Some Remarks on HAVE-less Perfect Constructions in English*

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Introduction

The goal of the present study is to investigate Perfect constructions in English found to exhibit no overt HAVE-auxiliary form. The pattern is attested from the Middle English period (e.g. (1)) and, though largely unrecorded by grammarians, can still be evidenced in Late Modern (2) and Present-Day English (3):

(1) Ac heuede Iosep ido ase þe quene him bad, he míȝte ben in halle mid òðre bliðe & glad (c. 1300) Jacob & Joseph 241, in: Molencki, 1999: 147. But if Joseph had done as the queen had asked him, he might have been happy and joyful in the hall with the others

(2) There are many subjects treated of in this work that we should liked to have discussed in our pages, but our limits will not permit us on the present occasion (...). (1854) (Quarterly Journal of Microscopical Science, review of James Paget, Lectures on surgical pathology, Vol. 2.)

(3) ‘We walked part of the Rail Trail but would loved to have cycled it!’ (2013) (http://www.tripadvisor.com.au/ShowUserReviews-g951371-d1754126 -r162594548-Otago_Central_Rail_Trail-Alexandra_South_Island.html)

Interestingly, the above instances show great diversity in terms of style and register and, in this respect, stand out from the large body of linguistic forms which are also apt to shift from full to null presence but only, or preferentially,

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in contexts of informal spoken discourse. The present study will also seek to ascertain to what extent infinitival forms mirror finite forms, or differ from them, when it comes to HAVE-less Perfect constructions.

For heuristic reasons—i.e. under the working premise that an absence of HAVE auxiliary need not systematically result from a deletion process—, the pattern under discussion will be referred to here via the neutral expression of HAVE-less Perfect constructions.

1 HAVE-Less Finite Perfect Constructions

Omission of HAVE before a past participle, is a standard feature of informal English in finite constructions: it is more specifically licensed in questions (e.g. (4a–a′)), where auxiliary alone, or auxiliary and subject can be omitted, but not in negative2 sentences (e.g. (4b–b′)), and only marginally3 in assertions, and then only on condition that both subject and auxiliary be absent (e.g. (4c) vs (4c′)):

(4) a. (Have) You spoken to Mary yet?
   a′. (Have you) Spoken to Mary yet?
   b. I *(have) not spoken to Mary yet.
   b′. *(I have) Not written to Mary yet.
   c. I *(have) spoken to Mary on the phone.
   c′. (I have) Spoken to Mary on the phone.

Interestingly, declaratives (affirmative, and negative with never) gain in acceptability with a small set of verbs, eg. (5) see, again exclusively in informal registers:

(5) [Have you seen this film before?]
   a. Yeah. I (have) seen it a couple of times.
   a′. (I have) Seen it a couple of times.

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1 Described by Thrasher (1974) as ‘conversational deletion.’ Biber et al. (1999: 157) likewise view instances such as What time (are) they supposed to be back? as cases of ‘ellipsis’ which are ‘characteristic of conversation and of dialogue or the representation of thought in fiction.’

2 Save with negative interrogative structures, e.g. Still not spoken to Mary yet?.

3 Echoing the pattern makes (4c) better: Been there, done that. Acceptability remains limited, however, e.g. Why are you sick? *Eaten an entire pizza. (Schirer, 2008: 83).