A Morpho-syntactic Analysis of Contraction in English

Danielle Lawson

Eastern Michigan University, dlawso10@emich.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://commons.emich.edu/mcnair

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://commons.emich.edu/mcnair/vol4/iss1/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at DigitalCommons@EMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in McNair Scholars Research Journal by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@EMU. For more information, please contact lib-ir@emich.edu.
A MORPHO-SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS OF CONTRACTION IN ENGLISH

Danielle Lawson
Dr. T. Daniel Seely, Mentor

ABSTRACT

What's contraction? Contraction is the process of taking two free morphemes and making one bound in order to create one morpheme. In short: two words are joined into one. To the native English speaker, contracted and non-contracted forms are semantically equivalent. However, there are certain instances where contraction is not permitted. For example, the sentence, “I’m happy, but she’s not,” is perfectly grammatical, but “*I’m not happy, but she’s,” is ungrammatical. Why should this be? Although the contracted and non-contracted forms are semantically equivalent, they differ structurally. To answer the question of what conditions allow for contraction, existing arguments on the topic will be discussed. However, the problem with these arguments is that they are too broad or they do not cover all types of contraction. This proposal offers a solution by claiming that there are two procedures for contraction in English. In this proposal, the contracting morphemes determine which procedure is performed. In finite contraction, the morphemes bear tense. This means that the bound morphemes must contract and attach themselves, as prefixes, to hosts located on the right of the morphemes. However, in non-finite contraction, the morphemes are tenseless. As a result, they must contract and attach themselves, as suffixes, to hosts located on the left of the morphemes.

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents a new analysis of certain types of contraction in English. We will examine previous explanations of the conditions that allow for contraction and reveal problems...
with them. The central problem with the previous arguments is that they inaccurately describe the phenomenon, or they do not cover all types of contraction. The proposal presented in this paper offers a solution by claiming that there are two procedures for contraction. The first procedure deals with morphemes that bear tense, which will be referred to as *finite contraction* in this paper. In this case, the contracted morpheme attaches itself to its host, located on the right of the morpheme, as a prefix. The second procedure deals with morphemes that are tenseless, which will be referred to as *non-finite contraction*. In this procedure, the contracted morpheme attaches itself to its host, located on the left of the morpheme, as a suffix. Overall, we will argue that the previous analyses are either too broad or too restrictive. The alternative account we have developed is shown to have both greater empirical coverage and interesting implications for the nature of clausal structure, and syntactic theory, more generally.

**BACKGROUND**

Contraction is an optional procedure where a once-free morpheme becomes “bound,” finding a host to which it attaches itself. In the following example, “She’s studying,” the copula has been reduced from “is” to “s” and as a result, the copula appears to change from a free morpheme to a bound morpheme. The contracted morpheme then locates a host to which it attaches itself. The traditional view of contraction is represented by the orthographic system in English. Using the example given above, this view states that when the copula is reduced, it attaches to its host (*she*), located to the left of the morpheme, and the apostrophe is a “placeholder” for the piece of the contracted word that is reduced. However, there is another influential analysis of contraction proposed by linguist Joan Bresnan (1971). Bresnan argues that, in tensed be-contraction, “be” is actually contracting and attaching itself, as a prefix, to a host
located on the right of the morpheme. The orthographic system gives the illusion that be-contraction is contracting to the left when in reality the opposite is occurring. (cf Boeckx, 2000)

This argument is plausible because in English, when tense appears as a bound morpheme, as in affix hopping, it always lowers and attaches itself to the verb, located on the right of the morpheme, as illustrated in example (1).

(1) She jumped.

In this example, past tense “-ed” is unable to stand alone in “T”. Because “-ed” is a bound morpheme, it must lower onto the verb so that it may be expressed.

A second group of countries contributed a substantial number of Arab Americans, but not as many as Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine, are Egypt, Yemen, and Iraq (McCarus 1994). For Bresnan (1971), the reduced tense-bearing auxiliary verb contracts to an overt category to the immediate right of the auxiliary. Bresnan’s analysis predicts that if there is not an overt category to the right of tensed “be”, contraction will not be possible because there is no appropriate host. The example below indicates that this prediction is correct.

(2) I [‘m/am] not (happy), but she [*‘s/is].

In example (2), under the traditional view, contraction should be permitted because there is an overt host (she) on the left of the reduced copula; however, this sentence is ungrammatical. On the other hand, if we adopt Bresnan’s analysis, which states that tensed be-contraction must
have an overt host on the right of the morpheme in order for contraction to occur, example (2) is correctly predicted to be ungrammatical because “‘s” has no overt host on the right.

(3) She [‘s/is] studying.

In example (3), there is an overt element to the right (studying), which serves as a host for tensed “be,” and the example is well-formed, as predicted.

(3)

(4) I [‘m/am] happy, but she [‘s/is] not.

(4)
In example (4), tense, which is being represented by “’s,” is contracting onto “not,” which is located directly to the right of the “T” position.

At first glance, Bresnan’s analysis seems counter-intuitive, but as previously stated, in English, when tense appears as a bound morpheme, it lowers and attaches itself to a host located on the right of the morpheme. It is the orthographic system that misleads us into thinking that when tensed “be” contracts, it attaches to a host on the left, when in reality it is contracting and attaching itself to a host located on the right. However, Bresnan’s analysis is not without its own difficulties, which is something we will reveal in section 4. First, we present more data in support of Bresnan’s analysis.

**Expanding Bresnan’s Analysis**

Although Bresnan’s analysis only deals with tensed be-contraction, it can be applied to some modals as well as to some complementizers. In examples (5) – (9), other tense bearing elements behave the same as tensed “be”; that is, if the tense-bearing verbal element is not followed by an overt category, contraction is disallowed.
(5) I have not been to the bank, but she [∗’s/has].

In example (5), the auxiliary verb “have” mirrors the exact behavior as the copula in example (2). “Has” must move to “T” to fill the tense position and just as in example (2), the morpheme is not able to contract because there is no host, on its right, with which to attach itself.

(6) He will not go, but I [∗’ll/will].

In example (6), the modal “will” originates in “T,” but it is still unable to contract because the verb phrase is no longer present. This is what makes the contracted version ungrammatical.
(7) She would not attend, but he [*'d/would].

Example (7) is ungrammatical because it behaves the same as example (6). The modal is unable to contract because there is nothing to the right which to attach itself (It appears that, in English, “would” is only able to contract in the tense position. It is unclear why “would” does not contract in the complementizer position like “be” and “have” do).
(8) What ['s/is] your name?

In example (8), “is” must move to “T” to fill the tense position. Once the copula moves to “T” it acquires tense. The copula must then move again to “C” so that a question may be formed. It is because the complementizer, represented by “is,” has to pass through the “T” position and acquire tense before moving to “C” that contraction is possible. As a result, the tensed complementizer is able to contract and attach itself to a host, located to the right of the morpheme.

(9) How ['d/did] you do?

In example (9), “did” has to be inserted in “T” because there are no auxiliary verbs present that can fill the position. Because “did” originates in “T”, it acquires tense. This allows “did” to contract and attach to the specifier of “TP” (It appears that, in English, “do” is only able to contract in the complementizer position and not in “T.” This may be due to the syntax inserting “do” last, after realizing that there are no auxiliary verbs present to perform the necessary movements or fill the necessary spaces. (Ex. *I’d go.)).
So far, we have reviewed the basic analysis of tensed be-contraction proposed by Bresnan and found that her analysis can also be applied to other morphemes that bear tense. However, in the next section, we will discuss the limitations of Bresnan’s analysis.

Problems with Bresnan’s Analysis

The primary problem with Bresnan’s analysis is that it does not cover other examples of contraction. Consider the following examples:

“*I wonder where the people’re tonight.”  “She did not go to the game, but she should’ve.”  “I wanna go home.”  “*Who do you wanna meet them?” or “I am happy, but she isn’t.”

These examples illustrate the problem: what is the difference between the contractions that work under Bresnan’s analysis and the ones that do not? We know the contractions that fall under Bresnan’s analysis contract to the right, but it appears that in the first example, “*I wonder where the people’re tonight,” that “’re” does in fact have an overt host (*tonight) on the right to which it should attach itself, yet the contracted form is still ungrammatical. In the subsequent examples, it
appears that the bound morphemes are in fact contracting to the left, instead of to the right. Let us consider the issues in more detail:

(10) I wonder where the people [*’re/are] (tonight).

In example (10), [+WH] feature takes “’re”s’ true host (where), leaving it nothing which to attach itself. This is what makes this sentence ungrammatical when contracted.

(11) She did not go to the game, but she should [*’ve/ have].

Although in some cases “have” has to move to “T” in order for tense to be expressed, in sentence (11), “should” occupies the “T” position and as a result, “have” remains in its VP shell, making it a tenseless morpheme. As stated early on in this paper, for morphemes to acquire tense they must originate in “T” (modals), raise to “T” (auxiliary verbs), or pass through “T”
(complementizers). Because “have” does not have to raise to “T” it is able to contract to the left and attach to its host (should) as a suffix.

(11)

(12) I [want to/wanna] go home.

In example (12), “to” is contracting and attaching itself as a suffix to its host (want) on the left because “to” is a tenseless morpheme.

(12)
(13) Who do you [*wanna/want to] meet them?"

In example (13), “to” would not contract and attach onto “want” because both “want” and “to” have different “TP” specifiers. This means that even if this sentence did not have the [+WH] feature, wanna-contraction would still not be possible. This example is similar in deep structure to the sentence “You want Jill to meet them.” In the previous sentence, “Jill” blocks “to” from contracting and attaching onto “want,” just as the “tDP” blocks wanna-contraction in example (13).
(14) I ['m/am] happy, but she is [n’t/not].

In example (14), “not” is also a tenseless morpheme. This means that if “not” appears in the contracted form, it would have to contract to the left, attaching itself to its host (is) as a suffix.
At this point, we know that tense plays a major role in determining the direction in which bound morphemes attach themselves. We see that tenseless morphemes contract and attach themselves to hosts in the opposite direction of those morphemes that bear tense. We also now know that it is not enough to state that there must be overt categories located to the right of tensed bound morphemes or to the left of tenseless bound morphemes. We must note that if trace elements are located between either of these bound morphemes and the overt categories, contraction is blocked. The trace elements are the true hosts for these bound morphemes, not the overt categories that follow the traces, in the case of finite contraction, or those that precede the traces, as in non-finite contraction. With this information in hand, a new proposal for contraction will be presented in the following section.

**New Proposal**

The data provided above shows that there are two procedures for contraction in English. The first procedure deals with finite contraction. Finite contraction covers the types of contraction where the contracting morpheme carries tense. In this type, the bound morpheme must locate a host, on the right, so that it may attach itself as a prefix. The second procedure
deals with non-finite contraction. Non-finite contraction covers the types of contraction where the contracting morphemes are unable to carry tense. In this type, the bound morpheme must locate a host, on the left, so that it may attach itself as a suffix. However, finite and non-finite morphemes will not be permitted to contract if certain trace elements ($t_{VP}$, $t_{DP}$, $t_{AdjP}$, etc.) are located to the right of finite morphemes, or to the left of non-finite morphemes. The ungrammaticality is a result of the bound morphemes needing to use the trace elements as hosts, which is impossible because there are no overt hosts present to which the bound morphemes may attach themselves (at this point, I am unable to explain why contraction is able to bypass “$t_{\text{subjects}}$”. It could possibly be due to “$t_{\text{subjects}}$” possessing a case feature).

This proposal explains why “*That is where we’re now,” as well as “*You’ren’t going today,” are ungrammatical, and why “You shouldn’t’ve done that,” is grammatical.

(15) That ['s/is] where we [*'re/are] now.

In example (15), the [+WH] feature takes “re’s” host (where), resulting in a “$t_{DP}$” being located on the right of the bound morpheme. This is why the sentence is ungrammatical.
(16) You [*’ren’t/are not] going today.

Example (16) is ungrammatical because “’re” is a bound finite morpheme, while “n’t” is a bound non-finite morpheme. This means that “’re” is trying to contract and attach itself, as a prefix, to a host located on the right, while “n’t” is trying to contract and attach itself as a suffix, to a host located on the left. Ordinarily this would not be a problem, but “’re” is to the left of “n’t” and “n’t” is to the right of “’re.” Both of these parasitic bound morphemes are relying on the other to be a free morpheme, which neither are. As a result, the only grammatical combinations are “You’re not going today” and “You aren’t going today” (This is an exception to the rule, a finite morpheme and a non-finite morpheme contracting to form a grammatical sentence (“I’d’ve gone, if I did not have other plans.”)).

(17) You should [n’t’ve/not have] done that.
Example (17) is grammatical because both of the contracted morphemes are non-finite. This allows them to seek different hosts to which to attach themselves. The bound morpheme, “’ve,” is able to contract and attach to its host (not) as a suffix, located on the left of the morpheme. Once “have” has contracted and attached itself to “not” as a suffix, “not” is then able to contract and attach to its host (should) as a suffix, located to the left of the morpheme.

(17)

CONCLUSION

This new information on how contraction works is beneficial to the field of linguistics because it aids in our understanding of how the English language works. This proposal may potentially be added to the list of known rules that govern the English language and it also gives
linguists more insight into the interactions between the syntax and phonology. Under this proposal, the syntax sets up the syntactic structure and then determines whether it wants to perform contraction or not. If the syntax decides to perform contraction, it will then analyze the structure to determine if contraction is possible. If contraction is permitted, the syntax makes the appropriate adjustments so that it may provide the structure to the phonology. The phonology may then analyze it for speech production. Discovering more rules in one language gives linguists the opportunity to apply these rules to other languages in hopes of finding universal truths about language as a whole.

REFERENCES


