

To have and have got: Ethnolinguistic Variation in Possession and Deontic Modality

James A. Walker & Michol F. Hoffman
York University

The English lexical verb *have* variably occurs as periphrastic *have got* (with the auxiliary variably contracted and deleted), in its functions of possession (1) and deontic modality (expressing necessity or obligation) (2). In the latter function, *have to* varies with other (semi)modals, such as *must* and *need to* (3). Previous studies have identified linguistic and regional constraints on the variation, as well as evidence for ongoing change (e.g. Kroch 1989; Tagliamonte 2013). An open question is whether this variation can be conditioned by other social factors, such as sex/gender and ethnicity.

- (1) a. Toronto **has** everything you could ever want. (TO.70:5)
b. I mean, Toronto's **got** it all. (TO.20:37)
- (2) a. You don't **have to** do everything in the store. (TO.24:9)
b. You **gotta** do everything. (TO.73:18)
- (3) a. Oh, you **must** interview him. (TO.27:740)
b. People **need to-** to get out of that habit. (TO.31:1273)

This paper investigates this question using a corpus of Toronto English stratified according to sex, generation and ethnic background. From transcriptions of recorded sociolinguistic interviews with 70 speakers, we extracted every lexical *have* and (semi)modal expression of deontic modality, resulting in a dataset of over 3,000 tokens. In addition to classifying the realization of the verb, we coded each token for a number of linguistic factors: grammatical function, temporal boundedness, the abstractness and specificity of the object, the type of subject, and the source of obligation. We also coded for the individual speaker and their ethnic background, sex and degree of ethnic orientation. The contribution of these factors to the choice of variant was analyzed using mixed-effects logistic regression.

Our results show the linguistic conditioning of the variation to parallel that of previous studies: NP subjects, generic objects and objective obligation favor *have*, while *they* and generic *you* strongly favor *got(ta)* (possibly reflecting collocational effects). Younger speakers, especially young women, lead in the rise of *have (to)* in both functions, and speakers of different ethnic backgrounds exhibit different degrees of participation in this change. However, as with the findings for phonological variation (Hoffman & Walker 2010), the linguistic conditioning is largely the same across younger speakers, regardless of ethnic background. These results provide further evidence that different social groups may vary in their overall rates of use while sharing an underlying linguistic system.

References

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