

# Two Situations Where *Had Better* Can Be Used

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**Abstract** The objective of this article is to argue that *had better* should be used only in connection with a particular situation, and usually in connection with a situation where there is a sense of urgency. These are exactly what we Japanese tend to overlook whenever we use this VP. This article explores how *had better* is defined in current dictionaries, then complement, or enlarge upon, what these dictionaries failed to mention, or neglected mentioning, and discusses the extent to which a large number of examples of *had better* in the COBUILD ON CD-ROM are used in connection with a particular situation and a situation that has a sense of urgency.

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## 1. Introduction

First of all, let us take a look at how *had better* is currently defined in the COBUILD 3, the LDOCE 4, and the OALD 6.

The COBUILD 3 defines this VP as follows:

- (1) You use *had better* or *'d better* when you are advising, warning, or threatening someone, or expressing an opinion about what should happen.

And it gives the following examples:

- (2) a. It's half past two. I think we *had better* go home.  
b. You *'d better* run if you're going to get a ticket.  
c. He *'d better* not fool me.

The LDOCE 4 is not much different:

- (3) a. used to give advice about what someone should do or to say what you should do or need to do.  
b. used to threaten someone.

The following examples are shown in this dictionary. ((4a,b,c,d) correspond to (3a) above, while (5) corresponds to (3b).)

- (4) a. I *'d better* go and get ready.  
b. I think you *'d better* ask Jo first.  
c. *Better* just check she's okay.  
d. You *had better* not tell Oliver.  
(5) You *'d better* keep your mouth shut.

The OALD 6 defines *had better* like (6), giving examples like (7). Comparing *had better* with *should* and *ought to*, this dictionary adds that *had better* can also be used in relation to a situation that is happening now (8), and an example similar to (7b) is given as its example in the dictionary.

- (6) used to tell sb what you think they should do.

- (7) a. You *'d better* go to the doctor about your cough.  
b. We *'d better* leave now or we'll miss the bus.  
c. You *'d better* not do that again.  
d. "I'll give you back the money tomorrow."  
"You *'d better*!" (=as a threat)

- (8) *Had better* can also be used to say what is the best thing to do in a situation that is happening now.

What these three dictionaries commonly say is that *had better* is used in suggesting something, giving advice, giving a warning to someone, or threatening someone. In addition, *had better* can also be used in ordering someone (9d), although any reference to it cannot be found in these dictionaries. The following are my own examples of various uses of *had better* from the COBUILD ON CD-ROM.<sup>1</sup>

- (9) a. "Then perhaps I *'d better* not make you get up at all," Linus *suggested*.  
b. "But I *'d better* warn you it's not drinking water. Even if it was, you wouldn't want to drink it, would you?" He gave a throaty laugh.  
c. "You *'d better* not be thinking of carrying a 35mm camera to scenes of crime," Mason *warned*, half in fun and wholly in earnest.  
d. "Then you *better* come with me," he *ordered*.  
"I may need you."  
e. You ever touch me again, you *better* never go to sleep.

The explanation given in (8) and also all of the examples that have been given so far in this paper imply

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clearly that *had better* is limitedly used, and that it cannot be used in all situations. Indeed, *had better* seems to be used only in reference to a particular situation, and it does not seem to be used in a situation that has general reference. Moreover, this VP seems to be usually used in a situation that has a sense of urgency. The enlargement upon these two points will be seen in the following.

## 2. Two Situations Where *Had Better* Can Be Used

Before proceeding to the main topic, I will make a brief mention of some forms of *had better*. Of the five forms, *had better*, *'d better*, *better*, *had best* and *better had*, the contracted form *'d better* is most popularly used. The form *had better* is not used as often as the form *'d better*. *Better* seems to be a little less frequently used than *had better*, and *had best* and *better had* are hardly used. To be specific, in the COBUILD ON CD-ROM, *'d better* is found in 93 instances (65%), *had better* in 29 instances (20%), and *better* in 22 instances (15%). *Had best* and *better had* are used only once. The *had* in *had better* has nothing to do with the past, and *had better* suggests present or future. And the reason why the *had* in *had better* is often contracted to *'d* or disappears altogether would be that this *had* has become almost meaningless now and it has become quite possible to communicate without recourse to the full form.

### 2.1 A particular situation

Murphy (1994:70) says that unlike *should*, *had better* is used "only" for a particular situation and that it is not used for things in general:

- (10) We use *had better* only for a particular situation (not for things in general).

And he gives the following example:

- (11) It's cold today. You'd better wear a coat when you go out.

Turton and Heaton (1996:51) say to the same effect:

- (12) *Had better* is used in informal styles when you give someone strong advice about what to do in a particular situation.

Murphy (1994:70) says that when we talk about things in general, we can use *should*:

- (13) I think all drivers *should* wear seat belts. (in general-not "*had better* wear")

Turton and Heaton (1996:51) also say that in a general situation *should*, *ought to* or *it would be better to* can be used:

- (14) a. Parents *should* teach their children to be kind to animals.

- b. Rather than complain and risk upsetting her, *it would be better to* say nothing.

It should be added here that all the 146 examples of *had better* in the COBUILD ON CD-ROM have to do with a particular situation, and not with a general situation.

### 2.2 A sense of urgency

*Had better* is usually used in a situation that has a sense of urgency. Turton and Heaton (1996:51) say:

- (15) The situation usually exists at the moment of speaking and so there is usually a sense of urgency in the advice.

And they give the following examples:

- (16) a. You'd better hurry or you'll miss the bus.  
b. You'd better ring your parents—just in case they're worrying about you.

Swan (1995:234) also says that *had better* is used in an urgent situation:

- (17) *Had better* refers to the immediate future. It is more urgent than *should* or *ought*.

And he gives the following example:

- (18) "I really ought to go and see Fred one of these days." "Well, you'd better do it soon—he's leaving for South Africa at the end of the month."

In the COBUILD ON CD-ROM, approximately 21 examples of *had better* out of 29 are used in situations where there is a sense of urgency. In the examples of *'d better*, approximately 68 examples out of 93 are used in situations in which there is a sense of urgency, and in the examples of *better*, approximately 17 examples out of 22 are used in connection with urgent situations. There are examples in the CD-ROM where the sentences other than the *had-better* constructions are not given, and in them it is unclear whether they are used with regard to an urgent situation. True, not all the examples have to do with urgency. But this may not be a large problem if we consider that Turton and Heaton are saying that there is "usually" a sense of urgency in the advice, and that they are not saying "always."

Furthermore, looking at the examples of *had better* in the COBUILD ON CD-ROM, one cannot help feeling that a sense of urgency is all the more felt by using such adverbs as *soon*, *now*, *quick smart*, *tomorrow*, etc., by using such verbs as *leave*, *hurry*, *fly*, *get started*, etc., or by using such conjunctions as *before* and *or*, or by using expressions other than those in *had-better* constructions. Of course, a sense of urgency can be recognized without using such words or phrases at all. But their presence can certainly add to a sense of

urgency. The following are those examples from the CD-ROM.

**2.2.1 Words and phrases that contribute to a sense of urgency**

**2.2.1.1 Soon, pretty soon, now, quick smart and tomorrow**

These words have to do with time or speed. They point to the present time or immediate future, at which time things should be done.

- (19) a. Only Caddick of the seamers should survive and he *had better* get Wickets *soon*.
- b. I'd *better* give Cutler a tinkle *pretty soon*.
- c. Well, you *had better* go to your lodgings *now*.
- d. You *better* get over here *quick smart*. We're in deep-shit trouble.
- e. The funeral is next Monday. Now then, you *had better* see Jones the gravedigger about a funeral *tomorrow*.

**2.2.1.2 Hurry, go, leave, get out, get along, slow down, fly, start and get started**

These verbs suggest that urgent action is needed.

- (20) a. But if anyone really wants the 68-piece Aynsley Elizabeth dinner set... they'd *better hurry*.
- b. You'd *better go*. You've done enough damage.
- c. "Right," said the bride, frowning. "We'd *better leave*."
- d. It's true what Giles says, you can't reason with nature. We'd *better get out*.
- e. Well, I'd *better be getting along*.
- f. You'd *better slow down* a bit, Hoppy.
- g. When Brookie wrote home and said she was living with an artist, I thought I'd *better fly over* and look for myself.
- h. *Better start* making some more babies? England gunna need 'em.
- i. Oh, well, I think we'd *better get started*.

**2.2.1.3 NPs**

There is a sense of urgency is *alarm*, *precaution* or *ambulance*.

- (21) a. I gave him a wave to keep him away, and then said, "We'd *better* go over to the Reception and raise *the alarm*."
- b. Whatever, she *had better* take *extra precautions*. She would rather not give bad luck any further opportunities.
- c. Celia arrived at the house within 20 minutes; she took one look at me and said we'd *better*

call *an ambulance*.

**2.2.1.4 Straight and fast**

These words mean "directly" or "at great speed."

- (22) a. "I think I'd *better* go *straight* back to my digs," I said.
- b. Listen, kid, you'd *better* sober up *fast*.

**2.2.1.5 Before, or and in case**

The conjunction *before* restricts time, and demands that something be done before a certain time, while the conjunction *or* warns or advises someone that a problem will arise if a thing required will not be done. The conjunction *in case* suggests the possibility of something happening.

- (23) a. You *had better* hurry up and make those notes *before* you catch your death of cold, dear!" one of the women called out after her.
- b. "You are drunk! You *had better* give me an explanation of how you got this suitcase and get out of here *before* I call the police!" the priest demanded angrily.
- c. I think I'd *better* get you to your lodgings *before* the weather worsens," he shouted out against the rising clamour of the storm.
- d. Terrible mistake, someone spilled my drink, someone else's urine sample, never touched the stuff in my life and all further questions *had better* be addressed to my lawyer *or* I'll sue.
- e. There's a lot of blood. I'd *better* stay, I'd *better* stop here *in case* someone turns up.

**2.2.1.6 The repeated use of the same words and the exclamation point (!)**

A sense of urgency is felt all the more strongly if, for example, a name is repeated with the exclamation point (!):

- (24) "You'd *better* come too..., *Mr Ryan!*" They approached the turf stock once more. "*Mr Ryan!*"

**2.2.1.7 Words and phrases other than those in the had-better constructions**

At times a sense of urgency can be recognized by words or phrases other than those in *had-better* constructions.

- (25) a. *The fires* were getting closer and closer to where I was working and we decided we *had better* get out of the office.
- b. I hear children *getting anxious*. I'd *better* let you go. Good luck.
- c. We'd *better* get a move on, though, *it's getting late*.
- d. "You'd *better* get it from there," *shrieked*

- my landlady. "I don't want to have it nesting in my drawers.
- e. Mason paused, and then decided he *had better* make explicit what else had crossed his mind as he spoke. His face was *suddenly* formal.
- f. You'd *better* come into the front room. *I've got the kettle on ready* for a cup of tea.
- g. *The Maryland State Police were arriving.* "You *better* go out and escort them in," he ordered the agent who'd just questioned him.
- h. Nell *sprang to her feet* purposely, added briefly, "I'd *better* let you go to bed."
- i. "When I say 'chaff,' Daren, you *better* give it to me," Parsons said *irritably*.

Swan, Michael (1995) *Practical English Usage* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Turton, N. D. and J. B. Heaton (1996) *Longman Dictionary of Common Errors* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Longman, London.

### 3. Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that it is in connection with a particular situation, and usually in relation to a situation that has a sense of urgency that *had better* can be used. With this in mind, let us consider the following examples from a Japanese reference book on English composition<sup>2</sup>:

- (26) a. \*You *had better* read English-language papers if you want to learn English.
- b. \*You *had better* practice speaking English with your friends so that you can help foreign travelers when they come to Japan.

These *had-better* constructions have general reference, and they are not used in connection with a particular situation. In addition, no sense of urgency is to be recognized here. These sentences are incorrect. However, we tend to write these sentences quite readily, using *had better* in all cases whether the situation is particular or not. That will certainly be what we have to be careful about when we use *had better*.

### Notes

1. All the following examples in this article are from the COBUILD ON CD-ROM unless otherwise stated.
2. Kawakami M. and J. D. Monkman, *Correcting Errors in Reference Books on English Composition* (orig. in Japanese) (Tokyo: Taishukan, 1993), p.52; p.83.

### References

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