There is a long-standing intuition in linguistic analysis that verbs like *be* are in some sense *default* verbs. This paper formalizes this intuition in the case of auxiliary uses of *be*, arguing that *be* is a *morphological* default. I argue that *be* is not present in the syntactic derivation, but is instead inserted by the morphological component as an unspecified $V^0$ element, to realize “stranded” inflectional material. This analysis sheds light on the typology of auxiliary-participle constructions, and more generally on the syntactic mechanisms that manipulate verbal inflection.

I argue that auxiliary constructions are of one of two types: in the first, auxiliaries are used only in certain combinations of inflectional categories (e.g. Latin and Kinande, discussed below); in the second, certain inflectional categories *always* require an auxiliary (e.g. English, French, Hindi, Basque, Finnish, among many others). I begin by discussing the first type. In Latin, for example, both the perfect and the passive had synthetic verbal forms, but the perfect-passive required an auxiliary construction.

(1) a. amavi, ‘I loved, I have loved.’  
b. amor, ‘I am loved.’  
c. amatus *sum*, ‘I was loved, I have been loved.’

In Kinande, similarly, single verbs can be inflected for past tense, or for aspect (progressive, in-completive, or inceptive), but to express both past tense and aspect on a single verb requires a tensed auxiliary followed by an aspectually-inflected participle:

(2) a. tu-nému-húma, ‘We are hitting’  
b. tw-á-húma, ‘We hit (recently, not today)’  
c. **tw-á-bya** i-tu-nému-húma, ‘We were (recently, not today) hitting.’

If auxiliaries were represented in the syntax, the auxiliary distribution in Latin and Kinande would indicate that forms like (1c) or (2b) are something more than the sum of their parts, with additional structure corresponding to the auxiliary.

A simpler syntactic analysis is available if auxiliaries are *not* represented in the syntax. I argue that the surface presence of auxiliaries is instead a *morphological* fact: they are inserted post-syntactically to realize stranded inflection that is unable to combine with the lexical verb (above, tense inflection). The analysis is formalized in the framework of Distributed Morphology (DM; Halle and Marantz, 1993, 1994, et seq.). I argue that inflection is stranded when it is insufficiently local to the main verb, preventing morphological merger or lowering (which is subject to structural locality conditions, as in Embick and Noyer, 2001).

Stranded inflection must nonetheless be realized; at the point of Vocabulary Insertion, a node that must be realized as a verb but which has no other specification (i.e. no root that would trigger realization as a specific verb) will be realized as an auxiliary *be*.

This analysis extends to languages in which auxiliaries *always* occur with certain inflectional categories (for example, the English passive or progressive). In these languages, the syntactic repre-
sentation is not simplified by the removal of auxiliaries (nonetheless, cf. Shütze, 2003 for English). I argue that there is nonetheless evidence internal to these languages for analyzing auxiliary be as a default realization of stranded inflectional information: this evidence comes from reduced relative clauses, which have been observed to be possible only when the relative’s participle would have taken auxiliary be (Iatridou et al., 2003: in English, The cake eaten by the children, The children eating the cake, but *The children eaten the cake). If auxiliary be is a morphological realization of inflection unable to combine with a main participial verb, and reduced relatives precisely lack higher inflectional structure, then this is exactly the environment in which we would expect an auxiliary not to occur.

I argue that the difference between Latin/Kinande-type languages and English-type languages is the position of the participial verb, which determines what higher inflectional structure it is local to. In English-type languages, the participial verb remains very low, and is able to combine only with one higher inflectional category (requiring an auxiliary if more occur in the structure); in Latin/Kinande-type languages it is slightly higher, and so can potentially express two inflectional categories on a single verb, but requires an auxiliary beyond that.

This analysis has broader implications for the syntactic theory of verbal morphology. Syntactic approaches often assume diverse mechanisms for the manipulation of verbal inflection, some of which can operate long-distance (i.e. Agree, Chomsky, 1998), with different mechanisms instantiated in different languages. This is at odds, however, with the typological commonalities of auxiliary-participle constructions, which exhibit patterns that a theory of morphosyntax should generate. This is possible only with a unified theory of verbal inflection that applies across languages.

References


