Eliciting copula variation in the lab

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In variationist sociolinguistic research, there is a well-known, pervasive tension between eliciting natural speech, on the one hand; and, on the other, focusing the research subject's production to elicit enough tokens of the variable under study for a robust analysis (Labov, 1984). This problem is compounded in the case of morphosyntactic variables, which are both infrequent (Cheshire, 1999) and encoded orthographically, meaning that incorporating them into a reading passage or word list will by necessity eliminate a speaker's natural choice between variants. Indeed, though there is a growing body of experimental sociolinguistic work on speakers' *perception* of morphosyntactic variation (e.g. Squires, 2013; Sneller & Fisher, 2015), experimental sociolinguistic work on speakers' *production* of morphosyntactic variables remains effectively non-existent in the literature, presumably for precisely this reason.

Nevertheless, being able to reliably elicit morphosyntactic variables in a controlled setting would allow researchers to investigate timely questions about the role of psycholinguistic factors in the production of sociolinguistic variation (Tamminga, MacKenzie, and Embick, forthcoming). One area in which these questions come to the fore is in the case of those morphosyntactic variables which are affected by constituent length, such as the dative alternation, verb-particle alternations, and auxiliary contraction. For each of these variables, the constituent length effect has been hypothesized to stem from factors relating to speech planning and working memory (Wasow, 1997; Arnold et al., 2000, MacKenzie, 2012). Being able to confirm this hypothesis will have important implications for models of the cognitive systems involved in variation. But confirming it will necessitate being able to reliably elicit these variables in a setting where psycholinguistic factors like planning can be manipulated and controlled.

We have begun preliminary work toward this goal by developing a novel picture description task designed to elicit copula sentences. Our aim with this task is to reliably elicit variable contraction of *is* (e.g. *The cat is ~ 's on the left*). By manipulating the length of the copula's subject, or by manipulating a speaker's speech planning while they carry out the task, we hope to be able to replicate the same kind of inhibitory effects on contraction that have been observed in natural speech corpora.

In this poster, we present our findings from having administered this task to 12 native speakers of British English. Results have been mixed. Some subjects produce copula sentences as expected, but others use different discourse strategies to describe the pictures. Moreover, those subjects who do produce copula sentences rarely contract in them, potentially demonstrating a stylistic effect on contraction that has not yet been attested in spoken language (though see Chafe and Danielewicz, 1987 on stylistic effects on contraction in writing). We discuss plans for future tasks that will better elicit both the vernacular and the particular structures we are interested in. Our findings have methodological relevance for researchers working on copula variation and morphosyntactic variation more generally.

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