# Licensing NPIs and licensing silence: *Have/be yet to* in English

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the syntax of the *have/be yet to* construction in English, as in *John has/is yet to eat dinner*. As pointed out by Kelly (2008), this construction raises a number of questions. How is the NPI *yet* licensed? Why is *have* interpreted as a perfect auxiliary verb, in spite of the fact that it appears to take an infinitival complement, rather than a perfect participle? What accounts for the apparent free alternation between *have* and *be*? We argue that *have* in the *have yet to* construction is, for many speakers, perfect *have*, which selects for a silent raising predicate that has negative implicative semantics. This predicate is responsible for licensing the NPI *yet*. We further show that the apparent free alternation between *have yet to* and *be yet to* is illusory. The category of the silent predicate can be shown to be different in each case in a way that is to be expected given independent c-selectional properties of *have* and *be* in English.
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## 1. The puzzles

Kelly (2008) points out several syntactic and semantic puzzles in regard to the constructions in (1), compared with their paraphrases in (2).

(1)  a.  John has yet to eat dinner.
     b.  John is yet to eat dinner.

(2)  a.  John hasn't eaten dinner yet.
     b.  John didn't eat dinner yet.

The first puzzle regards the presence of *yet* in the sentences in (1). How is *yet*, a Negative Polarity Item (NPI), licensed? The paraphrases in (2) contain negation, so could it be that the sentences in (1) contain an instance of silent sentential negation?

Second, we appear to have a clash between the syntax and the semantic interpretation of *have* here. That is, why do we see *have to* plus an infinitival complement in (1a) as opposed to *have* plus a perfect participle as in (2a)? *Have to* appears in English when the interpretation of *have* is modal, rather than the aspectual perfect, as in (3a). Could it be that

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the *have* in this construction is, in fact, modal *have*? One can raise a similar question for *be*, since *be to* in English also has a modal interpretation (3b).

(3)    a.    John has to leave by 5:00.    (≈ *John needs to leave by 5:00.*)
       b.    John is to leave by 5:00.     (≈ *John is supposed to leave by 5:00.*)

Third, in light of the grammaticality of (1a), and its interpretation in (2a), why is the sentence in (4) ungrammatical?

(4)    *John has yet eaten dinner.

Finally, what are the similarities and/or differences between (1a) and (1b)? Do *have* and *be* alternate freely, or are there differences underlying the syntax of these constructions?

   Kelly (2008) suggests that *yet* conveys negative perfect aspect in the constructions in (1), although it is not clear how exactly it comes to take on this meaning on its own. We will argue that *yet* does not, in fact, convey negative perfect aspect on its own. Rather, we will adhere to the standard assumption that *yet* is an NPI and argue that this NPI is licensed by a silent perfect participle FAILED, which has negative implicative semantics. Specifically, we will argue that the sentence in (1a) has the derivation shown in (5).[1]

(5)    John has yet FAILED [$_{TP}$ <John> to eat dinner <yet>].
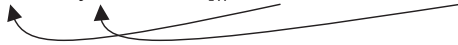
The linear placement of *yet* (which is atypical, as we will show) arises via movement. We suggest that *yet* raises into the specifier of its licensor, FAILED, which is in turn rendered silent by the presence of the NPI *yet* in its specifier. Our proposal is thus that the *have/be yet to* construction arises from a process that, while highly restricted in English, is robustly attested in other languages. In particular, this relationship between the movement of an NPI and the silence of its licensor is a well-known feature of Ibero-Romance languages, as we discuss below. Further, the proposal has the following consequences: (i) the *have/be yet to* construction is biclausal and involves raising; (ii) the construction is downward-entailing, licensing the NPI *yet* in the embedded clause; (iii) there is no sentential negation present in the syntactic derivation of this construction. Below we present empirical arguments in favor of each of these consequences.[2]

   The analysis presented in this paper follows a line of research in contemporary syntax whereby syntactic movement is argued to have an effect on the pronunciation or silence of an element. The silence of a given lexical item can be argued to follow from Koopman's (1996) Generalized Doubly-Filled Comp Filter, whereby only a Head or its Specifier may be pronounced if both are filled. This kind of approach has been adopted to account for a number of silent elements in a variety of syntactic constructions (e.g. in Collins, 2007; Kayne, 2005, 2010; Nchare and Terzi, 2014; Wood, 2013). More generally, our analysis falls in line with a number of proposals that account for various mysterious morphosyntactic properties cross-linguistically by arguing for the presence of a silent predicate. Proposals have been made for silent MEANT in English (Kayne, 2012/to appear), silent GO in Germanic and Slovenian (van Riemsdijk, 2002a; Marušič and Žaucer, 2005), silent particle verbs in Dutch (van Riemsdijk, 2002b, 2012), silent FEEL-LIKE in Slovenian (Marušič and Žaucer, 2006), and silent HAVE in English (Ross, 1976; McCawley, 1979; Larson et al., 1997; Harves and Kayne, 2012; Wood, 2013). The existence of semantically contentful silent elements in the syntax should come as no surprise, given the architecture of the grammar. Semantics is an interpretive system which assembles the meanings of sentences from the meanings of their parts and the way they are put together- in other words, semantics is a compositional interpretation of the output of syntax. Similarly, the PF component constructs a phonological representation from the output of syntax. The possibility that a terminal node might not have any associated phonology is quite expected once we recognize that PF and syntax are distinct systems – just as there are elements of phonology that are ignored by syntactic computation (e.g., features like [± voice]), so we expect there to be syntactic elements that are ignored by phonology. Hence, because semantics and PF do not interact directly, it would require a stipulation to prevent situations in which a given terminal node has a meaning but no associated phonology (which is all that a silent element amounts to).

   The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, we discuss the licensing environments of *yet* as an NPI. In Section 3, we consider the hypothesis that sentences with *have/be yet to* contain an occurrence of silent sentential

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[1] Following Kayne (2004 *et seq.*), all CAPS will be used to indicate SILENT elements. We will use <angled brackets> to indicate silent copies of moved elements, where the head of the chain is pronounced and the tail is not.

[2] An anonymous reviewer asks why *yet* cannot simply be argued to be licensed by a negative implicature, along the lines of Linebarger (1987). We address this issue along with other potential challenges in Section 4.4.