-ing as an Agreement Marker in African American English: Implications for Acquisition

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1 Introduction

This paper focuses on -ing in aspectual constructions in African American English (AAE) and argues that it functions as a morphological agreement marker that is required by the feature [HABITUAL], not as a progressive marker. Section 2 presents a general overview of the distribution of the forms of auxiliary be, which will be compared to aspectual (habitual) be in a later section. Section 3 considers the remote past marker BIN and suggests that -ing in BIN V-ing sequences is linked to the ambiguity in those constructions. V-ing in BIN V-ing constructions can have a progressive (or state) reading, or it can have a habitual reading. Section 4 presents an overview of aspectual be constructions, which are distinguished from progressive constructions and simple tense generics. Section 5 presents an analysis of -ing as an agreement marker that is required to occur on verbs in habitual remote past BIN and aspectual be constructions. The final section of the paper presents data from child comprehension tasks, which raise questions about the extent to which developing AAE speakers understand the habitual

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interpretation associated with aspectual markers be and BIN. In addition, the
data raise questions about the extent to which children begin to associate
–ing in aspectual be and remote past BIN V-ing constructions with the feature [HABITUAL] as they develop the AAE tense-aspect system.

2 Distribution of Forms of Beaux

There are at least two BEs in AAE: the auxiliary (and copula) and aspectual be. The auxiliary be (beaux) in AAE can be spelled out in its overt (contracted or full) forms, or it can be null (Labov 1969; Baugh 1980; Rickford, Ball, Blake, Jackson, and Martin 1991; Déchaine 1993; Green 1993; Walker 2000). Examples of the overt beaux are in (1):\(^2\)

(1) a. Dee beaux + [EMPH] t₁ running→Dee IS running.
b. Dee beaux + [PAST] t₁ running→Dee was running.
c. Qbeaux + [-PAST] t₁→IS Dee running?
d. Dee beaux+[PAST] t₁+NEG running→Dee wasn’t running.
e. 1st singular [-PAST]: I’m running.
f. 3rd singular neuter [-PAST]: It’s running.

The data in (1) show that auxiliary be occurs in its overt form when it hosts an emphatic morpheme (1a), past tense (1b), question morpheme (Q) (1c), and past tense and negation morphemes (1d). In addition, beaux surfaces in the environment of first person singular non-past and third person singular non-past neuter pronouns. Null (Ø) beaux occurs when it is not required to host past tense or a Q morpheme, as illustrated in (2). The Q morpheme may signal question intonation and interrogative force and may be different from the one in (1c), which requires a host.

(2) a. Dee Ø beaux + [-PAST] t₁ running→Dee running.
b. Dee Ø beaux + [-PAST] t₁+NEG running→Dee not running.
c. Q Dee Ø beaux + [-PAST] t₁ running→Dee running?

3 –ing and the Progressive

Beaux (overt or Ø) V-ing marks the progressive in AAE just as it does in other varieties of English.

(3) a. Dee running. (‘Dee is running’)

\(^2\)The copula can also be null in AAE.
b. Dee was running.
c. Dee was sweeping the floor when the phone rang.

As in mainstream American English, stative verbs do not generally occur in the progressive in AAE (4a); however, there are contexts in which this restriction is relaxed (4b).

(4) a. *Dee is/Ø knowing the answers.
   b. Dee is looking more and more like her mother these days.

V-ing also occurs as the predicate in BIN constructions. The remote past marker BIN, which is stressed, situates an eventuality or part of it in the remote past (Green 1998). BIN V-ing constructions are ambiguous between two readings that are labeled as $BIN_{\text{STAT}}$ and $BIN_{\text{HAB}}$.

$BIN_{\text{STAT}}$ situates the initial point of a state in the remote past. These BIN constructions are similar to progressives in that they also present “stable situations” (Smith 1997: 84).

(5) a. Dee BIN running.
    ‘Dee has been running for a long time’
   b. Dee BIN knowing Swahili.
    ‘Dee has known Swahili for a long time’

These BIN constructions can be represented in a Parsons-type (1990) analysis in which events are argued to underlie the eventualities to which sentences refer:

(6) a. Dee BIN running.
   b. $\exists l[(l.l < $now$ & (C_e)(C_s)$running$(e) & $\text{theme}(e, Dee) & IP state(e,s) & $\text{Hold}(s, l)]$

The representation in (6b) indicates that some long interval begins before now, and the running event holds throughout that interval.

$BIN_{\text{HAB}}$ situates the initial point of a habit in the remote past:

(7) a. Dee BIN running for 30 minutes.
    ‘For a long time Dee has had the habit of running for thirty minute stretches’

In (7) temporal modification is restricted to the verb. Modification is of periods of shorter instantiations of eventualities, running events expressed by the verb and that constitute the habit. Temporal adverbials cannot modify
BIN or the length of the long interval. The sentence in (7a) can be represented as in (7b):

b. (\exists I) [long(I) & Beg(I) now (i) i∈I & HAB, [for 30 minutes, i]
(\exists e)(\exists s) [running(e) & theme(e, Dee) & IP state(e, s) & Hold(s,I)]]

Given the restriction on modification, (7a) cannot have the BIN_{STAT} reading that means that Dee’s running started 30 minutes ago and has held throughout the 30-minute interval. In general, non-stative verbs can have both the BIN_{STAT} and BIN_{HAB} readings, and, in some contexts, stative verbs can also have both readings. This was also shown to be the case with $be_{stat}$ V-ing progressives. (See 4a.) A summary of BIN readings is given below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. ✓BIN_{STAT}, ✓BIN_{HAB}</td>
<td>Dee BIN running. (5a, 6a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. ✓BIN_{STAT}, ✓BIN_{HAB}</td>
<td>Dee BIN looking like her mother. BIN_{STAT} ‘Dee has looked like her mother for a long time’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BIN_{HAB} ‘For a long time, Dee has looked like her mother for periods of time’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. ✓BIN_{STAT}, ✓BIN_{HAB}</td>
<td>Dee BIN having that car. BIN_{STAT} ‘Dee has had that car for a long time’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BIN_{HAB} ‘For a long time, Dee has used that car from time to time’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. ✓BIN_{STAT}, ?#BIN_{HAB}</td>
<td>Dee BIN knowing how to fix washing machines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. ✓BIN_{STAT}, #BIN_{HAB}</td>
<td>Dee BIN knowing Swahili.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Summary of BIN Readings

Both the states indicated by the predicates looking (Table 1, b) and having (Table 1, c) can have an event reading in habitual contexts. However, the state indicated by the verb know is somewhat more resistant to an event reading, as shown in (Table 1, d) and (Table 1, e). While it may be slightly possible to force the BIN_{HAB} reading of know how to fix washing machines, it is not at all possible to get this reading for knowing Swahili, which shows that the type of predicate in the BIN construction has some effect on the interpretation.

4 **-ing and Habitual**

In addition to occurring in progressive contexts, V-ing also occurs in habitual $be$ constructions, which can be distinguished from progressive contexts.
In habitual constructions, habitual or aspectual *be* (*be_{asp}*) indicates that an eventuality recurs:

(8) Dee be running.

‘Dee usually runs/is usually running’

Habitual *be* constructions are similar to simple tense generics, but they can be distinguished from generics in that *be_{asp}* constructions are not ambiguous between habitual/generic and ability readings, but simple tense generics are:

(9) a. Bruce work on old Thunderbirds.  
   b. Bruce be working on old Thunderbirds.

   ‘Bruce works on old Thunderbirds from time to time’

While the sentence in (9a) can have the reading Bruce will work on Thunderbirds or has the ability to work on old Thunderbirds although he may not have had the opportunity to do so, or it can mean that he actually works on old Thunderbirds from time to time.\(^4\) The sentence in (9b) can only have the universal reading, in which Bruce does indeed work on old Thunderbirds from time to time; it cannot have the ability reading in which Bruce can work on old Thunderbirds but has never actually worked on one.

The *be_{asp}* construction such as that in (9b) has as its core reading habitual, but it is expressed with *be V-ing*, not simple tense. The *be V-ing* construction is similar in morphological form to the progressive, and it also has an in-progress reading:

(10) Dee be riding her bike when the phone ring.

   a. in-progress reading: Dee’s bike riding is in progress when the phone rings.

However, the sentence in (10) also has the closed reading (Smith 1997), in which the bike riding event is not in progress when the phone rings:

   b. closed reading: Dee’s bike riding begins after the phone rings.

The reading in (10b) clearly distinguishes the *be_{asp}* construction from the progressive. The habitual *be* construction differs from the progressive in one

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\(^3\)Person and number agreement marking in AAE is variable at best. In most cases, there is no overt person and number agreement marking in 3rd person singular contexts.

\(^4\)The characterization of the generic reading as an ability reading is based on the notion of capacity reading in Schubert and Pelletier (1989).
additional way. As shown in (11a), \( \text{be}_{\text{asp}} \text{ V-ing} \) is compatible with both states and events; however, as shown in (11b), progressive \( \text{be}_{\text{aux}} \text{V-ing} \) is not compatible with stative verbs:

(11) a. Dee be knowing how to fix washing machines.

Literally: Dee usually shows that she knows how to fix washing machines (by repairing broken machines, giving advice about which parts of the machines should be replaced, etc.).

b. *Dee Ø/IS knowing how to fix washing machines.

The example in (11a) provides further support that \( \text{be}_{\text{asp}} \text{V-ing} \) and \( \text{be}_{\text{aux}} \text{V-ing} \) (progressive) are different and that difference may be linked to –ing in both forms. The descriptive generalization is that \( \text{be}_{\text{asp}} \) is analyzed as introducing a habitual operator (HAB) into the logical representations. HAB binds variables ranging over eventualities. It relates an eventuality expressed by a predicate to an occasion. Consider the representation below:

(12) a. Dee be riding her bike when the phone ring.

b. HAB \([\text{ring (phone, e)}][\text{riding bike (Dee, e)}]\)

Informally, the representation in (12) says that habitually when the phone rings, Dee rides her bike at that time.

5 **-ing as an Agreement Marker**

5.1 –ing and \( \text{Be}_{\text{asp}} \) Agreement

In the preceding section, it has been shown that \( \text{be}_{\text{asp}} \text{V-ing} \) and \( \text{be}_{\text{aux}} \text{V-ing} \) differ in several ways, and the differences raise the question about the role of –ing in the constructions. \( \text{Be}_{\text{asp}} \text{V-ing} \) can have the in-progress reading, but even when it has that reading, it still has the habitual or quantificational reading. In this construction, I want to suggest that –ing matches the habituality of \( \text{be}_{\text{asp}} \), so it is analyzed as an agreement marker rather than as a marker of an event that is in progress. As an agreement marker, –ing is required in \( \text{be}_{\text{asp}} \text{V-ing} \) constructions; that is, \( \text{be}_{\text{asp}} \) forces the verb to occur with morphological agreement expressed as –ing:

\[5\text{As is clear from the sentence Dee is looking more and more like her mother these days, stative verbs can occur in the progressive with a type of event reading.}\]
The analysis of –ing as an agreement marker in be_{asp} V-ing constructions captures the difference in meaning between be_{asp} V-ing and be_{aux} V-ing constructions. Another advantage of such an analysis is that it provides an indirect explanation for why be_{asp} can never occur as Ø, but be_{aux} can. The explanation is that be_{asp} introduces into the representation an eventuality argument, so it cannot be absent. Habituality and the eventuality argument are linked to –ing:

\[
\text{(14)} \quad \begin{array}{c}
\text{be}_{\text{asp}}(e) \\
\text{[+HABITUAL]}
\end{array} + \begin{array}{c}
\text{know}(e) \\
\text{[+HABITUAL]}
\end{array} \rightarrow \text{be knowing}
\]

On the other hand, in the case of be_{aux} V-ing, be_{aux} does not introduce any additional information into the structure, so it is not required to occur on the surface. Furthermore, if it is indeed the case that –ing in progressive constructions stativizes verbs, then it is clear why be_{aux} -ing is not compatible with stative verbs. On the other hand, -ing in aspectual be constructions coerces verbs to have a habitual reading, and this coercion applies to stative verbs by making them take on eventive readings.

(15) a. *Bruce is/Ø knowing the answer.
    b. Bruce be knowing the answer.
    Literally: Bruce generally does something to show that he knows the answer.

Along these lines, be_{asp} must occur on the surface, not as a stativizer but as a quantificational element that introduces an eventuality argument into the representation and forces verbs to take a habitual interpretation. This description is compatible with the representation in (12b) above.

5.2 Extending the Agreement Analysis to BIN_{HAB}

The BIN_{HAB} V-ing reading is quite similar to the be_{asp} V-ing reading. Both constructions indicate habits, but the difference is that the former refers to habits that started in the distant past, while the latter does not make any claims about how far in the past the habit started. Given the similarity between the two constructions, it seems possible to extend the –ing analysis
proposed for be\textsubscript{ap} V-ing constructions to –ing in BIN\textsubscript{HAB} constructions. That is –ing in BIN\textsubscript{HAB} constructions also matches the [HABITUAL] feature associated with BIN, as shown in the representation below:

(16) \[
\begin{array}{c|c|c}
BIN\textsubscript{HAB} & V-ing & \text{[+HABITUAL]}_i \\
& \text{[+HABITUAL]}_i & \\
\end{array}
\]

A question that arises in light of the proposal for V-ing in BIN\textsubscript{HAB} constructions is about the source of the [HABITUAL] feature. There are a number of explanations for this feature. The explanation that I will present is related to the cooccurrence restriction on be\textsubscript{ap} and BIN. The claim is that both markers are generated in the head of the Aspect Phrase (AspP), so they cannot occur at the same time. The following are ruled out just for that reason:

(17) a. *[Asp\textsubscript{ap} be BIN] [VP running] (*Bruce be BIN running.)
    b. *[Asp\textsubscript{ap} BIN be] [VP running] (*Bruce BIN be running.)

While the cooccurrence of be and BIN leads to ungrammaticality, the logical interpretation resulting from the sequence of the two is compositional and the actual meaning of habitual remote past, the reading of BIN\textsubscript{HAB}. The meaning cannot be a result of the combination of the two markers because they never cooccur, but it might result from a habitual feature that may be left in the representation because there is no place for be\textsubscript{ap} when BIN already occupies the Asp position. Because BIN also carries a pitch accent, then it is the marker that always wins out when there is competition between be\textsubscript{ap} and BIN for the Asp position. Therefore, the sentences in (17) are ungrammatical. The meaning is conveyed by Bruce BIN running, and the argument here is that the feature [HABITUAL] occurs because the marker be\textsubscript{ap} cannot. In this case, the –ing in BIN\textsubscript{HAB} V-ing constructions is required by [HABITUAL] much like it is required in be\textsubscript{ap} V-ing constructions.

The properties of progressive –ing in AAE that occurs in be\textsubscript{aux} V-ing constructions is also found in BIN\textsubscript{STAT} V-ing constructions (4a, b). The –ing in those constructions indicates that the eventuality indicated by the verb has been in progress from some point in the remote past to the speech time. In such cases, –ing can be argued to be a stativizer, which is different from the –ing that is required to match the [HABITUAL] that is associated with be\textsubscript{ap} and BIN\textsubscript{HAB}.

In summary, the argument is that –ing in be\textsubscript{ap} and BIN\textsubscript{HAB} V-ing constructions is a type of morphological agreement that is required by the fea-
ture [HABITUAL]. It does not have the same function as progressive –ing in beaux and BINSTAT V-ing constructions.

6 –ing Agreement and Acquisition of Aspectual Markers

Given the prominence of aspectual markers and the interpretation of verbal predicates in aspectual marker sequences, a number of questions about the development of these markers and their use with certain predicates in child AAE arise. In order to address some of these questions, data from two comprehension tasks, one on BIN and the other on beaux, are considered.

6.1 BIN Comprehension Tasks

The BIN data are from forty-two three- to five-year-old developing AAE-speaking children in a child development program in southwest Louisiana. The participants were tested on ten scenarios that portrayed objects/characters as having been engaged in an activity for a long time as compared with other objects/characters that had been in the state or engaged in an activity for a shorter time. The scenarios consisted of short stories, pictures, and prompts. The interviewer read the short story to the participant while pointing to the corresponding pictures and asked BIN prompts (or target questions) related to the pictures. A sample scenario is given below:

Figure 1 BIN Scenario (BINSTAT)
Bruce and Jenny’s mother told them that they could watch TV if they wash and dry the dishes after dinner. Jenny started washing the dishes while Bruce went to put on his pajamas and brush his teeth. Then he came back to help Jenny dry the dishes.

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6Eight participants have been added to the study since the presentation. The overall results have not changed.
The ten scenarios consisted of BIN followed by V-ing, V-ed, N, and Adj; however, only BIN V-ing results will be reported here. The percentage correct for the BIN V-ing scenarios is given in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prompt</th>
<th>%Correct</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scenario 1: Who BIN working at the kitchen sink? (Jenny)</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Who has been working at the kitchen sink for a long time?’ (gloss)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scenario 2: Who BIN knowing how to climb trees? (Jenny)</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Who has known for a long time how to climb trees?’ (gloss)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scenario 3: Who BIN fixing bikes? (the old man)</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Who has been fixing bikes for a long time?’ (gloss)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 BIN V-ing Results

The participants scored over 80% correct on the BIN working and BIN knowing scenarios. The claim is that children who interpret BIN as a distant past marker, distinct from the simple past, will select Jenny for the BIN working scenario, and they will select the character who has known how to climb trees longer than the other characters for the BIN knowing scenario. In both cases, we get the BINSTAT reading, in which a state has held from the distant past to the speech time. For example, according to the scenario, Jenny started working at the kitchen sink a long time ago, and the working at the kitchen sink event has held since that time. The participants scored much lower on the BIN fixing scenario. The difference between the BIN fixing scenario and the other BIN V-ing scenarios is that it is ambiguous between a BINSTAT and a BINHAB reading. That is, in the BIN fixing scenario, the targeted character (old man) is not portrayed as fixing a bike at the speech time, so the story and pictures are compatible with the reading in which the old man started fixing bikes a long time ago, and he still fixes them from time to time. Compare the BIN working scenario, in which Jenny is portrayed as working at the kitchen sink, to the BIN fixing scenario, in which the old man is not working on the bike. If it is the case that children are sensitive to the BINSTAT and BINHAB readings, then a possible explanation for the lower BIN fixing score is that the children have some difficulty with the BINHAB reading, in which V-ing is taken as a habitual agreement marker rather than as an in progress marker. The data for the beasp scenarios offer some support for the hypothesis that children have difficulty with the habitual interpretation.
6.2 Be\textsubscript{amp} Comprehension Tasks

The \textit{be}\textsubscript{amp} comprehension tasks were designed to determine whether developing AAE-speaking children associate \textit{be}\textsubscript{amp} with habitual situations. The \textit{be}\textsubscript{amp} data are from twenty-five developing AAE-speaking children in a child development program in southwest Louisiana.\footnote{Nine participants have been added to the study since the presentation.} The six test scenarios included a short story, corresponding pictures, and a prompt or target question that featured \textit{be}\textsubscript{amp} followed by a verbal or non-verbal predicate. A sample scenario is given below:

![Sample Scenario Image]

**Figure 2 Be\textsubscript{amp} Scenario**

At lunchtime, all the kids eat together. Bruce always has turkey sandwiches because he loves turkey. He had turkey sandwiches last week and this week. Jenny likes peanut butter and jelly or ham and cheese. She doesn’t eat turkey for lunch. Faye likes everything. She sometimes has a cheese sandwich. Today, Faye has a turkey sandwich but Bruce doesn’t. He has soup. \textit{Who be having turkey sandwiches for lunch?}

As the results show, the participants scored much higher on the \textit{BIN} scenarios than they did on the \textit{be}\textsubscript{amp} scenarios:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prompt</th>
<th>%Correct</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scenario 1: Who be swimming in the neighborhood pool?</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Who usually swims in the neighborhood pool?’ (gloss)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scenario 2: Who be having turkey sandwiches for lunch? (Bruce)</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Who usually has turkey sandwiches for lunch?’ (gloss)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scenario 3: How does Faye be getting to school?</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘How does Faye usually get to school?’ (gloss)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scenario 4: Where does Jenny’s sister Haley be hiding?</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Where does Jenny’s sister Haley be hiding?’ (gloss)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 Be<sub>asp</sub> V-ing Results

Given the function of be<sub>asp</sub>, there is no ambiguity; all of the constructions have a habitual reading. While the participants scored above chance on all of the scenarios, they did not score above 60%. The result for BIN fixing (Table 2) is closer to the result for the be<sub>asp</sub> scenarios than it is to the results for the BIN<sub>STAT</sub> V-ing scenarios. If the child speakers have not quite grasped the feature [HABITUAL], then they would be expected to do less well on BIN<sub>HAB</sub> and be<sub>asp</sub> scenarios than on the other scenarios. These are the findings; however, because there is only one BIN<sub>HAB</sub> scenario in the BIN experiment, it is not clear how reliable the claim about BIN<sub>HAB</sub> is. However, the results for be<sub>asp</sub> seem to be more robust. Nevertheless, given the claim about [HABITUAL] requiring an –ing agreement marker, more data and experimentation on these constructions would be useful in providing insight into children’s interpretation of the habitual markers and the type of morphology that accompanies them.

7 Summary

V-ing occurs in progressive contexts as well as in be<sub>asp</sub> contexts, and there is sufficient evidence to show that –ing in the two contexts has different functions.

–ing in be<sub>asp</sub> V-ing constructions indicates that an eventuality is in progress, while –ing in be<sub>asp</sub> V-ing contexts is a type of agreement required by the habitual marker be<sub>asp</sub>. In other words, in the latter context, –ing is a morphological marker that agrees with the [HABITUAL] feature of be<sub>asp</sub>, which can coerce even stative predicates into a habitual reading. The question about whether –ing in BIN<sub>HAB</sub> V-ing constructions is also a type of
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morphological agreement that is required by the [HABITUAL] feature was also raised. Data from developing AAE-speaking children show that they fare well on $BIN_{STAT} V$-ing constructions; however, they do less well on $be_{asp}$ $V$-ing and $BIN_{HAB} V$-ing. The claim is that children have difficulty with the habitual feature associated with the aspectual markers, but more experimental work should be conducted to determine whether children encounter the same type of problems with $be_{asp}$ and $BIN_{HAB}$. 

References


