

**The Obligation Modals Must, Have to &
Got to: A Study of Gender, Meaning and
Structure in Academic Spoken English**

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Abstract

This corpus- based study aims at investigating, primarily, gender- based differences in the use of the obligation/ necessity modals *must*, *have to*, and *got to/ gotta* in addition to both structural and semantic characteristics in academic spoken language. The corpus used in this study is the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English, MICASE. The little research conducted on gender- based differences in addition to the contradictory findings reported about the meaning these modals express motivated the current study. The results revealed these modals tend to occur in certain structures more than others. It is shown that women tend to use obligation modals more than men, *must* is used less in expressing personal obligation and is being replaced by both *got to/ gotta* and *have to* (which are used more in expressing this meaning), and that the prevalent structure for *must* is “must+be” whereas *have to* and *got to/ gotta* were found in both external and internal structures in relatively the same rate.

Introduction

To look at whether there are any stylistic or conversational differences between males and females, this paper focuses primarily on the gender differences in the use of the modals *must*, *have to*, and *got to* along with two other characteristics; meaning and structure of these modal verbs. Although much research was conducted on modal verbs, the primary focus of that research was either on the function of modals or differences of usage across genres or tracing back their appearance and changes of both form and usage over time. The very small body of research that was done on gender- based usages along with some contradictory findings related to the meaning and structure of these modals motivated the current study in an attempt to bridge this gap at least for the above mentioned modals.

Modal verbs in general have been the subject of extensive investigation; yet, Dollinger (2006) states that corpus- based research on the modal *must* and the semi modal *have to* is still rather rare. Among this corpus- based research is that of Tagliamonte & D'Arcy (2007) in which they looked at gender- based usages of both *have to* and *got to* in a corpus of Canadian English. Their findings show that *have to* is seen to be a characteristic of females speech whereas *got to* is found to be a characteristic of males' speech. In a similar study on the corpus of Tyneside Spoken English, an expressionistic use of the modal *must* “I must admit” proved itself to be a characteristic of males' speech (Trousedale, 2003).

The research shows that modal verbs express at least two meanings. Each modal has epistemic and deontic meanings, in other words, logical and personal/ root meanings (Collins, 2007; Biber, Conrad, & Leech, 2002). Kjellmer (2003) goes even further in saying that a modal does have an effect on the meaning of the sentence even if the same sentence with and without the modal appeared to have the same meaning. Regarding the modals *must*, *have to* and *got to*, studies reported contradictory findings. Recski (2002) study proved that the root meaning (obligation/ necessity) of *must* is shown to be used more than the logical meaning (inferences, certainty and conclusion) in all the genres (written and spoken) of his corpus except the business genre where both the meanings were used almost equally. Unlike this study, Tagliamonte & D'Arcy (2007) reported that *must* is reaching the end of its usefulness in which it is used to express logical meaning more, and its root meaning is expressed by *have to* which started to replace *must* and is used far more than *must* in expressing this meaning. In support of these findings, it is also found that *must* is being replaced by *got to* in expressing personal meaning (Myhill, 1995).

Finally, a quick look on the structure of those modals reveal that the prevalence pattern in which *must* occurs is that of “must+ be”, *have to* is shown to express external obligation “you, they+ have to” and *got to* expresses internal obligation “I, we, it+ got to” (Recski, 2002;

Tagliamonte & D'Arcy, 2007) and this internal structure is usually related with the expression of root meaning (Verstraete, 2001).

Given the review mentioned above, the research questions the researcher is looking forward to answering are:

1. Are there any gender- based differences in the use of these modals?
2. Which is used more to express root or personal obligation/ necessity *must*, *have to*, or *got to*?
3. What are the prevalent structures, if any, in which these modals tend to occur?

Data

The data used in this study is the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English, MICASE. Within this corpus three sub- registers are chosen. These sub- registers are advising session, office hours, and study group. The total number of files of these sub- registers is twenty four files with a total word count of (360871) words.

Methodology

The steps of analysis used in this study involved running a concordance search for each of the modals *must*, *got to* and *have to* using MICASE web surface search after adjusting the search parameters. Under the "Transcript Attributes", all the boxes are set on the choice "All" except for the "Speech Event Type" where the sub- registers "advising session", "office hours" and "study group" are chosen. Regarding the "Speaker Attributes", I chose "All" for both the "Age" and "Academic Position/Role", "Native speaker, American English" for "Native speaker status" box, and left the "First language" box without specifying any choice since "Native American Speakers" option was chosen in the status box. As to the "Gender" of the speaker, it is switched between "male" and "female" options while running the search for each modal.

Searching for *must* resulted in a total of (49) hits out of which four are excluded. Since we are looking for both the structure and the meaning expressed by the modal verb, along with the gender based usage, the excluded instances were incomplete sentences in which *must* cannot be analyzed as in "saying that a person must this is I I haven't..." and "it is said you must we are us...".

Due to the abbreviations used by people in speech and due to the different orthographic ways used in transcribing these abbreviations, the search for *got to* involved two steps. The first was searching for the form *got to* which returned (12) hits out of which three hits were excluded because they were not modal verbs but a past tense form of *get+ to* as in "... I got to class late...". In the second step, the form *gotta*, on which (72) hits were found, was searched. Only four hits of *gotta* were excluded because, again, they were not complete sentences "... there's there's¹ gotta be I just but there are some..." and "... cuz we gotta, cuz we boil...".

As for *have to* the search returned (569) hits. Because the focus of the current paper is on the obligation/ necessity expressed by these modals, whether personal or logical, all the hits in which *have to* is preceded by negation or used in a question are eliminated along with incomplete sentences. The eliminated cases resulted in a total of (105) hits, and here are some examples:

1. "...so that, I wouldn't **have to** do all those high multiplications ...", *negation*.
2. "...do I **have to** like fill this out or something?... ", *question*.
3. "...it's a particle they **have to..** they....", *incomplete sentence*.

Results

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With regard to the first research question², we can see that *got to/ gotta* doesn't show a big difference in terms of usage between males and females with a total of (n.37, %48) for males and (n.40, %52) for females. As for *must*, there were some clear differences with (n.19, %42) for males and (n.26, %58) for females. The most significant difference was seen in *have to* which resulted in a total of (n.109, %23) for males and (n.355, %77) for females. All these results are illustrated in figure one below:

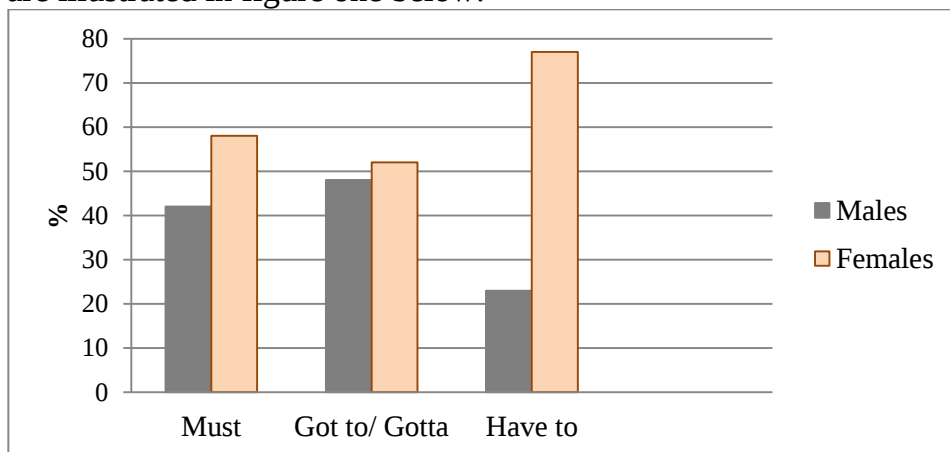


Figure 1. The distribution of the modals must, got to and have to according to speakers' gender.

The overall differences shown by the results suggest that there are some conversational differences between men and women. In general, it seems that women tend to express obligation or necessity more than men. This feature needs to be further investigated in natural every day speech to make sure that it is not motivated by the nature of the academic environment.

As for the second research question, we can see as illustrated by figure two below that the prevalent use of *must* is to express logical obligation/ necessity (n.32, %73) as in:

1. "...um, what was that? There **must** be a class in here now are...."
2. "...I liked what you did with your poem to change it which wasn't_ which **must** have involved a fair amount of work."

whereas the personal meaning constituted only (n.12, %27) of the data as in:

1. "...you **must** buy this book..."
2. "...African-American, neighborhoods where everyone **must** live together um, so I think that's an important point..."

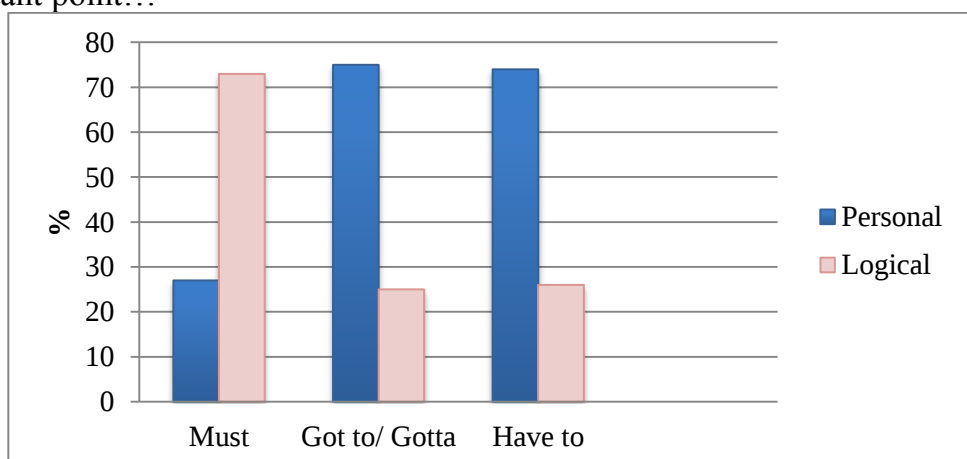


Figure 2. The distribution of the modals must, got to and have to according to meaning.

The reverse result is seen for both *got to/ gotta* and *have to* which were used to express personal meaning, (n.58, %75) for *got to* and (n.166, %74) for *have to*³, far more than logical meaning which constituted (n.19, %25) and (n.57, %26) of the data respectively.

1. Examples of personal obligation/necessity:

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- "...I've **got to** do some some work in...."
- "...oh mm well I **gotta** go now..."
- "...so now we **have to** write it..."
- "...then I **have to** go to Detroit at two thirty..."

2. Examples of logical obligation/ necessity:

- "...S-N-two? S-N let's see, there's **gotta** be something else.."
- "...I thought about that you know it's gonna have to be because you got Z-bar and then you **gotta** get Z back. right?..."
- "...if these are fixed it's gonna **have to** come in between so that the distance works..."
- "...go see their k- children it's like they're doing fun things and, you know they don't necessarily, aren't involved in the everyday activities that the moms **have to** deal with, um that's,..."

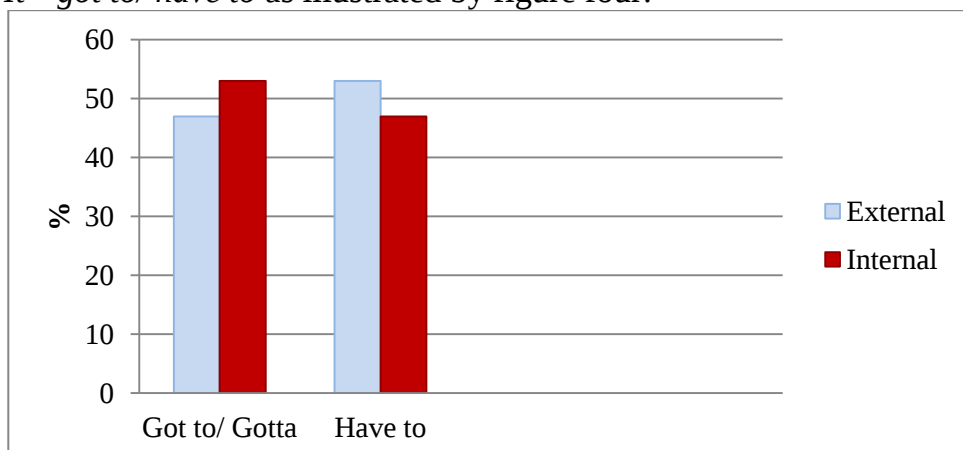
It is obvious from the results given above that people are relying more on *got to/ gotta* and *have to* in expressing the personal meaning , a usage that may be caused by the loss of this meaning in the modal *must*.

Regarding research question number three, the modal *must* showed a preference for the structure *must+ be* (n.22, %49) and *must+ have* (n. 10, %22), whereas other different structures formed the rest of the data (n.13, %29). Figure three summarizes these findings:



Figure 3. The distribution of the modal *must* according to structure.

The modals *got to/gotta* and *have to* are usually found in one of two structures⁴; either expressing external obligation/necessity, (n.29, %47) for *got to/ gotta* and (n. 88, %53) for *have to* and taking the structure of *you, they+ got to/ have to* or internal obligation/ necessity, (n.31, %53) and (n. 78, % 47) for both *got to/ gotta* and *have to* respectively, with the structure *I, We, It+ got to/ have to* as illustrated by figure four:



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Figure 4. The distribution of the modals *got to* and *have to* according to structure.

Discussion

In his study of the modals behavior in a variety of English; Indian, British and American corpora, Wilson (2005) reported that regionality is far less important than genre. He found that there were no significant differences between the three corpora and significant ones in between the genres. If that is really the case, we can assume that it is somewhat safe to compare the results found in this study of American corpus to that of other studies.

Based on the findings reported above it is obvious that *must* is preferred by females more than males whereas *got to/ gotta* did not show significant differences between the two. The modal *have to* is seen as a characteristic of females speech as is the case in Tagliamonte & D'Arcy (2007) study of Canadian English. They also reported that *got to* is a characteristic of males' speech which was not the case in this study. The expressionistic use of *must* "I must admit" that is reported by Trousdale (2003) to be a characteristic of males' speech in Tyneside English is not found in the American corpus of this study. The overall preference or use of obligation/ necessity modals by females reveals a difference in the conversational styles of men and women in which women seem to express obligation or necessity in their speech more than men. Yet, this finding cannot be taken for granted before investigating it in natural everyday speech to make sure that the academic environment, whose nature and duties may promote the use of this kind of modals, is not the major motivation behind this usage.

As for the differences in meaning, it is obvious that *must* is rarely used to express personal meaning and is being replaced by *got to/ gotta* and *have to*. This finding contrasts Recski's (2002) findings, which are mentioned earlier, but coincides with both Tagliamonte & D'Arcy (2007) and Myhill (1995) who states, in his study of American English, that when a modal loses one of its meanings people start to compensate this loss by adapting another modal to fill in this gap. So, maybe that is one of the reasons for the prevalence of *got to* and *have to* over *must*. Another reason for these semantic differences is that mentioned by Trousdale (2003). He justifies these differences in terms of modals semantic change over time which leads to either the simplification of the modal meaning; giving the modal one meaning either logical or root or redistributing it to account for a meaning lost by another modal.

The prevalent structure of *must* "must+ be" that is reported by Recski (2002) in his study seems to be the same in this study of American English, which revealed another common structure of *must* which is that of "must+ have". Both *got to/ gotta* and *have to* showed no important preference of one structure, external or internal, over the other unlike the Canadian English where the external structure is preferred by *have to* and the internal structure by *got to/ gotta* (Tagliamonte & D'Arcy, 2007). Looking at these structural differences and how they are used by the speakers helps in knowing the conversational styles preferred by speakers of different varieties of English. Another advantage of studying these structural differences is to help teachers decide what to start with in teaching (Recski, 2002).

This study investigated the use of obligation modals *must*, *got to/gotta* and *have to* in only one part of the spoken genre which is the academic spoken language. The relatively small number of hits analyzed in this study may be considered a limitation. In order for the findings of this study to be really of use in both teaching and investigating conversational styles, I would suggest conducting the same study on a corpora of natural daily spoken language.

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¹ These words, and some others to follow, are not mistakenly repeated by the researcher. They are the exact words transcribed from speakers of the MICASE corpus.

² The total percentage of the males and females participants in MICASE is (%46) and (%54) respectively. There was no way to know the number of participants because only Native Americans are being used. Though cross sub-register distribution of males and females was available, there was no way to know who the Native ones are. So, given that percentage of all the participants, I think it is safe to assume that they are almost equal in interpreting the results.

³ The hits of have to found in males speech (164) were all analyzed and the same number was randomly selected from females' speech, out of a total of (405), by taking the first ten of every twenty five hits.

⁴ With regard to the internal and external structure, they are used to mean personal obligation whether the obligation is self expressed or imposed by another person. For this reason all the hits of the logical meaning where excluded from this section only for *got to/ gotta* and *have to*.