The two *be*'s of English[1]

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Abstract
This qualitative study investigates the uses of *be* in Contemporary English. Based on this study, one easy claim and one more difficult claim are proposed. The easy claim is that the traditional distinction between *be* as a lexical verb and *be* as an auxiliary is faulty. In particular, 'copular-*be*', traditionally considered to be a lexical verb, is in fact a prototypical auxiliary. The harder claim is that there is a syntactic distinction between lexical-*be* and auxiliary-*be*, but that distinction does not coincide with the copular vs. non-copular usages. Rather, the syntactic distinction between lexical and auxiliary *be* has an entirely different, semantic motivation based on stativity vs. activity. In the process of providing evidence for these claims, the paper challenges a major assumption of traditional grammar – namely that every English sentence requires a lexical verb. This assumption is replaced by the notion that every English sentence requires Inflection. The proposals in this paper bridge the gap between theoretical and applied linguistics and have the potential to simplify significantly the conceptualization, teaching and learning of English grammar.

Keywords: English syntax, auxiliary verbs, copular verbs, language teaching

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, p. 53; Greenbaum & Quirk, 1990, p. 36; Berk, 1999, p. 151; Azar, 2002: A6; Teschner & Evans, 2007, p. 51; Börjars & Burridge, 2001, pp. 166–167, to name a few). Common textbook examples of these two uses of *be* are given in (1a, b) respectively:

(1) a. *LEXICAL VERB*
She **is** a doctor.
They **are** hilarious.
Malcolm **was** the leader.
This **is** for you.
We**'re** in the kitchen.
There **were** three children in the yard.

b. *AUXILIARY*
She **is** waiting.
The vase **was** broken by the workers.
We **were** devastated by the tragedy.

In this paper 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, p. 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 ap-

proaches 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.

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, p. 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 this journal in a clear fashion, and explore how they potentially affect the teaching and learning of English.

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, e.g., Givon, 2001, pp. 187–237; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). In this characterization of the lexicon, lexical verbs form an open class of words that have certain syntactic features and tend to express 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 a 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.

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 portaits.→ On the wall're hanging three portraits.
Here have fallen many fine soldiers.
→ Here've fallen many fine soldiers.

This contraction does not occur with any main lexical verbs:

(3) 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.

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.

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, pp. 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 chelow kebab.
She is eating chelow kebab.
The vase was broken by the workers.
We have lived in Isfahan.

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

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

(6) *She eats not chelow kebab.
*The workers broke not the vase.
*We live not in Isfahan.

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 chelow kebab. →
She **does not** eat chelow kebab.
The workers broke the vase. →
The workers **did not** break the vase.
We live in Isfahan. →
We **do not** live in Isfahan.

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

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

Y/N INTEROGATIVE:
Should she eat more chelow kebab?
Is she eating chelow kebab?
Was the vase broken by the workers?
Have we lived in Isfahan?

Wh- *INTEROGATIVE*:
What **should she** eat more of?
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 chelow kebab?
Did the workers break the vase?
Do we live in Isfahan?

Wh- *INTEROGATIVE*:
What **does** she eat?
What **did** the workers break?
Where **do** we live?

Again, lexical main verbs do not exhibit this property:

(10) *Eats she chelow kebab?
*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 kebabs, should she?
*She should not eat kebabs, eat she?
*She eats kebabs, 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 chelow kebab? She should. *She (should) eat.

We were eating kebabs, and so was she.
*We were eating kebabs, 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 kebabs, doesn't she?
*She likes kebabs, 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 kebabs? 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 chelow. 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 Isfahan. 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 chelow. Yes she DOES. ☹Yes she EATS.

The workers broke the vase. Yes they DID. ☹Yes they BROKE.

We live in Isfahan. Yes we DO. ☹Yes we LIVE.

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:

(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 **is** 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:

(18) She's a doctor. Yes, she IS.
☹Yes, she DOES.
We were in Isfahan. 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*:

(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.

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 baking.

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 chelow. →
What should he **do**?
*What should he?
They have eaten chelow. →
What have they **done**?
*What have they?
They eat chelow. →
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 song.

b. What she should **do** is sing the national song.

(24) a. *What she has is sung the national song.

b. What she has **done** is sung the national song.

(25) a. *What I'm not is singing the national song.

b. What I'm not **doing** is singing the national song.

(26) a. *What she is is singing the national song.

b. What she is **doing** is singing the national song.

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 exhibit 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 (20) (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 can be interpreted as gradable attributes that they can occur in these comparative constructions:

(34) The more to the left of and above the dashed straight line a curve *is*, the more potential exists for improvement.

Since something can be more or less to the left of something else, and more or less above something else, these particular prepositional phrases can be compared with the same kind of comparative construction as gradable modifiers can.

Finally, one could interpret the requirement that a pro-form be left *in situ* when the complement of progressive *be* is extracted as simply the result of the fact that English possesses no *wh-* word that corresponds to a present participle verb form. The same is true when prepositional phrases other than locatives are extracted. For example, there is no *wh-* word in English that corresponds directly to a benefactive element. Instead the complex, *for who(m)* must be used. In this case, the preposition must be left *in situ*:

(35) Whom this is **for** is you.
*Whom this is is for you.

This is true of other non-locative prepositional phrase complements of copular *be*:

(36) a. Whom she was **with** is your mother.
*Whom she was is with your mother.

b. Where this traveller is **from** is Vulcan.
*Where this traveller is is from Vulcan.

c. What this road is **toward** is your new house.
*What this road is is toward your new house.

Modern English simply lacks *wh-* words that correspond to the relations expressed by these prepositional phrases, just as it lacks a *wh-* word that corresponds to a present participle.

Notice, however, that the somewhat archaic English words, *whence*, and *whither* correspond to the modern *from where* and *to where* (*toward*) respectively. For speakers who still use these *wh-* words, the following are possible:

(37) a. Whence is that knocking? (BNC)[6]

b. Whence that knocking is is the front door.

c. The final chapter –; on whither the wedding cake –; . . .

d. 'Whither are we bound, my lord?'

Thus we see that extractability is at least somewhat dependent on the semantic relations expressed by the available inventory of *wh-* words. Imagine for a moment that the *wh-* word **whating* existed in English. In that case perhaps present participles could be extracted with no clarifying pro-form left *in situ*:

(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 coun-

terevidence to the 'easy claim' made in this paper.

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. I would like to claim 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 Inflection, there is no sentence. The actual arguments for this determination are quite compelling, if rather complex. Readers are referred to Radford (1997, pp. 61- ff.) for the details.

Second, the special forms traditionally termed present and past participles that follow *be* in progressive aspect and passive voice constructions are deverbal in that they have lost most of their syntactic properties of verbs; in particular, they cannot be inflected. Therefore, like other non-verbal categories (nouns, adjectives and prepositional phrases), participial forms must rely on some other element (a core auxiliary) to express the important inflectional information when the participle itself constitutes the main semantic content of a predicate.

Lets look at some examples that may help illustrate this fact. Basic passive constructions are very similar to copular predicate adjective constructions in which the adjective happens to be a past participle:

(41) a. The vase **was broken** when the workers moved the piano.

b. The vase **was beautiful** when the artisan finished painting it.

c. As soon as I walked into the room, I noticed that the vase **was broken**.

Many grammar books would say that *was* in (41a) is an auxiliary because the construction is a passive. On the other hand, *was* in (41b) and (41c) is a lexical verb because the constructions are predicate adjectives. However the three predicates are syntactically identical. Clearly there is a difference in meaning between the passive and attributive senses of the complements of *be* in these sentences, but that difference can be attributed to the nature of the complements, not necessarily to any syntactic categorial difference between the two uses of *be*.

Similarly, consider the following two examples:

(42) a. That person **is annoying** me.
*That person is very annoying me.

b. That person **is annoying**.
That person is very annoying.

Again, many grammar books and linguists would say that *be* in (42a) is an auxiliary, while in (42b) it is a lexical verb. Of course, the meaning difference between the senses of *annoying* in these two examples is important, and does affect the collocational possibilities (or selectional constraints) of the two constructions. That (42a) is progressive and (42b) is attributive is demonstrated, for example, by the fact that the adverb *very* can only be inserted in (42b) (see Wasow, 1977 for further selectional arguments for the difference between passive and attributive participles). Nevertheless, if the distinction between auxiliary and main lexical verb is supposed to be a distinction between two syntactic classes of items, there should be *syntactic* correlates to the semantic distinction. Otherwise, there is no reason to posit anything other than garden variety polysemy. Clearly *be*+complement constructions may be polysemous in a number of ways, including progressive vs. attributive. However, in every case the polysemy stems from the syntactic or discourse context (41a, c):

(43) *POLYSEMY OF COPULAR-be*:

a. That person **is tall.** *ATTRIBUTIVE*

b. That person **is a teacher**. *EQUATIVE*

c. That person **is in the kitchen**.
LOCATIVE

d. There **is a rat** in the kitchen.
EXISTENTIAL

e. This **is for you**. *BENEFACTIVE*

g. This **is mine**. *POSSESSIVE*

(44) *POLYSEMY OF AUXILIARY-be*:

a. That person **is eating** a banana.
PROGRESSIVE

b. That banana **was eaten** by someone.
PASSIVE

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 conceptual 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.

The harder claim

In the previous section, I have shown that the distinction between copular-*be*, and auxiliary-*be* is spurious. The only arguments against this claim 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 similar 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, and should not be used as examples in ESL classrooms. 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.

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; 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 (45), while states are normally understood as true present (46):

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

In the senses intended in the naturally occurring examples given in (44), *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 includes the time of speaking. No particular finite event of building or exercising is referenced.

On the other hand, the verbs *see*, *love* and *be* in (46), below, express STATES, in that no movement or change is asserted. In the present tense, these examples assert that the state holds 'now,' i.e., at the time of utterance. The specific current instance of the state is being referenced, rather than the possibility that the state holds true from time-to-time (all examples from the BNC):

(46) *TRUE PRESENT*:
I **see** you are troubled at something.
I **love** you.
The room **is red** now.

Thus 'present tense' for activities expresses 'habitual aspect,' while 'present tense' for states expresses a true present. In order to express the idea that an activity is taking place 'now', progressive aspect must be employed. This constitutes the next test for whether a situation is being presented as a state or an activity.

The progressive test: There is an apparent semantic anomaly between stative situations and progressive aspect. This is because the progressive aspect construction evokes an image that involves 'progression,' i.e., progressive change and/or movement. A state, by definition, does not involve movement or change, therefore prototypically stative situations are not semantically amenable to expression in the progressive aspect:

(47) I see the airplane.
?I'm seeing the airplane.
She likes ice-cream.
?She is liking ice cream.
We know the answer.
?We are knowing the answer.
The room is red.
??The room is being red.

However, the question-marked examples of (47) are not 'ungrammatical.' Rather, they constitute less-than prototypical expressions of the stative concepts of *seeing*, *liking*, *knowing* and *being red*. In fact, stative concepts can occur in the progressive, but when they do, a different, non-stative, sense is expressed. Because of the cognitive schema evoked by the progressive aspect construction, the construction itself evokes the notion of activity. The examples in (48) through (50), from the BNC, illustrate the same verbs as in (46) above, but this time in the progressive aspect. The active interpretations of these situations, as made clear by the context, are given in caps following each example:

(48) ***We're seeing*** already, that Health Authorities haven't got the money . . .
LEARNING
Yes they **were seeing** how much more they could eat and take home.
DETERMINING
I **was seeing** them one after the other.
INTERVIEWING

(49) 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:

(51) a. The children are being quiet.

b. *The river is being quiet.

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 chelow.
*They are having eaten more chelow.
*They are doing eat more chelow.
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 chelow.
*They do have eaten more chelow.
*They do do eat more chelow.
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!
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.

These examples show that indeed there is something strange 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.

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-*be*s-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 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?
STATIVE/AUXILIARY BE

b. Why don't you be the leader?
ACTIVE/LEXICAL BE

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 simple 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.

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, Burmese, Tagalog, 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 the 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 in second language classes. 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.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have shown 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 that distinguish lexically rich verbs. Thus, copular, passive and progressive aspect constructions are unified in requiring an auxiliary *be*.

The second 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* or *act like*. 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.

Notes

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 absense 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, p. 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 chelow kebab (rather than MAKE more chelow kebab)*. 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 0.
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 0a, in which the copula is retained.

7. Some languages actually do have distinct copulas that are used to express portions of 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.

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