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Interrogating possessive *have*: a case study

Abstract

Major, standard grammars of English give an account and interpret interrogatively used possessive *have* as a unique specialty of genres and text types of British English. Reviewing descriptions offered by some of these grammars and presenting empirically based evidence on acceptability of usage and function, the present paper offers results revealing the occurrence of inverted possessive *have* in other regional varieties, specifically in American English. It is suggested that *have*, retaining its possessive lexical meaning behaves as a semi-auxiliary in such constructions.

Keywords: possessive, inversion, *do*-support, corpus-based, semi-auxiliary, notionally and morpho-syntactically based categorization

1 Introduction

What made me start researching the functional-semantic and pragmatic-contextual force of interrogative sentences with the possessive lexical status of *have* was finding the example *Have you a pen?* on page 88 of the recently published *Oxford Modern English Grammar* authored by Bas Aarts (2011). The sentence was given under section 4.1.1.6. titled “Subjects invert positions with verbs in interrogative main clauses”, which section, due to its scope, did not address discussing syntactic variation concerning possessive usage of *have*, contrasting syntactic as well as cognitive-semantic and pragmatic, usage based issues of formally pure cases of inversion with the co-occurrence of *have* and *do*-support (also called *do*-periphrasis) or the *have got* construction. This came to me as a surprise, as types of *have*-based possession could have been discussed in a dictionary based on one of the most valuable corpora of British English, the British component of the International Corpus of English (ICE-GB). The other fact that also gave me a surprise was realizing that most learners’ grammars and the grammar sections of course-books for the learner only address two of the three types of possessive phenomena used in interrogative sentences: usage of *have* with *do*-support contrasted with that of the *have got* construction. Most of these sources used in the teaching of English as a foreign language commit themselves to stressing the stative, general meaning of possession expressed by using constructions with *have* and *do*-support, and attribute the expression of the actuality (to some extent, also stressing the generality and stative communicative force) to the meaning related force of the *have got* construction. Occurrence of the third type, *have* inversion in interrogative utterances, is greatly neglected, it is not discussed or even mentioned by most of them.

For illustration, let us see what the classic student's grammar titled *A Practical English Grammar* (4th edition) by Thomson and Martinet has to say on the issue (1986: 124-125). In interrogative sentences referring to habitual actions *have* is conjugated with *do*. When expression of the notion of habit does not occur, the *have got* construction is more typically used by speakers of British English (*Have you got time?*), whereas in other regional variants, specifically in America, *do* forms are used (*Do you have time?*). Contrasting of stative usage versus expression of actual possession in British English (*Do you have an ice-axe?* vs. *Have you got an ice-axe?*) is not highlighted in this grammar widely used by learners of English as a foreign language.

Another standard teaching aid for learners of English is Michael Swan's *Practical English Usage*. This handbook discusses all three forms of possessive *have* in questions, noting that *have got* means exactly the same in this case. However, it is also noted that *have got* constructions are less common in the past tense, which tentatively implies reference to the expression of actuality as a facet of the usage of the construction. (*Did you have good teachers when you were at school?* is the acceptable, standard example.) It is also noted that "In American English and modern British English, questions and negatives are commonly formed with *do* (*Does the house have a garden?*)". Inversion of *have* is rated as a form of older stages of English, without reference to the stage in the history of English¹ and it is suggested to occur primarily in formal registers of British English (ex.: *Have you an appointment?*). *Have got* constructions are observed to be much less common in the interrogative in American English. There is a gradual replacement of the *have got* construction with that using *do*-support in British English (upon the influence of standards of American English) to express query about the habituality of repetition of actions (2005: 207-209).

As its title suggests, the *Longman Student Grammar of Spoken and Written English* compiled for advanced level students of English by outstanding corpus linguists is a corpus-based grammar relying on data of two major corpora of mainly British English, the British National Corpus and the Longman Corpus Network. This grammar functionally differentiates between possessive *have* as a lexical verb and an operator in questions. As a lexical verb it takes *do*-support most frequently used in conversation and least commonly occurs in academic prose (ex.: *Did you have a good walk?*). The operator (inverted) status of *have* can be observed in British English conversation such as *Have you any comments on this Mick?*, whereas in American English the *do*-construction is the standardized option. It is noted that *have got* constructions serve as the main alternative to main verb *have* in the conversational register of British English, and that its usage usually highlights the expression of current possession (Biber, Conrad & Leech 2002: 253).

¹ Explanation to the classic type of expressing interrogation via inverting *have* comes from evidence revealed by diachronic studies of English. Historical linguists are now fully aware of the fact that *do*-periphrasis came to be standardized in English in the sixteenth century. Let me give two quotations in justification of this by Rissanen. *Do*-periphrasis in questions and negations "becomes common as late as the sixteenth century" and "by the end of the eighteenth century *do* had become an obligatory element in the grammatical structure of English" (1999: 239). "The earliest unambiguous instances of *do*-periphrasis in negative sentences appear in the late fourteenth century. The rapid increase in *do*-negation in the sixteenth century is parallel to the development of *do* in questions, although it is probably somewhat later" (1999: 245). Based on these observations it seems to be the case that in British English interrogative sentential constructions using *do*-periphrasis co-existed with the more classic formation of inverted *have*, whereas in American English, a regional variety of English taking shape at a later stage of the history of English, the later developing construction type of using *do*-periphrasis was standardized. (Let me express my thanks to historical linguist colleague Dr. Irén Hegedűs for calling my attention to this diachronic evidence.)

2 Representation of interrogative constructions of *have* in authoritative handbooks of English grammar

Right at the start of this section, let me note that authoritative grammars of the English, even if corpus-based, are primarily sources based on the British regional variant of the language. It is practically impossible to find standard, authoritative grammars of the other regional variants, including that of American English. One exception is the usage-based grammar textbook written for the US-based TOEFL exam, which source, however, due to its scope, is far from having the standards acceptable as authoritative (Lee 2012).

The *Collins COBUILD English Grammar* is based on the corpus classic *The Bank of English* developed and based on the pioneering work in corpus linguistics of its founding professor, father of the rapidly and radically growing field of corpus linguistics, the late John Sinclair. *The Bank of English* (primarily a corpus of British English) has always been the largest lexical corpus available. The grammar based on it is mainly used for educational purposes. Quite interestingly, inversion with *have* is not discussed in the grammar at all. *Have got* is mentioned as a possessive construction, with a note that it is “more often used instead of the present tense of *have* when talking about possession” (Hands & Berry 2011: 151).

In the late American generative linguist James D. McCawley’s famous handbook titled *The Major Syntactic Phenomena of English*, the renowned guru of generative syntax, referring to the predominance of using *do*-support in interrogative sentences with possessive *have*, noted that “for British speakers the ‘possession’ *have* ... may invert but also may be left behind by inversion”. He rated *Has Janet a lot of money?* as fully acceptable in British and Irish English, whereas, he noted, in American *Does Janet have a lot of money?* is the standard form of usage for this sentence, and also added a further example in support, noting that in Irish English *Had Tom his hat on?* is fully acceptable, whereas speakers of American English tend to use *Did Tom have his hat on?* (1998: 238).

Many linguists consider the voluminous handbook titled *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* compiled by Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik to serve as the classic, authoritative descriptive grammar of British English even today. Concerning the syntactic variation of possessive *have* the authors note that “it not only combines in forming constructions with an operator (*Do you have a lighter?*) but also acts as an operator itself in constructions such as *Have you a lighter?*”. They consider the latter to be the “traditional construction in British English”, adding that “it is somewhat uncommon, particularly in the past tense (*? Had she any news?*)”. Concerning the *have got* construction they note that its usage is common in negative and interrogative clauses, expresses actualized cases of possession as an alternative to the stativity expressed by cases with *have* (1985: 131).

The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language by Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey K. Pullum distinguishes between stative *have* as a lexical verb and the *have got* construction. It is stated that inversion of *have*, its “auxiliary use is tending to sound relatively formal or old-fashioned (with *have got* or lexical *have* preferred)”, and that the “auxiliary use is hardly possible with a habitual interpretation”. It is noted that in British English *have got* is characteristic of informal style, whereas “in American English *have* always behaves as a lexical verb and is preferred over *have got*”, which means, that it always takes *do*-support in questions (2002: 112-113). Actuality expressed by *have got* in opposition to using lexical *have* is not noted in the grammar.

In another, corpus-based (*The Cambridge International Corpus*) grammar written by corpus linguists Ronald Carter and Michael McCarthy, titled the *Cambridge Grammar of English: A Comprehensive Guide*, it is noted that inversion of *have* in its role as a lexical verb

expressing possession and attribution “sounds rather formal”. Interrogatives with *do*-support and with the *have got* construction comprise the acceptable, standard usage in colloquial language use. Acceptability under these conditions of register-based usage, however, only holds for sentences used in the present tense. In the past tense, the preferred form is the construction with *do*-support.² Based on their spoken corpus, the authors observe that in interrogative examples with *have* as a lexical verb expressing habitual actions, *do*-forms are exclusively used. (*How often do you have parties?* is fully acceptable, whereas **How often have you got parties?* and **How often have you parties?* are rated as ungrammatical (2006: 535-536).

To conclude this section, let us see briefly how one of the most authoritative corpus-based grammars, the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* compiled by the outstanding corpus linguists Douglas Biber, Stig Johansson, Geoffrey Leech, Susan Conrad, and Edward Finegan identifies, describes, and interprets the usage of possessive *have* in questions. This grammar is based on data gained from two major corpora: the British National Corpus and the Longman Corpus Network. Three types of interrogative constructions with possessive *have* have been identified in the two corpora occurring both in conversational and formal registers:

- (i) *have* used as a lexical verb, supported in interrogatives with *do*-periphrasis (ex.: *Did you have a good walk?* CONV.³, *Do you have a long way to go?* FICT.),
- (ii) auxiliary construction without *do*, with *have* inverted (ex.: *Have you any comments on this Mick?* CONV., *Have you any idea what you’ve done, what you’re involved in?* FICT.),
- (iii) construction with *have got* (ex.: *Have you got a busy week now, Michael?* CONV., *Have you got a cigarette, Jim?* FICT.).

The authors of the grammar have provided readers with frequency data on the rate of occurrence of these structures in British and American English conversation and fiction. Accordingly, the rate of occurrence of interrogative constructions with *do*-support is predominant in American English and is much lower in British English in both text types. Inversion of *have* is non-existent in American conversation and its occurrence is extremely low in American fiction, whereas it is relatively high in British English fiction and can be identified at a low rate in British conversation. Concerning *have got* used in interrogative sentences, frequencies are high in British but are very low in American conversation, and the occurrence of this construction is low both in British and American fiction. It is noted that inversion of *have* used in British English as part of the norm “probably reflects conservative usage” (1999: 215-216).

Based on the above characterizations and descriptions found in standard grammars of English it can be observed that grammars do not describe usage factors of possessive *have* constructions systematically. They only seem to agree about the dominantly British English related status of constructions with inverted *have*, but even there they do not agree on the functional syntactic status, category of the lexical item. Descriptions offered by classic and corpus-based grammars alike, show marked differences in the representation and

² It is also noted that occurrence of the *have got* construction in the present tense is much more dominant and frequent in spoken British than in American English.

³ Let me note, contrary to the categorization of the Longman grammar, that in types of construction such as *have a walk*, *have* serves as a light verb to the nominal in the complex predicate.

categorization of morphological and syntactic status between the notion of full verb vs. auxiliary or operator. Concerning inverted position, the general view is that syntactically *have* loses its full verb status and behaves like an auxiliary. I believe that such syntactic behaviour is characteristic of the category of semi-auxiliaries (like those, including *have*, identified and categorized as light verbs in composite verb constructions) described and functionally interpreted by Butt and Geuder (2001). In its inverted position and role *have* retains its lexical content and status of expressing possession and is not fully grammaticalized, hence the semi-lexical status of the item.

Another inadequacy of the grammars observed above is lack of interpretation of or even mention about the communicative purpose and force of potential utterances in which the constructional variants are used, i.e., lack of identification of their speech act domains. Claims like this could have been satisfied by grammars that are based on large lexical databases, electronically available corpora.

3 Further, empirically based evidence

In this section I would like to present empirically based evidence on the communicative force of the three types of construction using possessive *have*, with special emphasis on their expressed speech act related types of communicative force, via testing the intuitively based judgement of native speakers (Section 3.1.), and observing the representation, rate of the frequency of occurrence of the construction with inverted *have* occurring in interrogative sentences in two major corpora, the British National Corpus (BNC, representing the regional variety of British English, having the volume of 100 million words), and the US based Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA, a corpus with a larger volume of 450 million words) (Section 3.2).

3.1 Data of native speaker testing

In my experiment testing native speaker judgement I asked my informants (40 adult native speakers of American English) to give their responses on the acceptability of six sentences (three sentence pairs) using the three types of constructions with possessive *have*. The first pair represented the operation of *do*-support, in the second pair the *have got* construction was used, and the third pair of sentences had inversion of possessive *have* in its semi-auxiliary function. Expression of actuality of possession was also examined by using *with you* as a complement in the second sentence of each pair. As a complementary task, I asked my informants to try and identify the communicative role, the speech act related force of the sentences used as potential utterances in communication.

The sentences used in the experiment were the following:

- (i) *Do you have a pen?*
- (ii) *Do you have a pen with you?*
- (iii) *Have you got a pen?*
- (iv) *Have you got a pen with you?*
- (v) *Have you a pen?*
- (vi) *Have you a pen with you?*

I gained the following results. For all of my informants (i) - (iv) were acceptable, whereas (v) and (vi) were accepted by 34 speakers only. Concerning usage, all of my informants noted that (i) and (ii) were the ones used by speakers of American English in all types and styles of texts and discourse. Seven of the testees had the view that (iii) and (iv) would probably be more typically used by speakers of British English, but they also noted that there was no major meaning-related difference between the two sentence pairs. However, 7 of the informants noted that (iii) and (iv) sounded somewhat formal to them. All of my informants who rated (v) and (vi) acceptable had the intuitive judgement that these sentences were acceptable and used by speakers of British English. Participants of my experiment without exception had the view that (ii), (iv), and (vi) were lexically redundant, as the actuality of possession expressed by the complement *with you* was implied by (i), (iii), and (v). In their view, therefore, actual representation of the complement was unnecessary. In addition to referring to the British English nature or tone of (v) and (vi), these sentences were rated as archaic by 7 of my informants and formal by 12.

Concerning communicative function and speech act force, all of my informants expressed the same view: all of these sentences would be uttered in communicative situations when the speaker was in need of a pen for something and verbally indirectly expressed a request via directly asking a question. 31 of the 40 informants noted that a more polite way of verbalizing the request would be using constructions including the auxiliary *may* with various lexical verbs, such as *May I borrow your pen?*. In terms of speech act theory, the acts expressed by the utterances studied here have an illocutionary force of directions, directly expressing questioning, and at the same time, indirectly conveying a requestive action (Bach & Harnish 1979: 47-49).

Such an interpretation of acceptability rating and the speech act related pragmatic force of grammatically interrogative utterances with possessive *have* are not given any account in the learner oriented and standard grammars reviewed above.

3.2 Corpus-based findings

One of the major results of testing my native speaker informants' intuitive judgement about the usage and acceptability of inversion of possessive *have* used as a semi-auxiliary in interrogative sentences was that this type of construction was acceptable to speakers of American English but is not used by them in spoken or written genres of discourse, it sounded British to them. The data seem to match descriptions given by standard grammars of British English discussed in Section 1 of the present paper. With the aim to get further evidence on the issue as a control over the intuitively gained data, I searched two major, general corpora of regional varieties of English: BNC and COCA. The two corpora were searched for the frequency of occurrence of the construction *have you a*, clearly demonstrating interrogative sentences with inverted usage of possessive *have*.

3.2.1 BNC

In the British National Corpus with a volume of 100 million words, the frequency of occurrence of the *have you a* construction was 51, which number was considerably lower than

expected. Studying the conceptual types and morpho-syntactic representation of the nouns, the following distribution was found:⁴

- NP with indefinite article and noun only: 38 (ex.: *book, gun*), including 4 compound nominals (ex.: *knitting machine*)
- NP with indefinite article and noun premodified with an attribute: 11 (*small bowl, standard charge, final little homily, special interest, reserved ticket, thrilling weekend*)
- NP with indefinite article and possessive premodifier: 1 (*doctor's report*)
- noun with lexically based determiner construction: 1 (*grain of his art*)
- common nouns expressing physical notions (objects) in their meaning: 21 (*bag, basket, bed, blotter, book, bowl, cigarette, greenbelt, gun, key, knitting machine, letter, magnifying glass, medicine glass, pad, recipe, set, stuffed bird, sugar, ticket, toilet*)
- nouns referring to human beings: 2 (*brother, contact*)
- nouns expressing abstract (occasionally reified) notions: 21 (*art, charge, destination, hobby, homily, interest, location, mind, minute, moment (2), name, report, story, strategy, Voice, weekend, will*, including three deverbal nouns (*defence, reservation, wee*))
- nouns expressing the meaning of states or conditions: 2 (*fever, headache*)
- nouns representing substance: 1 (*smoke*)
- nominalized colour name (used in nominal ellipsis): 1 (*dark grey*)

3.2.2 COCA

In the Corpus of Contemporary American English with a volume significantly larger (450 million words) than that of BNC, I found 42 occurrences of the interrogative construction with inverted *have* with its possessive meaning. This is a major result of my study, as it justifies inverted usage of the semi-auxiliary in the speech acts of questioning and requesting, contrary to the views outlined in descriptions of standard grammars and the intuitive judgement expressed by my native speaker informants. The distribution of the morpho-syntactic as well as conceptually based semantic types of nominals occurring in the construction were the following:

- NP with indefinite article and noun only: 35 (ex.: *carriage, letter, pencil*), including compound nominals (ex.: *boy-/girlfriend*)
- NP with indefinite article and attributive premodifier: 6 (*reliable baby sitter, big bag, brewing background, sufficient substitute, special tale, positive wish*)
- NP with indefinite article and lexically expressed possessive premodifier: 1 (*mage's powers*)
- NP with indefinite article and lexically expressed possessive premodifier: 2 (*packet of crisps, drop of water*) or quantifier: 1 (*a few minutes*)

⁴ A notionally based categorization of the nouns listed is sometimes difficult to be made due to factors such as the nature of the concept as well as depth and type of abstraction. Buck's methodology of categorizing synonyms on conceptual bases into 22 major semantic domains offers useful help in gaining semantically balanced lists of the synonymous items categorized (1949).

- common nouns expressing physical notions (objects) in their meaning: 14 (*bag, bathroom, carriage, copy, crisps, knife, letter, pencil, rope, vessel, watch, water, weapon, wig*)
- nouns referring to human beings: 14 (*anybody, baby sitter, boyfriend, daughter, doctor, girlfriend, guy, hero, master, minister, mother, president, sister, substitute, tenant*)
- nouns expressing abstract (occasionally reified) notions: 10 (*hope, minute, name, plan, tale, vision, wish, including deverbal nouns (reservation, suggestion, treatment)*)⁵
- deadjectival noun: 2 (*favourite 2*)
- collective noun: 1 (*family*)

3.2.3 Observations

The major piece of evidence gained from the corpus data is that – contrary to the descriptions and interpretations on factors of usage offered by standard grammars, and also in opposition to native speaker judgement, inversion of the possessive sense of the semi-auxiliary *have* is not restricted to genres of British English, but it also occurs with an ample rate of frequency in other regional variants of the language, such as American English. Moreover, concerning the morpho-syntactic types of the nouns and nominal constructions as well as their notionally based typology and distribution, the two regional varieties of English reveal greatly similar data. Differences can only be observed in the rate of frequency of occurrence: the amount of common nouns expressing physical notions (objects) and those expressing abstract, sometimes reified types of nouns was lower in American and higher in British English, whereas usage of nouns representing [+animate] [+human] beings was higher in the American-based corpus. Interestingly, neither of the two regional varieties had even a single piece of occurrence of nominals characterized by the [+animate] [- human] selectional feature, such as those referring to animals.

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⁵ It is still extremely difficult, in lack of availability of adequately precise historical corpora, to identify whether cases of conversion in the lexicon are originally of denominal or deverbal nature. For instance, concerning the status of items like *plan* the *Compact Oxford English Dictionary* gives 1553 as the year of its first nominal occurrence and 1748 for usage in verbal constructions (*to make a plan of*). Hence, verbal usages of the item *plan* should be taken to be denominal. On the other hand, *wish* first occurs as a verb (897), and is used in nominal constructions in 1390 (*to have or feel a wish for*) only, which refers to the primacy of the verbal status of the item and suggests nominal cases of occurrence to be later developments (COED, 1991). However, my view concerning categorization of the originality of the type of such lexis is that pure reliance on etymological dictionaries such as COED is inadequate due to lack of data on the frequency of their usage in given relevant periods of time observed.

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