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The English modal had

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There exists a non-standard counterfactual construction in English, often called the “plupluperfect” or “superpluperfect” (Wilson 1993), that is created from the combination of had + have ((1)):

(1) a. If I had have known about John, I wouldn't have come.
   b. It would have been better had I have been there.
   c. If I had have been there, I could have helped.

It is often reduced to one of many phonological and orthographic variants, many of which create homophonous forms with another counterfactual construction employing would + have ((2)):

(2) a. If I'd have known, I could have helped. (ambiguous)
   b. If I had've known, I could've helped.
   c. If I had of known, I could'of helped.
   d. If I'da' known, I coulda' helped. (ambiguous)

The construction, while non-standard, is certainly not new – it dates as far back as the 15th century when English began to use analytical constructions rather than subjunctive voice for counterfactuals (Moelecki 2000). A number of different arguments have been postulated for the construction: that it is a redundant repetition of the perfect marker (Wilson 1993; Huddleston & Pullum 2002); that the second have contributes the counterfactual meaning (and is thus an irrealis marker) (Molencki 2000); that it is a phonological harmony effect (Molencki 2000); and that it is a psychological effect (Boyland 1995).

This construction is separate from the other two instances in English where two haves can appear together: 1) the combination of perfect and possessive main verb (e.g. I have had this book for too long) and 2) the combination of perfect and the obligation pseudo-modal (e.g. I have had to leave for some time). In fact, all four forms of have (the perfect marker, the counterfactual modal, the pseudo-modal, and the main verb) can co-occur (e.g. We would have been done already if John hadn't have had to have his way). Below we argue based on distributional evidence that the simplest account of this pattern is that the first have, which is always realized as had, is in fact an irrealis modal and the second is just a standard instance of perfect aspect.

The unlikelihood of a phonological account. The modal had undergoes V to T movement past Neg or is projecting a TP above Neg (If I had not have been there...) and it also undergoes T to C movement (Had I have been there...). In both positions, the movement results in an intervening head separating had from the have that marks perfect aspect. This indicates that it is a separate syntactic element from the second have, strongly suggesting that a non-syntactic account is unlikely.
Complementary distribution with other modals. The had + have construction cannot co-occur with other modals, even those that carry counterfactual meaning. Had + have is in complementary distribution with every other modal + perfect voice construction.

(3) a. *If I would have have been there, I could have helped.
   b. *If I could have have been there, I could have helped.

Dialectal variation with would + have. The had + have construction is in dialectical variation with and carries precisely the same meaning as the also non-standard counterfactual would + have construction (Huddelston & Pullum 2002). In fact, since both reduce to ‘d in cases such as (2a,d) above, in such reductions it is impossible to tell which modal is being used. Since the would + have construction is the more novel (Huddleston & Pullum 2002), it is not unreasonable to assume that the would + have construction is a reanalysis of the reduced had + have construction.

(4) a. If I would have been there, I would have stopped them.
   b. If I had have been there, I would have stopped them.

Consistent past-tense marking. The first have only appears as the past tense form had (*If I have have been on time, things would have ended better). Similarly, past tense is marked on all the other irrealis modals of English when receiving counterfactual interpretation (could, would, should, might) and, similarly, the counterfactual meaning is prohibited from the present tense form of those irrealis modals (can, will, shall, may). These modals, including had, are members of a set of English verbs called present-preterit verbs (Milward & Hayes 2011) that are always past tense in morphological form regardless of present tense meaning (such as got). Curiously, some of the other non-modal counterfactual constructions in English such as the periphrastic pseudo-modal construction (ought to) and the mostly obsolete subjunctive voice (If I were to) also carry this unconditioned past tense marking.

Licensing of unmarked auxiliary (rather than participial form). Like all other modals, had licenses the unmarked form of the following auxiliary (If I had have known; I should have known; I should go). Only the modals (including do and to) of the English auxiliaries license bare forms. The other auxiliaries (Asp and Voice) license one of the two participial forms (I am running; I have run).

Licensing of four-way reduction pattern of have. The modal had licenses the four way reduction pattern of have to have, ‘ve, ‘a, and of (see Kayne 1997): If I had have known...; If I had’ve known...; If I had of known...; If had’a known. This complete reduction pattern is only licensed by modals preceding the have aspect marker (*I of known English for years; *I’a known English for years).

Based on the above distributional qualities of the had + have construction, it is clear that the simplest account for it is that had is a modal (projecting a TP or always moved to T from a modal projection) and the phonologically reducing have that follows it is the aspect marker (see (5)).
(5) If Jack had have known English...

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C
  if
  TP
    Jack
      T'
        had
        AspP
          have
            VP
              known
                DP
                  ∆
                    English
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References