

## A Note on the Productivity of the Alternative Embedded Passive

The alternative embedded passive (AEP, see 1a), has been a well-known dialect feature within American Englishes for some time (dating at least to Staley 1959). This feature stands in contrast to the embedded passive that is standard in English (EP, see 1b). The key difference is that where the EP has a full passive construction, including infinitive *be* and a past participle, following a matrix verb like *need*, the AEP only has the past participle following the matrix verb.

1. a. The car needs washed.
- b. The car needs to be washed.

A wide range of linguists find the phenomenon to be worthy of inquiry. It is of interest to dialectologists because while the occasional user may be found across North America (Maher and Wood 2011), the AEP numbers among the few features most commonly found in the (North) Midland<sup>1</sup> (Murray, Frazer, and Simon 1996; Labov, Ash, and Boberg 2006), and as such is said to provide evidence that this area is itself a dialect region and not simply a negative space between North and South. It also helps to show the spread of dialect features; the AEP is additionally found in Scotland and Northern England (Strelluf 2020), and the general consensus in the literature seems to be that the regions share the same phenomenon as a result of migration. The AEP is further of interest to syntacticians (Edelstein 2014, Tenny 1998), as evidence suggests that it is structurally different from the EP, rather than simply an omission of *to be*, as claimed originally by Murray et al. (1996). For example, Edelstein (2014) proposes that the AEP is a Restructuring phenomenon with monoclausal-like properties whereby the matrix verb directly selects for an Aspect Phrase. I assume this analysis in the following pages. Finally, it is of interest to sociolinguists and variationists more generally: as an enregistered feature of Pittsburghese (Tenny 1998, Johnstone 2009), it is one of the few syntactic variables to achieve a

level of social awareness and evaluation. If we take the conservative view of syntactic variables as solely representing word order variation or variation in grammatical structure, as espoused by Robinson and MacKenzie (2019), this latter point becomes even more noteworthy as further study of the feature could lead to insights about the interface between syntax and sociolinguistics.

My goals in this brief note are twofold. Particularly because the AEP is of interest across many subfields of linguistics, we would like our description of the feature to be as accurate as possible. As such, my primary goal is to improve the accuracy of our description of the AEP by showing that one claim commonly made about the construction is inaccurate. Namely, I will show that the choice of matrix verb used in the AEP is more productive than previously thought. This productivity raises questions about the AEP for all subfields. As addressing each of them in total is beyond the scope of this note, let alone a full research article, my secondary goal is to outline some of these questions in order to help illuminate a path forward for study of the AEP.

As evidenced by the example offered in (1), the canonical form of the AEP uses *need* as a matrix verb. While the field commonly calls the AEP the ‘needs washed construction,’ the construction is in fact productive in the sense that any verbal participle can be used (Tenny 1998, Edelstein 2014). The choice of matrix verb, however, is said to be highly constrained. Whereas the EP can involve a wide range of matrix verbs (*hope, wish, etc.*), the range of matrix verbs available to the AEP has been claimed to consist solely of *need, want, and like*. This claim is in fact seen as one of the key differences between the EP and AEP according to Murray and Simon (1999, 2002). Given that they write separate papers for each matrix verb (Murray et al. 1996; Murray and Simon 1999, 2002), Murray and colleagues appear to suggest that these are three separate dialect features. They do note a relation, however, as well as an apparent implicational

hierarchy: acceptance of the construction with *like* as a matrix verb implies acceptance of *want*, which implies acceptance of *need*. Edelman (2014) finds this implicational hierarchy to be robust in consultations with Pittsburghers, and more systematic data collected by Edelman, Pan, and Wyner (2019) shows that this implicational hierarchy is robust in the UK as well.

Subsequent research to that of Murray and colleagues treat the AEP with each of these matrix verbs as the same phenomenon (see Edelman 2014, for example). However, such subsequent research tends to claim that the AEP is *only* acceptable with *need*, *want*, or *like* as a matrix verb.

This claim is a fair assumption in the absence of data showing the AEP in use with other matrix verbs, but is rather surprising upon further reflection. After all, many other matrix verbs can participate in the EP (Edelman 2014, see 2). Why would they not participate in the AEP?

2. a. My dog **loves** to be petted.
- b. Your cat **hates** to be picked up.
- c. Mary **deserves** to be thanked for her help.
- d. John **hopes** to be promoted next year.
- e. The prince **wishes** to be crowned king.
- f. My teacher **prefers** to be given work on time.

One potential reason could be that for each matrix verb, the AEP allows nonvolitional and nonsentient subjects (Edelman 2014, see 3).

3. The lawn (needs/wants/likes) watered once a week.

This is true of these verbs in the EP as well, at least by my own judgement. However, many verbs acceptable in the EP, such as *hope*, can only be used with a volitional or sentient subject. If the observation that the AEP permits nonvolitional/nonsentient subjects were to reflect

something crucial about the grammar of the construction, we would thus have a natural subset of verbs that can act as matrix verbs in it. However, Edelstein (2014) finds varying judgements regarding constructed AEP examples with nonvolitional/nonsentient subjects. This variability suggests that this observation may not in fact be quite so crucial to understanding the AEP. In this case, the restriction of possible matrix verbs to *need/want/like* appears somewhat arbitrary.

Another construction at least superficially similar to the AEP also permits a limited number of matrix verbs. The concealed passive involves a matrix verb followed by a present participle (4).

4. The cat wants feeding. (Edelstein 2014: 244)

Like the AEP, the concealed passive allows a restricted set of matrix verbs; however, the concealed passive allows a larger number of matrix verbs than the AEP, including *deserve* and *require* (Edelstein 2014). Even if we did not expect the AEP to be fully productive—that is, to allow the full set of matrix verbs as permitted in the EP—with respect to the matrix verb, it is curious that it is more limited than a similar construction.

Another construction superficially similar to the AEP is the transitive passive found in standard varieties, in which a matrix verb is followed by a direct object and past participle (5).

5. John needs the car washed.

This construction, like the concealed passive, allows a narrower range of matrix verbs than the EP. This range, however, is again wider than that apparently allowed by the AEP, and includes *wish* and *prefer* (Edelstein 2014).

Given that superficially similar constructions allow a wider range of matrix verbs, perhaps we should expect that more matrix verbs are possible with the AEP than previously attested. Below, I provide evidence of this by searching Google for strings involving several matrix verbs acceptable in the EP but claimed not to be in the AEP. The use of Internet searches to collect tokens of the AEP and associate them with a geographical location is well-established (Duncan 2019; Strelluf 2020). While Duncan and Strelluf both search within a single site, here I cast a wider net in order to maximize the likelihood of finding any examples of noncanonical matrix verbs. I selected five candidate matrix verbs: *deserve*, *love*, *hate*, *wish*, and *hope* (examples 2a-e show these to be possible in the EP). These candidates were selected because they share characteristics with the attested verbs *need*, *want*, and *like*. *Deserve* is attested in the concealed passive and shares some semantic content with *need* (for example, both verbs carry deontic force). *Love* and *hate* differ from *like* more by degree than by meaning. Test sentences with *love* have in fact been found to be acceptable to some speakers by the Yale Grammatical Diversity Project (Zanuttini, Wood, Zentz, and Horn 2018), although thus far this data has gone undiscussed in their public work. Finally, *hope* and *wish* are semantically similar to *want*, and *wish* is attested as a matrix verb in the transitive passive (Edelstein 2014). Although these latter two verbs more commonly take full clauses as their complements, their similarity to *want* and ability to be used in the EP makes them viable candidates to test. I searched for verb+participle strings using naturalistic pairs based on attested examples with *need*, *want*, and *like*. For *deserve*, the participles used were *thanked*, *congratulated*, *fired*, and *promoted*. For *love*, *hate*, and *wish*, these were *petted*, *hugged*, *cuddled*, *touched*, and *snuggled*. For *hope*, these were *helped* and *promoted*.

While I did not find any hits for *wish* or *hope*, I found several for *deserve*, *love*, and *hate* (6-8, respectively). In the examples below, I give the context in which it was found, the web address, the date found, and where the utterance appears to have been made. In the case of the latter, I judged this either from the location of the organization (if used by an organization such as a pet adoption center) or from the bio of the writer (if posted in a forum-like environment). Although they would give us a larger data set, I do not report any examples for which I could not come up with this information. Note that this location may not be the location in which the user grew up, as in many cases this information was unavailable. The examples that I show that involve *deserve* and *love* are all from the United States; these are a subset of the total tokens found. I did not find any examples involving *hate* that could be specifically linked to a location in the US, although I did find tokens that appear to originate from *somewhere* in the US. I strongly suspect that if some speakers in the US are willing to use the AEP with *love* as a matrix verb, they are also willing to do so with *hate*.

6. Examples with *deserve* (all from US)

- a. I wouldn't order from there again, worst ordering experience of my life, shes an ignorant ignorant woman that **deserves fired**. (<https://www.yelp.com/biz/dominos-pizza-easton-4>, 3/26/2019, Easton, PA)
- b. The other person isn't the one who **deserves fired**. (<https://www.quora.com/How-can-I-convince-my-boss-that-a-coworker-is-not-a-good-person-and-should-be-fired>, 3/26/2019, Spokane, WA)
- c. LVP- If you believe that James deserved to be fired from Sur, do you believe Kristen **deserves fired** from Vanderpump Rules.<sup>2</sup>  
(<https://twitter.com/andy/status/1082456856373514240>, 3/26/2019, Cuyahoga Falls, OH)

d. I don't think he **deserves fired**. (<https://hfboards.mandatory.com/threads/the-fire-jarmo-thread.2617581/>, 3/26/2019, Columbus, OH)

e. Cruz did well last night, he got 2 more states than folks thought he was going to get he **deserves congratulated** for that.

(<http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/news/3404174/posts?page=78>, 3/26/2019, Pittsburgh, PA)

f. The list could go on but these are just a few of the things you **deserved thanked** for.

(<https://www.theodysseyonline.com/8-reasons-to-thank-your-athletic-trainers>, 3/26/2019, Notre Dame, IN)

g. These sponsors **deserve thanked** again!

(<https://www.facebook.com/depressedcakeshopportland/photos/these-sponsors-deserve-thanked-again-without-them-weve-not-be-able-to-have-100-o/2150757758568630/>, 3/26/2019, Portland, OR)

h. If you are a Lazer Parent then you **deserve thanked!**

(<https://lprclazers.swimtopia.com/news/6055>, 3/26/2019, Lincolnia, VA)

i. I want to go on and on about Reggie but he is great and **deserves promoted** when and if he wants to! (<https://birdeye.com/harbor-pointe-153148272571496?page=3>, 3/27/2019,

Sandy Springs, GA)

j. None of those season set the world on fire, nor am I am trying to say that he has been much better than average, but he doesn't **deserve fired**.

(<https://www.hawkeyenation.com/forum/threads/most-disappointing-iowa-team-ever.81863/>, 3/26/2019, Omaha, NE)

## 7. Examples with *love* (all from US)

a. Peggy Sue **loves petted** & isn't afraid to schmooze you to get lovin'.

(<https://www.petfinder.com/petdetail/25368761/25368761>, 3/26/2019, Columbus, OH)

b. He likes to run in the yard and **loves petted** on the head.

([https://www.facebook.com/Alleghany.Humane.Society/photos/a.10152008700548023.1073741840.166796328022/10156464083298023/?type=3&source=48&\\_\\_tn\\_\\_=EH-R](https://www.facebook.com/Alleghany.Humane.Society/photos/a.10152008700548023.1073741840.166796328022/10156464083298023/?type=3&source=48&__tn__=EH-R), 3/26/2019, Alleghany, VA)

c. Meet Clint, a 3 year old domestic short hair cat that just arrived at our shelter, but we can already tell he **loves petted**. (<https://southwesthumane.org/adopt/cats/cat-details/?id=85545>, 3/26/2019, Vancouver, WA)

d. Gretchen **loves petted** and is a great lap cat.

(<https://patch.com/georgia/cumming/patch-pets-bonded-pair-looking-for-a-home>, 3/26/2019, Forsyth County, GA)

e. He **loves hugged** and entertained. (<http://furryvideos.com/video/manny-the-frenchie-tells-you-when-its-time-to-stop/>, 3/27/2019, Oklahoma City, OK)

8. Examples with *hate* (all from outside US)

a. Cats **hate snuggled** by babies but dont mind snuggling themselves.

(<https://twitter.com/ragub6/status/821951288762044416>, 3/27/2019, Chennai, India)

b. He **HATES touched** by strangers. (<https://www.deviantart.com/lospella/art/GoA-Rhodolite-Profile-783924144>, 3/27/2019, Canada)

c. She **hates petted** and only comes near us when she's starving.

(<https://twitter.com/SuperStyleSabby/status/299633000159784960>, 3/27/2019, Ireland)

I have plotted the locations of the examples in (6-7) within the US in Figure 1. The reader will observe two things. First, approximately half of the tokens appear to be from within the



(North) Midland. Roughly speaking, these are the tokens along the east-west corridor between Nebraska and just outside of Philadelphia. As the AEP is said to be a feature of this region, this is expected and perhaps could be seen as evidence that the examples are truly uses of the AEP rather than typographical errors. Secondly, several tokens are *not* from within the (North) Midland. This is surprising in some respects; however, although users of the AEP are concentrated in this region, they have in fact been found across the US (Maher and Wood 2011). The ‘surprising’ locations—Washington state and Georgia—have more than one occurrence, suggesting that the examples from these locations are not typos, but rather actual examples of the AEP. Further evidence in support of this is that speakers have been attested to accept the AEP with *like* in Washington state (Wood, Zanuttini, Horn, and Zentz 2020). The Yale Grammatical Diversity Project’s as-of-yet-publicly-undiscussed map of AEP acceptance with *love* includes a speaker from south Georgia as a user. Our attested examples from outside of the (North) Midland are therefore not impossibilities or evidence that speakers online are using ungrammatical forms in writing, but rather real examples. It is, of course, unclear whether the examples appear in these locations because the AEP is used in these regions or because we found speakers from the (North) Midland who moved to or were visiting these regions.

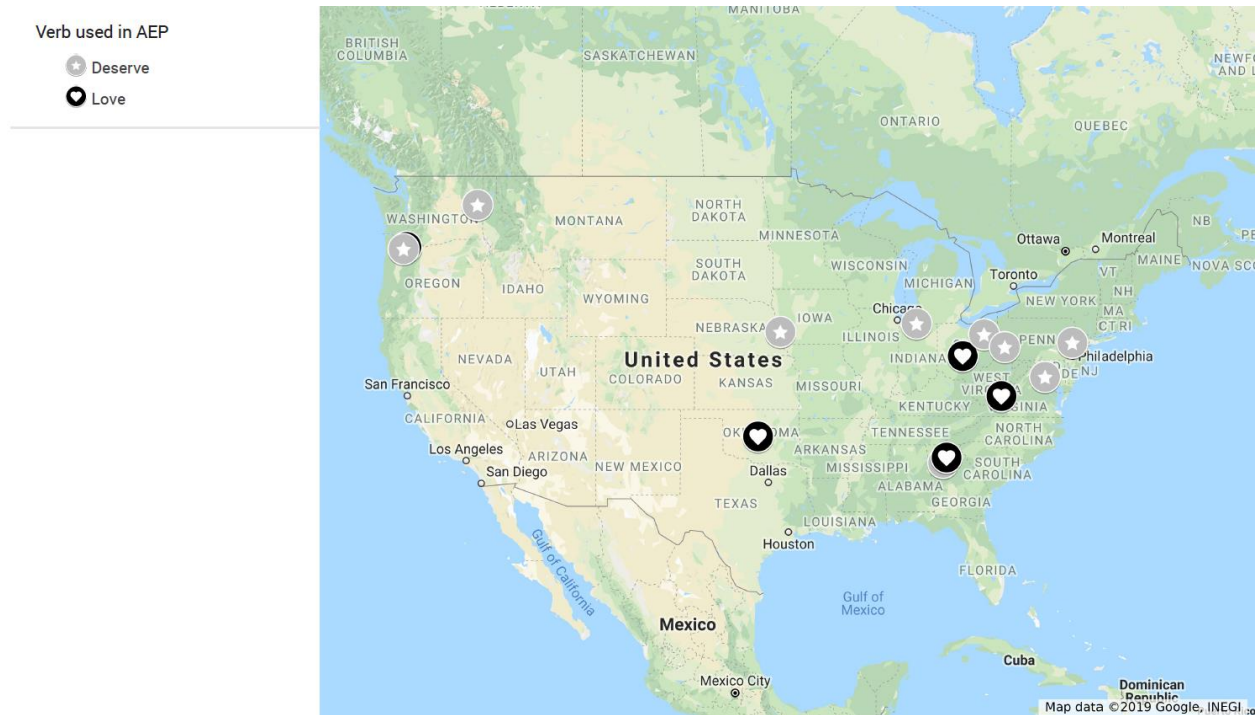


Figure 1. Distribution of AEP examples with *deserve* or *love* as matrix verb in US

My hope is that the above examples show that *deserve* and *love* (and probably *hate*, although the evidence is missing) are reasonably established as matrix verbs that can participate in the American version of the AEP. If these matrix verbs are possible, I suspect that more matrix verbs that are possible with the EP and semantically related to *need*, *want*, or *like* may be possible with the AEP. We might wonder a few things based on this observation. Firstly, can examples such as those provided above be accounted for by syntactic analyses of the AEP, such as the one offered by Edelstein (2014)? I believe so; Edelstein treats the AEP as a Raising construction, necessitating speakers to force the typically Control verbs *want* and *like* to behave as Raising verbs in this context. *Deserve*, *love*, and *hate* are also Control verbs, so her analysis easily accommodates this observation by assuming the same. Assuming Edelstein's analysis, in which the AEP is a Restructuring phenomenon whose matrix verb directly selects for a verbal participle, for these additional matrix verbs makes predictions about the grammaticality of

sentences as well. For example, if *deserve*, *hate*, and *love* participate in the AEP, sentences in which they are accompanied by a *by*-phrase should be licit. Examples (8a-b) suggest this prediction is correct; although no examples from the United States contained a *by*-phrase, (8b) is from elsewhere in North America. Another prediction is that because each previously attested matrix verb in the AEP permits nonvolitional and nonsentient subjects (Edelstein 2014), the same should be true of *deserve*, *hate*, and *love*. None of the above examples are cases of this, although an absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. More research is therefore required to further test these predictions, as whether or not they are borne out will determine whether revising the proposed syntactic analysis is necessary.

Secondly, what kinds of constraints are there on usage of the AEP with different matrix verbs? We would perhaps like to collect a body of tokens to take a variationist or corpus-based approach to the data. Such data could shed light both on the usage of the AEP and how such usage compares to other variables related to passives (for example, the *get*-passive; see Weiner and Labov 1983). These matrix verbs, however, appear to be too rare for such an analysis. This is actually no change from previous efforts; work exploring the use of the AEP in newspapers (Ulrey 2009), internet forums (Duncan 2019), and Twitter (Strelluf 2020) have all focused solely on *need* because even *want* and *like* occur as matrix verbs too seldomly for a viable quantitative approach. Thirdly, the geographical spread of the AEP with non-prototypical matrix verbs should be investigated in greater detail. This is not only an issue of interest to dialectologists for the sake of delineating isoglosses. The regional distribution of these matrix verbs could shed light on the development and spread of syntactic dialect phenomena: did they arise in the same location, or were they innovated independently in multiple locations? Did the non-prototypical matrix verbs spread together or separately?

Finally, how do these matrix verbs fit into the implicational hierarchy *like* > *want* > *need*?

One may suppose that they are quite rare, so imply acceptance of *like* as a matrix verb. My own judgements suggest otherwise. I am a user of the AEP with *need* who is less comfortable with *want* as a matrix verb and rejects *like* as a matrix verb. For me, *love* and *hate* are not permissible matrix verbs, which if replicated among other speakers would indicate that as predicted, these verbs are somewhere around or past *like* in the hierarchy. However, *deserve* seems fine as matrix verb to me, enough so that I suspect I may have used it on occasion. If this is true for others as well, *deserve* may actually be closer to *need* or *want* in the hierarchy. Because *love* and *hate* are semantically related to *like*, while *deserve* is more related to *need*, the semantic content of the matrix verb may be implicated in the hierarchy. I suggest, then, that the implicational hierarchy should be investigated further.

To answer each of the above questions requires a body of work, as they are divergent enough so as to be beyond the scope of a single paper. Indeed, these questions call for input from researchers engaged in a wide range of disciplines and approaches. Rather than attempt to achieve this all at once, my aim here is to share the observation first, in the hope that the observations offered in this brief note are helpful to other researchers in further explorations of the AEP. It certainly deserves studied further, if only to find out whether that last clause was in fact grammatical, and if so, for whom.

#### Notes

1. Dialectologists such as Murray et al. (1996) consider the ‘Midland’ to consist of a North Midland and South Midland, in which the AEP is found in the North Midland. Labov et al. (2006) argue that the ‘Midland’ is solely the North Midland, making the AEP a Midland feature

in their conception. Here I use ‘(North) Midland’ to acknowledge the debate while clarifying the region under discussion.

2. Note the intraspeaker variation between use of the EP and AEP here. Given that Duncan (2019) finds intraspeaker variation between the AEP and EP variants when *need* is the matrix verb, I believe this is a similar situation (rather than one of the variants being an error in production).

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