A. Considerations

The first consideration that needs to be made related to the copula be is the distinction between the two different types of copulas, both the contractible and contractible copulas. A copula is a variation of “BE” that serves as a main verb in a sentence, preceeded by a subject and followed by a noun, an adjective, some adverbs and/ or a prepositional phrase (Owens, 2012). According to Caroline Bowen in an analysis of Brown’s 14 Morphemes, the un-contractible copula is “the full form of the verb to be when it is the only verb in a sentence”. This will typically develop first in a child’s language, between 31 and 34 months. Contractible copula on the other hand, is “the shortened form of the verb 'to be' when it is the only verb in a sentence.” (1998) As far as assessment, “Contracted forms are short and underemphasized”, Says Owens, which makes them harder to detect when they are incorrect (2012).

Another important consideration for the clinician is the relevance and importance this concept provides for the clients linguistic and grammatical development. In a study focused on the “increasing productivity of the 5 morphemes in the tense productivity score and their relationship to one another” (Rispoli, Hadley, & Holt, 2012). This study looked at **copula BE**, third-person singular present –*3s,* past –*ed,* auxiliary DO, auxiliary BE. They found that copula BE was more productive than all other morphemes from age 27 months onward, “productivity was related to breadth of morpheme emergence across categories” (Rispoli, Hadley, & Holt, 2012). This indicates that the copula be serves a critical purpose for effective communication in a child’s grammar from a very early point in their linguistic development.

Contrary to this idea, it is critical for the SLP to consider the relationship the copula has with a number of dialects we come in contact with. The most prevalent of these to come to mind would be African American English. Copula deletion is a “syntactic feature of AAE”, it is systematic and rule governed (Bland-Stewart,2005). With this in mind we consider ASHA standards which state: “.... that no dialectal variety of American English is a disorder or a pathological form of speech or language” (ASHA,2003) . These are important things to be aware of when assessing and treating clients with deficits related to use of copula BE.

In some research some pretty reliable differentiations have been determined for the continued study of this concept. Collaborative research at The University of Rochester and University of Michigan looking at perception related to deleted copulas and an individual’s identity used the function of the copula within the sentence as a determining factor for disorder. The table below (Table 1) illustrates their determination between correct and incorrect examples of copula deletion. They determined that instances in which the intended tense or stress was not conveyed to be considered grammatically incorrect usage of a deleted copula. They all determined that situations in which the statement cannot be equated to a contraction in SAE, though this is debatable when considering the contractible copula (Seifeldin et. Al., 2015)

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| --- |
| **Table 1**  **Correctly formed examples:**  Who (are) you?  She (is) my teacher.  He (is) taking the train.  **Incorrectly formed examples:**  \*She ~~(was)~~ my teacher  Intended tense is not conveyed  \*I don’t know where he ~~(is)~~.  Construction fails if it cannot equate to a contraction in  Standard American English  \*But he really ~~(IS)~~ a genius!  Intended stress is not conveyed |

B. Methods

Most importantly in the methods of teaching copula BE is understanding the child’s development of language and grammar. Understanding where the copula BE fits into a child’s language development helps the clinician to understand and determine preceding concepts and skills to provide potential scaffolding and supports. According to Brown’s 14 morphemes, typical development of the uncontractible copula is at stage 3 (31-34 Months) and for the contractible copula it is present around age 5 (41-46+ Months) (1973). According to Owens the copula is “not fully mastered until around age 4” (2012)

A study conducted in japan on students learning English as a second language looked at how the copula BE was being taught; as well as how the underlying grammatical rules it required were or were not being incorporated into the teaching of this concept. They found that there are three underlying rules in the teaching of the copula; The agreement rule, the operator rule and the suppliance rule. The agreement rule is essentially the morphological rule, the operator rule is the rule for inversion, and the main focus, the suppliance rule addresses the “semantic role of *be* in a sentence” (Tode, 2006).

According to the article, in the school they looked at agreement and operators rules are typically taught and taught together; however the suppliance rule is typically left for the student to work out on their own. They found that for generalization, when taught individually the rules will take longer to form, and these rules are critical to a thorough understanding of the concept (Tode, 2006). This being the case in can be an important method to consider and incorporate all of these ideas together into treatment plans in order to make generalization most effective and efficient.

In clients with a diagnosis of a specific language impairment copula verb use is often an area of grammatical deficit. Due to this correlation, some of the best therapy methods are those that are proven to be affective for those with specific language impairment. Some methods that have been proven to be affective, particularly in targeting grammar are:

* Requesting direct imitations of targeted grammatical structures.
  + “The model and prompt were paired with an appropriate picture or object stimulus and verbal and/or token reinforcers were delivered following correct responses.” (Camarata, Nelson, & Camarata, 1994).
* Modeling paired with evoked production and performance feedback.
  + Incorporates modeling techniques such as focused repetitions of target words were provided during functional activities”, with the additional “opportunities for subjects to spontaneously produce words and receive feedback regarding their correctness.” (e.g. Weismer & Murray-Branch, 1989).
* Conversational recasting
  + In this condition, the “clinician structured the setting in a manner designed indirectly to elicit child attempts of the target” (Camarata, Nelson, & Camarata, 1994) Including play activities which foster naturalistic interaction between the child and clinician. incorporating open-ended statements by the clinician to encourage the child to vocalize without imitative prompts or overt reinforcers. “Following a child production that omitted the target, the clinician delivered a "growth recast" (Nelson, 1989) that included the target incorporated in a reply that recast basic semantic information from the child's utterance” (Camarata, Nelson, & Camarata, 1994).
* Implicit instruction rather than explicitly teaching grammar usage rules
  + (Swisher, Restrepo, Plante, & Lowell, 1995, but see Finestack & Fey, 2009 for older children)

In a study titled Acquisition of auxiliary and copula BE in young English-speaking children, Ling-Yu Guo found that “children form notion of “to be” on a word specific basis” (Owens, 2012). In particular experiments focused around the production of *is* Gou found that rather than the structural properties of a sentence, frequency determined the accuracy of a child’s copula *is* production. He also found that younger children who use *is* variable only have lexically specific representations of the BE (2009). This indicates to us that memorization is an important part of the development of the copula be, especially in younger children. This means that SLP’s may need to take a more sight word approach to teaching the copula than a rule based approach.

Another method that has been found to be effective by SLP’s is Focused Stimulation. As described by Patti Soloman-Rice at a presentation at the American Speech Language and Hearing Association Convention, “[The] SLP provides multiple models of targeted vocabulary or grammatical constructions within meaningful contexts a minimum of ten times” (Solomon-Rice, 2011). This method offers the client a high frequency of exposure and interaction with the concept. A high frequency of exposure can be beneficial to the client because as we discussed with Guo’s findings, memorization can be an important part of the acquisition of the Copula. Exposure can increase the likelihood that the client will be able to memorize the instances in which the copula is used before they are able to understand that complexities of the grammatical rules involved.

C. Materials

During resource presentations at the American Speech Language Hearing Association Convention in 2010 as well as 2011 SLP’s listed games that had been found to be particularly useful is sessions focusing on various grammar concepts including copula verbs. (Dorman, et. Al., 2010, 2011)

* “HiHo Cherry-o” can be used for Sentence Pattern IV: Noun phrase + copula + equivalent.
* “Lucky Ducks” can incorporate Sentence Pattern V: Noun phrase + copula + reason/recipient.
* “Ned’s Head” can use Present tense copula be:  “is/am/are”.
* “Grammar Gumballs” use Copula verbs: “is/are”.

D. Resources

Hoover, J.R. & Storkel, H.L. (in press). Grammatical treatment and specific language impairment: Neighborhood density and third person singular -s. *Clinical Linguistics and Phonetics*.

* Though this piece looks at new methods of treatment, it includes a vast collection and additional information on some of the relevant SLI treatments previously looked at.

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