

It Be's Like That Sometimes: On the Consuetudinal Use of Substantive BE

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1 Introduction

- 1.1 There is a marginal usage of BE in at least some American dialects of English (other than AAE). I will refer to this dialect (group) as “Non-standard American English” (NSAE) for convenience.
- 1.2 I have this usage in my dialect. Native-speaker judgments throughout this paper are my own and those of my colleagues who share this feature (who vary widely in age and region of upbringing).
- 1.3 Individual-level states such as the one in a sentence like *I am lazy* can be converted to events by the addition of BE: *I am being lazy*.
- 1.4 When habituated, such sentences can be expressed by what appears to be an uninflected BE: *I be lazy sometimes*.
- 1.5 Remarkably, this BE does not get spelled out as *am/are/is*, despite being marked for person, as is clear in the third person singular: *John be's lazy sometimes*.
- 1.6 The construction has been noticed by Payne (2010; 2013:30–2), confirming its existence in NSAE with an online corpus study. He provides the minimal pair in (1).
 - (1) a. *If she just **be's** herself, she'll do fine in the debate.*
 - b. *If she just **is** herself, she'll do fine in the debate.*
- 1.7 Payne (2013:32) notes further that the past tense of *be's* is (the much rarer) *be'd*.
 - (2) *I gave the monitor to her while she **'be'd** the doctor' using the monitor to poke around my feet.*
- 1.8 That this *be* is distinct from the copula is shown in (3).
 - (3) *He's not silly; he just **be's** silly when he's around girls.* (ex. from Payne 2013:31)
- 1.9 Habitual BE can thus surface in place of the standard *is* in certain environments. Often, its use is “optional,” but sometimes it verges on obligatory, as shown in (4) and (5).
 - (4) a. A: *How do you get people to like you?* B: *You just **be**(/*are/#get/#can be) yourself/friendly/confident.*
 - b. A: *How does Mary get people to like her?* B: *She just **be's**(/*is/#gets/#can be) herself/friendly/confident.*
 - (5) a. *I hate that he **be's**(/#is) dramatic.* HABITUAL, STAGE LEVEL
 - b. *I hate that he **is**(/#be's) dramatic.* GENERIC, INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

2 Proposal

2.1 In this paper, I propose to do the following:

- Provide a careful description of the data (§3).
- Compare this habitual usage of BE with the habitual BE found in AAE (§4).
- Sketch lexical/morphophonological (§5), semantic/pragmatic (§6), and syntactic analyses (§7) of the phenomenon.
- Offer some conclusions and directions for further research (§8).

3 Data and description

3.1 *Be's* is licensed only in a very restricted corner of the grammar, namely when a stage-level predicate *derived from an individual-level* state is habituated.

3.2 In other words, it is the habitual “version” of an individual-level predicate that has been converted into an event. It may be thought of, intuitively at least, along the lines shown in (6).

(6) *is silly* ⇒ *is being silly* ⇒ *be's silly*

3.3 The use is not available with intrinsically stage-level predicates, such as *be drunk*, *be sleepy*, or *be angry*, as shown in (7). This distribution exactly matches that of the “is being” construction.

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| (7) | a. * <i>John be's drunk/sleepy/angry.</i> | STAGE LEVEL |
| | b. ✓ <i>John be's smart/romantic/cute.</i> | INDIVIDUAL LEVEL |
| | c. * <i>John is being drunk/sleepy/angry.</i> | STAGE LEVEL |
| | d. ✓ <i>John is being smart/romantic/cute.</i> | INDIVIDUAL LEVEL |

3.4 Instead of BE, intrinsically stage-level predicates may use GET when habituated or progressivized, as in (8). Here, individual-level predicates are also permitted, albeit with a categorical difference in meaning.

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| (8) | a. <i>John gets drunk/sleepy/angry.</i> | STAGE LEVEL, HABITUAL |
| | b. <i>John is (getting) drunk/sleepy/angry.</i> | STAGE LEVEL (PROGRESSIVE-INCHOATIVE) |
| | c. ? <i>John gets smart/romantic/cute.</i> | INDIVIDUAL LEVEL, HABITUAL-INCHOATIVE |

3.5 Not all individual-level states can be habituated. These are exactly those that cannot be progressivized.

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| (9) | a. * <i>John be's tall/attractive/undefined/organic/a teacher.</i> | HABITUAL |
| | b. * <i>John is being tall/attractive/undefined/organic/a teacher.</i> | PROGRESSIVE |

3.6 Generally, then, it may be said that some (perhaps most) individual-level states can be converted into stage-level events by means of the progressive “is being” construction.

3.7 Though the exact details are unclear, (10) can be stated as a rule.

- (10) In all cases where conversion from state to event is possible, as derived with *is being*, a stage-level event may be habituated with the *be's* construction in the dialects of English that permit it.

3.8 Habitual *be's* is not particularly remarkable when compared to non-state verbs of English, which also use the simple Present tense to signify an ongoing habit.

- (11) a. *John is smoking.* PROGRESSIVE
 b. *John smokes.* HABITUAL/GENERIC

3.9 Though the *is being* construction must *not* have an indefinite object, the habitual *be's* construction may take any object, albeit in a special meaning.

- (12) a. *John is mean to kids.* GENERIC
 b. **John is being mean to kids.* *GENERIC
 c. *John is being mean to that kid/those kids.* PROGRESSIVE
 d. *John be's mean to that kid/those kids.* HABITUAL
 e. *John be's mean to kids.* HABITUAL

3.10 Habitual BE always involves some temporal contingency, often expressed by a *when*-clause, as in (13a). When not overtly expressed (13b) or supplied by the discourse (13c), this contingent event may be supplied by the pragmatics (13e)–(13f) (otherwise, (13f) would have a generic interpretation; see Green 2000:11–13).

- (13) a. *John be's nice (only) when he wants something.* OVERT
 b. *I hate it when(ever) John be's dramatic.* OVERT
 c. *John Wayne (always) be's a man in the face of danger.*
 d. A: *What does John do when he wants something?* B: *He be's nice to me.* DISCOURSE
 e. *I hate that John be's (so) dramatic.* PRAGMATICS
 f. *John (always) be's/is always being (so) dramatic.* PRAGMATICS
 (NB: not generic)

3.11 For this reason, its past equivalent is typically not *be'd* but *would be* (optionally *was*, generally not *used to be*), whose use is likewise necessarily contingent on the co-occurrence of some other event. Habitual *be'd* is, however, occasionally met with.

- (14) a. *John would (always) be/?be'd nice to me when he wanted something.*
 b. *I hated it when(ever) John would be/?be'd dramatic.*
 c. *I remember that/how John would be/#be'd/#used to be annoying.*
 d. *John Wayne would (always) be/(always) be'd/#used to be/?was (always) a man in the face of danger.*

3.12 This BE is necessarily eventive but only optionally/contextually habitual (cf. the “is being” examples).

- (15) *I saw John be(ing) nice to his friend Mary.* EVENTIVE

3.13 In its non-habitual use, its past tense is *be'd* (unambiguously eventive) or *was* (ambiguously stative or eventive).

- (16) a. A: *What did you do on your meditation retreat?* B: *We (just) be'd(?were/?kept/#got/*would be) quiet for 10 days.*
 b. [Jokingly, after a successful exam:] *I be'd(/#was) smart!* (≈ ‘I did a smart thing’.)

- c. A: *How did you get people to like you?* B: *I (just) **be'd**(?was/#got/?would be) friendly.*
 d. [On a diet:] *I **be'd/was good** all day but then I ate a plate of cookies.*

3.14 A definite restrictor such as *last night* renders the utterance unambiguously eventive (NB: **He was tall last night*). In such cases, *was* is strongly preferred over *be'd*.

3.15 In a small clause, eventivized individual-level states must have an overt BE. Intrinsically stage-level states must not have it.

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| (17) | a. | <i>*I saw a man dramatic.</i> | INDIVIDUAL LEVEL |
| | b. | <i>✓ I saw a man be(ing) dramatic.</i> | INDIVIDUAL LEVEL |
| | c. | <i>✓ I saw John (*be) naked/drunk.</i> | STAGE LEVEL |
| | d. | <i>✓ I saw John (*be) sit(ing)/smoke(ing) in his car.</i> | STAGE LEVEL |

3.16 Intuitively, the subject of habitual *be's*, like that of “is being”, is an agent (i.e., BE here is treated like an unergative intransitive verb). Note the near synonymy in (18). (I will provide semantic and syntactic support for this intuition later on.)

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|------|----|--|-------------|
| (18) | a. | <i>John be's weird/rude/arrogant/pedantic sometimes</i> | HABITUAL |
| | b. | <i>John acts weird/rude/arrogant/?pedantic sometimes.</i> | HABITUAL |
| | c. | <i>John is being weird/rude/arrogant/pedantic</i> | PROGRESSIVE |
| | d. | <i>John is acting weird/rude/arrogant/?pedantic.</i> | PROGRESSIVE |

3.17 Non-copular BE is often but not always able to be substituted with GET or ACT.

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| (19) | a. | <i>I can't resist him when he be's/acts/#gets/?is romantic.</i> |
| | b. | <i>I can't stand him when he be's/?acts/#gets/?is pedantic.</i> |
| | c. | <i>I can't resist him when he is being/acting romantic.</i> |
| | d. | <i>I can't stand him when he is being/?acting pedantic.</i> |

3.18 Since non-copular BE typically demands a volitional agent (Payne 2013:32), when there is no agent the copula is preferred even in (contingent) habitual sentences, as shown in (20).

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|------|----|--|----------|
| (20) | a. | <i>My cat be's/gets/?is (extra) cute when it wants food/attention</i> | HABITUAL |
| | b. | <i>My cat is/?gets/*be's (extra) cute after a bath.</i> | HABITUAL |

4 Comparison to “aspectual” BE in AAE

4.1 The habitual use of BE in NSAE resembles “aspectual” BE in AAE in certain key respects but is nevertheless markedly different in its distribution and range of application. (I base my comments on the findings of Green (2000).)

4.2 In both AAE and NSAE, habitual BE cannot have a generic “capacity” reading, unlike the simple tense generics, as shown in (21).

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|------|----|---|-----------------------------|
| (21) | a. | <i>John be's weird sometimes</i> | HABITUAL |
| | b. | <i>John smokes after dinner.</i> | HABITUAL |
| | c. | <i>John smokes/*be's weird.</i> | GENERIC |
| | d. | <i>This car goes/can go 120mph (#sometimes).</i> | CAPACITY |
| | e. | <i>John is/can be/#be's silly (sometimes).</i> | GENERIC/CAPACITY(/HABITUAL) |

4.3 NSAE differs from AAE in that the habitual BE in NSAE

- Cannot take a VP complement (**John be's running*).
- Cannot be used with bare plurals or indefinite subjects (**Dogs be good, *Some of them be big and some of them small*).
- Intrinsically stage-level states require the copula (**I be scared*).

5 Lexical and morphophonological analysis

5.1 That the copula and “substantive” BE are not the same lexical item has been well established (Becker 2004, Green 2000; though Arche (2006:84–5) rejects this).

5.2 I will refer to these as BE₁ and BE₂ respectively.

5.3 Evidence includes (22), involving negation and showing that the two differ both syntactically and semantically.

(22) BE under negation and with “do-support”

a. *Why **aren't** you my friend?*

RAISING TO T, GENERIC

b. *Why **don't** you **be** my friend?*

do-SUPPORT, INCHOATIVE

5.4 With *do*-support, BE₁ is impossible, as shown by the ungrammaticality of the passive in this position (23).

(23) **Why don't you **be ridiculed**?*

PASSIVE, *HABITUAL

5.5 Paradigmatically speaking, BE₂ is just a regular weak verb (Payne 2013:31) with a simple Present form *be's* and a Preterite *be'd*.

5.6 The form *be's* surfaces as a sort of compromise:

- It is no one's favorite form, since it “looks like” the infinitive of the copula and is stigmatized in relation to the prestige dialect.
- And yet it is unambiguously eventive in contexts where BE₁ is ambiguous or has only stative meaning.
 - E.g., *I hate that John **is dramatic***, which lacks a readily accessible stage-level interpretation.

5.7 If it is correct that *be's* surfaces to avoid ambiguity, we should expect that, where no ambiguity exists among pairs of lexical items and auxiliaries, no special spell-out is possible. This is borne out, as seen in (24).

(24) a. *He **is being** silly ⇒ He **be's** silly.*

b. *He **is having** nightmares ⇏ *He **have's** nightmares.*

5.8 With HAVE_{1/2}, no ambiguity arises, since there is syntactic complementary distribution: The auxiliary *have* only takes VP complements while “lexical” *have* never does.

6 Semantics/Pragmatics

- 6.1 In the interest of time, I will not go into the (very interesting) semantic/pragmatic details and issues raised by habitual BE.
- 6.2 Green's (2000) semantic/pragmatic analysis of aspectual BE in AAE is essentially sufficient to account for non-copular BE in NSAE, as shown in (25).
- That is, provided that syntactic differences between the two dialects mediate to account for the far more limited range of application of habitual BE in NSAE (viz., its incompatibility with VP complements, etc.).

(25) *John be's silly.*

HAB_e [(P, e)] [silly (John, e)]

Habitually, on pragmatically salient occasions, John is being silly.

- 6.3 Ramchand's (1996) treatment of substantive and copular BE in Scottish Gaelic is also relevant here.
- 6.4 Her distinction between a "Davidsonian" event variable (*e*) and a "Kratzerian" event variable (*s*) helps explain how syntactically derived stage-level states (type *is being/be's*) can have an "extra" event layer that is lacking in individual-level predicates.

(26) *The statue is in the garden* (currently/permanently).

a. $\exists s[\lambda e[\text{'in the garden' (the statue, e)}]](s)$

STAGE LEVEL

b. $\exists x: x=\text{the statue } [\lambda y[\exists e[\text{'in the garden' (y, e)}]]](x)$

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

- 6.5 A distinction between habitual and non-habitual genericity is required, despite Boneh and Doron's (2010:361–2) rejection of it, because it is morphologically encoded in NSAE and AAE.
- 6.6 I do, however, assume Boneh and Doron's (2010) HAB operator as adjunct to VP.

7 Syntactic analysis

- 7.1 Arche (2006:84–5, 135) rejects the "two copulas hypothesis" and proposes that the subject of "dynamic copular clauses" may originate in Spec-PP, then raise to Spec-AP, thereby deriving both the inner aspect and the relation of the property to another individual (type *be cruel to someone*).
- 7.2 However, such an approach cannot account for all the English data, since the presence of a PP complement neither necessarily induces the use of BE₂ (27a) nor entails volitionality of the subject (27c).

(27) a. *John is hurtful to his mother.*

±VOLITIONAL, COPULAR

b. *John is being hurtful to his mother.*

+VOLITIONAL, SUBSTANTIVE

c. *Cigarettes/This cigarette are/is harmful to humans/me.*

–VOLITIONAL, COPULAR

d. **This cigarette is being harmful to me.*

*–VOLITIONAL, SUBSTANTIVE

- 7.3 It is only the presence of BE₂ that forces the subject to be animate and the action volitional.
- 7.4 Accordingly, the complement AP/DP selected for by the V-head BE₂ must be of the correct sort—one that is conducive to volitionality.
- 7.5 As it happens, most temporary states tend to be more conducive to experiencer subjects (e.g., *be hungry, be angry, be in the garden*).

7.6 Likewise, many individual-level states are resistant to a volitional agent (e.g., *be tall*, *be attractive*).

7.7 Yet those states of either sort that *are* conducive to having a volitional agent subject may employ BE₂.

- (28) a. *John is (being)/be's on his best behavior for the teacher.* STAGE LEVEL, VOLITIONAL
 b. *John is (being)/be's dramatic about this.* INDIVIDUAL LEVEL, VOLITIONAL
 c. *John is (*being/*be's) tired of pizza.* NON-VOLITIONAL

7.8 Further, even those permanent states that are resistant to BE₂ may be coerced into its use under the right circumstances. (29) is from an online source in which a woman is complaining about how men have been put off by her height.

(29) “It was like they believed I **was being tall** AT them in order to emasculate them.”¹

7.9 Similarly, adding *on purpose* to stage-level states greatly increases their acceptability with BE₂.

- (30) a. *?John is being angry/drunk/confused on purpose.*

7.10 I assume, then, that BE₂ projects a specifier position and assigns a theta role of AGENT to this position.

7.11 Evidence against this assumption is that, if you use *is acting/acts* in sentences where *is being/be's* is illicit, these sentences are meaningful.

- (31) a. *John is acting/acts drunk.* (*is being/*be's) STAGE LEVEL
 b. *?John is acting/acts tall.* (*is being/*be's) INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

7.12 It appears that BE₂ is sensitive to what type of AP can complement it, while ACT freely combines with *any* AP.

7.13 The implication is that, whereas ACT selects for a subject, BE₂ does not assign a subject role and its apparent subject should be regarded as originating lower in the structure (i.e., in an AP, DP, or PP rather than VP).

7.14 Yet ACT is, in fact, also sensitive to the type of complement it selects for.

7.15 With stage-level states, it can mean either ‘pretend to be X’ or ‘exhibit signs of being X’, where X is a property of some sort.

- (32) *John is acting drunk.*
 a. ‘John is pretending to be drunk’.
 b. ‘John is exhibiting signs of being drunk’.

7.16 Moreover, ACT imposes no requirement that its subject be volitional, only that it be animate.

7.17 Indeed, John may be actively trying to act *not* drunk, say if he has been pulled over for drunk driving and is undergoing a field sobriety test. Still an observer may felicitously say “Oh no, John is acting drunk” (so there is no way he’s not getting a DUI tonight).

7.18 There are also certain APs and PPs that cannot easily associate with ACT, such as *is acting transparent/on his best behavior*, though *is being transparent/on his best behavior* is fine.

1. <<https://jezebel.com/i-m-pretty-short-and-i-m-not-at-all-turned-off-by-short-1730292194>>.

7.19 Thus, it turns out that the subject of the highly active verb ACT is not obligatorily agentive but may be an experiencer.

7.20 By contrast, BE₂ *does* require an agentive and volitional subject.

7.20.1 BE₂ cannot readily combine with stage-level states like *angry* or *drunk*, nor individual-level states like *tall*, because these are all things that one *experiences*.

7.20.2 Similarly, one can do cute things (hence *is being/be's cute*) but one either is or is not attractive/handsome/beautiful (**is being/be's attractive/etc.*).

7.20.3 So, too, one can be being a friend to someone by doing a set of particular volitional actions, or one can be being a child about something, but one cannot be being a teacher (or any other occupation) because this is a general property that a person has or lacks irrespective of their volitional actions at any given moment (in contrast to *is teaching*).

7.20.4 A friend, on the other hand, may be *being* a friend in one moment, but be *being* a jerk in the next moment.

7.21 In grammatical situations other than the habitual and progressive, stage-level predicates may be compatible with BE₂. Crucially, it is precisely in those contexts in which one can (still) voluntarily *do* something about the unfolding of some eventuality that BE₂ is licensed.

- (33) a. *Don't be angry (anymore/tomorrow)*
 b. *Don't be drunk (*anymore/tomorrow)*
 c. **Don't be ridiculed (anymore/tomorrow)*

7.21.1 In (33a), the inhibitive meaning 'stop your anger (now)' is possible because it is conceivably within the person's power to control their emotions.

7.21.2 In (33b), only the preventive reading 'don't get drunk' is possible, since, when drunk, one has no realistic control over their own drunkenness. Thus, it would be anomalous if the intended meaning were #'stop being drunk'.

7.21.3 In (33c), the passive is used, which consists of the copula and a VP complement. This is ungrammatical because BE₂ cannot take a VP complement and a passive cannot have a volitional subject.

7.22 So, here also the use of BE₂ is meaningful only insofar as the subject has agency over the realization or not of the predicate.

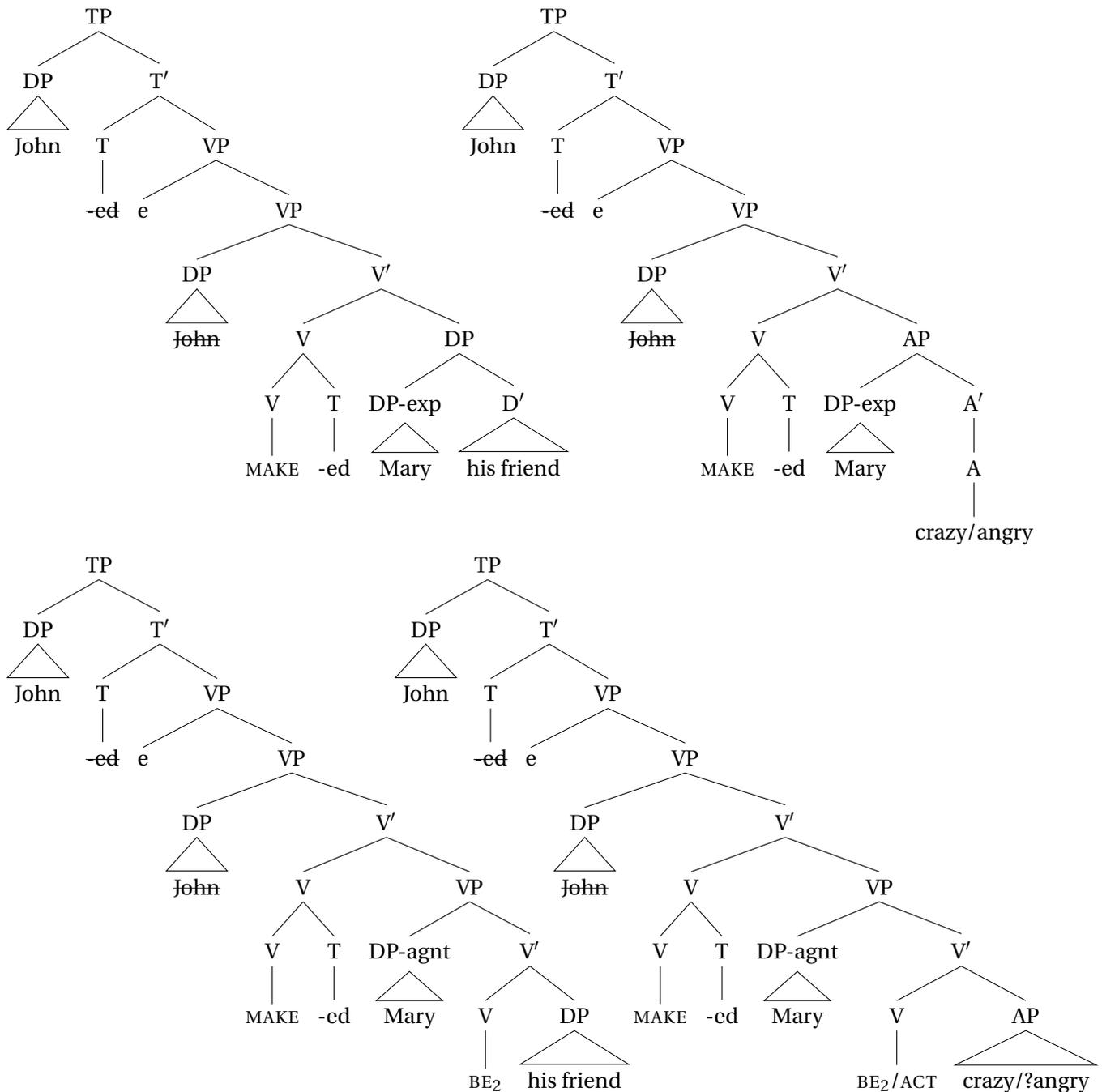
7.23 I see no theory-external reason, then, not to suppose that the subject of BE₂ is base generated in the specifier position of the VP headed by BE₂.

7.24 I therefore claim the following.

- (34) a. All predicates at least optionally have a "Kratzerian" event variable *e* (Kratzer 1995). (Whether this is realized and interpreted as eventive depends on the predicate type and the syntax of the rest of the clause/sentence.)
 b. The head BE₂ assigns an agent theta role as its external argument, which must be volitional. It selects for a complement that is compatible with this volitionality.
 c. All predicates with BE₂ obligatorily contain an event variable *e*, as with all other eventive verbs.
 d. *Is being/Be's* never has to be used, but it is licensed just in case the predicate is compatible with volitionality.

7.25 Some additional evidence in favor of this treatment comes from small clauses, where the linear order is compatible with a subject projection in Spec-VP.

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| (35) | a. | <i>John made/saw Mary angry.</i> | STAGE LEVEL |
| | b. | <i>John made/*saw Mary crazy.</i> | INDIVIDUAL LEVEL |
| | c. | <i>John made/*saw Mary his friend.</i> | INDIVIDUAL LEVEL |
| (36) | a. | <i>?John made/saw Mary be angry.</i> | STAGE LEVEL |
| | b. | <i>John made/saw Mary be crazy.</i> | INDIVIDUAL LEVEL |
| | c. | <i>John made/saw Mary be his friend.</i> | INDIVIDUAL LEVEL |



7.25.1 The linear order is compatible with *Mary* originating in Spec-VP, whereas assuming the subject originates in Spec-AP/DP would require some special movement to Spec-VP (or somewhere else) for ECM/raising-to-object.

7.25.2 Importantly, with an AP complement BE₂ can be felicitously replaced by ACT, whose subject is almost certainly generated in Spec-VP.

- That this is the same BE as the one found in *be's* and *is being* is clear from the ungrammaticality of this BE with an intrinsically stage-level predicate (BE ANGRY).
- The “Kratzerian” event variable (*e*) is reflected in the trees, found “in the Specifier position of the highest VP-shell” (Stowell 2007:443) (i.e., the “little” vP layer) whenever the predicate is not (treated as) individual level.

7.26 The meaning imposed by BE₂ turns out to be more complicated than just adding an event layer to the syntax or “converting” an individual-level predicate to a stage-level one. Instead, its main function is to require an animate and volitional agentive subject for a state predicate.

7.27 Thus, the difference between the predicates in (37) emerges.

(37)	a. <i>John is funny (in general).</i>	INDIVIDUAL LEVEL
	b. <i>John is funny (tonight).</i>	STAGE LEVEL
	c. <i>John is being/be's funny.</i>	STAGE LEVEL, PROG/HAB

7.28 The first is individual level, lacking a “Kratzerian” event variable *e*; the second is stage level with a Kratzerian event variable; the third is stage-level with a Kratzerian event variable *and* an obligatorily volitional-agentive subject.

7.29 It is a property of the V-head BE₂ that selects for a complement of the right sort, meaning that the complement must be compatible with volitionality.

8 Conclusion

8.1 Summary:

- There are two different lexical items BE in English (BE₁ and BE₂).
- The substantive BE requires a volitional, agentive subject.
- In NSAE, substantive BE (BE₂) has a habitual or “consuetudinal” use.
- The distribution of consuetudinal BE is consistent with that of BE₂ generally. Its range of application is predictable on this basis, such that grammaticality judgments are possible.

8.2 Further research:

- Other languages that have multiple words corresponding to English *be* have markedly different distributions.
- How can we account for these phenomena in a way that is cross-linguistically coherent?
- One problem is that in Spanish, for example, the translation of *John is being cruel to Peter* is *Juan está siendo cruel con Pedro* (Arche 2006:64). That is, with ESTAR translating *is* (BE₁) and SER translating *being* (BE₂).
- Likewise, in Sanskrit, the imperative of the copula, *edhi*, is used where English (I have claimed) has BE₂.
- Finally, in Scottish Gaelic and AAE, substantive/aspectual BE is used in many places where (N)SAE requires the copula.
- These facts are by no means predicted on the basis of the English data alone, and a more general account that applies cross-linguistically is, of course, desirable.

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