

Obligation and Possession in *All you have to do is ...* and Its Related Structures

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Abstract In *All (What, The first thing) you have to do ...*, "have" is semantically linked with the following "to" and it means obligation. However, no explanation seems to have been made so far as to why this is so. This article tries to explain it from two viewpoints. In such structures as *What do you have to eat?*, at times the verb "have" is semantically connected with "to," while at times it is not, in the latter case of which "have" means "to possess." In OE there were no such VPs as *have to*: "have" had nothing to do with "to". *Have to* came to have the meaning of obligation in early ModE.

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1. Introduction

It seems obvious today that in *All you have to do is ...*, there is no semantic break between "have" and "to" and that this VP "have to" means obligation or necessity. Yet in such structures as *What have you (got) to say?*, the verb "have (got)" does not always combine semantically with the following "to." This paper explores first that in such structures as *All you have to do is ...*, the meaning of obligation can be induced from two aspects and that the VP "have to" that means obligation did not exist in OE yet. In addition, this paper discusses that in such structures as *What have you (got) to say?*, "have (got)" can occasionally mean "to possess." Although Watanabe (1976:488-89) deals with problems of *have to*, it is confined to the structure *All you have to do is ...*, and not to such structures as *What have you (got) to say?* And in addition, this article tries to examine some problems related to the VP "have to" in both structures.

2. *All (What, The first thing) you have to do is ...*

Today it is generally agreed that in *All (What, The first thing) you have to do is ...*, the verb "have" combines with the following "to", that this VP means obligation or necessity, and that the verb "have" does not mean possession. However, no one seems to have explained why this is so. In my opinion, it can be attested from the following two

standpoints.

First, in such structures as *All (What, The first thing) you have to do is ...*, what follows the verb "is" has nothing to do with the idea of possession the verb "have" might imply. Instead it has much to do with some kind of activities. In (1a) (1b) "do your best" or "walk" that follows the verb "is" has much to do with the activities shown by the verb "do". I think that may be one of the strong reasons why in *All (What, The first thing) you have to do is ...*, the verb "have" does not mean possession.

- (1) a. All you have to do is do your best.
- b. All I have to do now is walk.

Second, in these structures such modals as *must*, *have got to* can appear in lieu of *have to*.

- (2) a. All I must do is keep the head clear.
(Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*)
- b. All you must do is to show him some affection. (Sam Shepard, "Silent Tongue")
- (3) a. I tell you what I must do, is to telephone.
(Evelyn Waugh, *A Handful of Dust*)(OED2)
- b. What they must do is (to) propose an amendment to the resolution.
(Quirk et al. 1985:1067)
- c. Often ... what we must do as simply right ... is just the hardest thing to do.
(Mozley, "Univ. Serm." (1876))(OED2)
- (4) The first thing you must do after the child is lost is to go to the Police.
(M. D. Landon, *E. Perkins* (1875))(OED2)

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- (5) 1865 L. Carrol, *Alice in Wonderland* iv. 54 The first thing I've got to do is to grow to my right size again. (*OED2* s.v. get v.24)

All of the above examples attest on the whole that in *All (What, The first thing) you have to do ...*, "have" is semantically related to the following "to" and it means obligation or necessity.

3. *What have you (got) to say?, etc.*

Today, when the interrogative *what* comes before *have to* or *have got to* in constructions similar to *All (What, The first thing) you have to do is ...*, it seems to solely depend upon the context whether the verb "have" means possession or not.

Kruisinga (1931 2:382) suggests that in (6) the object of "have" in *what have you to say to me?* is fronted (i.e. "what") and that here "have" does not combine semantically with the following "to".

- (6) Annie heard the General's voice reply: "Let her come in at once" ...
"Well, my little girl," said the General, "I am General Cornwallis; what have you to say to me?" - "I want my cow."

Kruisinga goes on to say that if the question "what have you to say to me?" is asked by a mother to a child when she wants the child to repeat a message she had given to him earlier, then this "have" is connected to the following "to" and it might mean obligation or necessity.

(7) is an example similar to (6), although this time the question is a rhetorical question. (7) is an advertising phrase I happened to find written just below a trademark of a certain American company.

- (7) What do you have to say?

In this case "have" means "to possess" and "What" is the object of "have". There is a semantic break between "have" and "to". That (7) is a rhetorical question means that the company's products advertised are so perfectly manufactured that the customers should have nothing to complain of.

The following is somewhat similar to (7). This is a question a man named Yank, a stoker in an ocean liner, shouts in desperation at the girls walking past him on the quay.

- (8) Now, what "a" yuh gotta say?

(Eugene O'Neill, *The Hairy Ape*)

Here the verb "have" in *have got* is shortened to "a" without disappearing completely¹⁾. Although *got* has amalgamated phonetically with the following *to* and has become "gotta" here, there is no

semantic relation between *have got* and *to*³⁾ because this "a" *gotta (have gotta)* means possession. (8) is a scene in which the protagonist is trying to take it out on the girls who are complete strangers to him. They are just walking past him on the quay. Thus (8) might be equivalent in meaning to *Now, do you have anything to say to me?*

What happens when "eat" comes instead of "say"? The following is a dialog between a boy and an old man.

- (9) "What do you have to eat?" the boy asked.
"A pot of yellow rice fish. Do you want some?"
"No. I will eat at home. Do you want me to make the fire?"

(Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*)

In (9) when the boy asked "What do you have to eat?", he was asking what kind of food the old man had, and here "have" is not connected with "to". "What" is the object of "have" and there is a break in meaning between "have" and "to".

Here is another example.

- (10) "Oh, to hell with the clock," the first man said. "What have you got to eat?"
"I can give you any kind of sandwiches," George said. "You can have ham and eggs, bacon and eggs, liver and bacon, or a steak."

(Ernest Hemingway, "The Killers")

In (10), "What have you got to eat?" is a question one of the customers, who turned out be killers afterward, asks to a restaurant keeper when he orders a dish there. That is, when the killer asked this question, he was referring to the menu of the restaurant. In this case "have got" means "to possess." However, if the same question is put, say, to a man who is on a diet, then "have got" is semantically related to the following "to" and this VP might imply obligation or necessity.

Ishibashi (1966:731-33) says that in the construction *There are a lot of things I have to do*, "have to" denotes obligation or necessity and that in this case "have" does not mean "to possess" with its object fronted. He explains that, because "There are" in the above sentence can be paraphrased as "I have," if "have" in "I have to do" means "to possess," and if there is a break in meaning between "I have" and "to", the same words "I have" are virtually repeated in the same sentence, and that becomes redundant. Yet this explanation seems doubtful, because as Pullum (1997:81) says,

two meanings are possible in the following (11), which is similar to the *There*-structure referred to above. Pullum says that (11) can be interpreted either as "I have some puzzles to work on" or as "There are some puzzles I must work on".

- (11) There are some puzzles I have to work on.
(Pullum 1997:81)

If the structure *have + to* in (11) is equivalent in meaning to "must," this *have to* can be shortened to *hafta* like the following and there is no ambiguity in this case.

- (12) There are some puzzles I hafta work on.
(ibid.)

Had to can be shortened to *hadda* and there is no ambiguity in this case either. In the following, "hadda" means obligation.

- (13) There was that Alsatian they hadda shoot because it wouldn't leave a kid's grave and kept scrabbling at the loose dirt.
(*Coast to Coast* 1967-68)(*OED2*)

4. Historical Background

Historically, *have to* came to have the meaning of obligation rather late. It seems that it was as late as in the 16th century that *have + to* came to have the meaning of obligation or necessity for the first time (*The Kenkyusha Dic. of Eng. Etymology*). The *OED2* gives the following instance of *have to* from the 16th century, and this seems to be the earliest instance of *have + to* that means obligation or necessity:

- (14) 1579 Fenton Guicciard (1618) He told him, he had not to beleeeue, that the couetousnesse of Virginio ... had moued Ferdinand.
(*OED2*, s.v. *have*)

And it was not until the 18th century that this use of *have to* became common (*Kenkyusha Dic. of Eng. Etymology*). All of this might show on the whole that, as for the structure *All you have to do is ...*, in earlier times "have" was not related to the following "to" and this "have" clearly meant possession. Jespersen (1949 5:227) suggests that in OE *have to do* might have been connected to the structure *have + object + to do* with the object of "have" fronted. He gives an instance of an oldest form of *have + to* that occurs in the construction *All you have to do is* His instance is from *Vices and Virtues* (c1200).

- (15) All ðat ze habbeð to donne.
Jespersen says that (15) is one of the instances in

which the object of the verb "habbeð" is placed before. He implies at the same time that in (15) "habbeð" means "to possess" and it does not combine semantically with the following "to".

This can also be said about the verb *have* that appears with the interrogative *what*. Originally, the verb *have* that cooccurs with the interrogative *what* was not connected with the following *to*, and it meant "to possess." According to the *OED2*, "have to do" in (16) meant "to have something to do", or "to have business, or concern", and thus (16) was equivalent in meaning to *What business has he ... ?* The *OED2* says further that this use of "have to do" is archaic and dialectal.

- (16) What has he to do? (*OED2* s.v. *do* v. 33c)

The *OED2* gives six instances that are similar to (16), in which are included the following two relatively recent examples. "Have" in the following examples means "to possess."

- (17) a. 1611 Bible Ps. 1. 16 What hast thou to do, to declare my Statutes?
b. 1748 Richardson Clarissa (1811)1. 187 What has he to do to controul you?

The fact that *have to* came to mean obligation in the 16th century denotes that, as is shown in (17a)(17b) that are instances from the 17th and 18th centuries, "have" that means possession, and "have to" that means obligation, seem to have coexisted for some time.³⁾

5. Conclusion

Here I first attested from two viewpoints why in the construction *All (What, The first thing) you have to do is ...*, the verb "have" invariably combines with the following "to" and it means obligation or necessity. In the second part I showed that when the interrogative "what" appears before "have got to" or "have to", in constructions like *What have you (got) to ...?* or in *There*-structures, it is ambiguous whether the VPs "have got" or "have" will combine semantically with the following "to." In this case, it depends on the context whether or not the structure *have got to* (or *have*) + *verb* means obligation or necessity. In the third part I referred to the fact that in earlier times in the structures *All you have to do is ...* and *What have you to do?*, "have" was not semantically linked to the following "to", and that the VP "have to do" might have been connected to the structure *have + object + to do* with the object of *have* fronted, and that it was

only with the development of the new meaning of *have to* in the 16th century that this VP came to mean obligation or necessity in both structures.

Notes

1) Pullum (1997:89) seems to be right on the whole when he says that in colloquial American English *gotta* appears without *have* as in *I gotta go*. Yet he does not seem to be wholly right, because, although in most cases this shortening occurs without *have*, one can often see instances in which the traces of *have* or *has* like "a" or 've or 's can be spotted with this structure. (8) is an instance in which "a" is seen. The following (a)(b) are from AmE and (c)(d) from BrE.

a. We all stood there and looked at her for a minute, and I remember, saying to one of the nurses, "Jeeze, I've gotta get a blood pressure! How am I gonna' get a blood pressure."

(Ina Yalof, *Life and Death*)

b. Come on, Reverend. I bet you can shake a hoof as good as anybody! The wife says she's gotta dance with you!

(Sinclair Lewis, *Elmer Gantry*)(OED2)

c. But I've gotta use words when I talk to you.

(T. S. Eliot, *Sweeney Agonistes*)(OED2)

d. Momma's gotta go redundant. She's a great kid ... but she's gonna be bad medicine on the run.

(Peter O'Donnell, *Silver Mistress*)(OED2)

2) Of course there are cases in which phonetically amalgamated *gotta* is semantically connected with the following *to* and it means obligation or necessity.

a. All you gotta do to that story is to give it the switcheroo.

(Budd W. Schulberg, *What Makes Sammy Run?*) (OED2)

b. All the Chinaman's gotta do is get into Saigon.

(Ronald S. Thomas, *Chinaman's Chance*) (OED2)

c. All you gotta do is follow these tracks. I know these tracks like the back of my hand. (Sam Shepard, "Far North")

d. All we gotta do is let Mel find his way back. (ibid.)

"Gotta" can also be used instead of "have to" in the construction *The first thing you have to do is ...*

e. Biff, first thing we gotta do when we get time is clip that big branch over the house.

(Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*)

3) As for *have got to*, it came to have the same meaning as *have to* or *must* in the 19th century. Before that, *have got* meant possession.

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