

The Two *be*'s of English¹

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1. Introduction

Standard approaches to English grammar usually identify two '*be* verbs' – one a lexical or copular verb and the other an auxiliary (see Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 1999: 53, Greenbaum & Quirk 1990: 36, Berk 1999: 151, Azar 2002: A6, Teschner & Evans 2007: 51, Bøjars & Burridge 2001: 166–167, to name a few). Common textbook examples of these two uses of *be* are given in (1a, b) respectively:

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|-----|---|----------------------------|
| (1) | <p>a. She is a doctor.
 They are hilarious.
 Malcolm was the leader.
 This is for you.
 We're in the kitchen.
 There were three dogs in the yard.</p> | <p><i>LEXICAL VERB</i></p> |
| | <p>b. She is waiting.
 The vase was broken by the workers.
 We were devastated by the tragedy.</p> | <p><i>AUXILIARY</i></p> |

In this article I would like to make two claims – an easy claim and a more difficult one. The easy claim is that the distinction illustrated in (1) is spurious. All the examples of *be* in (1) are prototypical auxiliaries. As described by Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 92), these are CORE AUXILIARIES. The more difficult claim is that indeed there is a morphosyntactic difference between *be* as a lexical main verb and *be* as an auxiliary, but that difference is not the standard one illustrated above. The syntactic distinction between lexical and auxiliary *be* is more insightfully motivated by the semantic distinction between ACTIVE *BE* and STATIVE *BE*. Both of these claims have profound consequences for theoretical approaches to the basic clause structure of Modern English, and to English language pedagogy. The net result of taking this approach is to significantly simplify the conceptualization, teaching and learning of English grammar.

2. The easy claim

It is very easy to show that syntactically all the examples of *be* in 1 are auxiliaries. In fact this has often been noted or assumed in the literature, without much ado (see, e.g., Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 114 and the references cited therein), so I am not claiming to

have discovered anything 'new' about English grammar in this section.¹ Rather I would like simply to put all the facts before the readers of *Understanding English Grammar* in a clear fashion, and explore how they potentially affect the teaching and learning of English.

2.1. The lexical verb vs. auxiliary distinction

Though terminology varies widely, most discussions of the lexicon of any language describe a distinction between LEXICAL VOCABULARY and GRAMMATICAL FUNCTORS (see Chapter 3, section 3.4, and also Givon 2001: 187–237, Huddleston & Pullum 2002, and others). In this characterization of the lexicon, lexical verbs form an open class of words that have certain syntactic features and tend to express rich (complex) semantic content. Examples of lexical verbs in English include *eat*, *advertise*, *read*, *dichotomize*, and a very large number of others. Auxiliaries, on the other hand, form a relatively small, closed set of grammatical functors. In English there are modal auxiliaries (*would*, *could*, *will*, *can*, etc.), aspectual auxiliaries (*have* and *be*), and a 'dummy' auxiliary, *do*. Some approaches consider auxiliaries to be a subset of verbs, because they either take verbal inflection, or, in the case of modals, themselves constitute the required verbal inflection for a clause. In any case, it is the distinction between lexical vocabulary and grammatical functors that underlies the traditional determination that there are two *be*'s in English – copular-*be* (1a) is considered to be a member of the class of lexical vocabulary, while auxiliary-*be* (1b) is a member of the class of grammatical functors. In the following subsections I will briefly describe a few of the morphosyntactic tests for distinguishing lexical verbs from auxiliaries.

2.2. Contraction

Since full verbs are lexical vocabulary, they are not amenable to contraction. Auxiliaries, on the other hand, being grammatical functors, tend to be phonologically reduced, and often do not take ordinary word stress. For this reason some auxiliaries, including most forms of *be*, may cliticize to (contract with) a preceding word:²

- (2) **WITH SUBJECT:** She would listen to you. → She'd listen to you.
 Cleo had listened to me. → Cleo'd listened to me.
 The teacher is smiling. → The teacher's smiling.
 The man in the suit is devastated by the news. →
 The man in the suit's devastated by the news.

WITH LOCATIONAL: Around the bend will come the train. →
 Around the bend'll come the train
 On the wall are hanging three portraits. →
 On the wall're hanging three portraits.
 Here have fallen many fine soldiers. →
 Here've fallen many fine soldiers.

This contraction does not seem to occur with any main lexical verbs:

- (3) *WITH SUBJECT:* She owed me a dollar. → *She'd me a dollar.
 Cleo had fourteen cats. → *Cleo'd fourteen cats.
 The teacher has a Jaguar. → *The teacher's a Jaguar.
 I will her my estate. → *I'll her my estate.

WITH LOCATIONAL: Into town wheel the bicyclists. →
 *Into town'll the bicyclists.

The following examples show that this contraction also occurs with copular-*be*. This, then, is the first structural feature that unites it with auxiliaries and distinguishes it from main lexical verbs:

- (4) *WITH SUBJECT:* She is a doctor. → She's a doctor.
 They are in the kitchen. → They're in the kitchen.
 The news about Australia is shocking. →
 The news about Australia's shocking.

WITH LOCATIONAL: Here are two children. → Here're two children.
 In the kitchen is a sink. → In the kitchen's a sink.

These contraction facts illustrate that copular-*be* exhibits at least one morphophonemic characteristic of auxiliaries – a characteristic not shared with full lexical verbs.

2.3. Auxiliaries have the NICE properties; lexical main verbs do not

All of the forms of *be* in (1) have several properties of prototypical auxiliaries, including those identified by Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 92–112) as the 'NICE' properties (Negation, Inversion, Code and Emphasis).³ In the following sections, I will quickly run through these properties, first showing that they hold for auxiliaries, and not for lexical verbs. Then I will show that the same properties hold for *be* in copular constructions such as those in (1a). Taken together, this evidence clearly shows that copular-*be* is a syntactic auxiliary.

Negation: In negative clauses, the negative particle *not* follows an auxiliary (the first, if there are more than one):

- (5) *AFFIRMATIVE:* She should eat more kimchi.
 She is eating kimchi.
 The vase was broken by the workers.
 We have lived in Paris.

NEGATIVE: She should **not** eat more kimchi.
 She is **not** eating kimchi.
 The vase was **not** broken by the workers.
 We have **not** lived in Paris.

In Modern English, lexical main verbs do not allow the negative particle to follow them:

- (6) *She eats not kimchi.
 *The workers broke not the vase.
 *We live not in Paris.

Rather, if there is no auxiliary in the corresponding affirmative clause, the 'dummy' auxiliary *do* is inserted, and the negative follows it:

- (7) She eats kimchi. → She **does not** eat kimchi.
 The workers broke the vase. → The workers **did not** break the vase.
 We live in Paris. → We **do not** live in Paris.

Inversion: In certain questions the first auxiliary and the subject must invert (exchange positions):

- (8) *DECLARATIVE:* She should eat more kimchi.
 She is eating kimchi.
 The vase was broken by the workers.
 We have lived in Paris.

Y/N INTEROGATIVE: **Should she** eat more kimchi?
Is she eating kimchi?
Was the vase broken by the workers?
Have we lived in Paris?

Wh- INTEROGATIVE: What **should she** eat more of?
 (non-subjects) What **is she** eating?
 Who **was the vase** broken by?
 Where **have we** lived?

If there is no auxiliary in the declarative, the dummy auxiliary *do* is inserted before the subject:

- (9) *Y/N INTEROGATIVE*: **Does** she eat kimchi?
Did the workers break the vase?
Do we live in Paris?
Wh- INTEROGATIVE: What **does** she eat?
(non-subjects) What **did** the workers break?
Where **do** we live?

Again, lexical main verbs do not exhibit this property:

- (10) *Eats she kimchi?
*Broke the workers the vase?
*What broke the workers? (trying to mean 'What did the workers break?')
*Where live we?

Code: In constructions that 'stand for' or 'code' a previously mentioned verb phrase, the first auxiliary is repeated (and inverted with the subject). The ungrammatical examples illustrate the fact that lexical main verbs do not have this property:

- (11) *TAG QUESTIONS*: She should not eat kimchi, should she?
*She should not eat kimchi, eat she?
*She eats kimchi, eats not she?
- The vase was broken by the workers, wasn't it?
*The vase was broken by the workers, (was) not broken it?
- ELLIPSIS*: I should see the doctor, and so should she.
*I should see the doctor, and so (should) see she.
- Who should eat kimchi? She should. *She (should) eat.
- We were eating kimchi, and so was she.
*We were eating kimchi, and so (was) eating she.

If there is no auxiliary in the original verb phrase, the dummy auxiliary *do* occurs in the coded phrase:

- (12) *TAG QUESTIONS:* She likes kimchi, doesn't she?
 *She likes kimchi, likes not she?
- The workers didn't break the vase, did they?
 *The workers didn't break the vase, broke they?
- ELLIPSIS:* I saw the doctor, and so did she.
 *I saw the doctor, and so saw she.
- Who ate the kimchi? She did. ☹️She ate.⁴

Emphasis: In constructions in which the truth of the proposition is emphasized, the first auxiliary receives emphatic stress (indicated by all caps in these examples). Again, the infelicitous examples show that lexical main verbs do not possess this property:

- (13) She should eat more kimchi. Yes she SHOULD. ☹️Yes she should EAT.⁵
 The vase was broken by the workers. Yes it WAS. ☹️Yes it was BROKEN.
 We have lived in Paris. Yes we HAVE. ☹️Yes we have LIVED.

If there is no auxiliary in the original clause, the dummy auxiliary *do* occurs and receives the emphatic stress:

- (14) She eats a lot of kimchi. Yes she DOES. ☹️Yes she EATS.
 The workers broke the vase. Yes they DID. ☹️Yes they BROKE.
 We live in Paris. Yes we DO. ☹️Yes we LIVE.

2.4. Copular-be has the NICE properties

The above examples all illustrate the well known and established syntactic tests for distinguishing auxiliaries from main verbs – auxiliaries have the NICE properties, while lexical verbs do not. It is also well known and easily demonstrated that the so-called 'lexical' use of *be* in predicate nominals, adjectives, locatives and other copular constructions illustrated in (1a) has the NICE properties.

Negation: Like auxiliaries, copular-*be* precedes the negative particle, and does not require or allow (in prototypical cases, but see below for the 'exceptions') *do*-support:

- (15) She is not a doctor. *She does not be a doctor.
 They are not hilarious. *They do not be hilarious.
 Malcolm was not the leader. *Malcolm did not be the leader.
 They are not in the kitchen. *They do not be in the kitchen.
 This is not for you. *This does not be for you.

Inversion: Like auxiliaries, copular-*be* inverts with the subject in certain questions. Unlike lexical verbs, it does not require *do*-support:

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|------|----------------------------|------------------------|
| (16) | Is she a doctor? | *Does she be a doctor? |
| | Are they hilarious? | *Do they be hilarious? |
| | Is this for me? | *Does this be for me? |
| | What is she ? | *What does she be? |
| | Who is this for? | *Who does this be for? |
| | Where are we ? | *Where do we be? |

Code: Like auxiliaries, copular-*be* codes previously mentioned verb phrases. Unlike lexical verbs, it does not rely on a dummy DO:

- | | | |
|------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| (17) | She's a doctor, isn't she? | *She's a doctor, doesn't she? |
| | I am a doctor, and so <i>is</i> she. | *I am a doctor, and so does she. |

Emphasis: Like auxiliaries, copular-*be* receives emphatic stress when the truth of the proposition is emphasized. Unlike lexical verbs, it does not need DO:

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|------|-------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|
| (18) | She's a doctor. | Yes, she IS . | ⊗Yes, she DOES . |
| | We were in Paris. | Yes we WERE . | ⊗Yes, we DID . |

Notice that other copular (or 'linking') verbs that take subject complements, such as *seem*, *become* or *resemble*, do not have the NICE properties, and do require the presence of *do* in NICE constructions. Therefore they are lexical main verbs, and as such are syntactically distinct from copular-*be*:

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|------|--|--|
| (19) | N: They don't seem hilarious. | *They seem not hilarious. |
| | She didn't become a doctor. | *She became not a doctor. |
| | I: Does she resemble her mother? | *Resembles she her mother? |
| | What did she become? | *What became she? |
| | C: She became a doctor, and so did he. | *She became a doctor, and so became he. |
| | The situation turned ugly, didn't it? | *The situation turned ugly, turned not it? |
| | E: They seem happy. Yes they DO . | *Yes they SEEM . |

Among copular verbs, then, only *be* has the NICE properties otherwise only attributed to auxiliaries. We can conclude, then, that copular *be* belongs to the same syntactic class as auxiliaries.

2.5. *wh*-extraction

There is one syntactic property of *be* in progressive aspect constructions that seems to contradict the claim that auxiliary-*be* and copular-*be* are one and the same syntactic entity. This is the fact that *wh*-extraction of the complement of *be* in progressive aspect constructions requires a pro-form, *doing*, while extraction of the complement of *be* in copular constructions is very possible and common with no recapitulating pro-form. Though this appears to counterexemplify the easy claim made in this paper, I believe there is a good explanation for this phenomenon that does not require that auxiliary-*be* and copular-*be* be treated as distinct syntactic entities. This explanation is presented briefly below, after the apparent counterexamples.

The complement of *be* in a copular construction can be the target of *wh* extraction, leaving no visible remnant *in situ*:

- (20) a. What is that? It is a birthday cake. ⊕ It is rolling down the hill.
 b. What are you? I am a linguist. ⊕ I am singing.

These are *wh* questions in which the complement of *be* is the target of the *wh* word. The *wh* word may not target the complement of progressive aspect *be*. This is shown by the incoherence of progressive aspect answers to these questions. Instead, if the complement of *be* in a progressive construction is extracted, the pro-form *doing* must remain *in situ*:

- (21) a. What is that **doing**? It is rolling down the hill.
 b. What are you **doing**? I am singing.

This non-extractability of the complement of *be* in a progressive construction holds for other auxiliaries as well, though of course the form of the *in situ* pro-form varies according to the particular complement type:

- (22) He should eat kimchi. → What should he **do**? *What should he?
 They have eaten kimchi. → What have they **done**? *What have they?
 They eat kimchi. → What do they **do**? *What do they?

Non-extractability of the complements of auxiliaries has consequences in all the 'classic' *wh*-extraction constructions, such as headless relative clauses, illustrated here in cleft constructions:

- (23) a. *What she should is sing the national anthem.
b. What she should **do** is sing the national anthem.
- (24) a. *What she has is sung the national anthem.
b. What she has **done** is sung the national anthem.
- (25) a. *What I'm not is singing the national anthem.
b. What I'm not **doing** is singing the national anthem.
- (26) a. *What she is is singing the national anthem.
b. What she is **doing** is singing the national anthem.

These kinds of clefts are perfectly acceptable without a pro-form recapitulating the extracted complement of copular *be*:

- (27) a. What I'm not is organized.
b. What she is is a doctor.
c. Where I am is at home.
d. Why I'm here is a mystery.

This one syntactic property seems to differentiate the auxiliary use of *be* from the copular use, and hence to constitute counter evidence to the 'easy claim' made in this paper. However, there are at least three reasons not to consider this property as definitive counter evidence.

First, this feature does not hold for *be* in passive constructions. In most cases, the complement of 'passive *be*' can be extracted with no pro-form left *in situ*:

- (28) a. What she was is devastated by the tragedy.
b. What we are is frightened by the severity of your reaction.

In fact, a pro-form is not possible in these contexts, just as it is not possible with the copular use of *be* (29c, d):

- (29) a. *What she was **done** is devastated by the tragedy.
b. *What we are **done** is frightened by the severity of your reaction.
c. *What she is **one** is a doctor.
d. *Where I am **there** is at home.

The fact that Wh-extraction does not distinguish passive auxiliary-*be* from copular-*be* indicates that, if anything, progressive-*be* is the odd one out in this typology. So-called

copular-*be* still has all the properties of prototypical auxiliaries, including passive-*be*. Since the class of auxiliaries is itself a mixed bag, e.g., the modals have a slightly different cluster of syntactic properties than the other auxiliaries and even from one to the other, it is not particularly telling that progressive-*be* has one apparently unique feature that distinguishes it from all the rest.

Second, there are unique features of some of the copular uses of *be* as well, yet these do not compel English grammar books to call each one a syntactically distinct copula. For example, only predicate adjectives can occur in various kinds of comparative constructions, as illustrated in (29) (examples from Davies 2004 – the BYU-BNC: The British National Corpus):

- (30) a. however complicated the key sequence is, a self-indexing function can be found . . .
 b. The more fleeting the moment, the more poignant the emotion.
 c. Depressed as he was, he managed to ruin the mood.

These constructions are not semantically compatible with predicate nominals and some predicate locatives:

- (31) a. *However a teacher she was, she couldn't get a job.
 b. *The more the father he was, the less he could get done.
 c. *A teacher as he was, he had to look stern.
 d. *However in the house he was, she couldn't get him to cook a meal.
 e. *On top of the mountain as we were, we couldn't breathe.

While they do seem to be acceptable with passive constructions:

- (32) a. However frustrated by events we were, we never gave up.
 b. The more frightened by the severity of your reaction she is, the less likely she is to open up.
 c. Shocked by the tragedy as we were, we couldn't bear to attend the party.

However, clearly these comparative constructions cannot occur with progressive *be*:

- (33) a. *However smiling at her I was, I couldn't get her attention.
 b. *The more singing in the rain they were, the more they got wet.
 c. *Smiling at her as I was, I couldn't get her attention.

This particular syntactic property follows from the semantic character of the complement of *be* – only forms that describe gradable attributes can be compared. One can be more or less happy, more or less complicated, more or less frustrated by events, frightened by a reaction or shocked by a tragedy. It is harder to interpret someone as being *smiling at someone*, *singing in the rain*, *a teacher*, *the father* or *in the house* to greater or lesser degrees. These are either/or notions. In fact, it is only to the extent that such phrases

- (38) *Whating is he? (meaning 'what is he doing?')
 *Whating he is is cleaning the refrigerator. (meaning 'what he is doing is cleaning the refrigerator.')

It just so happens that such a potentially useful *wh*- word does not exist, therefore, the composite form *doing what* must suffice. This can be considered parallel to the cases of *with what*, *for what* and modern *from where*, which also requires the preposed element to remain *in situ* when the complement is extracted.

In summary, the fact that the complement of *be* in a progressive aspect construction cannot be the target of *wh*-extraction without a resumptive pro-form left *in situ* does not entail that progressive *be* is a different kind of syntactic entity than copular *be*. Many of the uses of *be* that are all considered copular also engender distinct clusters of syntactic properties. These properties can often, if not always, be attributed to the semantic characters of the complements, and not to the syntactic category of the copula/auxiliary. The *wh*- extraction characteristics of present participles in progressive aspect clauses may simply be due to the fact that the inventory of *wh*- words of English does not include one that corresponds to a present participle. Therefore, *wh*- extraction does not constitute counterevidence to the 'easy claim' made in this paper.

2.6. The myth of 'lexical verb' *be*

Since copular *be* is so clearly a member of the syntactic category of auxiliaries, why have pedagogical and more linguistically oriented works on English grammar insisted on calling it a lexical main verb? I believe that this strange phenomenon can largely be explained by a myth of traditional grammar that has been perpetuated by generations of English teachers. This myth is expressed in (39):

- (39) Every clause in English must have a lexical verb.

Starting from this assumption, all the instances of *be* in (1a) must be lexical verbs, since the only other element in the predicate is non-verbal. What I would like to claim is that (39) is an unnecessary and ungrounded assumption. The more insightful generalization, I contend, is the following:

- (40) Every clause in English must have tense, aspect and/or mode inflection.

There are other reasons for replacing (39) with (40), in addition to resolving the status of copular *be*. First, several theoretical approaches to English grammar, including recent versions of Generative Grammar, affirm the assertion in (40). For example, in the minimalist paradigm (represented by Radford 1997), the 'Sentence' is no longer the highest node in a syntactic tree. Rather 'Inflectional Phrase' is the highest node. This reflects the fact that the category that is the syntactic 'head' of a sentence is its 'I-node', or inflection. In other words, the properties of a sentence are projected from its Inflection – if there is no

- (43) *POLYSEMY OF COPULAR-be:*
- | | |
|---|--------------------|
| a. That person is tall . | <i>ATTRIBUTIVE</i> |
| b. That person is a teacher . | <i>EQUATIVE</i> |
| c. That person is in the kitchen . | <i>LOCATIVE</i> |
| d. There is a person in the kitchen. | <i>EXISTENTIAL</i> |
| e. This is for you . | <i>BENEFACTIVE</i> |
| g. This is mine . | <i>POSSESSIVE</i> |
- (44) *POLYSEMY OF AUXILIARY-be:*
- | | |
|---|--------------------|
| a. That person is eating a banana. | <i>PROGRESSIVE</i> |
| b. That banana was eaten by someone. | <i>PASSIVE</i> |

Looking first at the examples in (43), we see that the semantic relations expressed are significantly different from one another, yet traditional and pedagogical grammars typically find no reason to posit syntactically distinct 'copulas' for each relationship.⁷ Similarly, in (44) two quite distinct meanings are expressed, both of which depend on the semantic properties of the complements, rather than on any syntactic category difference among the forms of *be* – the present participle form of a verb expresses an ongoing activity, while a past participle refers to a resultant state. The auxiliary in all these examples is functioning in exactly the same way – to express the Inflectional information required of every English clause.

In summary, insisting that there is a fundamental syntactic difference between copular *be* and auxiliary *be* introduces a number of unnecessary analytic and pedagogical complexities. Adopting the alternative assertion, suggested in (40), resolves these complexities. From this point of view, every independent clause must contain an element that is 'Inflectable' with whatever Inflectional information is appropriate for that clause's syntactic function (e.g., as an independent assertion, a question, a relative clause, an adverbial clause, a clausal object, etc.). One job of the first auxiliary in an Inflected verb phrase is to carry the necessary Inflectional information. Most auxiliaries participate in expressing various aspectual and modal categories as well, but *be* basically just serves as a 'platform' for Inflection when the lexically rich element – the one responsible for most of the semantic content of the predicate – is de-verbal or non-verbal, and therefore cannot express the Inflectional information directly. This function unites the uses of *be* in copular as well as progressive aspect and passive constructions.

3. The harder claim

In the previous section, I have shown that the distinction between copular-*be*, and auxiliary-*be* is spurious. That is a fairly easy claim. The only arguments against it are based on different interpretations and selectional properties that arise because of different semantics of the complements that follow *be*. But, as I have shown, many semantic differences may arise between *be* and its complement that traditional grammars do not attribute to a syntactic category difference between types of *be*. Given the overwhelming

fact that copular-*be* and auxiliary-*be* have exactly the same syntactic properties, there is no reason to suggest that the different uses of *be* are due to a categorial distinction between two lexemes.

The more difficult assertion I would like to make is that in fact there are two syntactically distinct *be* verbs in English, and that one is a lexical main verb and the other is an auxiliary. Furthermore, I will claim that the syntactic distinctiveness of these two *be*'s (evidenced by *syntactic* properties) is motivated by the semantic difference between *stative be* and *active be*. The reasons that this assertion is more difficult are 1) the argument may give the impression that the harder claim actually contradicts the easier claim. In fact it does not. 2) Corroborative evidence for the harder claim is based on data from 'non-standard' forms of English. Some examples given below would definitely be 'ungrammatical' to most English teachers. However, such examples are attested in natural discourse, and are logically coherent. This fact lends additional support for the hard claim, though it does not constitute the major evidential basis.

3.1. Semantic Stativity vs. Activity

The semantic distinction between STATES and ACTIVITIES is mostly determined by volitionality and change. Situations that are presented as involving change, and normally initiated and controlled by some entity acting with volition (on purpose) are ACTIVITIES. Situations that do not involve change, and have no controlling entity are STATES. This is a very general characterization. As with any semantic distinction, there is in fact a continuum between prototypical states and prototypical activities – there are very good examples of states and very good examples of activities, but a large number of situations fall somewhere in between (see Vendler 1967, Chafe 1970, and Comrie, 1989 for fuller characterizations). However, the grammar of English tends to discretize (make into discrete categories) the semantic difference between stativity and activity in a number of ways. In this section I will describe two of the 'tests' for whether a situation is being presented as a 'state' or an 'activity.' These I will refer to as the habitual test and the progressive test.

The habitual test: When an independent clause occurs in the so-called 'present' tense form, the temporal reference may be interpreted as habitual aspect or as a 'true present,' i.e. a situation that is in effect at the time of utterance. Activities are normally understood as habitual (43), while states are normally understood as true present (44):

- (45) HABITUAL: They sometimes *build* their eyries on inland lava pinnacles.
You *exercise* to look good. (both from the BNC)

In the senses intended in the naturally occurring examples given in (45), *build* and *exercise* describe ACTIVITIES in that they refer to situations that involve intentionality, volition and change. When occurring in the 'present tense,' as in these examples, these verbs do not assert that the activities are taking place 'now,' i.e., at the time of speaking (though they incidentally may be), but rather that they occur from time-to-time over a long period that

- (49) Minutes later he **was loving** her completely. *HAVING SEX WITH*
 Football is a game of chance and I **am loving** every minute of it. *ENJOYING*
- (50) They 're **being rude** up that end. *ACTING RUDE*
 they're **being silly**. *ACTING SILLY*
 I'm **being honest**. *SPEAKING HONESTLY*
 I thought I'd persuaded him that he **was being foolish**. *ACTING FOOLISHLY*

Another piece of evidence that *be* in the progressive aspect is active is the fact that it doesn't seem to work with subjects that are incapable of acting with volition. The following are examples from Partee (1977):

- (51) a. John is being noisy.
 b. *The river is being noisy.

Thus we see that, like other stative verbs, when *be* appears in the progressive aspect it takes on an active, volitional meaning. But wait – isn't this a syntactic property of lexical verbs that distinguishes *be* from auxiliaries? I don't think any other auxiliaries can occur in the progressive aspect:

- (52) *They are shoulding eat more kimchi.
 *They are having eaten more kimchi.
 *They are doing eat more kimchi.
 etc.

Furthermore, active *be* can occur with *do* support, as in the following:

- (53) Careful! No **don't be silly** Amy. *DON'T ACT SILLY*
Don't be stupid Stuart! *DON'T DO SOMETHING STUPID*
 My dear, **do be quiet** –; he may be listening now! *CEASE MAKING NOISE*
Do be careful, love . . . *ACT CAREFULLY*

This is another property that *be* does not share with other auxiliaries.

- (54) *They do should eat more kimchi.
 *They do have eaten more kimchi.
 *They do do eat more kimchi.
 etc.

Finally, compare the examples in (53) above to the following stative situations expressed with the same lexical items, but without *do*-support or progressive aspect (examples from the BNC):

- (55) They're **silly** buggers though **aren't they**?
 They **are stupid** that lot!
 Of course, I'm **stupid**.
 Toads **are quiet** and **harmless** and **nice**.
 Usually she **is careful**,

While it may be a stretch to think of states as being 'habitual,' it should be clear that these clauses in the present tense make assertions about the general character of their subjects, rather than to any particular instance of their being *silly*, *stupid*, *quiet*, etc. that is asserted to be true at the moment of speaking. This seems to me to be the stative equivalent of habitual aspect.

These examples show that indeed there is something 'fishy' about *be*. It has all the properties of auxiliaries, but it can occur in the progressive aspect and it can occur with 'do-support.' It just so happens that whenever *be* occurs in the progressive aspect, or takes *do*-support, it expresses an activity rather than a state.

3.2. Stative *be* vs. Active *be*

In the above section we have seen that *be* in copular constructions that express STATES has all the properties of auxiliaries. However, *be* may have properties of lexical verbs exactly in those situations that express ACTIVITIES – *acting* quiet, *acting* silly or *acting* stupid, etc. It passes the syntactic tests for lexical verbs exactly and only when the semantics involves an ACTIVITY, usually initiated and controlled by an agent acting with volition. This is the basis of the hard claim made in this paper: that in fact there are two syntactically distinct *be*'s in English, one stative/auxiliary *be* and another active/lexical *be*.

In addition to the evidence presented so far, is there any independent evidence of the distinction between the two *be*'s? Consider the following naturally-occurring example from one of my daughters when she was 12 years old. The context was the behavior of one of her friends who attended a birthday party:

- (56) He's not silly; he just **be's** silly when he's around girls.

The form *be's* (pronounced *bees*), though utterly non-standard, is logically coherent in this context. It shows that this native speaker has two *be*'s in her lexicon. The stative *be* is the irregular one that is really an auxiliary whenever it occurs (as demonstrated in the first part of this paper). The active *be*, on the other hand, is morphologically regular, taking the regular third person singular present tense –s ending. Thus active *be* and stative *be* are formally, as well as semantically, quite distinct. This example is particularly telling in that it explicitly contrasts stative *be* – *He's not silly* – with active *be* – *he just be's silly*, thus showing that the speaker had internalized both *be*'s in her lexicon, and considered them to describe distinct states of affairs, one of which she presented as true and the other not.

Example (56) is so sensible in this context that I was curious to determine how widespread this usage was. Unfortunately, the BNC provides no clear examples of the

'regular' active *be* illustrated in (56). So, I turned to an even larger corpus – the internet. There I found much more fertile ground. Below are a few of the several hundred examples of the morphologically regular, active *be*. Examples (57) through (59) are a few of the results of a Google search for 'he just be's' (845 total hits):

- (57) Sometimes he just **be's** like that.
(preggersinlalaland.blogspot.com/2008/09/sometimes-he-just-bes-like-that.html)
- (58) he dosent really dress up he just **be's** himself and wears bermuda shorts, headband, sandles and plain shirts sometimes sleeveless
(littlemisssavannah.buzznet.com/user/journal/2021051/)
- (59) He doesn't hold one side or the other, he just **be's** himself and I admire that.
(www.populistamerica.com/not_blood_not_color_people_one_nation)

The following is from a Google search for 'she just be's' (428 total hits):

- (60) If she just **be's** herself...people will stay add her!
(www.myrefresh.com/showthread.php?t=38608&page=4)

Clearly *X just be's Xself* is a relatively common collocation. Other examples of morphologically regular *be* used in an active sense are also attested on the internet. However, they are eclipsed by many instances of the regularization of auxiliary *be* in AAVE (African American Vernacular English) – though many varieties of AAVE generally exclude the *-s* ending in 3rd person present tense. While the regularization of active *be* may or may not have originated with AAVE, it is a totally reasonable formation based solely on the internal syntactic character of so-called Standard English. Consider the following example:

- (61) If she just **be's** herself, she'll do fine in the debate.
(mikerupert.newsvine.com/_news/2008/09/28/1924839-sarah-palin-contradicts-mccain-on-pakistan-seems-to-back-obamas-position-)

The 'standard' way of expressing this would be:

- (62) If she just **is** herself, she'll do fine in the debate.

According to my native speaker intuition, this just doesn't capture the sense of volitionality and activity that is nicely expressed in (61). This distinction is reminiscent of the distinction between other pairs contrasting stative and active *be* (constructed examples):

- | | | |
|------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| (63) | a. Why aren't you the leader? | <i>STATIVE/AUXILIARY BE</i> |
| | b. Why don't you be the leader? | <i>ACTIVE/LEXICAL BE</i> |

In example (63a) the speaker just questions a state of affairs, while (63b) is a suggestion that the addressee act in some volitional way to take a leadership position. Again, this illustrates that auxiliary *be* (63a) is stative, while lexical *be* (63b) is active.

Example (64) is one last example of regular active *be*, this time occurring in the major-class past tense with *-ed*:

- (64) I gave the monitor to her while she ‘beed the doctor’ using the monitor to poke around my feet. (www.tertia.org/so_close/2007/07/well-there-you-.html)

This is an example of an adult quoting a child, and so may be dismissed as a simple morphological overgeneralization. Nevertheless, it is interesting to me that this usage clearly implies the child was actively acting like a doctor. The regular form, *she was the doctor*, simply would not have expressed the same sense.

4. Consequences for pedagogy

The consequences for English grammar pedagogy of spuriously uniting copular *be* with the lexical copular verbs, and distinguishing it from auxiliaries are manifold. In particular, every discussion of the NICE constructions must be qualified in a disjoint way: Auxiliaries and *be* work one way; lexical verbs except *be* work the other way. If ESL/EFL teachers and grammar books would consider stative *be* to be an auxiliary, the number of special cases that students would have to learn and assimilate would be reduced by almost half. After all, a significant number of rather complex constructions are sensitive to the auxiliary/lexical verb distinction as manifested by the NICE properties, namely:

- Clausal negation
- Yes/no questions
- Non-subject Wh-questions
- Emphatic constructions
- Imperatives
- Do-so (recapitulated verb-phrase) constructions

And perhaps others.

Another consequence of calling copular *be* a lexical verb is that it renders the basic clause structure of English mystifying to many SLLs. My contention and my experience as a TESOL and EFL teacher is that the assertion given in (40) (repeated and slightly modified here for convenience) goes a long way in helping students conceptualize and internalize basic English clause structure:

- (65) Every clause in English must have **one expression** of tense, aspect and/or mode inflection.

There are several reasons for this fact. First, many languages do not employ auxiliaries to the extent that English does. Such languages (Russian, Hebrew, Burmese, Tagalog and

Indonesian, to name a few) require no lexical verbal element in copular constructions (predicate nominal, predicate adjectival, locational and existential constructions, etc.). Typologically, the clause structure of English (and many other Indo-European languages) is rendered quite 'exotic' by the supposition that a lexical verb is used in such constructions. This is a major and unnecessary conceptual hurdle for many SLLs.

Second, *be* is so common in English that many students become confused as to when to include *be* and when not to, as well as when to inflect it and when not to. For example, the use of spurious *be* is common, as well as double inflection constructions such as the following (actual examples from advanced Korean SLLs of English):

- (66) Did you brought the forms?
 She is went to the store.
 They already were came.

I believe that a strong emphasis on the importance of the INFL (inflection) slot in English goes a long way toward helping students overcome such difficulties. In many ways the initial position in the predicate phrase is the pivot for English syntax. Part of mastering the 'character' of English syntax, and thereby developing fluency, is capturing a sense of how central that INFL position is. Of course, it is not necessary to emphasize the unity of copular-*be* and auxiliary-*be* in order to help students assimilate this important fact about English. However, I believe that keeping the two distinct actually introduces unnecessary confusion which makes understanding of the overall clause structure of English much more difficult.

Finally, this approach underscores the profound importance of the distinction between activities and states for English grammar. While this is a semantic distinction that can undoubtedly be expressed in every language, not every language pays quite so much attention to it grammatically as does English. In this paper we have seen how the activity/state distinction helps explain the different usages of the 'present tense' and 'progressive aspect' forms. In addition to this well-known feature of English grammar, activity vs. stativity helps to explain the use of perfect aspect forms in discourse. In particular, the distinction between simple past and present perfect is one that many SLLs find perplexing. This distinction can largely be understood in terms of the difference between an active event and a resultant state – the simple past tends to express an active event, while the perfect expresses a state that results from an earlier event. A full exposition of this manifestation of the state/activity distinction in English is the subject matter for a different paper. Suffice to say that, again, part of assimilating the general 'character' of English grammar is incorporating the state/activity distinction into one's unconscious cognitive framework for speaking English.

This paper underscores what I consider to be an important and often overlooked consideration in second language learning – namely that each language has its own typological 'character', or profile, that students must incorporate into their subconscious

model of the language in order to feel comfortable speaking it, and to develop a 'natural' or 'native-like' written and conversational style. Sometimes ways of conceptualizing and discussing grammar that arise within traditions of first language education ('grammar schools' in the traditional sense) are not intuitive for second language learners. In particular, many second language learners of English in the present century come from first language backgrounds that are typologically very different from that of English. In such situations it is very important, in my opinion, to focus on the features of English that are particularly perplexing and which seem, on the surface, to be very different from those of the students' first language. Second language learners often perceive English as quite 'exotic', not necessarily because it really is so different or strange, but mostly because of the way it is presented. I believe that a typologically informed approach to English grammar will go a long way toward helping students comprehend the essential character of English syntax, and thereby enjoy the rewards of becoming confident second language speakers.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, I have tried to show that the assumption that every English clause requires a lexical verb is unfounded. Like most languages of the world, the main predicating element in copular constructions is not a verb at all, but a de-verbal or non-verbal complement. The *be* that occurs in such constructions functions mostly as a 'platform' for expression of the all-important Inflectional information. As such, it has all the syntactic properties of core auxiliaries, and none of the properties of lexically rich verbs. Thus, copular, passive and progressive aspect constructions are unified in requiring an auxiliary *be*.

The second, related claim is that there is, in fact, a lexical verb that, in its base form is identical to auxiliary *be*. Semantically, it has lexical content in that it expresses activity; in most cases it may be paraphrased with the lexical verb *act*. However, for some speakers this lexical verb belongs to the major inflectional class, taking the present tense form *be's* and the past tense form *beed*. This lexical verb does have the syntactic characteristics of lexical verbs in general, and as such is united with copular verbs such as *become*, *seem* and *resemble*. This non-traditional, but syntactically and semantically highly motivated approach to the basic clause structure of English significantly simplifies the conceptualization and teaching of English grammar.

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FOOTNOTES

¹ Several parts of this proposal have been previously considered in the literature. Lyons (1977) notes the syntactic commonality between copular and auxiliary *be*. Bach (1967) assumes that English copular *be* is transformationally inserted, i.e. that it is not a lexical verb. Williams (1984) suggests that the copula *be* is inserted in INFL; in other words it does no more than express the Inflection of the clause.

² Grammatical functors may take emphatic or contrastive stress, e.g., 'I AM going.' In which case contraction is precluded. However, in the absence of special pragmatic features, grammatical functors are usually unstressed, and therefore tend to bind phonologically to a local host.

³ The 'semi-auxiliaries' *ought to*, *have to* and *used to* do not have all of these properties, but that is a topic for another paper. So called copular *be* is a core auxiliary in that it has all the properties of the best examples of auxiliaries in the language. When I use the term *auxiliary* in this paper, I mean core auxiliary, as described in Huddleston and Pullum (2002:92).

⁴ The 'frowny face' symbol (☹) indicates the following utterance is infelicitous in the context provided, though not strictly speaking 'ungrammatical.'

⁵ Expressions in which the verb phrase alone is emphasized do allow emphatic stress: *Yes she should EAT more kimchi (rather than MAKE more kimchi)*. The property in question here is *verum focus*, when the truth of the whole proposition is being emphasized. Only in this case may the complement of the emphasized element be ellipted, as illustrated in the examples in 13.

⁶ In most of the examples of *whence* referencing an ablative (*from X*) relation in a copular construction in the British National Corpus, the copula is omitted, e.g., *Whence this insolence? . . . whence the name --; Aubeterre*, etc. However, there are a few examples, such as 37a, in which the copula is retained.

⁷ Some languages actually do have distinct copulas that are used to express the range of semantics expressed by English *be*. Mandarin, for example, uses the form *shì* for attributive and equative clauses, *zài* for locational clauses, and *yǒu* for existential and possessive clauses. Spanish uses *estar* for temporary attribution, all locational clauses and progressive aspect, *haber* for existential clauses, and *ser* for permanent attribution, equative and passive clauses.