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Evidence for generalized verbal periphrasis in English

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Abstract

It is commonly assumed that the two simple tenses of English (*We love / loved the wine*) do not involve verbal periphrasis. Instead, I consider evidence which supports an analysis of the English simple present and past tenses as compound tenses. For non-vernacular Englishes, the auxiliary is covert; however, there are numerous cases of variably overt auxiliaries in different vernacular English constructions yielding simple present and simple past interpretations which support the proposal. The conclusion that all English tenses (present, past, perfect) are compound entails two concomitant hypotheses: (i) English verb forms traditionally characterized as present and past tense verbs are non-finite (reviving an idea put forward by Solà 1996), and (ii) meaning differences between simple past and the perfect tenses do not derive from the absence vs. presence of an auxiliary. Thus, the difference in interpretation between *we loved that wine* (past) and *we've always loved that wine* (present perfect) cannot find its source in the absence vs. presence of *have*, which itself does not contribute to the meaning difference. Rather, à la Iatridou et al. (2001), I develop the idea that interpretive differences must be found in the different functional/adverbial projections of the matrix and embedded clauses.

Keywords: auxiliary verbs; *do*-support; light bi-clausality; finiteness; non-finiteness; past participle; simple past; present perfect; verbal periphrasis; V-to-T movement

1. Introduction

Lack of V-to-T movement of the main verb in English (e.g., as in (1)) has long been attributed to some “defective” property of Infl / T / Agr.

- (1) a. We never **walked** to school.
b. *We **walked** never to school.

Under this view (e.g. Pollock 1989), in contrast with what happens in the Romance languages, the defective nature of the higher inflectional field in English fails to overtly attract the main verb, which is assumed to be finite, like its Romance finite counterparts. This difference between overt V-to-T movement versus lack thereof is understood to be an overarching grammatical distinction between the Romance language family on the one hand, and English (or, the English language family) on the other.¹

Despite the currency that the Pollockian approach (and its descendants) has held over the

¹ From here forward, I will use the term *English* to refer to the entire family of languages that are sometimes referred to in the literature as “Englishes” or “English varieties” or “English dialects” (terms which I will also use), much as we use the term *Romance* to refer to an entire language family.

decades, this paper revives, supports, and extends an alternative hypothesis, originally put forth Solà (1996), where the English main verb in (1) is taken not to be finite, but rather, to be a past participle. The idea that main verbs such as *walked* in (1) are past participles accounts for the lack of V-to-T movement (overt or covert) in all Englishes, without any reference to the features of Infl (see footnote 2 below for comments on the “simple present” form). That is, under Solà’s account, the verb *walked* in (1) fails to move to the higher inflectional field for the same reason that the past participle in Romance fails to do so.

To expand on Solà's idea, we can consider two (not mutually exclusive) ways to conceptualize the failure of past participles to raise to T: (a) as non-finite forms, they lack any inflectional features that would require them to move to the higher inflectional field, and/or (b) they are too low in the structure to be involved in any relationship with the higher clause. In other words, the past participle occupies a different domain (or phase) than the root inflectional field, projected by the root verb. For the Romance compound tenses which contain past participles, we can furthermore follow the tradition of e.g. Kayne (1993) and Rizzi (2000), which holds that the past participle projects its own clause, such that the auxiliary + past participle structure is what we can term "lightly bi-clausal" (Tortora 2014), as in the Italian example in (2):

- (2) [root clause *noi* INFL_[+fin] *abbiamo*_{aux} [participial clause *camminato*_{main-v} ...]
we have walked

In (2), a Romance past participle such as Italian *camminato* ‘walked’ is in a domain (i.e., the embedded clause) too distant from the root clause to have any relevance to its higher inflectional field.

If V-to-T movement is absent in English for the same reason it fails to occur with past participles in Romance, then we can further assume that the hypothesized past participle *walked* in (1) is also in an embedded participial clause. The difference between (1) and (2) would thus reside in the nature of the matrix auxiliary, which for English (or, for some Englishes in some structures, as we will see), we must assume is silent. I provide a sketch of this idea in (1'):

- (1') [root clause *We* INFL_[+fin] AUX_{silent} [participial clause *walked ...*]]

The sentence in (1) is thus lightly bi-clausal, contrary to appearances. This hypothesis entails that there are no so-called “simple tenses” in English: both the simple past and the simple present (as in (3), which also exhibits lack of V-to-T movement) are covert compound tenses.²

- (3) [root clause *We* INFL_[+fin] AUX_{silent} [non-finite clause *walk ...*]]

² One of the differences between the simple present (3) and the simple past (1') would be the nature of the non-finite verb form: in (1') it is a past participle, whereas in (3) it is the (uninflected) verb root. I put aside the question of verbal -s, the presence of which varies across Englishes. If present (which is not always the case; *she run every morning*), it is found in the third person, either singular (*she runs*), or singular & plural (*the girls runs*). See e.g. Green (2002), Kayne (1989), Henry (1995), Tortora & den Dikken (2010), Zanuttini & Bernstein (2011), and references cited therein, for discussion of this morpheme and the question of whether it should be analyzed as a marker of number or person (as opposed to a marker of tense); if not a marker of tense, then the idea that verbs in -s are finite becomes less convincing. The fact that this suffix is not present on the main verb in *do*-support environments in those varieties that do exhibit -s (*she runs*; *she doesn't run*) is not trivial, but a discussion of these facts (and how to account for them) is outside of the scope of this paper.

If this analysis is on the right track, then it follows that all Englishes are what we can call *generalized verbal periphrasis* languages.

The purpose of this paper is simple: it brings together several apparently unrelated cross-dialectal facts from English with an eye towards providing supporting evidence for the silent AUX seen in (1') and (3), which supports Solà's hypothesis that the main verb in (1) is a past participle. As I will show, the hypothesis that all Englishes exhibit generalized verbal periphrasis — such that all tenses involve an auxiliary verb (even in those cases where it is not immediately evident) — arguably has greater potential for leading to further progress in our understanding of morpho-syntactic variation and semantic interpretation of English tense and aspect.

To this end, in section 2, I discuss a (non-comprehensive) range of structures across English varieties, together as a coherent whole, and argue that the variety of structures suggest that all English finite tenses involve at least an auxiliary and a main verb, making the so-called simple tenses look structurally less different from the compound tenses. In all of the cases discussed, this auxiliary is variably overt / silent, which makes the idea of a silent AUX in (1) seem less exotic (especially given the facts covered in 2.5). In section 3 I briefly discuss independent evidence from English which expands on and supports Solà's claim (made prior to Solà by e.g. Wolfram & Fasold 1974) that the English the simple past and past participle have levelled into a single category. In section 4 I conclude with a discussion of a few avenues for future research. As the reader will see, this work is exploratory, aiming only to provide a basic outline for a specific research agenda.

2. Silent auxiliaries: A view from less-studied structures

Let us examine a by no means exhaustive variety of complex predicate structures in English which, taken together, show (a) that the non-modal auxiliaries *have* / *be* and *do* play a far wider range of roles in verbal constructions than is typically characterized for English, and (b) that these auxiliaries are spelled out overtly far more variably than what we observe for the less vernacular Englishes.

Regarding the range of roles these auxiliaries play, we will see for example that auxiliary *have* is not reserved for the so-called “perfect” construction and that auxiliary *do* is not always a “dummy.” We will also see that there is evidence from the use of *ain't* across varieties that *have*, *be*, and *do* are underlyingly the same auxiliary, extending the Freeze/Kayne hypothesis that *have* and *be* are the one and the same verb; this in turn suggests the hypothesis that underlyingly, *have* / *be* / *do* are surface variants of a single underlying form. This single underlying form furthermore may be silent or spelled out.

The cross-dialectal facts show that the category AUX in English can give rise to interpretations otherwise associated with the simple tenses. The vernacular uses of auxiliaries for different tense-aspect meanings which the standard language expresses with simple tenses thus suggests that despite appearances, all Englishes exhibit auxiliary verbs in the simple tenses. I remind the reader here of footnote 1: it is important to recall that I am treating all Englishes as a language family, not as a “single language.” In this regard, it is no less coherent to claim that all languages in a particular family share the property of exhibiting generalized verbal periphrasis, than it is to claim that all languages in a particular family share the property of lack of V-to-T movement.

2.1 *have got*

Consider use of the form *got* in its present possessive interpretation in the examples in (4):³

- (4) I / You / We / They got the flu. (= I / You / We / They have the flu.)

For many speakers, the examples in (4) have a semantically equivalent variant, with what seems to be the auxiliary verb *have*, as in (5):

- (5) I've got the flu / You've got the flu / We've got the flu / They've got the flu.

Given the semantic equivalency of the variants in (4) and (5) (no *have* vs. overt *have*), one possible conclusion we can draw is that (5) is indicative of a silent AUX in (4).⁴

2.2 *have-support with AAE BIN*

In the previous section, we observed an instance of auxiliary *have* which does not contribute any perfective meaning. In other words, the overt morpheme *have* in (5) is not “perfective *have*.” One possible conclusion we can draw based on this data is that generally speaking, auxiliary *have* is itself semantically vacuous, and may simply be the reflex of a more complex structure, inside of which we can find the structure's true meaning components. In other words, contrary to appearances, *have* is a dummy verb, like “dummy *do*,” even in the case of the perfect. Note that African American English (AAE) structures with the aspectual marker *BIN* provide further evidence for this claim.

What is AAE *BIN*? As Green (1998) explains, *BIN* is “a [n uninflected aspectual] marker that situates an eventuality, or some part thereof, expressed by the following predicate, in the remote past.” Consider in this regard the example in (6), from Green (1998):

³ As a separate issue, note that *got* is ambiguous between past and present tense interpretations (*I got the flu* > ‘I acquired the flu’ versus ‘I have the flu’), which itself needs to be explained. In Tortora (2006), following Shim's (2006) analysis of a similar present possessive construction in Korean, I argue that in contrast with “past tense” *got*, present possessive *got* incorporates the silent morphemes PAST and INCH (= inchoative), which combine with the morpheme *have* to give rise to the surface form *got*. Furthermore, in “*do*-support contexts,” where the PAST morphology is removed (which I argue entails the removal of INCH), the main verb form surfaces as *have*. Thus, for American speakers such as myself, though (4) is an acceptable declarative form, the interrogative version of (4) is *Do they have the flu?* (and similarly: *They('ve) got the flu, don't they?*). The string **Have they got the flu?* (and likewise *They've got the flu, *haven't they?*) does not seem natural to me; instead, it seems distinctly like another English variety, and not part of my own grammar.

Note that for many speakers (such as myself), present possessive *got* is not possible in the third person singular without *have*; thus, (ib) is the only possibility.

(i) a. %She got a problem.
b. She's got a problem.

⁴ It is also worth noting that this structure reveals that auxiliary *have* does not always yield a “perfect” interpretation in English. If *have* is not responsible for perfect aspect, then for those structures where *have* does have a perfect interpretation, we have to look elsewhere for the source of this interpretation (see footnote 6). One could attempt to provide a counter-argument to this conclusion by stating that the lack of perfect aspect in (5) derives from the fact that *got* is not a past participial form (cf. *They've gotten the flu three times this year already*). This counter-argument does not hold, however, because *got* is the past participial form for many English speakers. For this reason, in fact, for these speakers the examples in (5) are ambiguous between present possessive and present perfect (cf. *They've got the flu three times this year already* = *They've gotten the flu three times this year already*).

- (6) He *BIN* quit school.
 ‘He quit school a long time ago’

Although *BIN* is not a main verb (as Green argues, it is an aspectual marker, like aspectual *be*), like main verbs, it does not invert in interrogatives, or appear to the left of the negative marker, or become prosodically prominent in emphatic contexts. Rather, in these classic *do*-support-type environments (negation, questions, emphasis), the auxiliary verb *have* appears, as can be seen in (7) (examples adapted from Green):

- | | | |
|--------|---|---------------|
| (7) a. | He ain’t / haven’t <i>BIN</i> quit school. | negative |
| b. | Have he <i>BIN</i> quit school? | interrogative |
| c. | He <u>have</u> _{EMPH} <i>BIN</i> quit school! | emphatic |

In other words, we find in this case what can only be described as *have*-support, on analogy with *do*-support. And like we claim is the case for “dummy *do*,” the presence or absence of *have* does not affect the meaning.

As in 2.1, a logically possible hypothesis is that just as in the examples in (7), the structure in (6) contains auxiliary *have*, the only difference being that it is the silent version, as in (8):

- (8) He *HAVE*_{silent} *BIN* quit school (cf. (6))

Note though that this does not entail that *have* itself (silent or overt) contributes any meaning. This becomes particularly clear when we compare the case of the aspectual marker *BIN* with “aspectual *be*” in AAE (also studied by Green), which gives rise to a habitual interpretation:

- (9) He *be* late all the time.

Like *BIN*, aspectual *be* is not a main verb, but like a main verb, it does not invert in interrogatives, or appear to the left of the negative marker, or become prosodically prominent in emphatic contexts. In contrast with *BIN*, however (which exhibits *have*-support), in these *do*-support-type environments we get classic *do*-support (cf. (7)); examples adapted from Green:

- | | | |
|--------|--|---------------|
| (10)a. | He don’t be late. | negative |
| b. | Do he be late? | interrogative |
| c. | He <u>do</u> _{emph} be late! | emphatic |

There is thus an exact parallelism between remote-past *BIN* and aspectual *be*, where the only difference in *do*-support environments is that in the former case, *have* appears, while in the latter case, *do* appears. This fact makes it difficult to sustain the view that *have* and *do* are really different from one another. Either both of them contribute meaning to the structure (either in their overt or silent forms), or neither of them do.

2.3 Periphrastic *did* (non-habitual and habitual)

In the previous two sub-sections, I have been building a case regarding the auxiliary verb *have*. In the structures examined thus far, we see (a) that the appearance of this auxiliary is variable, and (b) that the auxiliary itself is not as obviously responsible for the semantic content of the

compound tense constructions it participates in, as we might have otherwise been led to believe by the literature on the perfect (and the claims regarding the role of “perfective *have*”). The data suggest a greater semantic vacuity of auxiliary *have*, and also the existence of a silent version of this auxiliary. Indeed, it seems that auxiliary *have* may not carry any more meaning than auxiliary *do* carries. If the claim that auxiliary *have*, like auxiliary *do*, contributes little (if any) meaning to the structure might seem controversial, it might seem equally controversial to claim that auxiliary *do* contributes more of a meaning component to the structure than we are otherwise led to believe by the literature on Standard English *do*-support. In what follows, I consider two cases of auxiliary *do* which are not instances of classic *do*-support. I consider these cases of auxiliary *do* as further evidence that the auxiliaries *have* and *do* are less different from one another than is commonly assumed.

As has been extensively illustrated and discussed by various authors (Tagliamonte 2012, Jones & Tagliamonte 2004, Rickford 1986, Harris 1984, a.o.), there are many varieties of English which exhibit the variable presence of an auxiliary verb *do* in non-*do*-support environments. I review only a few cases here. Consider the following examples from Guyanese (taken from Tagliamonte 2012):

Guyanese

(11) When I **did** make the application, I stated “an intelligent person.”
(= When I made the application, I stated...)

Tagliamonte (2012) reports that the interpretation of (11) is equivalent to a simple past (i.e., an E,R_S interpretation in Reichenbachian terms). There is no evidence of any prosodic prominence on the form *did*, and no evidence of an emphatic interpretation. We find a similar such example from southwest Middle English (also taken from Tagliamonte):

(12) His sclauyn he **dude** dun legge.
his cloak he **did** down lay
‘He laid down his cloak.’

This use of auxiliary *do* in a standard-issue declarative environment contrasts with what we find in Standard English.⁵ The presence of this auxiliary in these structures makes these sentences with a simple past interpretation look a lot more like a compound tense, along the lines of the “perfect” tenses.

The question arises as to what its function is, in such structures. One can hypothesize (on analogy with the widely accepted notion of a “perfective *have*”) that auxiliary *do* in (11) and (12) has interpretive content, encoding e.g. the notion of “past” or “past punctual” or “past completive.” Alternatively, one can hypothesize that in and of itself, it does not contribute any meaning. Rather, its presence simply indicates a more articulated clausal architecture than meets the eye (i.e., a light bi-clausality).

Note that the use of *do* in Guyanese and southwest Middle English contrasts with another, found in Somerset English and Samaná English, where periphrastic *did* seems to disambiguate the non-habitual from the habitual reading of the “past” (see also Harris 1984 for Hiberno-English). Thus, ambiguous examples like *we walked to school* are disambiguated, where the

⁵ See Tamminga (2014) and Ecay (2015) and references cited therein for a discussion of the various contextual influences on the use of auxiliary *do* in the history of English.

habitual would contain the form *did* (13a), while the punctual would not (13b).

- (13)a. We **did** walk to school all the time when I was a kid. habitual
 b. We walked to school this morning at 10am. punctual

The following non-hypothetical examples from Jones & Tagliamonte (2004) illustrate:

Somerset English (Southwest England)

- (14)a. And mi husband always used to tell me I **did** always speak before I **did** think.
 b. ‘Cos the nineteen-twenties and thirties was, well like ‘tis now, farming **did** hardly pay.

Samaná English

- (15)c. They had a little road way out there what they **did** go over.
 d. I **did** like to eat the sugar. (= I used to like to eat the sugar.)

Consider also the following example from Harris (1984), for Belfast English:

Belfast English

- (16) Well when you put them on the barrow you **do** have them in heaps and then you **do** spread them and turn them over and all.

There seems, then, to be cross-dialectal variation in the function of *do* in non-*do*-support environments, with evidence for less (as in Guyanese) or more (as in Somerset or Samaná) of a discernable contribution to tense/aspect interpretations. The literature on the matter speaks to the fact that more experimental work on these structures in these dialects would prove useful to gaining a better understanding of these allegedly distinct uses of *do*.

That said, we still have a main finding which remains: in 2.1 and 2.2 we saw evidence of auxiliary *have* exhibiting less of a semantic contribution than we are otherwise led to believe from the literature on the “perfect,” and in this section we see auxiliary *do* exhibiting more of a semantic contribution than we are otherwise led to believe from the literature of dummy *do*. Furthermore, in all of these cases there is intra-speaker variability in the overt realization of these auxiliary forms. Thus, in 2.1 we saw the variable use of contracted *have* in the possessive *got* construction. Similarly, regarding the use of *do* examined in this section, it is important to note that its appearance is variable. This variability suggests the hypothesis that there is a silent version of these auxiliaries. In sections 2.4 and 2.5, I briefly review two more telling cases.

2.4 semi-overt *had* with *liketa*

Consider the case of *liketa*, which I will call here an aspectual marker; examples taken from Johnson (2013):⁶

- (18)a. And I knew what I’d done and boy it **liketa** scared me to death.
 b. That thing looked exactly like a real mouse and I **liketa** went through the roof.

⁶ I believe there is evidence to support the hypothesis that *liketa* is an “aspectual marker” in the sense of Green’s (1998; 2002) analysis of the AAE aspectual markers *BIN* and *be*, discussed in 2.2.

See Johnson for analysis and for the meaning of *liketa* (which he argues, contrary to previous literature, does not have the same semantics as *almost*).

- c. When we got there, we **liketa** never got waited on.
- d. I **liketa** never went to sleep that night.
- b. That just **liketa** 've killed him.

For space reasons I put aside a discussion of the cross-linguistic variation in the use of *liketa*, and restrict myself to the variety described in Johnson (2013). I also put aside the semantic interpretation of this form, referring the reader to Johnson's work. Here I have the simple goal of pointing out that speakers of Johnson's variety (Eastern Kentucky) variably allow for the presence of the overt auxiliary verb *had*; consider the following example (from G. Johnson, p.c.):

(19) She **had liketa** killed me. (= She *liketa* killed me.)

All of the examples in (18) occur variably with the auxiliary *had*, where the presence or absence of *had* does not change the semantic interpretation. Depending on the angle we wish to take, we can think of this auxiliary as “dummy *had*” (if we wish to liken it to the *do* of *do*-support), or, we can liken it to the Guyanese form *did* discussed in section 2.3 (and hypothesize that it contributes some tense-aspectual information), or somewhere in between. However we slice it, we have to account for its variable appearance, and the fact that whether it is overt or not, the meaning of the sentence does not change. Again, here, we have evidence to support the hypothesis that in the cases in (18), we are dealing with a silent auxiliary.

2.5 The “compound simple past”

Various authors, including Rickford & Rafal (1996), Green (2002; 2013), and Ross et al. (2004) discuss use of a structure that has been referred to either as the “pre-verbal *had*” (e.g. Green) or as “preterite *had*” (e.g. Rickford & Rafal). I refer to the structure as the “compound simple past,” not to create a proliferation of terms for one and the same phenomenon, but to underscore its formal similarity to the compound tenses, such as the past perfect.

Consider the following examples from Ross (2004), where we see a narrative laying out a sequence of events, where sometimes the compound simple past is used (bold), and sometimes the simple past is used (italics):

- (20) a. My mama, she *was* about to go to Bible study,
 b. and on the way back there, **her car had stopped**.
 c. And then **she had called** the house because somebody *let* her use the phone.
 d. And then **she had called** the house,
 e. and then I *said*, “Hello. Who’s this?”
 f. And then my mama *said*, “It’s your mama. Let me talk to your daddy.”
 g. And then **she had told** my daddy to come with us and bring a big rope so they could ...

Note that the form in (20g) (for example) does not indicate an event in the past, relative to the time of the event reported in (20f). The above-cited researchers have all noted that the semantic interpretation is that of a simple past, not of a past perfect.⁷ An individual speaker’s use of this

⁷ It is important for the reader to heed the warning of Harris (1984) here, and to resist the temptation of interpreting the numerous examples throughout the literature on the topic from the perspective of our own grammars, if our own grammars do not exhibit the compound simple past. Anecdotally, I can report that English speakers who are not familiar with the form (such as English literature and writing professors, who display a fierce commitment to

compound simple past is variable, and in my experience, seems to be far more widespread than the literature lets on: it is exhibited in all kinds of regional vernaculars (e.g., Staten Island, Appalachia), and is not just particular to African American English.

I do not wish to oversimplify the complex nature of this construction. There is no question that much qualitative and quantitative research still needs to be done to gain a fine-grained understanding of the compound simple past. There may be regional variation in its use, and it is not clear whether the auxiliary *had* is licit in all syntactic contexts. For example, it is unclear whether *Had he called you?* is a possible variant of *Did he call you?* Additionally, it is difficult to find examples in the literature with an intervening adverb (negation or other), or with a tag question. It is also not clear if the compound simple past can be used with a habitual interpretation like the simple past can, or like the compound tense with *did* can.

Nevertheless, there are several clear facts here, with respect to the compound simple past. Two of them are as follows: (a) the interpretation is equivalent to E,R_S (in Reichenbachian terms), i.e., a simple past, and (b) speakers use it variably with the non-compound simple past (i.e., *he had called* < > *he called*). That is, the presence or absence of auxiliary *had* does not change the tense-aspect semantics; the sentences are thus syntactic variants. This variable use of *had* can be framed, quite simply, in terms of use of an overt (21a) vs. silent (21b) auxiliary *had*:

Compound simple past:

- (21) a. [*He* INFL_[+fin] *had* [participial clause *called ...*]]
 b. [*He* INFL_[+fin] HAD_{silent} [participial clause *called ...*]]

Thus, in sentences like *he called you* (as in (21b), with silent HAD), we have a compound tense, despite appearances to the contrary.

2.6 Section summary

In this section I reviewed a number of structures in English where the variable presence of the auxiliaries *have* and *do* does not seem to affect the semantics of the structure in question. This suggested one of three things: Either (a) these auxiliaries are pleonastic elements, or (b) if they can be shown to be associated with certain meanings, then the fact that these meanings persist in the auxiliaries' "absence" must be explained, or (c) regardless of whether we can show (at the moment) if the auxiliaries carry any meaning themselves, their variable presence still points to the existence of a silent AUX. In other words, despite appearances, wherever an auxiliary seems to be absent, we have a silent counterpart to the overt auxiliary. Let us pursue this idea.

prescriptivism) mistake it for the past perfect, and incorrectly maintain that those speakers who use *had*+participle "do not know how to use the past perfect." I have also heard numerous times, including from one reviewer, the claim that this is simply a "polite" form, a claim which illustrates the problem discussed by Harris 1984, whereby speakers of closely related dialects are misled into believing they understand what a particular form means for the speakers who use it, by virtue of allowing personal intuition to come into play. But as Harris argues, personal intuition regarding meaning should not be appealed to, if the form is not part of one's grammar.

On a different note: as observed for example by Green (2013), the compound simple past exists independently of the fact that speakers vary in their use of simple past / past participial forms. (In section 4, I assert in fact that the simple past and the past participle are one and the same category.) Thus, we find examples like *had went*, *had gone*, *had told me*, *had tell me*, etc. (see footnote 3). As such, for the present purposes it makes little sense to try to determine if the form which follows auxiliary *had* is a simple past or past participial form.

Though a theory of the silent auxiliary needs to be developed, I put that aside in this work (leaving it for future research), and will simply assume silent AUX.⁸ Instead, I now move to an issue which could be characterized as the other side of the same coin.

3. Variation in use of non-present verb forms

In the previous section, I argued that English exhibits generalized verbal periphrasis, even when appearances indicate the contrary. Thus, the simple past (as in (21b)) involves a silent auxiliary embedding a participial clause, headed by a past participle. To support the idea that simple pasts are crypto-participles, Solà (1996) observes that “...Modern English speakers tend to blur the contrast between the ‘past participle’ and the ‘past’ form,” an observation which has been made repeatedly in the sociolinguistics literature at least since the 1960s (see e.g. Labov et al. 1968; Wolfram & Fasold 1974). The two most obvious facts pointing to this conclusion are (a) the identity of past/participle forms within the class of regular verbs (which represent the majority of verbs in English; e.g. *we walked* and *we have walked*), and (b) the identity of form within a paradigm (i.e., the lack of distinct forms across persons/numbers; e.g. *he walked*; *they walked*). However, as noted by Solà, the irregular verbs (as few in number as they are) seem to present a counter-example to this claim (e.g., *ate* vs. *eaten*). In this section, I briefly discuss evidence that — despite this appearance of a distinction between the two categories in the class of irregular verbs — there is evidence that vernacular speakers do not specialize distinct “non-present forms” (as Tortora et al. 2015 term them) for simple versus compound tenses. In fact, Tortora et al. (2015) show that it is a myth that distinct non-present forms in English come in pairs. Data from the *Audio-Aligned and Parsed Corpus of Appalachian English* (Tortora et al. 2017) show that vernacular speakers may exhibit upwards of five non-present forms for a single verb (e.g. *saw*, *seen*, *see*, *seed*, *seened*). Note that this is not what we would expect if distinct non-present forms were simply indicative of a simple past vs. past participle split. This evidence for the lack of specialization of non-present forms (for simple vs. compound tense) in turn further dismantles the hypothesis that speakers distinguish between simple past and past participle.

Here I briefly review the data for ~110,000 words from 5 speakers from the Dante Oral History Project (a sub-corpus of the AAPCAppE). In this sub-corpus Tortora et al. (2015) find (a) that all speakers have variant types; (b) that variants occur more in past than in compound tense contexts, reflecting the fact that the corpus data contains more past than compound tenses overall; and (c) that all speakers display variant forms that occur in both past and compound tense contexts.

To answer the question of whether the relative frequency of a given variant (e.g. *saw*) within a set (e.g. *seen/saw/seed/seened*) is similar in past and compound tense contexts, Tortora et al. tally up the number of tokens of each variant in a set in each non-present environment, with the results in Table 1:

⁸ The theory of silent AUX is corroborated on completely independent grounds by Kayne (2005), who proposes a silent AUX in the present tense, in order to explain the non-standard English agreement pattern in (i) (where the indexing expresses subject-verb agreement):

(i) people who_k John $_i$ Aux $_i$ like $_k$

Table 1: Distribution of morphological variants by context

<i>variant type</i>	<i>simple past</i>	<i>compound</i>	<i>total</i>
majority variant	1150 (94%)	65 (77%)	1215 (93%)
minority variants	76 (6%)	19 (23%)	95 (7%)
total	1226 (100%)	84 (100%)	1310 (100%)

Table 1 shows the distribution of morphological variants by syntactic context (simple past vs. compound tense). Note that for each verb root (e.g., *see* or *run*), there is a set of two or more variants (e.g., *seen*, *saw*, *seed*, *seeded*, or *run*, *runned*), whereby one type in this “variant set” occurs more frequently. The term “majority variant” refers to this more frequent form, while “minority variants” refers to the variant or variants which are less frequent. The table shows that simple past contexts favor majority variants relative to compound tense contexts (94% vs. 77%). In this dialect, then, context (simple past vs. compound) does have an effect on variant selection, but, note that the effect is much weaker than would be expected on standard accounts. In compound tense contexts, like in past tense contexts, majority forms are strongly favored relative to minority variants (77% vs. 23%), indicating much greater tendency toward a levelled tense paradigm.

Based on these findings, Tortora et al. (2015) conclude that the variation may reflect the otherwise commonly accepted idea that some speakers allow for equivalent variants in both contexts — i.e., “morphological doublets.” Consider in this regard the more normative variation found with *They dreamed* ~ *They dreamt* and *They’ve dreamed* ~ *They’ve dreamt*: we have two forms, *dreamed* and *dreamt*, where for a single speaker, neither form specializes for simple past versus past participle. That is, both forms are used for both contexts. The findings in Tortora et al. (2015) indicate that vernacular speakers exhibit a similar variable use of irregular non-present forms with the entire range of verbs, and again, with sets of non-present forms larger than pairs.

To conclude this section: emerging studies of vernacular speech indicate variable uses of sets of lexically related non-present forms which belie the claim (a) that non-present forms of a verb come in pairs, and (b) that non-present forms of a verb are specialized for simple past versus compound tense. This in turn suggests that speakers do not conceptualize the simple past and past participle as distinct categories, a conclusion which is consistent with Solà’s claim that the simple past is none other than a past participle.

4. Closing thoughts

Let us take stock of the interplay between the related proposals I put forth in this work. The (by no means exhaustive) examples from numerous English varieties in section 2 supports the idea of a silent auxiliary. I thus view Englishes as *generalized verbal periphrasis* languages, even when appearances (i.e., those of the simple tenses) suggest the contrary.

This in turn leads to the idea that all tensed verb constructions are “bigger” than what meets the eye, regardless of whether the auxiliary is overt or silent. Indeed, given the view that compound tenses are bi-clausal (argued for in Tortora 2014), even a sentence as simple as *We walked* should be analyzed as bi-clausal (cf. (21b)):

(22) [TP1 *We* INFL_[+fin] AUX_{silent} [TP2 *walked*]]

The structure in (22) now gives rise to some wiggle room for exploring the functional fields of the different clausal domains (TP1 and TP2) as the true loci underlying the range of tense-aspect

interpretations available in the different Englishes, which far exceeds the range of overt forms available. Consider for example the ambiguity exhibited by (22), which can be interpreted either as a habitual or a punctual event. One possible account is that the ambiguity is structural, where there are at least two possible hypotheses for distinct underlying structures: (a) the different interpretations could be the result of distinct functional heads, or (b) the different interpretations might arise as a result of the presence of distinct silent adverbials. This latter possibility arises in light of another case of ambiguity discussed by Iatridou et al. (2001), seen in (23):

(23) Sue has been sick.

As Iatridou et al. note, the perfect construction in (23) gives rise to two possible interpretations, which can be termed the *universal* vs. the *experiential* readings. Under the universal reading, Sue's state of illness has been continuous for some period of time, and holds at the time of utterance. Under the latter reading, Sue has been episodically ill one or more times in the past (but is not ill at the time of utterance). The two different readings are made salient with the addition of adverbial phrases that have particular semantic properties, such as those in (23'):

- | | | |
|---------|---|----------------------|
| (23')a. | Sue has been sick [continuously/ever since last December] | universal reading |
| b. | Sue has been sick [before]; [twice since last December] | experiential reading |

Given that (23) is disambiguated with the addition of adverbials with specific semantic properties, a question arises as to the source of the two meanings in (23) (without the adverbials). One possibility is that the string in (23) is sufficiently vague as to allow for both senses, and therefore, to allow for its compatibility with the two types of adverbial (*ever since* [universal] vs. *before* or *twice since* [experiential]). Another possibility is that the string in (3) is structurally ambiguous; that is, contrary to appearances, there are two different possible underlying structures.

Iatridou et al. argue that (23) is structurally ambiguous; that is, the different readings are asserted, and not implied. Simplifying tremendously, they provide evidence that under the universal reading, a sentence like (23) contains a covert adverbial (with particular syntactic properties) which provides the relevant semantic content. Similarly, the experiential reading results from the presence of a different kind of covert adverbial. The two possible meanings associated with (23) thus do not derive solely from the combination of the form *have* and the form *been* (and the stative nature of the adjective *sick*). Instead, there is a component of meaning that can only be attributable to a silent adverb in the structure. Iatridou et al.'s evidence for such covert adverbials opens the door for investigating the entire range of tense and aspectual interpretations associated with verbs, in these terms, including examples like that in (22), or strings like that in (21a), which is ambiguous between a compound simple past and a pluperfect:

- | | | |
|--------|---|----------------------|
| (24)a. | [He INFL _[+fin] <i>had</i> [participial clause <i>called</i> ...]] | compound simple past |
| | (= e.g. he called two minutes ago; E,R_S) | |
| b. | [He INFL _[+fin] <i>had</i> [participial clause <i>called</i> ...]] | past perfect |
| | (= e.g. he had already called by the time you came home; E_R_S) | |

The hypothesis that the two different meanings are associated with two different structures should be falsifiable. This is a matter for future work, but briefly, I note that one possibility for the source of the structural ambiguity is the existence of distinct (sets of) functional heads, where one (or one set) encodes the E,R_S interpretation, and a different one (or a different set) encodes the E_R_S interpretation. This type of explanation would look to e.g. Giorgi & Pianesi's (1997) system, which provides a basis in which to discover where the encoding of the relationships among E and R and S reside in these two different (but surface-string-identical) tenses. But another possibility is to follow the lines of Iatridou et al. (2001). However, if the source of the difference between (24a) and (24b) were to find itself in a system of silent adverbials, we would first have to establish which are those overt adverbials that are only licit with simple past interpretations, versus which are those overt adverbials that are only licit with past perfect interpretations. As already noted, in terms of temporal-aspectual interpretation, there is at least one difference between the two: in the former, E and R are simultaneous (i.e., the event is at the same time as the reference point, which is in the past), whereas in the latter, E is prior to R (i.e., the event is prior to the reference point, which in the past). The question of whether this difference can be captured in terms of time adverbials is less obvious. Both E,R_S and E_R_S can correspond to punctual events, and neither is incompatible with non-punctual interpretations, for example.

Perhaps related to the issue of structural ambiguity is the proposal alluded to earlier that the distinct surface forms of the auxiliary derive from a single underlying form. Evidence from the different Englishes reveals that the auxiliaries *have* and *do* are more like one another than any restricted focus on the *present perfect* and *do*-support in Standard English lets on. The facts reveal that concepts like “perfective *have*” versus “progressive *be*” versus “dummy *do*” are misleading reifications of epiphenomena. Indeed, as Kayne (1993) provided ample cross-linguistic evidence for, the auxiliaries *have* and *be* are arguably spell-outs of the same underlying verb (notated *BE* by Kayne). Furthermore, as argued by Tortora (1994), this theory of auxiliary selection is readily applicable to English, allowing us to frame the use of *have* versus *be* in e.g. the *present perfect* versus the progressive (*John is eating*) as equally epiphenomenal, making English also an “auxiliary selection” language.⁹

To add *do* to the mix: a fine-grained analysis of *ain't* in different Englishes reveals the following fact: While some speakers allow *ain't* only as a spell out for the verb *be* (25a), others allow it as a spell out for *have* and *be* but not *do* (25a,b), while others still allow it as a spell-out for *have*, *be*, and *do* (25a,b,c):

- | | | |
|--------|---|--|
| (25)a. | John ain't hungry. | (= John isn't hungry) |
| b. | John ain't eaten anything since Monday. | (= John hasn't eaten anything since...) |
| c. | John ain't eat breakfast this morning. | (= John didn't eat breakfast this morning) |

Furthermore, I believe that future experimental work will confirm a casual observation I have made, working informally with speakers on Staten Island: those speakers who allow (25c) also allow (25b) and (25a); those speakers who don't allow (25c) but who allow (25b), also allow (25a). And finally, those speakers who allow (25a) do not necessarily allow (25b) or (25c). In other words, there is a one-way entailment, whereby use of *ain't* for *do* entails its use as *have* and *be* (and use of *ain't* as *have* entails its use as *be*), but not the other way around. While the

⁹ Tortora (1994) was developed under the direction of István Kenesei, during his visit to the University of Delaware. Our syntax class with István that year was one of my most memorable and happy experiences as a graduate student.

mechanisms underlying this variation have yet to be explored, I maintain that Kayne's theory of auxiliary selection (as elaborated in Tortora 1994 for English), extended to *do* and incorporating the proposals put forth in this work, promise a fruitful avenue for providing a systematic explanation the *ain't* variation. In turn, an explanation of the underlying structural relationship between the auxiliaries *have*, *be*, and *do* will arguably lend clues to the nature of the clausal architecture giving rise to the (im)possible silent adverbials, and in turn, this will yield a more complete understanding of the issue I set forth to understand in this work, namely, how to explain the wide range of possible tense-aspect interpretations associated with the comparatively limited set of morphological forms and syntactic structures for simple and compound tenses across Englishes.

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