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BA Linguistics and  
Phonetics

Finiteness and Modality:

The Syntax and Semantics of 'should of'

# Linguistic prejudice

*'Many of us feel free to make judgements about others because of the ways that they use language. **We make assumptions based on the ways that people speak and write**, presuming to know about their intelligence, their competence, their motives and their morality.*

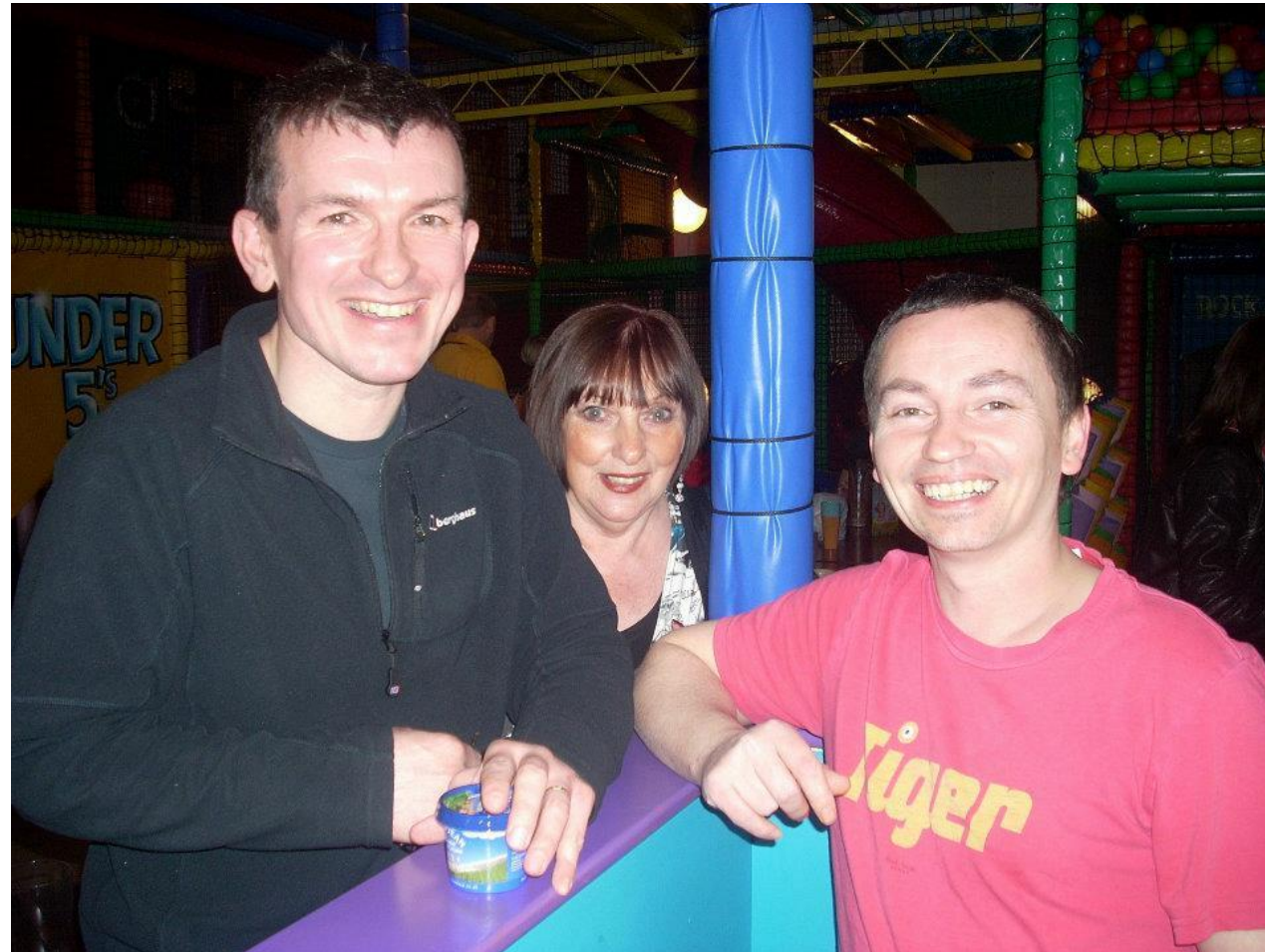
(Zuidema 2005)

I do that all the time.

# John Keats, Marcus Rashford & My brother



# A family photo



Mum's funeral 2014.

Eulogy meets '*Grammar Police*' older brother (Me)

This is what my brother wrote re: His experiences of helping mum choose hair dye

*Mum: 'Which of these two ash blondes is the most ash blonde?'*

*I **should of** said 'Mum, I'm 6, I have no idea what that even means' but I remained patient in the hope she'd take me to Sparks Hardware shop and **buy me a screw driver.***

# I published it (with changes)

*I **should have** said 'Mum, I'm 6, I have no idea what that even means' but I remained patient in the hope she'd take me to Sparks Hardware shop and buy me a screw driver.*

*NB. I only spotted the non-Standard version because I saw it **written down**.*

*In **speech alone** I wouldn't have noticed it!*

4 years later

Dissertation o'clock



# I saw this... Ding a ling a ling!



**Marcus Rashford**  @MarcusRashford · Sep 2

Emotions got the better of me, I shouldn't of reacted like that. Sorry to everyone at the club and all the fans #MUFC



Manchester United

 3.9K  9.2K  73K 



# September 2018. Things that people said.

Q. What do you think about people using 'should of' instead of 'should have'?

- *I hate it*
- *I really hate it.*
- *It drives me mad.*
- *It really annoys me.*
- *It's ignorance*
- *It shows a lack of education*

# Things that no-one whatsoever said

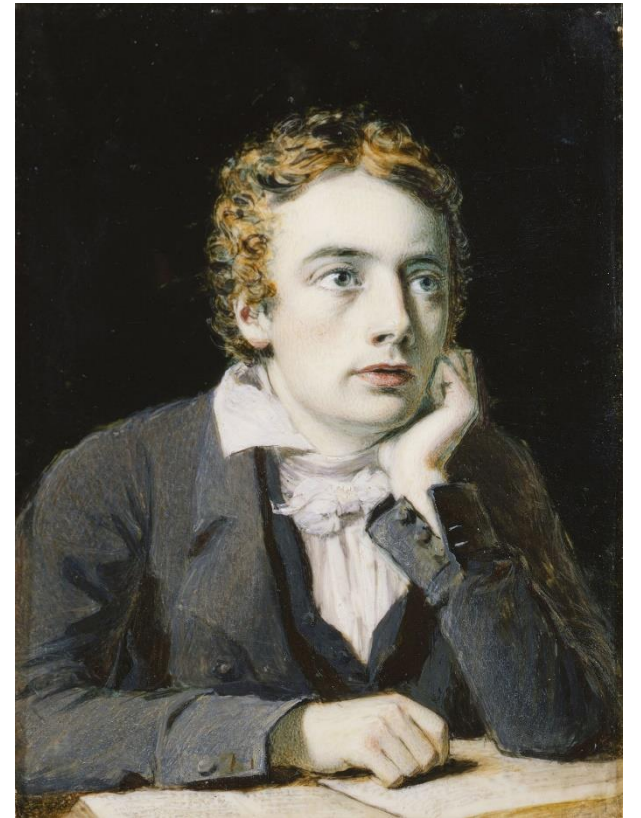
- *I feel completely apathetic about it*
- *It doesn't bother me,*
- *it's completely benign.*
- *I actually quite like it*
- *Oh, I do that.*

Is it a **recent** thing, brought about by social media *‘falling standards’* or *‘kids today’*?

No! OED 1773.

John Keats 1819. Private letter.  
(Denison 2012)

*“Had I known of your illness, I **should not of** written in such fiery phrase in my first letter.”*



Is it a **regional** thing? No.

Yorkshire. Those / them.

*'Pass me **them** apples'.*

Yorkshire. No plural 's'.

*'Them apples cost me 20 **pound**'.*

Jenny Cheshire et al (1989) found the '**should of**' variant in 91% of urban areas of UK.

Commonly thought of as a simple mistake due to homophony. 'schwa + v'

The weak pronunciation of 'have' in  
*I should've known*

Sounds like the weak form of 'of' in  
*A bunch of grapes*



# My null hypothesis

'Of' in 'should of' is always a **sound-alike** mistake and should really be 'have'.

But, logically, if it was only a sound-alike effect, you should find 'of / have' confusion in other places where they sound the same.

\**of* you heard the news?

\*people *of* known for a long time?

\*where are you thinking *have* going?



# The alternative hypothesis

It is constrained more by **Syntax** than by **Sound**.

And like my brother's tie, if we look hard enough we should be able to see it.



# A waste of 6 months?

Within the syntax,  
the most important  
constraint was:

Finiteness

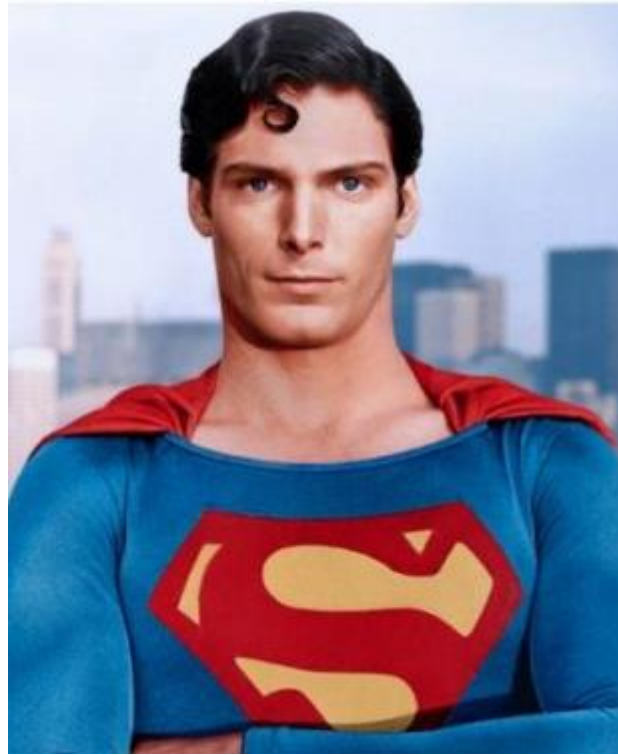


# Syntax of 'have'

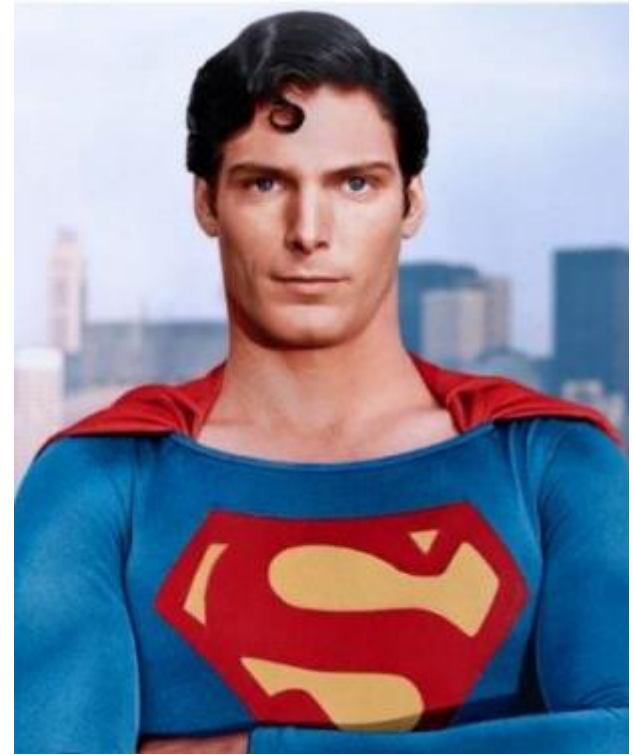
Out of context, all 'haves' look alike.



have



have



have

## Add some context and meaning:

- 1) I **have** a ticket 'have' = 'lexical have' (ticket in my hand)
  - 2) I **have seen** Star Wars = 'auxiliary have'
  - 3) I **should have seen** Star Wars = 'auxiliary have following a modal'
- The first one is different, **but the other two are the same?**



lexical 'have'



auxiliary 'have'



modal +  
auxiliary 'have'

No! They're not!





# Why are 2) and 3) different?

1) I *have* a ticket to see 'Star Wars'.

Lexical 'have'. Finite. **Person and Number agreement with Subject 'I'.**

2) I *have* seen 'Star Wars'

Auxiliary 'have' Finite. **Person and Number agreement with subject 'I'.**

3) I should *have* seen 'Star Wars'.

Following a modal so: **Non-finite.**

**No agreement with anyone!!**





And if it's not finite, it's syntactically possible for it to be 'of' rather than 'have'!



lexical 'have'



auxiliary 'have'



modal + 'of' ?

# But wait, isn't 'of' a preposition?

Traditionally, linguistics is very categorical. Sounds / b / and / g /

But recently, some linguists have argued that some 'word class boundaries' are too fixed (Denison 2012)



# Syntax of 'of'

Traditionally 'of' is thought of as a preposition. And it selects a Noun Phrase complement

*Match of* [<sub>NP</sub>*the day*]

Like other prepositions, such as 'to':

*I'm going to* [<sub>NP</sub>*the zoo*]

Coates (1989), Kayne (1997) argue that 'to' and 'of' can both also introduce Verb Phrases.

We use 'to' all the time for infinitives.

*John wants to* [<sub>VP</sub>leave]. 'to + infinitive' **Non-finite**

So, why not

*John should of* [<sub>VP</sub>gone]. 'of + participle'. **Non-finite**

# Results from British National Corpus 2014

**121 occurrences of:**

MODAL VERB + OF + Past Participle

e.g. 'I should of seen'

**Zero occurrences of**

NOUN PHRASE + OF + Past Participle

e.g. 'People of known'

**So, 'of' does not occur in place of finite 'have'.**

# Conclusion

The weak forms of 'of' and 'have' do sound the same, but **'of' replacement does not occur in finite constructions.**

**Syntax is more dominant than sound.**

So, you don't see:

\*people of known' and

\*of you seen?'

non-Standard forms are not random but rather systematic.



# References

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# Semantics of 'of'

Stowell 2008

The use of 'of' could be semantically significant, indicating a subjunctive polarity item in non-factual situations.

# Lost semantics: missing subjunctive. Stowell (2008)

After I **had eaten** breakfast, I went to the zoo. **100% real. Happened.**

If I **had eaten** breakfast, I wouldn't have been hungry. **0% happened. Unreal.**

Standard English uses 'past perfect' for both, whereas in some non-Standard dialects:

If I **had of eaten** breakfast, I wouldn't have got hungry.

The 'of' is 'subjunctive polarity item', telling you it's conditional, and not real.

Why is it so stigmatised?

# The Social Life of Cultural Value

- Asif Agha 2003.
- Some Standard Forms become 'prestige forms'
- Some non-Standard forms become stigmatised
- These things are not just **culturally conditioned, but incredibly powerful.**



# Accents: Birmingham

## *Educating Archie 1950 - 1960*



[HOME](#) » [NEWS](#) » [NEWS TOPICS](#) » [HOW ABOUT THAT?](#)

### Brummie accents 'worse than staying silent', study shows

Those who speak in a Birmingham accent were viewed as less intelligent than those who stayed silent, according to a study





# Charles Dickens – Household words 1850-1859.

Dickens and 'h' dropping

Example: Uriah Heep in David Copperfield

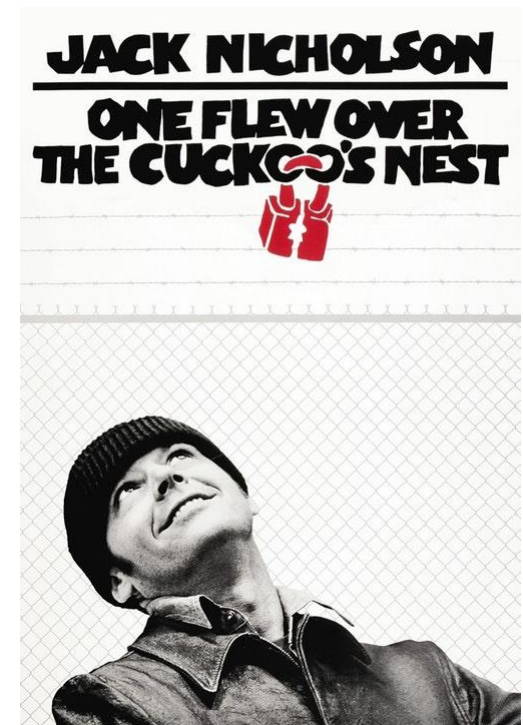
*"I am the 'umblest person going [...]  
My mother is likewise a very 'umble person."*



# Stigmatised forms in Fiction

## Handmaid's Tale

*“Anyways, they’re doing it for us all, said Cora, or so they say. If I **hadn’t of** got my tubes tied, it **could of** been me, say I was ten years younger.”*



# Eye dialect in Fiction.

Example: 'wimmin' instead of 'women'

*“a literary device in which the **writer was able to establish a shared feeling of superiority** with the reader towards whichever character used this non-standard form”.*

No difference to pronunciation. Just spelled wrongly to infer a lack of education

Cross-linguistic examples

# Kayne (1997). Example from Norwegian

Vi skulle gjort det før.

'we should done it before'

Modal introduces past participle directly, with no need for another auxiliary.

# German Konjunktiv 2 mood

- Nachdem ich gefrühstückt **hatte**, ging ich in den Zoo.
- 'After I had eaten breakfast, I went to the zoo'.
  
- *Wenn ich gefrühstückt **hätte**, hatte ich keinen Hunger bekommen.*
- *If I had eaten breakfast, I wouldn't have got hungry*

The unreality is expressed through **hätte (would have) instead of hatte (had)**. This is the non-Standard 'had of' in English.

Difficulty of using corpora to  
analyse non-Standard forms

# Evidence in corpora – hard to find

Non-standard forms can be difficult to analyse using corpus data.

Zero occurrences in academic writing

Hardly any in newspapers, or magazines.

In transcriptions of spoken data, it is regularly corrected to the Standard form, by prescriptive transcribers.

The place 'should of' is found most commonly in corpus data is in 'Fiction'. But it is not authentic speech, it is an 'imitation of speech'.





# Different 'haves' are easier to see in Spanish

Separate verbs for lexical 'have' and auxiliary 'have'.

And more inflection for person and number on finite 'have'

**Tengo** una pregunta.

*'I **have** a question.'*

**He** visto esa película.

*'I **have** seen that film.'*

Debería **haber** visto esa película.

*'I should **have** seen that film.'*