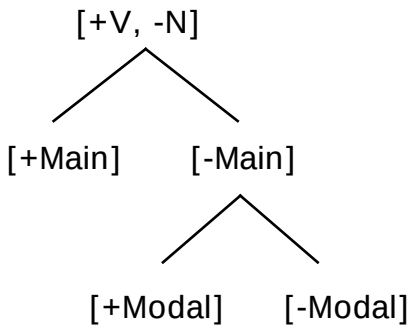
Dummy Verbs

Linguistics 322

Dummy verbs are verbs whose function is to host various verbal operators. There three dummy verbs in modern English: do, be, have. Dummy verbs are often called auxiliary verbs. However, auxiliary verbs in English also include modal auxiliary verbs which have meaning and do not act as hosts. Auxiliary verbs in English are strong [+Strong] in that they may occur at the beginning of a clause when in question form, and they can host contracted forms: *isn't, can't, won't* and so forth. The grammatical layers of verbs are thus:

(1)



[-Main] (or [-Strong] verbs) are auxiliary verbs. [-Modal] verbs are dummy verbs.

The operators are each generated as lexically (and phonetically) empty forms. If the operator is marked as [[+Host], [[+V, -N], [+Main]]], it needs to find the main verb in the same clause. If no other operator is adjoined to the main verb, the feature of the operator is adjoined to the main verb, and is then spelled out. The original feature is spelled out as null.

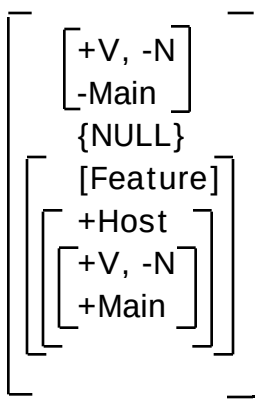
However, if some other operator is already adjoined to the main verb, the operator in question cannot be adjoined to the verb, due to a morphology condition on English verbs and nouns:

(2) Grammatical Suffix Constraint
Only one operator-feature may be adjoined to a main verb.

In this case, the hosting procedure of the operator must find another strategy to find an appropriate host. The third strategy, which is a last resort, is dummy insertion. Essentially, in-

serting a dummy verb is replacing the lexically null feature with {BE}, {HAVE} or {DO}. The entry for the operators is the following:

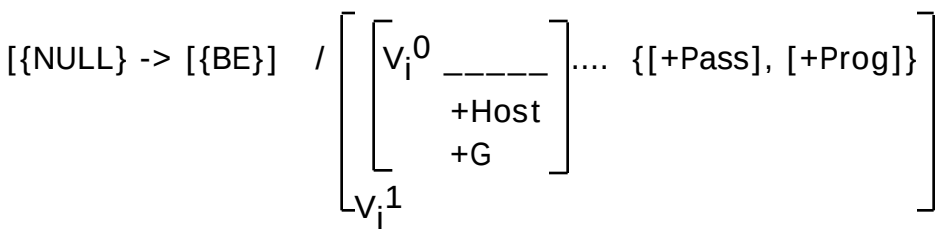
(3)

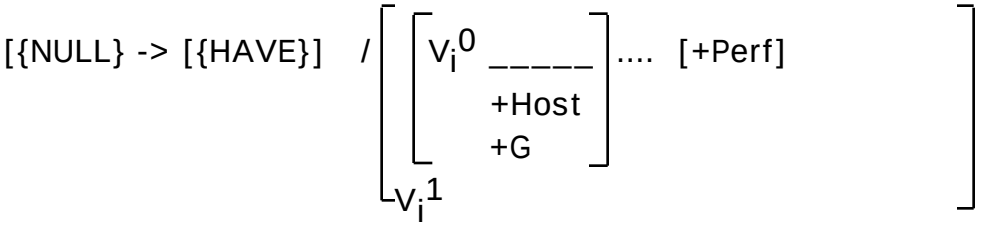


The following rule complex inserts a dummy form; i.e., it replaces the NULL with the appropriate dummy verb:

(4) Dummy Verb Insertion

(5)





Condition: V_i^0 must govern the feature on the right.

In short, BE is inserted if the operator governs either [+Pass] or [+Prog], and HAVE is inserted if it govern [+Perf].

Essentially, the same process occurs with the insertion of dummy Case markers. First, the Case must determined. For the Accusative Case and the Agentive Case, the dummy Case replaces the null Case marker. The short form is:

(6) The Agentive Case [-Nom]

{NULL} -> {BY} / _____, the external argument.

(BY) contains the feature [-Nom]. The value of these feature is copied to any pronouns which need a value for [Nom].

This page last updated 11 MR 03