Aspectual be-type constructions and coercion in African American English
(Green, 2000)

1. Introduction

- The major goal of this paper is to provide an informal description and formal account of the generics with aspectual be, which has been known to be a distinctive construction of AAE.

- Two types of genericity in AAE

In one type of constructions, the verbs are in simple tense, whereas in the other type of constructions, the verbs in -ing forms go together with aspectual be.

(1) a. Mice Squeak.
   b. Mice be squeaking.

(2) a. Bruce sing.
   b. Bruce be singing.

(3) a. Bruce write novels.
   b. Bruce be writing novels.

(4) a. They have money.
   b. They be having money.

The simple tense generics are ambiguous between habitual/generic readings, while the generics with aspectual be only receives a habitual reading.

- Key assumption: Kratzer (1995)

Stage-level predicates take an eventuality argument, while individual-level predicates do not.

- Analysis of aspectual be-type constructions

A habitual operator (HAB) that binds an eventuality argument is introduced into the logical representations of aspectual be-type constructions. The operator yields a universal generic reading (i.e. habitual reading) for a given construction. Unlike a generic operator (GEN), the HAB operator does not yield an existential generic reading that is unnecessary for the aspectual be-type constructions in AAE.
2. Informal characterization of aspectual be-type constructions

- Existential vs. universal generic reading

In AAE, simple tense constructions like (5a) can have an existential generic reading, while aspectual be-type constructions like (5b) are restricted to a universal generic reading.

(5)

- a. Bruce sing. **Existential generic**
- b. Bruce be singing. **Universal generic**
- c. Bruce can sing.

The reading of (5a) is roughly that there is a possibility that Bruce can sing and he does not object to singing, while the reading of (5b) is that Bruce's singing occurs on particular occasions. There is an important difference between the two reading; the former does not require the Bruce's singing event to happen, whereas the latter means that the singing must happen on particular occasions.

- General property vs. actual activity

The simple tense constructions can refer to a general property of an individual or species, while the aspectual be-type constructions cannot.

(6)

- a. This printer print a hundred pages a minute. **General property**
- b. This printer be printing a hundred pages a minute. **Actual activity**

(6a) makes a general statement about capacity of the printer, and the sentence is true even if the printer has never printed a hundred pages a minute in the past. However, (6b) means that the printer has already printed a hundred pages per minute on particular occasions.

- The aspectual be-type constructions in AAE does NOT receive (i) existential generic readings, or (ii) capacity readings. The only available reading for the given type is habitual reading.

- If an eventuality expressed by a predicate in aspectual be-type construction is well-established by having occurred on particular occasions, the above-mentioned characteristics also holds when the eventuality describes a state.

(9) Mary be knowing the answer.

Although it seems odd to say that the static eventuality indicated by know habitually reoccurs, the paradox could be solved by separating apart times when Mary does not know the answer from times when the knowing stage holds.
3. Two be's in AAE

- Copula/auxiliary be vs. aspectual be

1. The aspectual be-type V-ing construction is not inflected, while the copula/auxiliary is inflected when it is overt.
   a. He be reading.
   b. He ∅ reading. (cf. He is reading.)

2. The aspectual be-type V-ing construction only receives a habitual reading.
   a. He be reading too loud.
      'He is usually reading too loudly.'/'He usually reads too loudly.'
      *'He is reading too loudly (now).'</a>
   b. He ∅ reading too loud. (cf. He is reading too loud.)

3. The aspectual be-type V-ing construction can have a stative predicate, while the progressive be cannot.
   a. She be knowing the answer.
   b. *She ∅ knowing the answer.

4. The eventuality in the aspectual be-type V-ing construction can be interpreted as starting after the time indicated by the adverbial, while the eventuality in the progressive be must coincide with the eventuality in the adverbial.
   a. Bruce is crying when the teacher call his mother.
      'It is usually the case that Bruce is already crying when the teacher calls his mother' or
      *'It is usually the case that Bruce starts to cry when the teacher calls his mother.'
   b. Bruce ∅ crying when that teacher call his mother.
      'It is usually the case that Bruce is already crying when the teacher calls his mother'

4. Generics and habituals

The classic literature on genericity tends to assume that generics and habituals are related.

- GEN operator (Gerstner-Link and Krifka, 1993)

(17) a. John smokes after dinner.  

   Habitual reading
   GEN (x = John ∧ after-dinner(s) ∧ in (x, s); smoke (x, s))

b. John smokes.  

   Generic reading
   GEN (x = John ∧ in (x, s); smoke (x, s))
The reading of (17a) is that most situations where it's after dinner are ones where John smokes. Since (17b) does not have an explicit phrase restricting quantification like *after dinner* in (17a), it roughly means that John usually smokes.

- Note that both sentences allow for exceptions; the sentences can still be true in some situations where John does not smoke (after dinner).

*Non-monotonic inference rule for GEN operator*

The conclusions drawn may be withdrawn in the light of further information, even though all the original premises are retained.

- GEN operator can account for both existential and universal genericity.

(18) a. John [DRINKS]_{FOCUS} beer.  
    \[ \text{Existential generic} \]
    \[ \text{GEN}(x = \text{John} \land \text{beer(y)} \land \text{in}(x, s) \land \text{in}(y, s); \text{drink}(x, y, s)) \]

b. John [drinks BEER]_{FOCUS}  
    \[ \text{Universal generic} \]
    \[ \text{GEN}(x = \text{John} \land \text{in}(x, s); \exists y[\text{beer(y)} \land \text{drink}(x, y, s)] \]

- The GEN operator analysis does NOT adequately account for the aspectual be-type constructions in AAE!

The aspectual be-type constructions do not have the existential generic reading, and thus there should be a better analysis for the construction that clearly captures its restricted interpretation.

5. Aspectual be-type representations

5.1. A pragmatics variable

- The HAB operator

(19) a. Bruce be crying when the teacher call his mother.  
    b. HAB [call his mother (the teacher, e)][cry (Bruce, e)]

The HAB operator binds an eventuality argument in the restrictive clause and in the nuclear scope, and thereby relating the eventuality expressed by a predicate crying to a particular occasion where the teacher calls Bruce's mother.

- The HAB operator vs. the GEN operator

(20) a. Bruce be crying.  
    b. HAB_c [(P, e)] [cry (Bruce, e)]
Since the eventualities indicated by the predicate has been established as a regular or habitual occurrence in these constructions, sentences like (20a) cannot have the existential generic reading that it is possible that Bruce will cry or he has cried.

Since the eventuality expressed by the predicate does occur just at the specified times in the restrictor, sentences like (20a) cannot have the interpretation that Bruce cries in all situations.

The pragmatic variable \( P \) is introduced to capture the pragmatically salient occasions that are not given in a sentence.

5.2. Pragmatic restrictions

6. Be-type states

6.1. States and coercion

The aspectual be-type constructions are compatible with individual-level predicates that inherently lacks eventuality.

(24) a. Sue be having a lot of books.
    'Sue usually/always has a lot of books.'
    b. Sue be knowing that song.
    'Sue usually/always knows that song.'

When stative predicates like have and know occur in be-type constructions, they express a general property in which the eventuality is understood as holding on different occasions.

Since the \( \text{HAB} \) operator relates eventuality to an occasion by quantifying event variables, it falls short of explaining sentences with individual-level predicates that do not have those variables.

(25) a. Manon is dancing on the lawn.
    [dancing (Manon, 1) & on-the-lawn (1)]
    b. Manon is dancing this morning.
    [dancing (Manon, 1) & this morning (1)]
    c. Manon is a dancer.
    [dancer (Manon)]

However, a shift from an individual- to a stage-level predicate in a productive process:

(26) a. Richard is nice.
    b. Richard is being nice.

(27) a. Richard is a nuisance.
    b. Richard is being a nuisance.
Footnote 9.

(i)  a. Sam resembles his great aunt. (stative)
    b. Sam is resembling his great aunt more and more these days. (activity)

(ii) a. The bird flew. (activity)
    b. The bird was in flight. (stative)

(iii) a. The old man died. (achievement)
    b. The old man finally finished dying. (accomplishment)

Based on the observation, Green (2000) suggests that aspectual be involves this shifting process.

- Coercion

At LF, aspectual be would force some type of spatiotemporal argument to be present, and therefore the sentences like (24a&b) can have habitual readings.

(28) a. Sue be having a lot of books.
    b. HABe [P(e)] [(∃x) [a lot of books(x) have (Sue, x, e)]]

(29) a. Sue be knowing that song.
    b. HABBe [P(e)] [(∃x) [that song(x) know(Sue, x, e)]]

The representation in (28a) says that habitually on some occasions that are specified by pragmatics, there are some books that Sue has on those occasions. In other words, Sue habitually exhibits her possession of some books on particular occasions although she has the books in other occasions as well.

The coercion of individual-level predicates into stage-level predicates is productive process in the aspectual be-type constructions in AAE.

(36) a. John Ø the choir director.
    b. John be the choir director.

6.2. Bicycle sentences

Not all states in construction with aspectual be are as easily interpreted as stage-level.

- Bicycle sentences

A group of sentences involving plurals and predicates that indicate a permanently stable property of an entity.
(38) a. Some of them be big and some of them be small.  
   'It is usually/always the case that some of them are big and some of them are small.'

   b. Sam's wholesale stores be on the outskirts of town.  
   'It is usually/always the case that Sam's wholesale stores are on the outskirts of town.'

In the bicycle sentences, aspectual be does NOT yield stage-level readings. The predicates describing the size of the bicycles and the location of Sam's wholesale stores name permanent state, and they are not to be interpreted as changing sizes or locations.

- Permanent states vs. aspectual be coercion

Although predicates in bicycles sentences are not interpreted as stage-level readings, aspectual be forces some type of habitual reading on a predicate.

(39) a. Some of them be big and some of them be small.  
   b. Some of them Ø big and some of them Ø small.

In (39a), quantification is over situations of encountering bicycles. Since an event of encountering bicycles can change over time and space, aspectual be still force some type of habitual reading on a predicate even though the predicate itself does not have stage-level reading.