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Micro-Variation in the Have Yet To Construction

Overview We present novel data to show that although the have yet to (HYT) construction (1) exists in all varieties of English, speakers’ grammars vary in terms of the underlying syntax that derives it.

(1) John has yet to visit his grandmother.

Our primary focus is on whether have is analyzed as a main verb or an auxiliary; for many speakers, it can be either, with no difference in interpretation. This discovery forces a new analysis of the syntax of HYT, one which will be supported by novel data from closely related yet to constructions. The result is a fully compositional analysis of an otherwise puzzling, ostensibly sui generis construction.

Background Since Kelly’s (2008) snippet, at least three detailed analyses of HYT have been proposed: Kelly 2012, Harves & Myler 2014, and Bybel & Johnson 2014. What is striking is that although they share many theoretical assumptions, they end up with very different analyses based on different judgments of the crucial data points. For Kelly 2012, HYT involves auxiliary have (aux-have) and sentential negation; for Harves & Myler 2014, HYT involves aux-have and no sentential negation; for Bybel & Johnson 2014, HYT involves main verb have (main-have) and sentential negation. We will resolve this tension by showing that (i) there is genuine speaker variation regarding the main-have/aux-have question (with an interesting twist), and (ii) syntactic negation is only present in the embedded clause, which correctly predicts mixed results on negation tests.

Proposal We propose that a matrix main verb selects for a negative C (cf. Landau 2002), which is responsible for licensing the NPI yet and the mixed results on negation tests (see below). Following the spirit of Kelly 2012, this yet has temporal features which must be valued as [PERF]. Departing from Kelly 2012, the temporal features can be introduced either by the main verb selecting for the negative C, or by a higher head in that verb’s extended projection. If a speaker allows the former, then have will be a main verb; if the latter, have will be an auxiliary, and the main verb will usually be null. A schematic overview of the analysis is presented in (2) below. (Note: we adopt Wurmbrand’s (2012) “Reverse Agree” analysis of temporal features, and assume with Harves & Myler 2014 that yet moves to a spec-head configuration with its licensor.) (We set aside be yet to here, but will discuss it in the talk.)

(2) a. [TP John [vPERF has[IT:PERF] [vPERF vP0 (=Ø)] [CP yet CNEG to visit his grandmother ti] ]]  
   b. [TP John [vPERF PerfP (=Ø)] [vPERF has[IT:PERF] [CP yet CNEG to visit his grandmother ti] ]]

In essence, we agree with Harves & Myler 2014 that aux-have derivations involve a null main verb, and with Bybel & Johnson 2014 that main-have derivations, with raising verb syntax, are possible as well. The difference is that for us, the silent main verb of (2a) is pronounced as have whenever it introduces the [PERF] feature. We now present evidence for the crucial aspects of this proposal.

Main vs. Aux-have In a recent survey, we asked for acceptability judgments for the sentences in (3).

(3) a. Oh, she has yet to finish, {has/does} she?  
   b. What {have you / do you have} yet to eat?  
   c. {Has John / Does John have} yet to win…  
   d. {Hasn’t John / Doesn’t John have} yet to…

Acceptance of the do-support variant implies that a speaker treats have as a main verb; acceptance of the have-raising variant implies that a speaker treats have as an auxiliary. In (4), we cross-tabulate the maximum ratings speakers gave to do-support and aux-have sentences. (The survey was administered on Mechanical Turk (Sprouse 2011); the results below include only participants who passed control sentences to ensure that they understood the task; more details will be given in the talk.) We see in (4) that 48% of participants accepted both aux-have and do-support sentences. Moreover, we find a striking implicational relation between them: almost everyone who accepts do-support also accepts aux-have, but a good number of participants (15%; 42/281) accept aux-have while rejecting
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clause in HYT is (for most speakers, we argue) not negative, (8a) is gener
negative slifting example in (8a) that truly must attach to a negative matrix clause. Since the matrix
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sion requires only a syntactically negated verb phrase; the understood ellipsis in (8c) is
with syntactic negation, but that is easily satisfied by the embedded CP in (2). Similarly,
(8)
were
spondents generally judged sentences like those in (8
the matrix clause, also explains some of the variation found
The
(5)
[75x500]T:
[79x353]i
[80x159]ERF
[81x104].
[82x308]NEG
feature on both the main verb and in
[83x590]—
[84x590]P
[85x91].
[86x500]Perf
[87x471]follows
[88x486]in
(5b).
[89x471]support cases, and in the sentences in (5),
suggests that yet is not high in the structure (as in Harves & Myler’s and Kelly’s proposals), but below
the matrix main verb, as in Bybel & Johnson’s proposal. Moreover, note that yet survives in the absence
of a higher predicate, as in the small clause in (6).
(6) With the bride yet to arrive, the wedding was about to fall apart.
We also find evidence, from the sentences in (7) that yet must precede a complementizer:
(7) a. John has yet for anyone to openly oppose him. (Accept: 19%, Marginal: 18%, Reject: 63%)
b. I have yet for this battery to last longer than a couple of hours.
These sentences, which have not been noticed in previous work, have an ‘experiencer have’ reading, a
reading that arises configurationally when a lexically empty light verb takes an external argument
(Ritter & Rosen 1997, Myler 2014); this supports the proposal that a main verb must be present.

The syntax of ‘have yet to’ constructions. The presence of a [NEG] feature in the lower clause, rather than
the matrix clause, also explains some of the variation found in the literature and in our surveys. Re-
spondents generally judged sentences like those in (8a) to be quite bad, but sentences such as (8b-c),
were judged to be much better. Whence the discrepancy?
(8) a. Jordan has yet to read it, I don’t think. (Accept: 19%, Marginal: 18%, Reject: 63%)
b. Jordan has yet to visit Grandpa, not even once. (Accept: 79%, Marginal: 10%, Reject: 11%)
c. Jordan has yet to read it, and neither has Pat. (Accept: 61%, Marginal: 18%, Reject, 20%)
We suggest that the discrepancy follows from how the tests work. Not even must attach to a clause
with syntactic negation, but that is easily satisfied by the embedded CP in (2). Similarly, neither-inversion
requires only a syntactically negated verb phrase; the understood ellipsis in (8c) is neither has Pat
<READ IT>, and <READ IT> falls under the scope of the embedded negative C as well. It is only the
negative slifting example in (8a) that truly must attach to a negative matrix clause. Since the matrix
clause in HYT is (for most speakers, we argue) not negative, (8a) is generally rejected.

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