

An Experimental Approach to the Syntax of “*have yet to*” Constructions

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Introduction: Harves & Myler (2014) analyze *have yet to* (HYT) constructions as being composed of perfect auxiliary *have*. On the other hand, Bybel & Johnson (2014) argue that HYT constructions are composed of main verb obligation *have* which is commonly assumed to select for an infinitival complement. In this talk we present behavioral data gathered from 108 college subjects, which bears on the syntactic category of *have* in HYT constructions. The data show that HYT constructions as judged by our subjects are not consistent with either a main verb *have* analysis or an auxiliary *have* analysis. Instead we argue that *have* in HYT is a vestigial $V \rightarrow T$ raising verb in English which is likely related to obligational *have*.

The Puzzle: The data in (1) raises the following question: Given that the perfect auxiliary is unable to take a nonfinite complement, what is the syntactic category of *have* in (1)?

(1) John has yet to eat.

Harves & Myler (2014) propose a solution that argues *have* is the perfect auxiliary and *yet* is licensed by a FAILED-TO predicate that is rendered silent by the movement of *yet* to the predicate’s specifier, similar to neg-deletion in negative concord languages. However, Bybel & Johnson (2014) note that the proposed silent FAILED predicate contained in HYT unexpectedly resists adverbial modification (2) and VP coordination (3). Furthermore, (4) is acceptable, raising doubts about the status of *have* as the perfect auxiliary.

(2) a. John has completely failed to eat yet.
b. *John has completely yet to eat.

(3) a. John has neither [VP failed to excite us yet] nor [VP bore us to death].
b. *John has neither [VP yet to excite us] nor [bore us to death].

(4) John had had yet to make a decision before he left.

The acceptability judgements reported in Harves & Myler (2014) are complicated and the authors argue that the wide variation between and within their 12 speakers is the result of the presence of multiple grammars. We suggest that the inconsistent grammatical judgments coupled with the counterexamples provided by Bybel & Johnson (2014) motivate a re-evaluation not only of the syntax of HYT but also the diagnostics surrounding Harves & Myler’s study.

Experimental Design: We employed an acceptability judgment task, taken as an online survey via Qualtrics. Participants, undergraduate students at a large Southern university, were asked to rate each sentence on a scale of 1-5 (1 = unacceptable; 5 = acceptable). Each participant was sorted into one of two conditions: (i) a main verb condition, meant to test the hypothesis that the *have* in HYT occupies a verb position and (ii) an auxiliary *have* condition, meant to test the hypothesis that the *have* in HYT occupies the T position. Both conditions were composed of 30 experimental sentences testing the syntactic position of *have* (10 HYT questions formed via either do-support or subject-auxiliary inversion, 10 HYT sentences containing *do*-ellipsis, and 10

HYT sentences containing *have*-ellipsis.) and 60 control sentences (30 grammatical and 30 ungrammatical) for a total of 90 items per condition. Speakers who rated questions formed via *do*-support as acceptable should rate *do*-ellipsis sentences favorably, while speakers who rated questions formed via subject-auxiliary inversion as acceptable should rate *have*-ellipsis sentences favorably.

Results: Participant ratings of HYT questions formed via *do*-support, as in (5a), patterned with their judgement of the ungrammatical controls. Participants in the auxiliary *have* condition rated HYT questions formed via subject-auxiliary inversion, as in (5b) more favorably than they did ungrammatical controls but still far below grammatical controls..

- (5) a. Does John have yet to leave?
b. Has John yet to leave?

In the main verb condition, speakers preferred *have*-ellipsis over *do*-ellipsis, consistent with their rejection of the questions formed via *do*-support. Interestingly, although preliminary statistical analyses indicate a significant preference for *have* ellipsis over both *do* ellipsis and ungrammatical controls, these participants did not rate *have* ellipsis as acceptable as the grammatical controls. When compared to ungrammatical controls, participants found questions formed via subject-auxiliary inversion acceptable. As expected, these speakers preferred *have* ellipsis over *do* ellipsis.

Discussion: While the data trends reported here are consistent with the analysis presented in Harves & Myler (2014), the counterexamples are not. The trends in the data are also consistent with a $V \rightarrow T$ vestigial raising analysis of *have*, thus we propose an alternative solution that is both consistent with the data and consistent with the counterexamples shown above. We argue that the *have* in HYT is just such a raising verb, related to obligatory *have*. It's raising verb status explains both its ability to co-occur with the perfect auxiliary (4) and the rejection of questions formed via *do*-support. This analysis would also be consistent with the unacceptability of *have*-ellipsis sentences if speakers are unable to coordinate auxiliary *have* and $V \rightarrow T$ raising *have*. Crucially, an auxiliary *have* analysis of HYT constructions can not explain the ellipsis facts alone.

References

Bybel, K., & Johnson, G. (2014). A syntax of "have yet to" in American English. *Paper presented at SECOL 81, Coastal Carolina University, March 27-29.*

Harves, S., & Myler, N. (2014). Licensing NPIs and licensing silence: Have/be yet to in English. *Lingua*, 148: 213-239.