A FORMAL SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS OF AGENTIVITY IN MOTION PREDICATES IN GHANAIAN STUDENT PIDGIN (GSP)

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the syntactic structure of Agentive motion predicates in Ghanaian Student Pidgin (GSP), an English-lexified expanded pidgin spoken by (mostly male) students (and young adults) in Ghanaian secondary and tertiary educational institutions. I argue that GSP uses Serial Verb Constructions (SVCs) to encode Agentive motion predicates and propose syntactic analyses to account for the difference in interpretation between Initial Contact Agentives and Continuous Contact Agentives — despite the apparent similarity in their surface structures. The paper argues that though (in accordance with previous studies on agentivity (KRATZER, 1996; PYLKKÄNEN, 2008; HARLEY, 2013)) GSP introduces the agent with an agentive *v*P in both Initial and Continuous Contact agentives, the difference in interpretation between the two results from an embedded *make*-clause in the underlying structure of Initial Contact agentives which is not present in Continuous Contact agentives.

Keywords: Agentivity, Motion Predicates, Ghanaian Student Pidgin

RESUMO

Este artigo explora a estrutura sintática de predicados agentivos de movimento no Ghanaian Student Pidgin (GSP), um pidgin expandido de base lexical inglesa falado por estudantes e jovens adultos (majoritariamente do gênero masculino) em instituições ganesas de ensino. Argumento que o GSP usa construções seriais verbais para codificar predicados agentivos de movimento e proponho análises sintáticas para dar conta da diferença de interpretação entre aqueles predicados agentivos de contato inicial e de contato contínuo — a despeito da aparente similaridade de suas estruturas superficiais. O artigo defende que, embora o GSP introduza um agente com um *v*P agentivo tanto nas estruturas iniciais quanto contínuas (de acordo com estudos prévios sobre agentividade, como Kratzer (1996), Pylkkänen (2008), Harley (2013)), a diferença de interpretação entre os dois resulta de uma sentença do tipo *make-clause*, presente na estrutura subjacente de um predicado agentivo de contato inicial, que estaria ausente nos predicados agentivos de contato contínuo.

Palavras-chave: agentividade, predicados de movimento, Ghanaian Student Pidgin

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1 INTRODUCTION

In this paper I discuss the structure of the Agentive subcomponent of motion predicates as it presents the Ghanaian Student Pidgin (GSP) motion predicate. I argue, based on previous analyses (KRATZER, 1996; PYLKKÄNEN, 2008; HARLEY, 2013), that the Agentive structure is an add-on to the intransitive (i.e. non-agentive) structure and that this add-on is introduced by the functional projection 'VoiceP' (which later came to be known as 'little *v*'). Before continuing on to present my argument, I will begin with a very brief background to the language of interest — GSP.

According to Eberhard et al. (2021), Ghana has 83 mutually unintelligible indigenous languages belonging to three different language families — Kwa, Gur and Mande, with the Kwa group having the largest number of languages. In addition to these indigenous languages, English was introduced via British colonization (ADIKA, 2012; SACKEY, 1996) and this has led to an indigenous variety of English, which is used widely in Ghana both in official and domestic domains. Alongside these languages, Ghana is also home to two varieties of pidgin: what Huber (1999) refers to as "uneducated" or "non-institutionalized" Ghanaian Pidgin English (which I refer to in this paper as "Town Pidgin", following Dako (2002b)) and what Huber (1999) refers to as "educated" or "institutionalized" Ghanaian Pidgin English (which I call "Ghanaian Student Pidgin" and which is the focus of this case-study).[1]

As may be gathered from its name, GSP, which began as an off-shoot of Town Pidgin (in the second half of the 20th century), is spoken mainly by students in high schools and universities (DAKO, 2013; DAKO, 2002; DADZIE, 1985; HUBER, 1999). However, it can now be heard being used across all sectors of the country by young adults who have completed their education and are in gainful employment. Additionally, its speakers now see themselves as distinct from the speakers of Town Pidgin and, thus, have endeavoured to differentiate their variety with regard to phonology (OSEI-TUTU, 2018), morphology and lexis (OSEI-TUTU, 2016a; OSEI-TUTU, 2016b), semantics (OSEI-TUTU; CORUM, 2014; OSEI-TUTU, 2008) and syntax (OSEI-TUTU, 2019).

Despite its widespread use and popularity in Ghana, GSP, is still stigmatized because, as a non-standard variety, many people (both speakers and non-speakers; linguists and non-linguists, alike) are of the view that is it just a makeshift code that does not meet the requirements to be a fully-fledged language. However, I am of the opinion that by virtue of how they are formed, pidgins/creoles are uniquely positioned to address the contrasting (and, often incompatible) systems of their lexifier (in the case of GSP, English) and substrate (which is, in the case of GSP, largely the major Kwa languages of Ghana — Akan, Ga and Ewe). Consequently, this paper is significant because it provides a formal analysis of how this underlying conflict is negotiated (or even resolved) within an understudied pidgin and, thus, contributes to scholarship on the subject and (also) to the Minimalist Program (inasmuch as it sheds light on the parametrization of the structure of Human Language).

1 I have added *Ghanaian* to Dako's (2002b, 2013) term "Student Pidgin" in order to make it more distinctive.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: I provide a description of the data in §2, summarize arguments for the agent being introduced in spec, *v*P (in §3), present the general structure of Agentives in GSP (§4) and then in §4.1, present the argument for the embedded *make*-clause structure which differentiates Initial Contact Agentives from Continuous Contact Agentives, and conclude the paper in §5.

2 THE DATA

The data were collected from three speakers of GSP using a self-paced application (designed by Elena Benedicto in collaboration with the Envision Center at Purdue University) which administered a series of 175 video prompts designed to elicit and contrast the set of parameters relevant to complex-path motion predicates.[2] Out of the 175 video prompts, 87 were targeted at eliciting responses on the Agentive subcomponent — specifically, two types of agentive motion predicates: those with initial contact (as in Figure 1, where the agent acts on the figure and then the figure alone goes through the motion) and those with continuous contact (as in Figure 2, those in which both the agent and the figure undergo the motion).

FIGURE 1 — COMBINED SCREENSHOTS OF AN INITIAL CONTACT PROMPT

Source: elaborated by the author.

FIGURE 2 — COMBINED SCREENSHOTS OF A CONTINUOUS CONTACT PROMPT

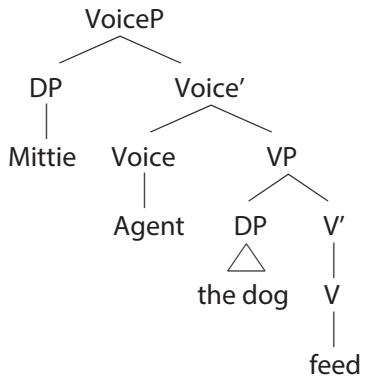
Source: elaborated by the author.

2 Benedicto (2017).

3 THE EXTERNAL ARGUMENT

As stated in the introduction, many scholars have argued that the agent is the external argument of the predicate. Kratzer (1996) proposes that the agent is generated in specifier of VoiceP as is illustrated in the diagram (taken from Kratzer (1996, p. 121)) below:

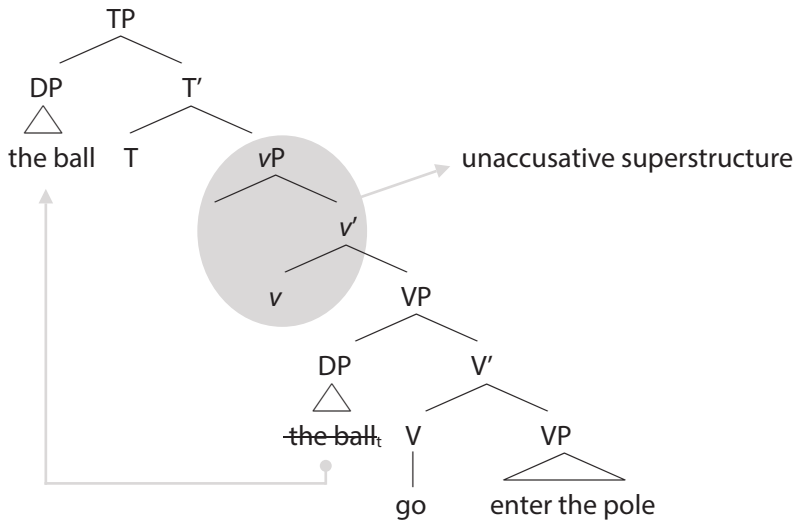
(1)



The VoiceP of Kratzer's (1996) proposal is now considered the same as Chomsky's (1995) Little *v* and is generally accepted as the functional projection that introduces the external argument of the verb. Later work (particularly, Arad (1999)) have argued for different flavors of little *v*, to the effect that non-agentive sentences (such as (2), below) have an unaccusative little *v*, which does not introduce an agent; whereas agentive sentences (such as those in §4) have a different little *v** which introduces the agent.[3, 4]

(2) The ball go enter the pole
D ball go enter D goalposts
'The ball went into the goalposts.'

(3)



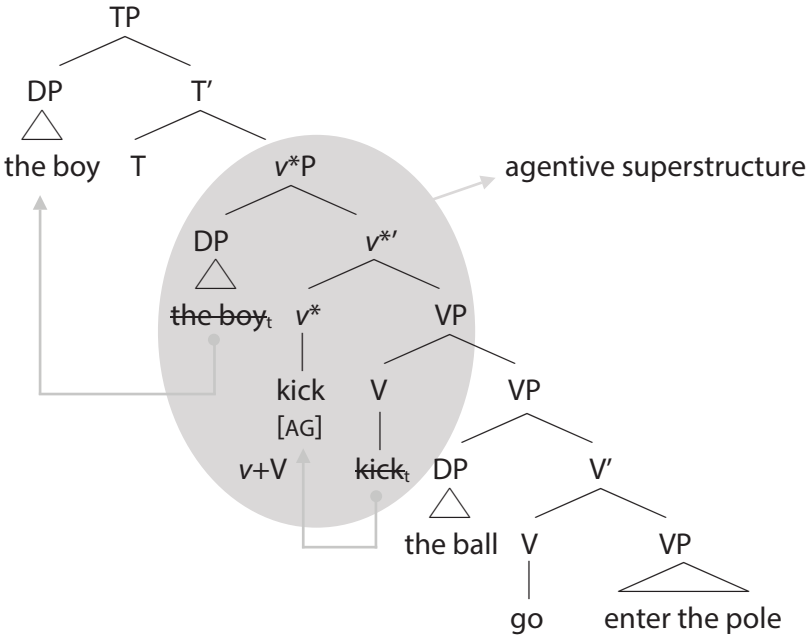
3 The * is used to differentiate the agentive little *v* and from the non-agentive little *v*.

4 List of abbreviations used in this paper: C: complementizer; D: determiner; OBJ: object; SBJ: subject; SG: singular; t: trace; VP_{mnr}: manner verb phrase.

4 THE GSP AGENTIVE STRUCTURE

Following the structure above, I propose that the agentive verb results from a *v*+V combination (with *v* providing the agentivity and V providing the manner of action). Thus, if we revisit (2), above and provide an agent (for e.g., *the boy*), (4), will be the resulting structure:

(4) The boy kick the ball go enter the pole



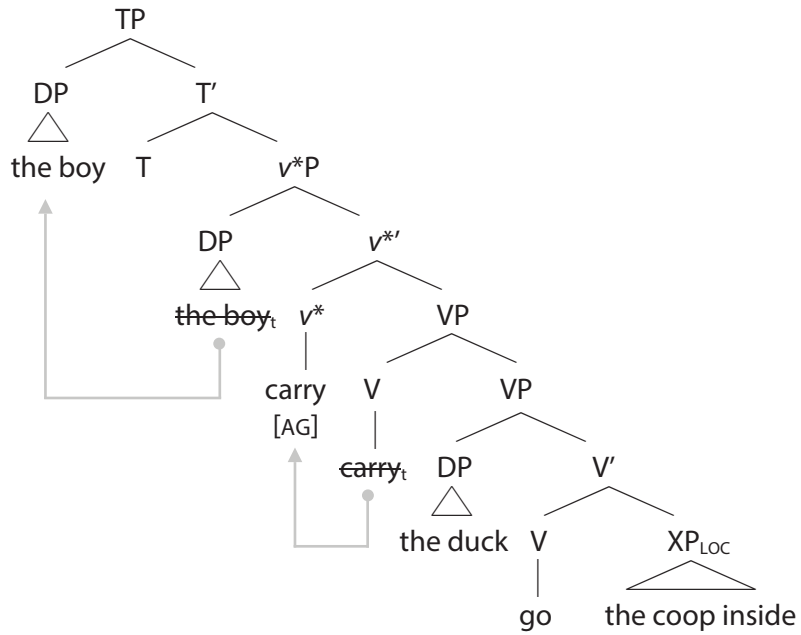
The structure above shows that the agentive verb *kick* is generated in V where it takes two arguments, the figure 'the ball' and rest of the event 'go enter the pole'. The VP it forms is then merged with the agentive little *v*, which introduces the agent *the boy* in its specifier. After being complete, *kick* moves from V to *v* so that it can assign accusative case to the DP *the ball*. The evidence for this is even clearer when we consider (5) below, in which the figure *the ball* is replaced with a pronoun:

(5) The boy kick am/*e go enter the pole
D boy kick 3SG.OBJ/3SG.SBJ go enter D goalposts
'The boy kicked it into the goalposts.'

As (5) shows, the pronoun which replaces *the ball* must receive accusative case otherwise the sentence will be ungrammatical. This structure is also applicable to events in which the agent has continuous contact with the figure and they (i.e., the agent and the figure) both undergo the motion. this is illustrated in (6) and (7) below:

(6) The boy carry the duck go the coop inside
D boy carry D duck go D coop inside
'The boy carried the duck into the coop.'

(7)



As (7) shows, the manner verb *carry* is also generated within a VP-shell that has the agentive *v* and subsequently moves to *v* to assign accusative case to the figure *the duck*.

4.1 INITIAL VS. CONTINUOUS CONTACT

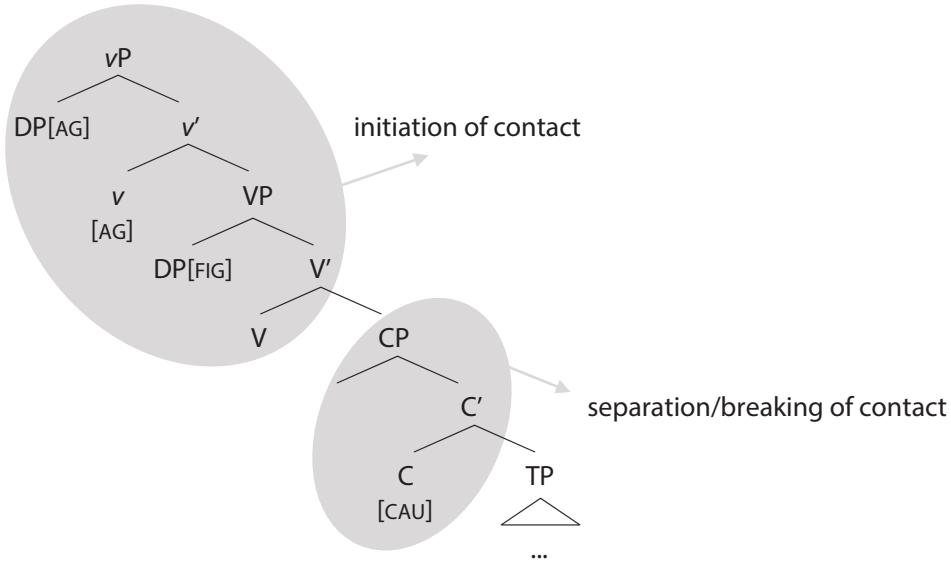
The analysis above suggests that Initial Contact and Continuous Contact sentences yield the same results as far as interpretation is concerned. However, as already stated above, in initial contact events, the agent acts on the figure and the figure undergoes an event (as in (4)); whereas, in continuous contact events, contact is maintained between the agent and the figure while the latter undergoes the motion event (as in (6)). This suggests, therefore, that there is additional structure which leads to the difference in interpretations. Consider (8) and (9) below, both using the verb *push*:

(8) The boy push the girl make she enter the water
D boy push D girl C 3SG.SBJ enter D water
'The boy pushed the girl into the water.' [one initial contact]
#'The boy pushed the girl into the water.' [one continuous contact]

(9) The small girl push the toy train enter the tunnel inside
D small girl push D toy train enter D tunnel inside
#?'The little girl pushed the train into the tunnel.' [one initial contact]
'The little girl pushed the train into the tunnel.' [one continuous contact]

The interpretations of sentences (8) and (9) show that *push* is used to mean a single instance of contact against the girl; while *push* in (9) is a continuous contact with the train which begins when the boy first touches the train and does not stop until the train enters the tunnel. When the interpretations are switched, they become ungrammatical or questionable (depending on the speaker). This pattern (i.e., initial contact being expressed with a *make*-clause) is consistent throughout the data and, to account for it, I propose the structure in (10), below:

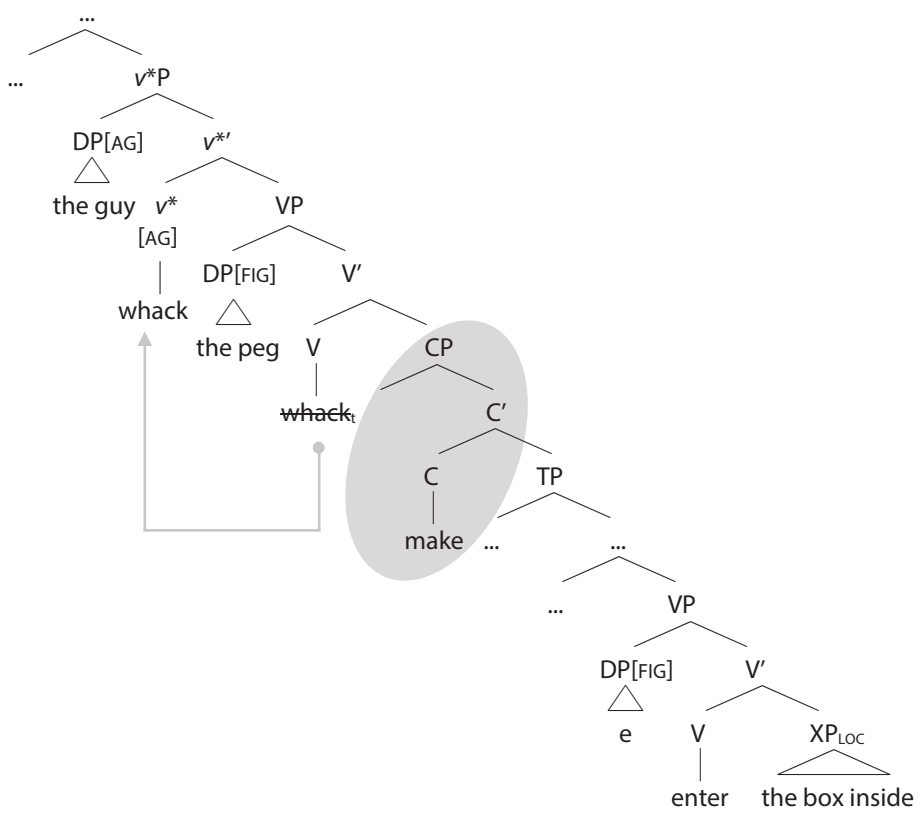
(10)



The structure in (10), above, proposes that (in Initial Contact Agentives) the agent (i.e. initiator of the motion event undertaken by the figure) is separated from the figure by the causative complementizer *make* which then takes as a complement the TP which is the effect of the initiation (i.e. the motion event that the figure undergoes). This is illustrated, below, with (11) and the corresponding structure in (12):

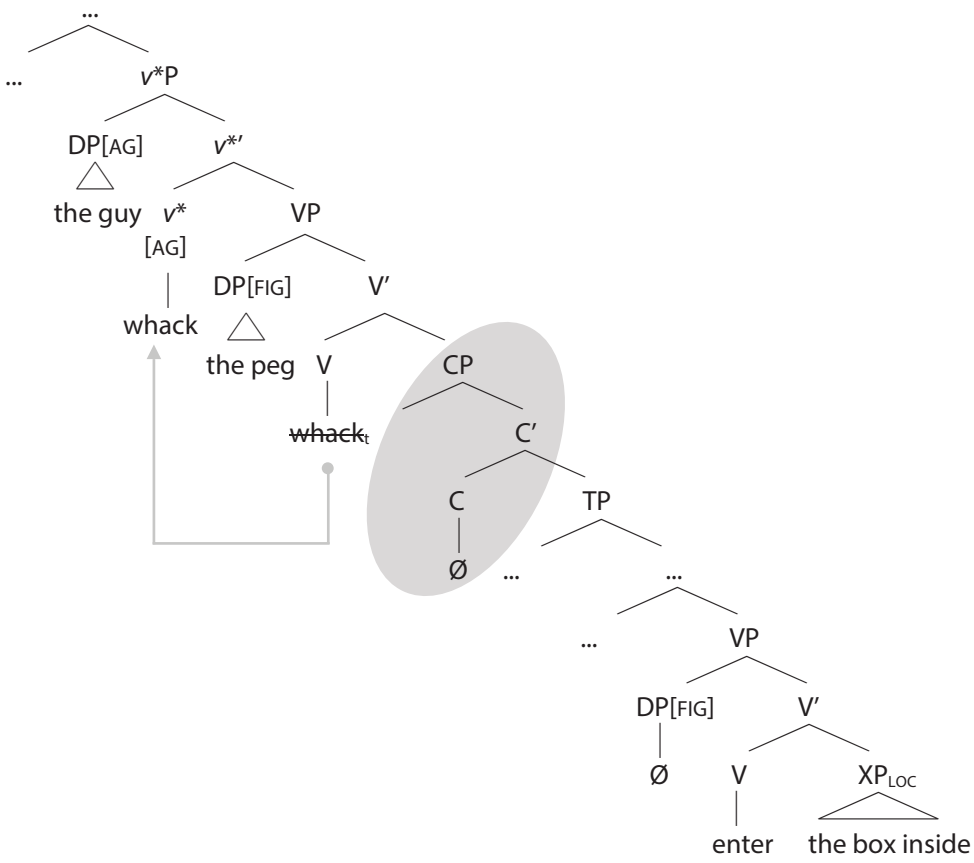
(11) The guy whack the peg make e enter the block inside
D guy whack D peg C 3SG.SBJ enter D block inside
'The guy whacked the peg so that it went into the block.'

(12)



In essence, I argue that *make* is used to express some sort of relationship (i.e. either *causation* or the creation of *an enabling environment*) between the clause that contains the agent and the one that contains the process. This relationship is very much like what Ramchand (2008) refers to as the "*leads to* relation" in event composition; that is, that the interpretation of a part of the event is causational due to its position in the structural hierarchy. Thus, even in the cases where the *make* is not overtly stated (as in (13)), it is still represented in the underlying structure which is why it yields the initial contact interpretation:

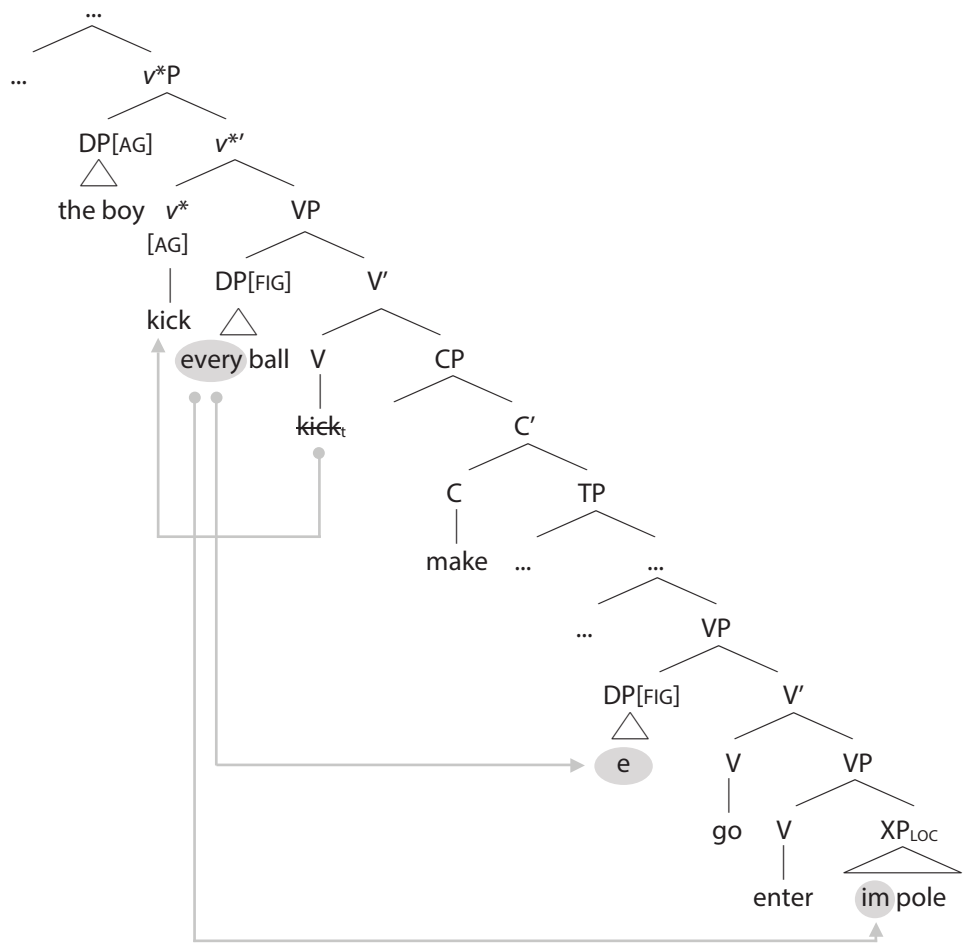
(13) The guy whack the peg enter the box inside



It is important to point out, here, that this additional structure (i.e., the one responsible for *breaking the contact*, for example, the circled portion in (13)) is added to the existing structure via complementation. This is easily verified with two tests for c-command: a Bound Variable Test ((14) and (15)) and a WH-Extraction test.

(14) The boy kick every ball make e go enter im pole inside
D boy kick every ball C 3SG.SBJ go enter 3SG.SBJ pole inside
'The boy kicked every ball into its own (individual) goal.'

(15)



The Bound Variable Test relies on the c-command relationship between an operator and a variable — i.e., on the premise that an operator is able to bind a variable as long as the variable is within the operator's c-command domain. Based on that premise then, the operator *every* would not be able to bind the two variables *e* and *im* if it did not c-command them and the only reason a c-command relationship is possible is because the added-on component is a complement of the higher structure. A similar principle is responsible for the grammaticality of (16), where it is possible to extract the interrogative pronoun *weytin* ('what') from its in-situ position and from a WH-question only because the phrase where it is contained is merged to the rest of the structure via complementation.

(16) Weytin the boy kick the ball make e go enter inside ~~weytin~~$_t$
What D boy kick D ball c 3SG.SBJ go enter inside ~~what~~
'What did the boy kick the ball into?'

Another noteworthy point is that the presence of this *make*-CP in the deep structure of the initial contact agentives does not disrupt the integrity of the monoeventive reading or interpretation of these types of structure. However, this is not to say that the *make*-CP structure cannot be used to describe a sequence of separate events. Let us take, for example, a game of pool where a player uses the cue stick to hit the white ball which then

goes on to knock another ball into one of the pockets. It is possible to use the sentence (17), below to describe this scenario:

(17) The paddi whack the ball make e go the pocket inside
D guy hit D ball C 3SG.SBJ go D pocket inside
'The guy hit the (white) ball so that it (i.e. the other ball) went into the pocket.'

The interpretation of (17) is that though the two events are related (i.e., the hitting of one ball and the entering of another ball into the pocket), they are still separate. Thus, it is impossible to achieve the same interpretation for the same situation with (18):

(18) The paddi whack the ball go the pocket inside
D guy hit D ball go D pocket inside
'The guy hit the (white) ball into the pocket.'
#'The guy hit the (white) ball so that it (i.e. another ball) went into the pocket.'

The separate event reading is not attainable in (18) because the hitting of the ball and its subsequent entering into the pocket are not considered two separate events, but merely sequences in the same event — i.e. the same ball undergoes the hitting and the entering of the pocket. Thus, though the monoeventive interpretation of (18) can be expressed with a *make*-CP (as already pointed out), there is a crucial difference — the subject pronoun of such a *make*-clause (i.e. one with a monoeventive reading) can only refer to the object of the agentive verb (as illustrated below in (19)):

(19) The paddi whack the ball make e go the pocket inside
D guy hit D ball c 3SG.SBJ go D pocket inside
'The guy hit the ball so that it (i.e. the same ball) went into the pocket.'

Further evidence of the monoeventive interpretation of sentences such like (19) can be gathered from the fact that it is not possible to ascribe different temporal specifications to the various subparts of the sentence that has a single eventive reading. Imagine, for example, a game of soccer in which a player, taking a penalty kick, strikes the ball at exactly 11:58:58am and the ball enters the net two seconds later, at exactly 11:59:00am. Despite the difference in temporal specifications for when the ball was kicked and when it entered the net, since the event (of taking a penalty kick) is considered as a single unit, it is possible to express it using sentence (20) below:

(20) The player kick the ball go the net inside
D player kick D ball go D net inside
'The player kicked the ball into the net.'

On the other hand, if the different temporal specifications for the kicking of the ball and entering of the net are enforced — in other words, we try to include the different time references for the subparts of the event described in sentence (20), the resulting sentence (21), is ungrammatical.

(21) * The player kick the ball at 11:58:58am go the net inside at 11:59:00am
D player kick D ball at 11:58:58am go D net inside at 11:59:00am
'The player kicked the ball at 11:58:58am and it entered the net at 11:59:00am.'

The only way for the desired interpretation (i.e., not a single event, but two separate events) in (21) to be achieved is to break the sentence into two clauses each of which expresses one of those events (as in (22), below):

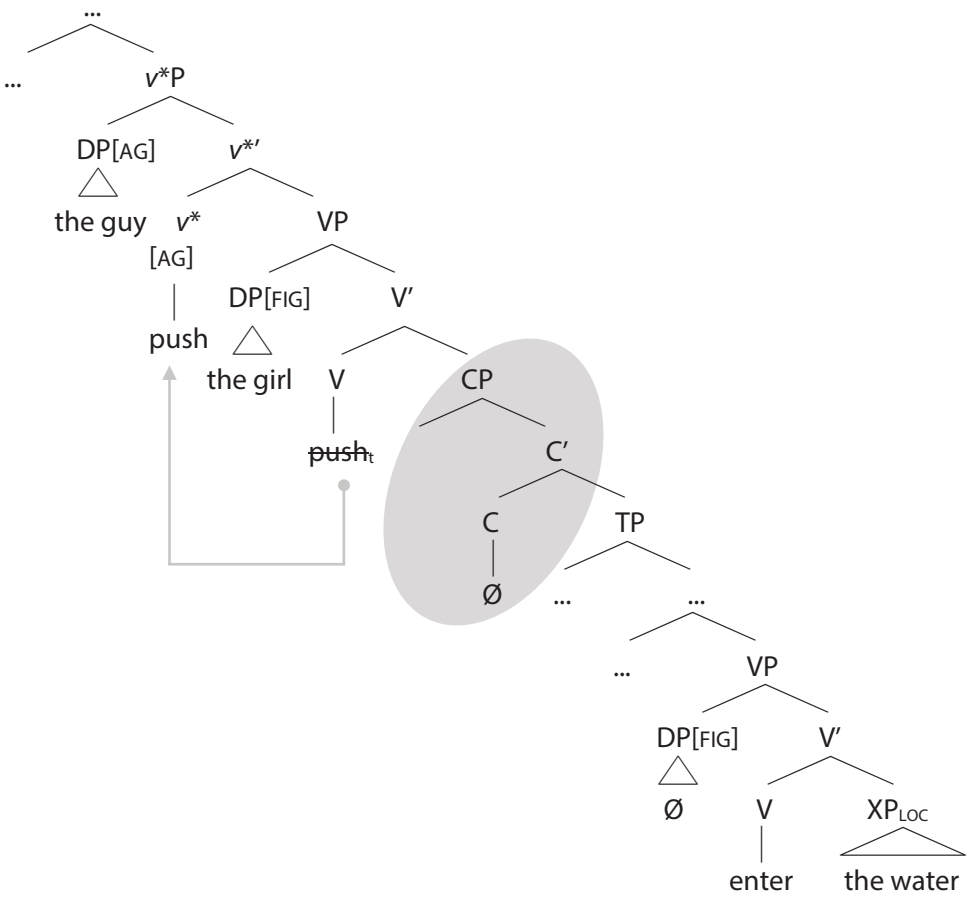
(22) The player kick the ball 11:58:58am make e enter the net 11:59:00am
D player kick D ball 11:58:58am c 3SG.SBJ enter D net 11:59:00am
'The player kicked the ball at 11:58:58am and it entered the net at 11:59:00am.'

Thus, simply put, sentences like (20) — which are the type that express Initial Contact agentives — can only have a monoeventive interpretation, which in turn means that the deep structure which I have proposed can also only support monoeventive interpretations.

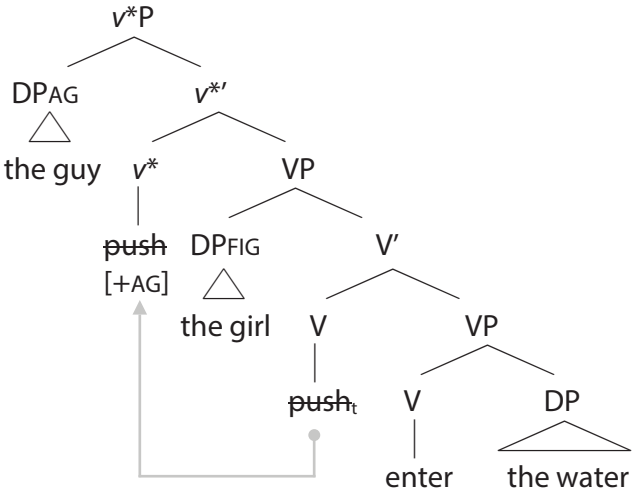
Now that I have shown that the two realizations of the initial contact agentive in GSP are one and the same, I can now return to the original discussion on how this agentive type differs structurally from the Continuous Contact agentive type. As already noted, the underlying difference between the agent and the figure in Continuous Contact agentives is that contact is maintained throughout the motion event. In other words, the *separation* or *break of contact* element, which I have argued the *make* is responsible for, is absent in the deep structure of Continuous Contact agentives. Thus, when you have a verb like *push* (23), which can be interpreted as either initial or continuous contact — the choice of one interpretation or the other is dependent on the underlying structure.

(23) The guy push the girl enter the water
D guy push D girl enter D water
'The guy pushed the girl into the water (initial contact).'
'The guy pushed the girl into the water (continuous contact).'

(24) Structure for initial contact interpretation in (23)



(25) Structure for continuous contact interpretation in (23)



Thus, in a case like *push*, it is highly likely that the *make*-construction will be used more consistently for initial contact in order to force that interpretation and leave no room for ambiguity. It is not surprising, therefore, that the data collected showed that in all the cases of *push*, the participants always used the *make*-construction when the prompt depicted an

initial contact agentive (e.g., (26) elicited with the prompt in Figure 3) and avoided it when it depicted a continuous contact situation (e.g. (27) elicited with the prompt in Figure 4).

FIGURE 3 — COMBINED SCREENSHOTS OF INITIAL CONTACT CLIP 07-05

Source: elaborated by the author.

(26) The man push the kiddie make e come down the slide
D man push D kid C 3SG.SBJ come down D slide
'The man pushed the kid so that he/she came down the slide.'

FIGURE 4 — COMBINED SCREENSHOTS OF CONTINUOUS CONTACT CLIP 09-08

Source: elaborated by the author.

(27) The small girl push the toy train enter the tunnel inside
D small girl push D toy train enter D tunnel inside
'The small girl pushed the toy train into the tunnel.'

5 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper examined agentive constructions in Ghanaian Student Pidgin (GSP) — within the minimalist framework — with the aim of providing a formal analysis of how they are structured. The paper argued that the agent is introduced above VP_{MNR} with a little *v* as is traditionally agreed. Additionally, I presented evidence for the argument that the difference between initial and continuous contact agentives lies on the internal structures — i.e. that in Initial Contact Agentives there is an embedded *make*-clause which is sometimes null, whereas this clause is absent in continuous contact agentives.

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