

Forms, constructions, and total syncretism: The case of USETA  
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September 2005

Syntax, morphology

A rule of thumb says not to distinguish inflectional categories unless there is some distinction in their phonological realizations. This rule tells us to treat the “present subjunctive” of English (*I insist they be expelled*) as just another use of Fo:U (“base form”) verbs, though in a Finite:+ syntactic construction.

We distinguish strictly between (syntactic) properties of constructions (Finite:+), and morphological properties of individual words (Fo:U, the “nonfinite form” property Fi:A, the “finite form” Fi:B). These properties are often intimately related – Finite:+ clauses usually have Fi:B heads – but they can diverge.

A rule of thumb, however, is just that. If the grammar of a language needs to distinguish two fully homophonous sets of word occurrences, then so be it. We argue that a grammar of English should distinguish Fo:U from a totally syncretic Fo:X. There are at least three relevant phenomena; here we discuss one, the distribution of the defective verb USE(D) TO (hereafter USETA) and of supportive DO (DO<sub>S</sub>), relying on well-known facts.

USETA looks like a Fi:B-only item, like the modals; it apparently has no Fi:A occurrences, in particular, none in Fo:U (used with modals and infinitival TO), but occurs only in the Fi:B “past tense”. Yet, paradoxically, it occurs with DO<sub>S</sub>, which is customarily described as requiring a Fo:U complement: *Did you useta live in L.A.? I didn't useta like sushi*. So the inflectional form *useta* seems to have both Fi:B and Fi:A properties.

We propose that A (non-B) and B (non-A) don't exhaust the finiteness types, and posit a third type: AB, both Fi:A and Fi:B, and embracing a new inflectional form Fo:X.

USETA is then intrinsically Fo:X (type AB) (while the modals are intrinsically Fi:B only); normal verbs have both Fo:U (type A) and Fo:X (type AB) versions, but they're identical (since except by stipulation, all forms are phonologically identical to Fo:U). Modals and infinitival *to* require Fo:U complements, so USETA is out there. And DO<sub>S</sub> requires Fo:X (type AB), so that Fo:U-only verbs, like BEWARE, cannot occur in its complements (*Must/\*Do I beware of the flying pigs? No!*), while USETA is allowed there.

Next, since normal Finite:+ clauses have Fi:B head verbs, USETA (both Fi:A and Fi:B) can occur there too.

Then, if we say that DO requires Fo:X, and that BE (unlike most verbs) has no type AB form, only type A and type B forms, we get an account of the well-known failure of BE to occur in complements of DO (*\*Do I be nasty to the kids?*). (This is stipulative, but no more so than other accounts.)

To summarize: Most verbs have forms of all three types, with Fo:X identical to Fo:U. Finite:+ clauses normally have Fi:B heads; modals and infinitival *to* govern Fo:U; but DO<sub>S</sub> governs Fo:X. The rest of the story follows entirely from the morphological defectivity of particular verbs: USETA has only a Fo:X, Tense:Pst form; modals have only type B forms; and BE has no type AB form.