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LOOK WHAT WE GOT

Louis Foley

Among people who speak the most careless English, certain kinds of mistakes unfailingly appear, whatever individual idiosyncrasies may accompany them. Almost always, errors of grammar are confusions between forms which have some relationship but should logically be kept distinct from each other. One of the commonest is the confusion between the simple past tense and the past participle of verbs. This can go either way; a person who makes the mistake in one direction is just as likely to do the opposite in another case. So anyone who says “I seen him,” “He done it,” “He come,” or “He run,” may be quite as capable of saying “have drank,” “have rode,” “have saw,” “have swam,” or “could of went.”

Other deep-seated qualities of English on its least disciplined levels naturally go along. One of these is a reliance upon a very small number of all-purpose verbs adaptable to an extremely wide range of meanings. Another is a tendency to clutter up simple ideas with totally unnecessary words. Curiously enough, the word of least logical importance in a sentence will often be the one to be spoken with strongest emphasis.

The free play between past tense and past participle has had plenty of literary employment. One may remember, for instance, some lines from Lord Byron as well known as any he ever wrote, in his impassioned reference to the Isles of Greece, “where burning Sappho loved and sung . . . where Delos rose and Phoebus sprung.” Manipulating the forms of words for the sake of rime was standard practice for centuries from Chaucer down, but here it was unnecessary. Byron could have had his rime just as easily with the correct forms sang and sprang.

Now it happens that all the various sorts of hit-or-miss looseness in careless English are plain to be seen in common ways of handling the verb get. To begin with, usage has long ago established for it beyond recall a lengthy list of quite idiomatic and legitimate meanings. From the basic idea of obtaining or acquiring, a clearly active sense, it has gone on to that of inactively receiving, as “to get a letter,” and farther into that of becoming, as “to get tired,” “to get sick.” Then it can be pieced out with adverbs or prepositions to cover an amazing variety of concepts. So with this convenient means it is possible to “get along,” “get through,” or “get by” with a comparatively small
number of other verbs, and yet manage to express all sorts of ideas in an acceptable manner.

Consistently with the class of verbs in which get belongs, its natural form for the past participle is gotten. To see this as a matter of course in the older language one has only to read the King James Bible. The first verse of Psalm 98, for example, praises the Lord because “his holy arm hath gotten him the victory.” Or in Jeremiah 48:36 we read: “. . . The riches that he hath gotten are perished.” From a historical point of view, then, “have got” is the same sort of grammatical corruption as “have rode,” “have saw,” or “have went.”

Some people in this country have a strange prejudice against the unexceptionably correct form gotten. In various “authorities” we find quite arbitrary statements about it. One widely-distributed “style manual,” for instance, says that gotten “is still used to a slight degree in the United States.” William Strunk’s Elements of Style declares that “the preferable form of the participle is got, not gotten.” Another handbook, giving the principal parts of irregular verbs, has simply get, getting, got, got, as if gotten did not even exist. (1)

A few years ago one of our leading newspapers published a letter from an exasperated reader who wrote: “‘Gotten’ is not even good American. In schools all across the land you will find English teachers indefatigably waging war on this horror.” (2) It seems incredible that any “English teacher” in his right mind could so misdirect his energy, and the supercilious disposal of “not even good American” is silly in more ways than one. As a perceptive critic has pointed out, “the American language is far more accurate and concise than the variety of English that is spoken in the British Isles . . . and, let’s face it, American grammar is often far superior to that found in Britain.” (3) The latter part of this statement is admirably demonstrated by the respective ways of handling the verb in question.

An amusing example of befuddlement about “correct” usage appears in Edward Albee’s play, “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” Martha and George quite naturally both use “gotten.” Martha says, “My arm has gotten tired whipping you.” In another place George says, “Well now, let me see, I’ve gotten the ice.” At a later moment, however, after Martha has again said “gotten” as usual, George cor-

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rects her: "Got, Martha. Got is perfectly correct . . . it's just a little . . . archaic, like you." As if the truth were not just the other way around!

It is simply being realistic to recognize that it comes natural to any American to use "gotten" when the word has real meaning, as a true concept of something that one really gets. Only in its (exceedingly common) meaningless encroachment will he naturally use got as the past participle.

So Will Rogers, who could use got in the crudest way, "You got to [i.e. have to] work your way out," says quite as instinctively, "This country has gotten where it is in spite of politics." Ernest Hemingway, who was not interested in grammar, but who made his characters talk the way people naturally do talk, has a person say in Fifty Grand, "He'd never gotten fat." A normal 14-year-old girl writes home from summer camp that one of her cabin-mates "has gotten 2 boxes of cookies" and another "has gotten 2 boxes of candy." In a book about story-writing Alice Hegan Rice asked, "Is it something you have known and observed in real life, or gotten from someone else?" (4) Again and again newspaper writers, the most careful columnists and the careless alike, employ gotten from day to day when they really mean its past-participle idea. A thick folder of clippings at hand would demonstrate the point beyond the slightest doubt.

"They've finally gotten the word we've hit town," said Richard M. Nixon in Berlin. (5) "The difficulty here could be gotten around," says a speaker about school problems. Governor Connally told newsmen in Dallas that he "had gotten several letters from outside the state . . ." American airmen "had strayed across the dividing line in Germany and gotten over Communist territory." "Hitler had instinctively gotten hold of the most powerful, most destructive drives . . ." "We seem to have gotten to the place . . ." A union claims to be "entitled to this, that, or the other thing because the other union had gotten it." Mayor Collins "has gotten people stirred up to do things for Boston." "We in Maine would have gotten to know you folks and you would have gotten to know us." During his campaign for the presidential nomination Governor Scranton said, "I certainly had gotten the impression that they never were happy about my being a candidate." An editorial writer remarks that "the Morrissey nomination [for a federal judgeship] should never have gotten off the

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ground in the first place.”(6) These random examples are thoroughly typical. To pretend that they are in any way “incorrect” is merely preposterous.

It is really rather rare, in fact, to find an American using got in such a case, as Anne Morrow Lindbergh did in the first paragraph of Dearly Beloved: “Even after all these years of married life, he had never got used to it.” We suspect that the lady’s language had been influenced by a long sojourn in England. Occasionally, however, a writer may have schooled himself in artificial (for him) expression as the result of influence by a teacher of arbitrary views.

For anyone really interested in cleaning out impurities from our language, the obvious enemy to be conquered is certainly not the perfectly correct gotten but the scourge of the ubiquitous unnecessary got. To those who cared about clean-cut speech, this has been apparent for a long time. Nearly a century ago, an honest manual laid it on the line: “The word got is frequently unnecessarily used, as ‘I have got the book’ should be ‘I have the book.’ ”(7)

The way this cluttered expression carries on is one of the curious phenomena of the English language. Its commonness on this side of the ocean, however, is as nothing compared to its prevalence in England. The British seem quite incapable of saying simply that someone has something; it has to be “he’s got.” But this is merely the start. They carry it over into compound tenses as no American could ever learn to do without great effort. “He went to London because he’d got [i.e. had] an uncle there.” In The Walrus and the Carpenter, “the sun had got no business to be there.” “He’d got [i.e. had] brown eyes.”

From an objective point of view, as curious as anything is the widespread otiose use of “has got to” or “have got to” to mean has to or have to or must. Always the superfluous “got” is made the emphatic word. “I’ve got to get back by Friday . . . he has got to go to Canada,” writes a London correspondent. “We have got to do fairly well in Oregon,” says a campaign manager. “We’ve got to be able to equate quality with quantity,” declares a college chancellor. “It’s got to work out. We’ve got to adopt a new system of credit . . .” said Alfred M. Landon in 1962. An advertisement warns us, “If you want economy, you’ve got to pay for it.” The late Robert Frost at his eighty-eighth birthday party told his hearers: “You’ve got to be sweeping and

you've got to be pointed. You've got to come out somewhere . . .” President Dickey of Dartmouth announced that “competence has got to be supplied primarily by higher education,” and that education “has got to have more active concern with being universal in its reach.” (8) “We've got to remind ourselves that there's got to be some concern for the physical health of our students,” says a prominent school superintendent. “We have got to begin at the bottom,” says a popular preacher, “and we have got to begin with good will.” Former President Truman has said that “a President has got to keep in touch with the people.” One could go on forever with such quotations.

As one might expect, the British carry this use of got into compound tenses where no American would. “If you told him that he had got to do so, he would immediately turn nasty . . .” (9) “In any case, you haven’t got to be [don't have to be] clear,” said Agatha Christie in There Is A Tide. “I always knew we had got to [had to] face them,” wrote a London correspondent concerning certain current problems.

Anyone who wishes to see in complete array all the ways in which British people find got irresistible has only to peruse the novel by Arnold Bennett, Imperial Palace. Though of course this is not literally true, one may carry away the impression that got occurs in almost every sentence. The story is told mainly in dialogue, and since Bennett was a realistic writer, we may be sure that he is giving us authentic specimens of British conversation of all classes of people. The most cultivated speakers among the many characters in the novel use “got” just as freely, and in exactly the same ways, as those whose crudities of speech are faithfully reported to reveal their lower social class.

America seems to have a monopoly, however, on the most extreme and least excusable abuse of the single word got to mean indifferently has or have, has to or have to (must). Usually when foreign immigrants are blamed for corruption of our language, the charge is mainly unjust, but here we might suspect that it has some justification. A person who picks up spoken English by imitating what he hears said, and who is accustomed to the full recognition of syllables which is characteristic of other languages in general, might simply not hear the unaccented, almost imperceptible ve of “I've got” or “you've got.” In fact this phenomenon must have begun operating a long time ago. Negro slaves brought from Africa, with a language background ex-

tremely different from ours, were prevented by law in the South from receiving any education. Quite understandably, they developed dialects of would-be English with a quaintly simplified grammar of their own, and this elliptical use of got is always part and parcel of it; “all God’s chillun got wings.”

Of course this corruption is very much more common in speech than in writing. Not infrequently, however, it does appear in print, as when a newspaper report of an interview quotes exactly what someone said. “I got the horse right here,” says a jockey who thinks he has a winner. “I got it,” says a baseball player running to catch a fly. “What you got to eat?” inquires a patron in a restaurant. “We got a special on that right now,” says a store-clerk. “They just got to see how much they can get away with,” according to a man interviewed concerning traffic violations. A taxi-driver, discussing automation, says, “They got machines now that you just put steel in one end and out comes a cash register or a toaster.” “I got to go out” were the last words spoken to his wife by a man who was soon to be murdered by gangsters. Occasionally advertisements endeavoring to appeal by folksiness adopt this crudity among others: “Mild . . . yet they got taste and plenty to spare.”

Viewed in the perspective of history, this prevalent abuse of got seems a fairly modern thing. Nevertheless it appears to be deeply rooted in the everyday “usage” of far too many people for it to be likely to fade out in the foreseeable future. There are, however, as there have always been, those who appreciate, enjoy, and practice a disciplined language, une langue châtiée. Perhaps, if our civilization really advances, their number may increase. Certainly anyone who cares about the purity of his own speech can easily avoid this unnecessary blemish, let others do as they will.