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On the Use of the Verb Need

The verb need presents specific problems of description both for diachronic and synchronic investigation of English grammar and the study of its usage will therefore have a bearing on general questions of the study of English verb system and on applied English linguistics.

1. According to language historians[1] the verb need began as a normal verb, an open-set item, and then underwent a change in the direction of an anomalous finite, a closed-set item, dropping -s in the third person, not requiring *to* in front of the following verb-base, and *do* in the negative and inter-rogative, and even being used with reference to past time without -ed morpheme. Descriptions of modern grammarians show that in British English today one comes across the verb need structuring as a "normal" verb or full verb, as an ano-malous finite and as a "mixture" of the two when in the same construction it shares the properties of both the anomalous and full verb.

2. A general synchronic statement as the above for *need* may be also valid for the verb *dare* (historical development of the two verbs was quite different) which is the reason why these two verbs are sometimes treated together,[2] although a detailed observation of usage shows that when frequency of different structuring of dare and need are compared the differences between the two verbs become clearer (cf. 5. below).

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[1] Henry Sweet, *New English Grammar*, Oxford, 1891, 1950, § 1487; Otto Jespersen, *Modern English Grammar* etc., London, 1946, V, 12.2 1, (further abbreviated: Jespersen MEG).

[2] F. R. Palmer, *A Linguistic Study of the English Verb*, London, 1965, (further abbreviated: Palmer LSEV); R. W. Zandvoort, *A Handbook of English Grammar*, London, 1957, 1960, (further abbreviated: Zandvoort HEG).

3. The use of the verb need has been copiously illustrated by Jespersen[3] but his material covers a wide time-span and a variety of styles; it has been dealt with carefully and economically by Zandvoort;[4] it has been treated more recently by Barbara Strang[5] who is very much aware of present day usage, and by F. R. Palmer[6] who aims at an exhaustive descriptive study. What they have found and said can be summed up, in a general way, by Twaddell's observation that the class of verbs to which need belongs "is defective in varying degrees for various speakers today".[7]

4. Such a state of things invites a student of usage to compile some quantitative data and test them against the statements of important grammarians. As generalization, mainly on notional bases, about the difference between the anomalous and full verb forms of *need* don't seem to go very far, quantitative analyses (admittedly more comprehensive than ours) should be useful in presenting its usage for the English language in general or at least for some of the language styles.

The material for the following analyses are all the examples of the verb *need* which occurred in the *dialogues* of 7 novels and 3 plays[8] written by British authors and published after 1950. In this way examples have been obtained which belong to a single language style — we may call it *literary colloquial* — and to a *restricted time-span*, both these properties distinguishing our material from that of e. g. Jespersen's. By also collecting all the examples of *can* and *dare* from the same sources, a meaningful comparison of the frequency of need with the frequency of other two verbs can be made.

Bearing in mind the limitations of the material we should like to test it for:

    a) the relative frequency of the full verb, anomalous, and "mixed" need,

    b) the frequency of comparable patterns with the anomalous and full verb need,

   [3] Jespersen MEG, V. 12.2 1, 12.3 1 etc.
   [4] Zandvoort HEG, § 203, 206.
   [5] Barbara Strang, *Modern English Structure*, London, 1962, § 126, (further abbreviated: Strang MES).
   [6] Palmer LSEV, 2.5, 2,5.4.
   [7] W. F. Twaddell, *The English Verb Auxiliaries*, Providence, 1960, 4.1.1.
   [8] *Plays:* H. Mills, *The House by the Lake* (HL); G. Greene, *The Potting Shed* (PSh); J. Osborn, *The Entertainer* (Ent). *Novels:* A. Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* (AS); H. Innes, *The Mary Deare* (MD); M. Innes, *A Private View* (PV); J. Braine, *The Room at the Top* (RT); A. Christie, *A Pocket Full of Rye* (PFR); C. P. Snow, *The Masters* (M); J. Wain, *A Travelling Woman* (TW). Letters in brackets are abbreviations as indicated on slips.

and discuss the results in the light of what some important grammarians have stated about these matters.

5. The text, as defined above, has yielided 177 examples of the verb need. In the same stretch of prose there were 45 examples of dare (including a high proportion of the phrase I dare say or I daresay) and 1804 examples of the verb can.

The following is the ratio between the full verb and anomalous verb need in our material:

Table 1

need (177)	
full	anomalous
131 (74%)	46 (26%)

Such presentation of *need,* and of other special verbs for that matter, are rarely available[9] although they can form a valuable appendix to descriptive studies. In this case such data indicate that, at least in the style investigated, the use of the anomalous verb need is really only a fraction of the general frequency of the verb need.

Here is a similar presentation of the examples of the verb dare in our material:

Table 1a

dare (45)		
full	anomalous	mixed
11	32	2

A different general frequency in texts, a different ratio of the occurrence of the full and anomalous form, the occurrence of "mixed-type patterns"[10] are some of the quantitative features which distinguish, as we already mentioned, the verbs *dare* and *need.* The "mixed-type patterns" are known to occur with the verb need[11] but such have not been found in our material.

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[9] But cf. C. C. Fries, *American-English Grammar,* New York, 1940, in which, however, the verb need has not been treated in detail, probably owing to the material analysed where it has not occured.

[10] The examples of the "mixed type pattern" with *dare* are: "Ladies, and you took off your hat before you dared speak to them" (Ent 18). "Don't you dare touch her again" (Ent 18).

[11] Barbara Strang (MES, p. 138) reports having heard in a broadcast: *he needs not go.*

It can be seen that anomalous need with past reference is rare and that full verb need predominates here.

The frequency of the anomalous and full verb need referring to the past or present is shown on the following table:

Table 2

need (153)[12]			
past		present	
full	anomalous	full	anomalous
19	1	88	45

6. The most interesting data which we have obtained can best be shown if all the patterns of the present tense[13] of anomalous and full verb need with their frequency of occurrence are presented as on the following table:

Table 3

need (133)				
	anomalous	45	full	88
1			need(s) ø	10
2	need V	11	need(s) to-V	7
3	needn't V	29	(do, does not) need to-V	3
4	need S V?	1	do S need to-V?	1
5	needn't have V-en	2		
6	needn't ø	2		
7			need(s) -ing	11
8			need(s) N	45
9			need(s) to be V-en	1
10			is(are) needed	2
11			do(does) need N	2
12			do(does) not need N	6

It is certainly worth noticing the frequencies of the pattern 3 on both sides of the table, and the comparative rarity of the interrogative need as exemplified in pattern 4, but especially

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[12] The remaining 24 examples are used in modal or future phrasses (20), and there are 4 non-finite forms of the verb.

[13] The present tense of the full verb need has been presented on the Table 3 because of its comparability with the examples of the anomalous need which in the material occurs almost completely with present time reference (cf. Table 2). This is the key to symbols on Table 3: V plain infinitive, V-en past participle, N noun or pronoun.

pattern 2 invites some comment in connection with two questions:

a) does anomalous need occur in positive (non-negative) constructions;

b) could the examples from the material point to any formal factors contributing to the choice between full and anomalous need in cases where they seem to be in free variation i.e. where the overlap takes place.

7. a) In view of some very definite statements by a number of grammarians that anomalous need occurs only in negative constructions and in inversion, our material calls for less generalizing in this matter particularly if one wants to apply formal analyses on the language material.

Hornby[14], for example, says: "The anomalous finite need is not used in the affirmative. It occurs only in the negative and the interrogative". Scheurweghs[15] says that need is "used as an anomalous verb in the present tense, in negative statements and questions". The implication is that it cannot be found in affirmative statements. F. R. Palmer (SEV 1965) states at least in two places (pp. 107 and 120), with some reservations which we shall discuss later, that need functions as an auxiliary only in negation and inversion.

Some other grammarians are less definite, or they see other restrictions for the use of anomalous need in the affirmative. Jespersen is certainly aware of the use of anomalous need in the affirmative as he illustrates it with examples.[16] W. S. Allen[17] thinks that need can be used in the affirmative only if a strong element of negation or doubt is involved, thus relying mainly on meaning. Two authors of a teaching grammar, Thomson and Martinet[18] state that need can be used after a negative verb. Barbara Strang writes: "we say *He needs to go* in preference to *he need go* (but non-finally this is more acceptable: *he need go only when he is explicitly summoned)*".[19]

The matterial collected gives little support to the first group of statements and by partially confirming some statements of the second group points to their non-comprehensivness.

Our examples of the pattern *need V* can be divided into four groups:

[14] A. S. Hornby, *A Guide to Patterns and Usage in English*, London, 1954, 1960, § 8.

[15] G. Scheurweghs, *Present-day English Syntax*, London, 1959, § 613.

[16] Jespersen MEG, V, 12.3.1.

[17] W. S. Allen, *Living English Structure*, London, 1959, p. 41.

[18] A. J. Thomson, A. V. Martinet, *A Practical English Gramar* etc., London, 1960, p. 140.

[19] Strang MES, § 126.

I There are four examples of need in subordinate clauses with the negative verb in the preceding main clause (cf. Thomson-Martinet 7. above):

> I assure you, Brown, I don't think you need fear a defection (M 124); Don't be a bigger coward than you need be (PSh 38); I don't think you need worry about him (M 114); I shouldn't have thought you need worry (M 42).

II There are two examples of this pattern accompanied by adverbials *never* and *no more:*

> I find one must know how to do everything oneself. Then one never need do it (PFR 30); But these people know quite enough about picture dealing to realize that they need pay no more than fifty (PV 155);

and they should certainly be kept apart from the ones in the following group.

III Four examples of this pattern have adverbs *hardly*(3) and *only*(1) in their immediate context:

> I need only take the boat into the wide part of the lake and flood it (HL 155); That's the whole idea, I need hardly say ... of any form of hysterical fugue (PV 165); I've got messages already. I need hardly say (PV 165); I hardly think, Middleton, that you need indulge these personal scruples (AS 324).

Palmer[20] would not separate group II and group III. He treats all such constructions as negative because of his presumption that anomalous need is only found in negation and inversion. His reasoning is that if these adverbs were not negative they would not occur with the anomalous need. Now one can understand treating in this way adverbs like *never*[21] but it is difficult to see how *only* can be taken to make a construction negative. Palmer's description, in an effort to deal neatly with the anomalous need, does not allow for its occurrence in formally affirmative constructions, in which, however, it does occur even in our limited material (and in Palmer's own text cf. pp. 107 and 120).

IV This is the example of the affirmative need from our material with no formal indication of negation or otherwise in its context:

> I doubt if we need get there before half past (ASGM 131).

Obviously the use of anomalous need in positive constructions is not as frequent as its use in the negative (cf. pat-

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[20] Palmer LSEV, 2.5.4.

[21] Palmer (LSEV 2.5.4) may have been misled by the shortage of objective data about usage. Thus he mentions *never, no one,* and *hardly* as occurring with the affirmative need and overlooks e. g. *only.*

terns 2 and 3). Various grammarians succeed, as we have seen, in offering an occasional plausible hint, either notional or formal, about the restrictions on its distribution, which may have some pedagogical value, but if a formal description intends to reflect usage it must allow for the occurrence of the pattern:

need V $\pm$ adverbial.

7. b) In tracing the possible formal factors contributing to the choice of the anomalous or full verb need in patterns *need V/need to-V* (cf. pattern 2) this is what has been found in connection with their occurrence in *dependent* and *non-dependent* clauses:

Table 4

	non-dep.	depend.
need V	1	10
need to-V	6	1

As it can be seen, there is a preference for anomalous affirmative need in dependent clauses, and for full verb need in non--dependent constructions. The ratio here is reasonably convincing and following this up in a wider material may prove useful.

8. Considering the frequency of the overlapping patterns *need V/need to-V* on Table 3 it becomes clear that in spite of the overlap the number of the occurrences of the two patterns in our sources is palpably different. The pattern *need to-V* in its four variants (cf patterns 2,3,4,9) occurs only 12 times in a corpus of 88 examples. On the other hand in the same material 41 out of 45 examples of anomalous need are found in the pattern *need V*. Thus there is no competition in frequency between the two patterns, the latter being absolutely more frequent. An interpretation of these differences might be that what suggests itself first to a writer in creating a dialogue in a situation requiring *need plus verb* is the pattern of the anomalous need. What leads him to choose occasionally the full verb is certainly far from easy to define. We have tried above to suggest one of the possible syntactical factors.