Must down: On non-occurring verbs of motion in modern English

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Introduction

The first line of what is perhaps the poet laureate John Masefield's best-known poem, "Sea fever", runs

> I must down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky

It is a memorable line in a fine poem. One of the things that make it memorable is the use of *must down,* a phrase with a somewhat quaint ring to it in modern ears. In present-day English we may expect to find a main verb between the modal and the adverb: "must go down". The non-use of the verb of motion in such a construction is considered "archaic",[1] "virtually dead",[2] "obsolete or archaic",[3] "ungebräuchlich"[4], or at best having "an archaic or dialectal flavour"[5] in modern English. So, does Masefield depart from the norm for modern English in this poem?[6]

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[1] OED

[2] Denison (1993: 11.3.3.1)

[3] Visser (I §178)

[4] *Must* without an infinitive of motion "hält sich bis in den Anfang des 18. Jhs., z.B. *His work is done, the minister must out* (Swift), wird aber dann ungebräuchlich." (Brunner II: 323).

[5] Quirk *et al.* (§8.50 Note [b])

[6] Masefield was born on June 1, 1878, in Ledbury, Herefordshire, England.

Non-occurrence of verb of motion after modals in earlier English

The non-occurrence of a verb of motion as an infinitive after modal verbs is a well-known phenomenon in earlier periods of English. Cf. Mitchell (1985 §1007):

> Examples with 'ellipsis' (non-expression) - or apparent 'ellipsis' - of the infinitive of a verb of motion are common enough in OE. They include *Or 286.20 . . . Þæt he nyste hwær he ut sceolde, BlHom127.8 is þonne on westan medmycel* ['narrow'] *duru þæt mannes heafod ge þa sculdro magan in, ChronE 139.20 (1009) . . . þa hi to scipan woldon,* and *Beo 754 no þy ær fram meahte.*

Elizabeth Closs Traugott (1992: 193f.) similarly discusses the Old English modals, or "pre-modals", and says

> All the verbs are used as main verbs. ... In intransitive constructions they frequently occur with a directional expression:
>
> ... þa hi to scipan woldon
> ... when they to ships wanted
> ... when they wanted to go to their ships.

In Middle English there is a good deal of evidence for the same pattern. As Mustanoja (1960: 543) puts it:

> Non-expression [of the infinitive after an auxiliary verb] is quite common when the infinitive is a verb of motion and the direction of the motion is obvious from the context (usually there is an adverb or adverbial phrase indicating the direction). Instances with auxiliary verbs: *... borewed þing wole hom* (Good Wife 149) *... Beton þe brewestere ... axed hym ... whiderward he wolde* (PPl. B v 307).

Fischer (1992: 263) mentions "the increasing unwillingness of [Middle English] modals to appear without an infinitive of another verb in series" but quotes examples such as

> And seyde he *moste* unto Itayle, ... (*HF* 187)

In fact, such examples abound. Here is a small sample (taken from the MED):

> Non of his men forðere ne mot But ysaac, is dere childe (*Gen. & Ex.* 1304)
> Forth he moste, this holi man. (*SLeg.Becket* (Hrl): 58)
> þa ferde he into Clunni, & þær man him held þat he ne mihte na east na west (*Peterb. Chron.* an. 1131)
> [He who is not christened ...] ne mæᵹ he into Godes rice. (*Bod. Hom.* 6/2)
> Doune shall the castell euery dele, If eueriche do his en-tent (*RRose* (Htrn) 5868)
> But ['unless'] þey sone amende, Thay shullen to hell pyne (*Fasc. Mor.* (Rwl) Tag 40 [45] 7)

This usage is carried on into Early Modern English:

> Modal verbs in EModE became restricted to auxiliary function; use as a 'full' verb was continued only with expressions of direction (*you shall along with me*) and with *can* 'know': *lerne no frenssh ne can none* (Görlach 1991: 113 T1/34).

Barber (1976: 258-9) gives the following examples from Shakespeare:

> I *must* to Couentree (*Richard II*)
> I *will* after straight
> And tell him so (*Henry IV Part 1*)
> thou *shalt* not from this groue,
> Till I torment thee for this iniury (*Midsummer Night's Dream*)
> I *will* to morrow
> (And betimes I *will*) to the weyard Sisters (*Macbeth*)

One might add Hamlet's well-known words to his mother, "I must to England. You know that?" So, to sum up, the use of auxiliaries with a directional meaning but without an infinitive of motion was frequent in earlier periods of English; such constructions "are regular idiom in Old, Middle and early Modern English" (Visser I §178). Let us now take a look at other Germanic languages from this point of view.

Non-occurrence of verb of motion after modals in other Gemanic languages

In modern German, the use of a directional auxiliary without a following infinitive is common. Curme (1922: §214) sees it as a case of omission:

Omission of the Verb Depending upon the Auxiliary. This omission is very common, and perhaps the following cases are the most frequent.

1.*a.* If the dependent verb is **gehen** to go, **reisen** to travel, **fahren** to drive, and verbs of motion in general: **Wohin wollen Sie (gehen)?** Where do you intend to go? **Ich muss nach Koblenz (gehen)** I must go to Coblentz.

The modern Scandinavian languages have the same type of construction. For Norwegian, Faarlund, Lie & Vannebo (1999: 527) suggest that a (non-occurring) infinitive of motion is to be understood:

> De egentlige modalverbene kan også opptre uten etter-fölgende hovedverb. De forbindes da med adverbial og spørreord som angir en retning:
>
> Hun skal hjem
> De må til byen
> De bør ut for å se seg omkring
> Han laut i veg
> Han hadde vært redd helt til de satt i båten og skulle til kirke (Wassmo 1992)
> I alle disse setningene kan vi regne med et underforstått bevegelseverb som hovedverb: *Hun skal reise hjem; De må dra til byen* osv.

For Swedish, where the situation is identical in this respect with Norwegian, Teleman, Hellberg & Andersson (1999: 3/470) also see an infinitive of motion as understood:

> Vissa hjälpverb konstrueras direkt med adverbial för mål eller i någon mån med adverbial för utgångspunkt. Ett rö-relseverb kan då ses som underförstått efter hjälpverbet. De hjälpverb som konstrueras på detta sätt (eller med par-tikeladverbial) är framför allt *vilja, måste, skola, hinna:*
>
> Vi ska *till kyrkan.*
> Han måste *till stan.*
> Han vill *på sjön.*
> Vi hann inte *till Systemet.*
> De sjukskrivna måste *i tjänst* snarast. Jag vill *härifrån.*

More generally speaking, "[m]odal + directional adverbial is often used in Germanic languages as if a verb of motion is to be under-stood." (Denison 1993: 11.3.3.1)

Non-occurrence of verb of motion after modals in regional English

To move on to a different aspect, Quirk *et al.* (1985) suggested that non-use of the infinitive of motion could have a dialectal flavour (above), and Curme (loc. cit.) notes that "[i]n parts of Great Britain and America it is common to say: *I want in, I want out.* " There is thus some indication that the phenomenon has survived from earlier times in the dialects. In fact, this is clearly evident in modern Scots:

While the auxiliary verbs *maun* and *wul* usually precede main verbs, they are sometimes used in the absence of verbs (usually *gae* or *gang*), when the presence of the verb is understood:

> He that wul ti Cupar, maun ti Cupar.
> A wul awa ti the Kirk.
> We maun awa doun the brae!
> A wul ower an see ma Grannie efter ma denner.

> Ye maun up and awa wi the laiverock!
> (Purves 1997: 25-26)

EDD says about *will* (II^5):

> Used elliptically with the omission of the verb of motion,
> esp. in phr. *he that will to Cupar maun to Cupar,*

and gives the example

> Sin ye will to Embro', Peter

That this usage in Scots is recognised elsewhere, is suggested by a passage in the Cobuild Corpus (for which see below):

> Gerry has just come back with his two fish, so I'<u>ll away</u>
> now as they say north of the border.

> Corpus: ukephem/02. Text: E0000002126

Similar cases can be found in Irish English, as in the following example (where there is no modal auxiliary!):

> I'<u>m away</u> to my bed (Harris 1993: 145)

Non-occurrence of verb of motion after modals in modern standard English

This type of construction (the *must down* type), describable by means of the formula "modal auxiliary followed not by a verb of motion but by an adverbial of direction, where a verb is not naturally supplied by the immediate context[7]", is at all current in the language, regional dialects apart. The corpora I will be using are BNC, the 100-million-word British corpus, and Cobuild Direct, the 57-million-word corpus of British, American and Australian texts.[8]

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[7]This is meant to exclude sentences like "He must go to London, as she must [*go*] to Edinburgh."

[8]BNC examples have their references before the textual matter, Cobuild examples have theirs after it.

There are a number of cases in the corpora that have a modal + "direction indicator" but which are in all probability due to faulty delivery and therefore of little interest in this connexion. Such a case is

> they just took it for granted that I <u>should to</u> to university.

> Corpus: ukspok/04. Text: S0000000812.

> [*Should to* probably = 'should go']

Other clearly irrelevant cases are those where an adverb of direction has a homonymous verb, as in

> Now, hopefully, the rest of us <u>can up</u> our performances to give us something more to cheer about. I believe we can do it.

> Corpus: sunnow/17. Text: N9119980524.
> [*up* = 'raise, increase, improve']

A related phenomenon is that where the modal has what is now best regarded as a homonymous main verb, as in

> CG3 1549   the fight with fancy, as if one could <u>will away</u> one's deepest fear;

A little more relevant are cases in the Cobuild corpus from older texts, chiefly Shakespeare's *Othello*, like

> Good night, Lieutenant. I <u>must to the watch</u>. <f> Cassio: <f> Good night, honest Iago.

> Corpus: usbooks/09. Text: B9000001423.

But if we disregard the above type of material, there remains a collection of clearly relevant examples. Let us first look at a piece of conversation (from "Birmingham University, SCR, Arts Faculty", according to Cobuild):

> You can see in the middle a flush toilet a W C and on either side a midden priv er not a midden pri a dry-pan privy a big wooden seat with a pan underneath to catch everything and if they were lucky every couple of weeks the muck man<u>'d could along</u> and take it away.

Corpus: ukspok/04. Text: S0000000498.

There are at least two things of linguistic interest here. First, there is no verb between *could* and *along*. Another speaker would perhaps have said "could *come* along" with an infinitive of motion. Secondly, there seem to be two modals in the clause, *'d* (for *would*) and *could*. This is a characteristic feature of Scottish dialects (Miller 1993: 120f., Brown 1991). If the speaker is accurately transcribed, he can therefore be assumed to be Scottish (although he was recorded in Birmingham). Consider next a somewhat longer sample, also from the spoken British component of Cobuild:

> <M06> And then Mexican guy comes up and catches them unawares right. He says I'm going to kill you unless you tell me what colour hat your wearing. None of them know what colour hat they're wearing. ... But <ZF1> who can <ZF0> who can get away every time <F0X> T' fella at the top ... <M06> You're missing the point. And none of them are allowed to commit suicide to let the others get away ... One of them <u>can away</u> every single time

Corpus: ukspok/04. Text: S9000001435.

The discussion concerns the question who can escape from a dangerous situation (in a hypothetical scenario). Speaker <M06> uses the phrase *get away* several times in the exchange, but in the last sentence he says "one of them can away", leaving out the *get*. If we look a little more closely at the passage (and again assume it is accurately transcribed), we shall find evidence of the Yorkshire dialect in it. "Mexican guy" without an article or other determiner in the first line, and "t' fella" halfway down the passage are indications of a Yorkshire origin, thus northern English and no longer Scots.

In most other cases the material does not allow us to identify the origin of the speaker or writer. There are some recurring phrases that have attained a certain degree of fixedness:

> Transient political entities such as Seoul, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore can be segregated for a while from their hinterlands, but not for ever. Politics <u>will out.</u>

Corpus: times/10. Text: N2000960106.

But it's evidence though that even when gays are threatened with the death penalty, gay love and sex <u>will out</u>.

Corpus: ukmags/03. Text: N0000000109.

In these cases *will out* can be interpreted as being equivalent to 'will *come* out', i.e. 'will/must show itself/themselves or become visible'. The collocation occurs with an inanimate subject.

Other recurring phrases are *will/would away* (cf. the "Gerry ..." example on p. 00).

> IN one of A.J. Cronin's Dr Finlay stories, the senior doctor, Dr Cameron, dies with the words: `I<u>'ll away</u> now."

> Corpus: oznews/01. Text: N5000950319.

> AN7 320 "Right then, I<u>'ll away </u>back to the hotel and see how those Australians are settling in."

and must away:

> BMN 588 I <u>must away</u>. I will send Erceldoun to you tomorrow.

> CCD 601 "I <u>must away</u>," Prince Edward put in gently.

> HA4 1144 And I <u>must away</u> to my Green Line bus ...

Nearly all the modal verbs are represented in the corpora in the modal + directional adverbial construction: *can, could, may, must, shall, will, would,* with the reservation, as before, that some of them may be cases of faulty delivery or transcription. Here is one example of each:

> FLY 447 When you have an operation these days that's lasting anything more than just er a couple of minutes or so, they will insert down your windpipe an endotracheal airway, which is a tube that goes down into your windpipe to seal into the windpipe, so if you vomit, for example, no vomit <u>can down</u> round that tube.

FXV 85 Oh yes, the interesting part <-|-> there, in those days, was that the majority of the children were in the same boat, we were all poor and er m-- the Town Council had got this skating ring at Mansfield, roller skating ring, near the Gas Works, where they provided a school meal for all the children that <u>could there</u> during the hour lunch.

Mrs Mandela said in the statement she believed the second dismissal was also `irregular and unconstitutional" and hinted she <u>may to the courts</u> to contest it.

Corpus: oznews/01. Text: N5000950419.

At moments like these, Mechthild brings to mind some of the best blues singers. `I <u>must to God,</u>" she insists now and asks, `Do you think that fire must utterly slay my soul?

Corpus: usbooks/09. Text: B9000001110.

It <u>shall to the barber's</u> with your beard [A quote from *Hamlet.*]

Corpus: usbooks/09. Text: B9000001423.

BEARS star Alastair Lynch, Queensland's most famous chronic fatigue syndrome sufferer, was married in a low key ceremony, last week. <p> Lynch and his wife Peta are honeymooning overseas, but he <u>will back</u> for pre-season training next month.

Corpus: oznews/01. Text: N5000951016.

Property sources said AMP made an attractive offer to the department to stay in the centre for fear the Garden City <u>would down</u> without an anchor tenant.

Corpus: oznews/01. Text: N5000950928.

The adverbials are either adverbs (*along, around, away, back, down, further, home, out, outside, there, up*) or prepositional

phrases introduced by *at, between, for, in, on,* and the most frequent of them all, *to.*

Non-occurrence of verb of motion after main verbs

The main focus of this little study has been on constructions where the finite verb is a modal auxiliary. In some cases, however, it can be a main verb. As we saw above, the construction we are interested in was frequent in earlier stages of the language. The reason why this was so is clearly that the class of verbs that we call modal auxiliaries started out as full verbs in early English, only slowly developing into auxiliarihood. It was as natural to say "He must away" as "He goes away", or to say "I must to God" as "I pray to God". The main transitional period was Middle English, but earlier uses of the verbs as full verbs remained in the language for a long time. Against this background it is not surprising that some semi-auxiliary and full verbs that do not ordinarily denote direction can still be used in the same way as the modals in the construction. Chief among them are *help, let*[9] and *want,* the first two used transitively. Here are a few examples of *help:*

> Somebody has to tuck in my blouse when it pulls out of my slacks or <u>help me in and out of bed</u>
>
> Corpus: ukbooks/08. Text: B0000001233.
>
> If one falls down, his friend can <u>help him up</u>. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!
>
> Corpus: usbooks/09. Text: B9000001088.

Next come some *let* examples:

> `My life wouldn't be worth living if I didn't <u>let the guys away</u> early."
>
> Corpus: sunnow/17. Text: N9119980604.

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[9]"Quite general is the similar usage after *let: Let me in,* (to a conductor of a street-car) *Let me off at 12th Street."* (Curme 1922: §214)

It was silly; we <u>let them back</u> in the game

Corpus: times/10. Text: N2000960102.

The EBRD's guards would not <u>let him by</u>.

Corpus: ukmags/03. Text: N0000000794.

Don't <u>let me down</u>, please.

Corpus: today/11. Text: N6000940311.

And here are some examples of *want*:

Soon, Ali's son decides he <u>wants down</u>. Ali lowers him to the ground, holding his left hand, and tries to get him to walk.

Corpus: ukmags/03. Text: N0000000054.

Another challenge facing the community is the long line of nations from Northern and Eastern Europe who <u>want in</u>.

Corpus: npr/07. Text: S2000920603.

Too many United players these days look as if they <u>want off</u> the park as soon as things don't go their way

Corpus: sunnow/17. Text: N9119980502.

Gary, a regular customer at the flower shop, says he <u>wants out</u>, although he's not sure where he can go.

Corpus: npr/07. Text: S2000930217.

A related case is mentioned by Quirk *et al.* (1985: §8.50 Note [b]). After discussing the modal + verb of motion construction with an "archaic or dialectal flavour" they add:
But the following is wholly current:

After being treated at the hospital for shock, Mr Toyota was allowed *home*.

The adverbial here is equivalent to *to go home*

In cases such as the ones above, it seems the construction is well established in the language and neither archaic nor dialectal. On the whole, non-expression of the main verb may be less alien to modern English ears than a first impression would suggest.

Independent non-expression or deletion?

A relevant question here is whether cases of non-expression in modern English should be seen as instances of deletion/omission/ellipsis or as non-defective and fully legitimate variants of the more usual constructions with auxiliary + main verb. In connexion with his discussion of the corresponding Old English constructions, Mitchell (1985 §1007) says, "I tend to agree with Visser (i, §178) that 'to call this idiom elliptical, as OED does, is misleading'." Cf. also Denison (1993: 11.3.3.1), quoted above: "Modal + directional adverb is often used in Germanic languages *as if* a verb of motion is to be understood." (My emphasis.) As is usual in such cases, the issue can be regarded in two different ways. From a historical point of view, there is every reason to see the modern phenomenon as a direct continuation of the Old and Middle English construction. In the same way as it is reasonable to look upon Old English *hie woldon nor• weardes ofer Temese* 'they wished to go north across the Thames' as grammatically independent of a synonymous *hie woldon ferian nor• weardes ofer Temese*, it should be possible and reasonable to look upon modern English *I will away* as independent of *I will go away*. On the other hand, for the vast majority of speakers with little or no knowledge of earlier forms of English, the full type with a verb of motion is the expected and unmarked one, and the type with non-expression is less familiar and therefore tends to be regarded as a variant, with ellipsis of the main verb, of the more familiar one.

It might be added that there is a related but clearly different phenomenon in English which will not be dealt with here,[10] viz. the tendency to do without auxiliaries, including infinitives, in perfective constructions, again a phenomenon with roots in the past and with possible manifestations in the modern language.

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[10]See Kjellmer (forthcoming).

Conclusions

The conclusions that may be drawn from the material presented here are, first, that directional verb phrases without a verb of motion were frequent in earlier periods of English as they still are in other modern Germanic languages. Even today they are well established in certain collocations in standard English. Secondly, they lead an active life in the dialects, particularly Scots, outside of regimented collocations. And thirdly, these freer variants can also be said to have a sort of potential existence in the standard language, perhaps tinged with a whiff of regionalism or archaism, and liable to be called into service at a moment's notice. John Masefield can hardly be said to depart from the norm for modern English in his poem; his use of the construction is effective but far from unique.

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