

Current Change in the Modal System of English: A Case Study of *Must*, *Have To* and *Have Got To*

JOANNE CLOSE & BAS AARTS

UCL

This paper takes the variation between *must*, *have to* and *have got to* as a window through which to view changes in the modal system in present-day British English (1960s-1990s). The results from this study show a dramatic decrease in frequency of the core modal *must* and a significant increase in the semi-modal *have to* in the *Diachronic Corpus of Present-Day Spoken English* (DCPSE). Changes in the modal system affect both epistemic and root uses of *must*, although *have to* is only an active rival to root *must*; epistemic instances of *have to* (and *have got to*) are rare in the corpus.

1. *Introduction*

The class of English modal verbs have undergone a number of important changes in the history of English,

competition between *must* and the semi-modals? ¹ (iii) is *must* becoming monosemous? And (iv) what is the motivation for the change?

The variation between the three forms is a window onto the changing modal
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[grammatical] changes to include changes of frequency, significant grammatical changes

2.3 *Core modals vs. semi-modals*

Mair and Leech (2006) point out that although many changes involve a competing

3. Corpus and data collection

3.1 Current change and the Diachronic Corpus of Present-Day Spoken English

There are a number of pitfalls of anecdotal observation as far as current change is concerned, most notably [t]he spread of salient new uses is exaggerated, while the less salient persistence of older forms is not noted or [...] a diachronic trend is read into a situation which merely shows variable or fluctuating usage (Mair 2008). For this reason, studies on current change are carried out more reliably using corpora.

One of the strengths of the research reported on here is that it uses a corpus reported d,.

etc.); and the bottom section contains optional additional *features* (intransitive (verb), common (noun), main (clause), etc.).

The corpus can be explored by using the *International Corpus of English Corpus Utility Program*

- b. You don't have to go (the modal has scope over the negative: You are allowed to not go.').
- c. You haven't got to go (the modal has scope over the negative: You are allowed to not go.').

Secondly, interrogative contexts were excluded because interrogative forms with *must* did not occur at all in the later period, and only one example occurred in the early period:

(2) Must

modals are divided into two semantic classes, Root and Epistemic. In this approach

out of a total of 436 as ambiguous.¹¹ In the ambiguous cases syntactic features which could disambiguate such [ambiguous] utterances are either not present or are themselves ambiguous. Coates (1983: 47).

In coding the data from DCPSE, it was assumed that the speaker had an intended meaning when producing the utterance and an attempt was made to classify each example, keeping ambiguous cases to a minimum. The audio files were invaluable here. Despite this, there exist a number of examples which are impossible to disambiguate for two main reasons: (i) the utterance is compatible with both Root and Epistemic meanings and/or (ii) the modal is followed by an ellipsis site or unclear words. The numbers of ambiguous cases are shown in Table 3.

4. *Results and discussion*

4.1 *Overall frequencies*

To examine a possible trend for declining core modal usage and investigate the theory of competition between core modals and semi-modals, the overall frequency of core modal *must* is compared with frequencies of the semi-modal forms in DCPSE. As shown in Table 1, during the thirty-year period the frequency of *must* has declined by over 53% while the frequency of *have to* has significantly increased (+24.27%).

Somewhat surprisingly, *have got to* decreases in frequency by -8.21%. It is impossible for us to be sure whether *have got to* has reached its peak and is showing a decline in the 1990s data prior to levelling out in the future, or whether the decrease is simply fluctuating usage in the corpus. To be certain, it will be necessary to measure the frequency of *have got to* at a point later than 1992. Unfortunately, the lack of available corpora makes this impossible at this point in time.

| (Semi-) modal | LLC frequency | ICE-GB frequency | Change in frequency |
|---------------|---------------|------------------|---------------------|
| | | | raw |

(figures in bold are significant at $p < 0.01$).

@@ Insert Table 2 here.

| Source | Epistemic | | Root | | Performative | | Ambiguous | Total |
|---------------|------------------|---|-------------|---|---------------------|---|------------------|--------------|
| corpus | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | |

To discover if the decline in root and/or epistemic *must* is related to the use of the semi-modals, root and epistemic uses of the three forms were compared. The results for root and epistemic uses are presented in Tables 3 and 4, respectively.

Table 3 illustrates that as expressions of root obligation, *must*, *have got to*

number of suggestions to explain the decline in *must* have been made in the literature, many of which refer to the authoritarian nature of *must*. Myhill (1995), for instance, attributes the decline in *must* (=obligation) and the rise of *should* (=weak obligation) around the time of the American Civil War to a growing tendency to avoid overt claims to authority by the speaker/writer. He claims that the old modals were linked with people controlling the actions of other people while the new modals were more personal, and used to give advice to an equal, etc. He attributes changes in the modal system to a growing tendency to avoid overt claims to authority by the speaker/writer (a trend he refers to as *democratisation*). Smith (2003) shares a similar view, and makes the following remark:

It seems probable that MUST is a casualty of a changing society where increasing emphasis is being placed on equality of power, or at least the appearance of equality of power, and the informality of discourse found in private conversation is becoming more acceptable, even usual, in official types of discourse. Just as these conditions are likely to disfavour the use of MUST, they should correspondingly favour other forms which express obligation less directly (Smith 2003: 259).

The problem with the suppositions by Myhill and Smith, however, is that epistemic *must* has also decreased, and this verb is not related to power and authority. Leech *et al.* (forthcoming) suggest that the partial decline [of epistemic *must*] could be due to contamination by the dramatic fall of deontic *must*. This is not an attractive explanation either because root and epistemic meanings of *must* do not intersect, so it is not clear how a fall in one would cause a fall in the other (cf. Coates's (1983: 170) treatment of the meanings of *will* which do intersect). In their data, root *must* declines more drastically than epistemic *must*, which Leech *et al.* suggest is because neither *have to* nor any other form has become widely adopted as an alternative expression of strong epistemic necessity. In the spoken data from DCPSE, however, the

As an explanation for the decrease in *must*, we appeal to what Huddleston and Pullum *et al.* (2002: 175) refer to as strength of commitment where necessity involves a strong commitment. We suggest that the decline in *must* is a result of a decline in forms expressing strong commitment. In the root sense, *have to* is favoured over *must*. The difference between the two forms is illustrated in (8) where the conjoined clause is not possible with *must*, because the commitment is stronger and does not permit resistance (example from Sweetser (1988: 54), quoted in Hopper & Traugott (1993: 79)):

(6) I have to/??

must and the rise in *have to* in the 1990s data suggests that *have to*

Hundt, Marianne. 1998. It is important that this study (should) be based on the analysis of parallel corpora: On the use of the mandative subjunctive in four major varieties of English. *The Major Varieties of English* (Papers from MAVEN 97) ed. by Lindquist, Hans, Staffan Klintborg, Magnus Levin and Maria Estling, 159-175. Växjö: Acta Wexionensia,

Kroch, Anthony S. 1989. Reflexes of grammar in patterns of language change . *Language Variation and Change* 1: 199-244.

Krug, Manfred. 1998. *Gotta* — The tenth central modal in English? Social, stylistic and regional variation in the British National Corpus as evidence of ongoing grammaticalization . In Lindquist, Hans, Staffan Klintborg, Magnus Le0003972.74 Tm[(,& EM

Warner, Anthony. 1993. *English Auxiliaries: Structure and history*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹ For Quirk et al. (1985: 141-146) *have to* is a modal semi-auxiliary, while *have got to* is a modal idiom. These combinations are not identical in their syntactic behaviour: *have to* takes *do*-support, while inversion is not possible for most speakers. It can occur as a non-finite form and be preceded by an auxiliary verb. By contrast, *have got (to)* is always finite, and therefore cannot be preceded by auxiliary verbs. It can invert with a subject. We will use the label *semi-modal* for *have to* and *have got to*.

² The term 'Brown quartet' refers to four comparable corpora: the Brown Corpus and Frown (Freiburg-Brown) Corpus from 1961 and 1991-2, respectively, and two matching corpora of British English, LOB (Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen) and FLOB (Freiburg-Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen), again from 1961 and 1991-2, respectively. These corpora each contain a million words in fifteen written text types.

³ The SEU-mini corpus used by Leech (2003) contains 80,000 words (16 texts) from conversation, BBC discussions and news, sports and other commentaries, broadcast talks, etc., all dated between 1959-65. The ICE-GB-mini corpus contains 80,000 words from text categories chosen to match those of the SEU-mini corpus, the only difference being the date: texts are dated 1990-92.

⁴ Leech's (2003) results show that the epistemic reading of *may* has increased in the written corpora, but all other meanings have shown a decline. With s