Non-inflecting verbs in Modern English

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1   Introduction

- I speculated a long time ago that current distinction, **main verb ~ auxiliary**, might be moving towards replacement by a new one, **inflecting ~ non-inflecting verb** (Denison 1998: 209-12).
- Present paper is first sketch of re-assessment. Possible joint paper with Marianne Hundt ('Is English heading towards invariant auxiliaries?') would aim to test the idea with corpus data.
- Will give three descriptive pictures, each partly superseding the last: all have some validity.
- Confine discussion to surface patterns. Theoretical model of syntax irrelevant to purpose: could be structuralist, generative, dependency, CxG. But need (at least) dual inheritance.

2   Picture 1: Aux ~ V

- Verbs usually regarded as predicators, inflected for tense, person, number and mood, prototypically about events or actions, etc.
- In English, if discount verb *be*, the **only** evidence of both mood and person-number inflection is presence vs. absence of 3 sg pres *–s*! So principal verbal inflection is tense.
- Excursus: relatively recent and very parochial NICE properties not useful for defining auxiliaries: **all** V used to have same negation properties and inversion, and Standard Average European still does. Oddity is **loss** of these syntactic properties by most verbs, not fact that auxs have them.
- In Present-day English (PDE), first verb in finite clause carries tense and (potential) S-V concord, each verb determines morphological form of next verb, and four independently optional auxs allow 2^4 = 16 neat patterns, or 32 if allow for two tense choices:

$$\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{(Modal) (Perf = \textit{have}) (Prog = \textit{be}) (Pass = \textit{be})} \\[2em] \text{(Dummy = \textit{do})} \end{array} \right\} \quad \text{V = Lexical verb}$$

- So both aux (items within curly brackets) and V can have tense, are inflected. (*Have, be* and *do* can also occur irrelevantly as V.)
- Hardly any lexical verb apart from *beware, forgo* lacks pres ~ past distinction.
- Auxiliary *have, be* and *do* really do have tense in ways exactly analogous to lexical V:
  - morphologically (e.g. some version of *–s* for 3 sg pres; clear formal tense marking)
  - semantically (past tense in main clause implies past time; meaning relationship between pres and past is same as in V).

3   Picture 2: Modals

- For modals none of this is true. By far most idiosyncratic, but seem to form a coherent (sub)category with distinctive semantic, syntactic and morphological properties. Usually said to be compatible with picture 1, the general sequence of auxiliaries.

3.1.1   Morphological idiosyncrasies
- No 3 sg present *-s*   *He can/*cans speak Dutch.*
- Past tense formation highly irregular   *can ~ could*
- No untensed forms   **to shall, *shalling, *have should*

3.1.2   Syntactic idiosyncrasies
- Require following verb in base form   *He can speak Dutch*, cf. *want*
- Past tense of modal allegedly required in   *If I had known that, I would/could/*
  apodosis of unreal conditional   *might/etc. have written sooner.*
- (other properties shared with other auxiliaries and some raising verbs)

3.1.3   Semantic idiosyncrasies
- Typically three main kinds of meaning, often to do with obligation, necessity, possibility, etc.:
  - **deontic**   *You mustn't eat here.*
  - **dynamic**   *Boys will be boys.*
  - **epistemic**   *They must have been mad.*
- Past tense rarely used like normal past tense: *She should be here soon*,
  main clause uses without reference to past time   cf. **She arrived soon.*

4   Picture 3: invariant verbs

4.1   Core Modals

4.1.1   Tense
- Modals notoriously lack 3 sg pres inflection. Since loss of *thou*, no 2 sg inflections either.
- Most had a tense distinction, albeit with highly irregular morphology, but relationship between tenses is abnormal: unlike all other verbs (main or aux), M in past tense can be used in main clause without implying past time.
- Fewer and fewer modals actually have a past-time meaning at all. *Shall ~ should* and *may ~ might* do not have a time-related semantic relationship; in fact many speakers unaware that *shall~should* and *may~might* are pairs at all, to judge from anecdotal experience with students.
- Little evidence of modal "tense" in PDE: apart from dynamic and deontic *can ~ could* (and *will ~ would* in marginal 'have propensity' meaning)*,* almost **only** evidence is sequence of tenses in reported speech:
  - *I may return ~ He said he might return*   (works, but not for younger speakers)
  - *I shall return ~ He said he *should/would return*   (fails)
- Counterfactual *may have* now widespread: shouldn't be possible if *may* is present tense.
- The direction of change suggests, for example, that *may* and *might* are becoming separate modal verbs. If so, they would be invariant.
- *Must* (historically a past tense) has become a present tense with no past tense partner.
- So it is increasingly forced/false to treat a modal as a tensed item comparable to a non-modal.

4.1.2   Contracted negation
- All aux verbs, the main verb *be* and some uses of main verb *have* have possibility of contracted negative form, shown by Zwicky & Pullum (1983) to be inflected, not stem + clitic. Should mean that modal verbs have two inflected forms, contradicting claim of inflectional invariance. But

some of these contractions are dropping out: *mayn't* is effectively obsolete, *mightn't* is recessive, and in some dialects *shan't* is not found.

- Cf. no sign of loss of contracted negation with *have, be* and *do*.
- Even when a modal verb has positive and negative forms, they often do not act as a pair, e.g. in standard English, negative of *He must be on his way* is *He can't be on his way*, of *You must fill in that form* is *You needn't fill in that form*, etc.
- Modal subcategory is losing its internal coherence.

4.2 Peripheral Modals

- Can include marginal modals (*need, dare, ought*) and emerging modals (*gonna, gotta, wanna, hafta*) (as defined more narrowly by Krug 2000: 4). See also Bolinger (1980), Krug (2011).

4.2.1 Tense

- *Ought* has only one form, shown by Jørgensen (1984) to be past tense, though there is a case for treating the form as *oughta*, parallel in phonetic shape to Krug's 'emerging modals' *wanna, gonna, gotta* . Add *better* (Denison & Cort 2010) and perhaps *useta*. All lack tense distinction.
- The peripheral/emerging modals *hafta, hazta, hadta, ista,* etc. retain tense variation.
- The question of potential S-V concord is dialectally variable, and dependent on degree of reduction. Modal *have* and *be* show S-V concord as fully as other uses of *have* and *be*.
- Modal *be* has, however, lost untensed forms.

4.2.2 Contracted negation

- Most contracted negatives, where they existed at all, are obsolescent: *oughtn't, haven't (to),* ?**use(d)n't*. *Needn 't* and *daren't* are losing out to forms with *do*.

4.3 Infinitive-marking *to*

- On category status of *to* see e.g. Denison (1998, 2012), Huddleston (2002: 1185-7), Levine (2012), Warner (1993), Zwicky & Levin (1980).
- Pullum and Levine's claim is that the infinitive-marker *to* is most parsimoniously categorised as an obligatorily untensed auxiliary verb, mainly on the basis that it can stand before an ellipsis site under post-verbal ellipsis, aka AUXILIARY STRANDING (Huddleston 2002: 1519-26),parallel to auxiliary verbs ('operators') (Pullum 1982: 199-200) (my examples from BNC):
  - o He wants to break away. He means to _. (AT7 1835)
  - o But one look at her face told me she had _. (A6E 583)
  - o I would like to go with him if I could _ (EVG 1899)
- Furthermore, like the few other **untensed** auxiliaries which can stand before an ellipsis site, it cannot carry stress.
- Note that ellipsis after *to* is relatively recent (rare before 1800).
- If accepted as an auxiliary, this *to* is clearly inflectionally invariant.

4.4 Infinitive of perfect *have*

- The perfect auxiliary *have* has almost the normal range of inflectional variation, lacking only a past participle.
- Grammaticalisation came to a partial halt in that , unlike French and German, the English present perfect is not a colloquial past-tense equivalent (though there are sporadic signs that such grammaticalisation is restarting).

- However, the infinitive of perfect *have* is beginning to grammaticalise separately from the rest of the paradigm, its semantics becoming associated with modality/non-assertiveness, hence irrealis. The evidence is of various kinds.

4.4.1 Cliticisation

- On cliticisation of auxiliaries in English and more generally see Krug (2011: 554-5).
- There are sporadic examples where modal + *have* exhibits NICE properties supposed to apply to tensed operators alone, suggesting that *have* has been cliticised to the modal:
  - o N: "You should've'n't took all the brick cheese!" (child data, Bowerman)
  - o I: "What would've you done?" (JTB)
  - o C: ("I should've read the error message.") "Yeah, so should've I." (JTB)
  - o E: What could have she been reading? (fluent non-native speaker, JTB)
  - o might 've he continued to elude police, had that fourth murder not occurred? (1999 COCA)
- (First four examples from Boyland (1998: 3).)
- Adverb placement can be slightly abnormal (but normal if M + *have* is one word):
  - o a sentiment he would have probably denied (1961 Brown corpus G65 1880)
  - o 'I should've never went on a stupid blind date. They never work out.' (1992 Armistead Maupin, *Maybe the Moon* xv.225)

4.4.2 Doubling

- A pattern going back to the 15th century adds an extra morpheme, variously spelled *have/'ve/of/ha'/a*:
  - o 'If I had ha' seen Nancy, I should ha' given her my mind very different. …' (1864-6 Gaskell, *Wives & Daughters* [WC] xlvi.577) [Mrs. Goodenough]
  - o Little Dombey was my friend at old Blimber's, and would have been now, if he'd have lived. (1848 Dickens, *Dombey* xxxii.445.12)
  - o Now if you'd've told us that last Thursday we'd've thought (BNC KCX 3528)
  - o "Terry's with his tutor at present," said Blanca … "But he said he wouldn't have come down even if he hadn't of been," chimed in Zinnie (1928 Edith Wharton, *The Children*, viii.71)
  - o if it hadn't a been for Old Cribb there wouldn't have been none (BNC H09 1152)
- I argue that it is an invariant grammatical particle confined to the verbal group (cf. negator *n't*), so probably less of a verb and more like an adverb.

4.4.3 Spelling

- Marianne Hundt (p.c. 17 Sep 2012) shows this example of *would have* in a letter written from Mary Hamilton to Fanny Burney in 1789:
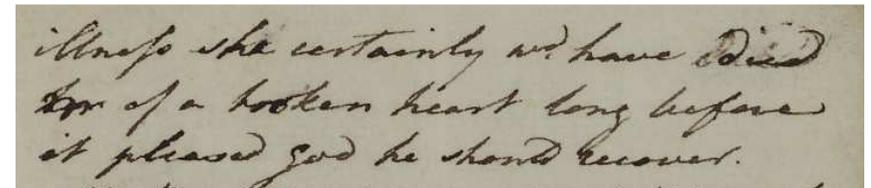
which the modern catalogue (Hamilton Papers, ref. HAM/1/6/5/2) quotes as containing the words "she 'certainly w[oul]d of died of a broken heart …'"!
(http://archiveshub.ac.uk/data/gb133ham?page=21#id846630)
Even though Mary Hamilton did not write <of> here, at almost exactly this time, genuine examples start to appear in unschooled or hasty writing:

- o the servant to the old Lady I sho~ld not <u>of</u> thought of after what had past, but I wonder at no_thing (1773 Corpus of l18C Prose)
- o I should be very happey to <u>of</u> seen m^{rs}. Orford at Leek (?1774 Corpus of l18C Prose)
- o I would <u>of</u> gone Long before this but I still expected Letters from you as I wrote often to you. (1796 CORIECOR Chambers)
- o I never could <u>of</u> thought that force Could turn affection in its course. (1814 [OED])
- o Had I known of your illness I should not <u>of</u> written in such fiery phrase in my first Letter. (1819 Keats, *Letters*)

- • <of> is more than a mere misspelling, even if made possible by homophony between the unstressed preposition *of* and the verb *have* as [əv]. But spelling <have> is relatively unusual in representing **only** a verb (rarely as N in *a must-have* or *the haves*), while <of> is unusual in spelling a form which is uniquely a pure preposition. Therefore when writers get it 'wrong', it is almost certainly significant for word class assignment. There is strong anecdotal evidence that many educated young Britons do not realise – let alone assume – that there is any connection with the verb *have*, and the occasional pronunciation [ɒv] is another strong indication.
- • See further (Denison 2012), Coates (1989), Kayne (1997); (Cheshire & Edwards 1993), (Sampson 2002), (Denison 1998: 140-2, 210-2, 2007a, b).

4.4.4 Other evidence

- • Brian Joseph and Joyce Tang Boyland found that 'there are speakers who used the preterite form in modal perfect contexts [e.g. *should've took* – DD] and but [*sic*] the standard past-participle form in regular perfect contexts. For these speakers at least, the modal perfect is losing its connection to the perfect. ' (Boyland 1998: 4)

4.5 Try and

- • The verb *try* shows some evidence of incipient auxiliary behaviour. Amongst other things, it appears to allow stranding in a way comparable to true auxiliaries:
  - o They tried to shift the car and we tried too.
- • Prescriptivists think that *try and* is a lazy form of *try to*. It isn't.
  - o You could try and hurry up.
  - o Try and hurry up.
  - o Let's try and hurry up.
  - o They try and hurry up when they see the manager approaching.
  - o He *try/*tries and hurry/hurries up
- • The *and* is not the usual coordinator, since only one event is referred to.
- • In most dialects, *try* must be uninflected in this construction (untensed or general present); see (Austin 2007, Carden & Pesetsky 1977, Culicover & Jackendoff 1997, Faarlund & Trudgill 1999, Hommerberg & Tottie 2007, Hopper 2002, Kjellmer 2000, Lind 1983, Pullum 1990, Tottie 2012, Tottie & Hoffmann 2011, Yuasa & Sadock 2002).

4.6 Don't, let's, there's

- • These diverse items, all originally cliticised two-morpheme structures, have this in common: they serve as clause-introducers, nearly always coming in initial position (apart from marginal AmE *let's don't*). In that position they have the discourse function of identifying the clause type (negative imperative, 1st person plural imperative, existential, respectively). And as verbs, or portmanteaus containing a verb, they show less inflectional variability than might generally be expected.

5 Discussion

- • I'm not sure yet how best to handle this data and what generalisations to draw. Uninflectedness casts doubt on Picture 1, in which tense is so basic.

5.1 Sources

- • Sources of these uninflected verbs are diverse:
  - o post-verbal ellipsis (*to*)
  - o chunking/grammaticalisation (*have*)
  - o clause union (*let's, try and*)

5.2 New category of item

- • Items are moving out of V, or at least (further) away from the prototypical V. This is to be distinguished from at least two other situations, where item essentially stops functioning as part of verbal group (and won't be considered at all here):
  - o (instantaneous) conversion e.g. from V to N (*an invite*)
  - o (gradual) change of category, e.g. from V to P in cases like *concerning, regarding* or from V to A in cases like *interested, concerned*
- • In cases under discussion in this paper, item becomes less verbal, even a non-verbal particle (Adv?)

5.3 Syntactic slots

- • However, it retains a syntactic slot among the string of verbs.
  - o It can be in 1st slot, as with M, *gonna* (usually before *wanna* when used together)
  - o It can be in 2nd slot, as with *have/of*, …
  - o Or it can (for some speakers at least) occur in either, as with *ought, wanna*

6 Conclusion

- • The verbal system is in transition.
- • Speakers have different prototypes (in Construction Grammar terms, different meso- or macro-constructions) to base their syntactic output on.
- • Take as an analogy the underspecification of certain N ~ A items, as in *a <u>key</u> term, a <u>fun</u> party*.
- • Situation can obtain when a given word occurs in some contexts clearly as one class, in others clearly as a different word class (but with the same meaning), and in yet other contexts where the word class distinction is neutralised:
  - o He's a <u>genius</u>, unbelievable. (2012)   must be N
  - o everyone else's <u>genius</u> tactics also came up blank. (2012)   can be N

- o This series is arguably the most <u>genius</u>, the most entertaining and the most poignant chapter in the Father Ted chronology. (2001 WebCorp)   must be A
- For speakers who use *genius* is patterns which are unequivocally adjectival – and it's an innovation which is spreading, entirely comparable to the development of *fun*, *key* and many others – the use of *genius* as a premodifier is now underspecified and vague as to word class: there is no ambiguity, as it makes no difference semantically or structurally whether *genius* is N or A, and neither speaker/writer nor hearer/listener needs to decide.
- Somewhat in the same spirit, it may be possible to view some of the uninflected verbs as coming from a dual source. Consider four examples of the *have*-perfect. The first two are unproblematic. The last is fully grammatical for some speakers, and for them, it casts doubt on the correct analysis of the third example, the modal perfect .
    - o I've$_V$ eaten it   '*ve* = *have* = 1 sg pres of V
    - o If I'd$_V$ eaten it   '*d* = *had* = 1 sg past of V
    - o If I'd've$_{ADV}$ eaten it   probably '*d* = *had* = 1 sg past of V,
                         while '*ve* = particle (Adv?)
    - o I could've$_?$ eaten it   blend?
- The '*ve* in in the standard modal perfect resembles both V and ADV uses. The former maintains nice generalisations about patterning of English auxiliary system ('Picture 1' above). For increasing numbers who have the *if I'd've* construction, the latter is also a possible source.

7   References

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