

The Simple Past and Present Perfect in African-American English

As noted by Dechaine (1993), unlike their Standard American English (SAE) counterparts, African American English (AAE) simple *V-ed* sentences such as that in (1) are ambiguous; they have both simple past (past perfective) and present perfect readings.

- (1) John ate the hamburger. (AAE)
'John ate the hamburger' (SAE)
'John has eaten the hamburger' (SAE)

This paper focuses on the role of verb morphology in AAE perfect and perfective constructions and the ambiguity of sentences like (1). I argue that the ambiguity of (1) can be traced to the presence of a covert present tense operator found in its present perfect version and the interaction of this operator with what I will call *-ed*, the morphology that turns the verb *eat* into *ate*. When it interacts with the present tense operator, *-ed* is interpreted as perfect aspect, but when it is the highest tense/aspect marker in the sentence, it is interpreted as past tense.

I provide further evidence for Dechaine's claim that AAE simple *V-ed* sentences are ambiguous. AAE simple *V-ed* sentences can be used in all of Dahl's (1985) prototypical occurrences of the perfect and in all of his prototypical occurrences of the perfective. They can also be used as any of Comrie's (1976) 'perfects' except the perfect of persistent situation. In this they contrast with AAE preverbal *done* sentences such as *John done ate the hamburger*. *Done* sentences are unambiguously present perfect. They can be used in all of Dahl's prototypical occurrences of the perfect, but none of his prototypical occurrences of the perfective. They can also be used as any of Comrie's perfects including the perfect of persistent situation. Further, like the Standard American English (SAE) present perfect, they are not compatible with past-time-denoting adverbs. Simple *V-ed* sentences, on the other hand, can be modified with such adverbs, but only in past perfective contexts.

Tag question data reveal the relationship between the present perfect reading of AAE simple *V-ed* sentences and a covert tense operator. In past perfective contexts, AAE simple *V-ed* sentences take *didn't* tags (e.g. *John ate the hamburger, didn't he?*). In present perfect contexts they take *ain't* tags (e.g. *John ate the hamburger, ain't he?*). The marker *ain't* only appears as tag to present tense sentences. *He is eating, ain't he?*, for instance, is grammatical, but *He was eating, ain't he?* is not.

Like Green (1993), upon whose work she partly builds, Dechaine argues that *done* is a perfect (or completive) aspect marker. Her explanation for the ambiguity of sentences such as (1) is that on their present perfect readings, these sentences employ a covert *done*. Comrie's classification, however, reveals that the present-perfect version of (1) and its *done* counterpart are not semantically equivalent. Thus, the ambiguity of sentence (1) cannot be explained by positing a covert *done*. I claim the source of perfect (or completive) aspect in both simple *V-ed* and preverbal *done* sentences is *-ed*, and that role of *done* is to introduce stativity, which allows for perfect of persistent situation readings.

I propose that *-ed* acts as the precedence operator on times. This definition allows *-ed* to act as carrier of either tense or aspect as in defining tense and aspect, I follow Wolfgang Klein (1994), who argues that these categories are relations between time intervals. Aspect, according to Klein, is a relation between the time interval during which an eventuality takes place and the time interval about which a sentence makes an assertion (Reichenbach's 1947 Reference Time). Klein refers to these intervals as the situation time (TSit) and topic time (TT), respectively. Tense, on the other hand, is a relation between the TT and the utterance time (TU). Both past tense and perfect aspect contain the notion of precedence. Past tense tells us TT precedes TU, and perfect aspect tells us TSit precedes TT. My claim that the meaning of the *-ed* morphology is simply precedence explains why it appears in both past perfective and present perfect sentences. Positioned under a null tense operator, *-ed* relates a TSit to a TT, and thus is interpreted as aspect. When *-ed* is the highest tense/aspect marker in the computation (no other tense/aspect marker is projected), it introduces a TT and relates it to the TU. Thus, it is interpreted as tense.

In this paper I put forward a compositional account of AAE simple *V-ed* sentences, which provides insight into the relationship between past tense and perfect aspect.

References

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