observation that Ø copula may be the result of a syntactic process in child AAE) and semantic constraints on the production of *be* that might be general developmental phenomena. Benedicto, Abdulkarim, Garrett, Johnson, and Seymour (1998) considered contexts beyond the preceding and following grammatical environments to account for the occurrence of the copula in child AAE. They found that the copula is (near) categorical in the past and in presentational sentences, which introduce some type of participant. In the following sentences from Benedicto *et al.*, *a girl* (22a) and *her shoes* (22b) are the participants that are introduced in the presentational sentences, and an overt copula (contracted *'s*) occurs in each sentence:

(22) (a) It's a girl.
     (b) Huh! Here's her shoes. (1998:52)

They argue that the copula occurs in presentational contexts because it is needed to host information about an event or situation. They also explain that the copula is required in past contexts (e.g. *He was a student*) to support a past tense feature in the syntactic structure. Of course, early variation studies noted that the copula was (near) categorical in past tense contexts, but there was no discussion about how the requirement was linked to syntactic structure. Given Benedicto *et al.*'s analysis, the copula is not required in predicational contexts, in which a predicate such as a noun or adjective follows the copula (e.g. *He a boy/mad*), because the predicate carries the necessary information. This analysis differs from the one proposed in Becker (2000) in that it does not distinguish between predicates that indicate temporary properties and those that denote permanent properties. Data from developmental AAE should be studied carefully to determine whether there is support for these types of syntactic (and semantic) analyses.

Consider the following summary of *be* constructions in a sample of speech from a developing AAE-speaking female at 3; 4 (A117). The sample is based on her narration of the picture book *Good Dog, Carl*.[5]

The *be* construction summary in Table 2.5 shows that A117 uses zero *be* categorically preceding V-*ing*, *gon/gonna* ("going to"), adjectives, and nouns. The number of adjectives and nouns is low in the sample, so it would be useful to consider these constructions in additional samples from A117. Also, there are no *be* + preposition sequences in the sample. On the other hand, *be* as a contracted form with *it*, *that*, and *what* is near categorical. What has generally been important in the sociolinguistic variation literature that is concerned with the distribution

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[5] These examples are taken from data collected in connection with a project supported by an NSF grant (BCS-0214388) to the author.

Table 2.5 *Copula and auxiliary* be *summary (A117, 3;4 years)*

Construction	% Ø *be*	(N)	Example
be+V-*ing*	100%	(33)	1. He Ø running on the flo' [floor].
			2. The baby Ø laying down and he Ø not sleeping.
be+*gon*/*gonna*	100%	(5)	1. He Ø gon bite.
			2. And it's p – and it Ø gon burn his mouth.
be+Adj	100%	(1)	He Ø mad.
be+N	67%	(3)	1. He Ø a boy.
'*s* (1) Ø (2)			2. He's a boy. [repetition of interviewer's line]
			3. And they Ø brothers.
it's (5) it Ø (1)	16.7%	(6)	1. Cause it's pepper!
			2. It's not a good dance.
			3. And it's p – and it Ø gon burn his mouth.
that's	0%	(6)	1. And that's not her dog.
			2. That's bleet. [i.e. bleeding or blood]
what's	0%	(3)	1. What's happening? [repetition of interviewer's line]
			2. What's that on your book?

of *be* is the type of preceding or following grammatical category; however, in order to compare the child AAE data with other child *be* data, it is necessary to look beyond the preceding and following grammatical and phonological environments. The copula and auxiliary *be* are categorically absent in the constructions in which the predicate indicates a temporary property (e.g. *running*, *mad*). This is an environment in which Ø *be* occurs at a high rate in Becker's child data. The following environment V-*ing* favors Ø *be* in adult AAE also; however, there is no separate discussion about the effect of adjectives denoting temporary properties on the occurrence of *be* in the copula literature on AAE. Ø *be* also occurs with nouns in A117's data, which indicate permanent properties. If a larger data set of *be* with nouns corroborated the trend here, the findings would be against Becker's claim about permanent properties and overt *be*. It would be useful to have more data in which there are tokens of nouns and adjectives indicating permanent properties to get a clearer view of the *be* patterns in A117's speech and the way they interact with predicates with different temporal properties.

Benedicto *et al.* can account for the finding with nouns in A117's sample because there is no distinction between permanent and temporary properties in their analysis; they predict that the copula can be absent in that environment as well as in the environment preceding predicates that indicate temporary properties. Overt contracted *be* in *it's* and *that's* has generally been accounted for in the AAE literature as resulting from a phonological process. If the cases of *it's* and *that's* in A117's speech are presentational, then they would be accounted for under Benedicto *et al.*'s analysis, and they can also be accounted for in Becker's analysis.

Table 2.6 *Copula and auxiliary* be *summary (Z091, 4;5 years)*

Construction	N	Ø	Overt	% Ø be	Example
be+V-*ing*	3	3	0	100%	That's where he sleeping tonight?
be+*gon*	2	2	0	100%	We gon fix it.
be+N	6	3	3	50%	1. He a bad boy.
					2. And this is his bed, too?
be+Adj	1	1	0	100%	My bike still broke.
presentational	1	0	1	0%	And there's a police car.
what's	3	0	3	0%	What's his name?
inversion	3	2	1	67%	1. This Bruce?
					2. Is this his bed?
I'm	1	0	1	0%	I'ma throw it away.
be+Prep/Adverb	2	2	0	100%	Bruce right there again.
it's	0			NA	
that's	1	0	1	0%	That's where he sleeping tonight?
past	5	0	5	5%	They was crying.
sentence final	3	0	3	3%	Who this is?

It is important to raise questions about the extent to which A117 is acquiring patterns in adult variation, but it is also necessary to consider her data in light of developmental AAE and general copula developmental patterns. Both Becker (2000) and Benedicto *et al*. (1998) are useful in pursing this line, which must also include issues about non-uniformity of development of *be* in different syntactic and semantic contexts and in different English varieties.

In Tables 2.6 and 2.7, we see additional patterns in *be* development in data from an older developing AAE speaker (Z091) at ages 4;5, 4;8, and 4;11.[6]

Z091's data resembles A117's in that there is categorical Ø *be* in certain contexts, but the difference is that in Z091's summary, there is also a range of variable *be* occurrence. In this summary, the categorical occurrences of *be* closely resemble those in adult AAE. For instance, it is well known that a *be* form is generally required to host past tense, and this is also in line with Benedicto *et al*.'s prediction. In research on adolescent and adult AAE, Ø *be* forms occur optionally before prepositions, and both Becker's and Benedicto *et al*.'s analyses would predict optional occurrence preceding prepositions. For Becker, optional occurrence would be due to the nature of the temporary predicate (which does not require *be*), and for Benedicto *et al*. it would be due to the claim that nothing requires there to be a *be* form in the syntactic structure. While Z091 has Ø *be* forms, he is also developing variable *be* in appropriate contexts. For instance, Z091's patterns fall

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[6] Z091's sample is based on speech produced during spontaneous speech and interaction during two elicitation tasks. This research was supported by an NSF grant (BCS-0214388) to the author.

Table 2.7 *Copula and auxiliary* be *summary (Z091, 4;8 and 4;11 years)*

Construction	N	Ø	Overt	% Ø *be*	Example
be+V-*ing*	7	6	1	86%	1. He cooking. 2. I'm making him talk.
be+*gon*/*gonna*	7	4	3	57%	1. We gon do another book? 2. I'm gon swing on some trees.
be+N	7	4	3	57%	1. And he the ghost. 2. My daddy is a cop.
be+Adj	7	4	3	57%	1. It look like he mean right there. 2. You're smart.
presentational	5	2	3	40%	1. It's a radio right here. 2. There's Jenny.
what's	0			NA	
inversion	4	3	1	75%	1. Who's Faye? 2. You gon do another book?
I'm	5	1	4	20%	1. Ok, I'ma come on. 2. I finna pass this test.
be+Prep/Adverb	2	1	1	50%	1. This where you put your hand. 2. It's in my booksack.
it's	0			NA	
that's	2	0	2	0%	That's what we do?
past	16	0	16	100%	When I was twisting, I had did a flip.
sentence final	2	0	2	100%	I don't know what it is.
finna	1	1	0	100%	I finna pass this test.

in line with adult (near) categorical production in the case of *be* with first person singular (*I'm*), and the developmental account in Becker and Benedicto *et al*. can account for this finding. Note that based on the limited number of examples, Z091 takes the occurrence of *be* forms in presentational contexts to be variable. Because there is a limited number of presentational contexts in Z091's data, it is not clear whether *be* forms would be more likely to be overt in those environments or not. It would be interesting to determine whether or not Z091's presentational contexts become (near) categorical *be* contexts as development progresses. Such data is important in determining the extent of syntactic and semantic variation in the development of *be* constructions in child AAE. Acquisition data reveal trends in the development of variation in the distribution of the copula and auxiliary *be*, but it also makes clear the point that the questions we should ask cannot be limited to whether developing AAE speakers have patterns of adult variation in grammatical and phonological contexts. It is also important to address questions about syntactic (and semantic) constraints that may provide insight into developmental trends.

Conclusion

Variation in non-standard dialects of American English has received some attention in sociolinguistics, with emphasis on the social factors, linguistic constraints, and language change that play a role in variable structures. In addition, in sociolinguistic variation theory, variable structures in these varieties may also be characterized by a probability index, which may be argued to be part of the grammar. Syntactic variation is also beginning to be addressed in theoretical frameworks, such as Optimality Theory and the Minimalist Program, which raise questions about whether speakers have multiple grammars and choose from among them. The integration of variation in syntactic theory could contribute to our understanding the range of possible intradialectal and interdialectal variation in various constructions such as negation and questions.

Consideration of variation in theoretical syntactic models would also help to broaden research on the acquisition of variation and the developmental paths children take as they learn their community grammars. The copula and auxiliary *be* have received considerable attention in linguistic research, and given the variable occurrence of the *be* forms in child language, more data and research in this area would be useful in providing information about developmental patterns in child language, especially in child AAE, which is often compared to adult AAE without much focus on the properties of stages of acquisition.