

SAMPLE from  
Brian Steel, *Insights from Spoken English*  
(*A Textbook for ESL Students and Translators*)

Copyright © 2006 Brian Steel

For details on how to purchase this e-book, see [www.briansteel.net/writings/](http://www.briansteel.net/writings/)

## Chapter 4 [first half: pages 61–72]

### Spoken Variations in the English Verb System

The preceding chapters have dealt with those emotional and other special characteristics of spoken English which manifest themselves in the form of ritual units, subjective comment sentence patterns, and spoken signals, etc. In addition to these, there are many other syntactical, morphological and lexical characteristics of spoken English. Some of these consist of variants or equivalents of components of standard spoken sentences.

These types of spoken structural variants occur in all parts of the sentence but the greatest number – and those most likely to affect accurate comprehension and translation by students of English as a Second Language – are variations of the central feature of the standard clause and sentence, namely the VERB. Examples of **spoken verbal variations** are offered in this chapter, leaving other types of structural variation for Chapter 5. The following groups of variation are illustrated in this chapter.

- spoken verb forms (Exercises 1–2);
- condensed sentence structures (Exercises 3–4);
- special uses of *to be*, auxiliaries and modal verbs (Exercises 5–11);
- tense usage (Exercise 12).

### Exercise 4.1 Spoken Verb Forms

An idiosyncratic feature of informal and colloquial English is the use of a number of abbreviated verb forms and fusions, as listed below. Most of them are an important feature of standard spoken pronunciation; others are more informal; a few are non-standard English.

's =

1. *is* He's not at home today.
2. *has* Why's he done it?
3. *does* (less frequently) How's he manage, I wonder. (AM, 348)

#### Notes

's is also used as the possessive sign (e.g. *His father's son. The fathers' sons*) and as an abbreviation of the pronoun *us* in the exhortative verb pattern *Let's go. (Let's go to the theatre.)* For 's meaning *as*, see Chapter 5, Exercise 11.

'Tis survives mainly as a regional contraction of 'It is'. Or in colloquial arguments:

'Tis' – 'Tisn't.' – 'Tis!'

'Isn't that a marvellous cup o'tea I made,' he said ...

'Tis all right,' she answered. (EOB, 125) [*Ireland*]

(*'Twas* and *'Twill* are mainly found in literary or dialect usage.)

're = *are*: We're going on holiday tomorrow.

'm, = *am*: I'm very happy here.

'd =

1. *would* I'd do it for you if I had time.
2. *had* I suddenly realised that I'd finished the job in two hours.
3. *did* Why'd you come?

d' = *do* [especially before *you*: *d'you ...?*]

'll = *will* I'll see you.

've = *have* I've just finished.

'd've = *would have* I'd've finished earlier if I hadn't been interrupted so many times.

#### Notes

1. To these contracted forms must be added the very frequent spoken abbreviation of *not* to **n't** [pronounced *unht*, or *ənt*] after *to be* or an auxiliary or modal verb, e.g. *isn't, haven't, wouldn't, couldn't, mustn't* (pronounced *mussuhnt*), etc.

The following special spoken contractions should also be noted:

*can't* = *cannot*; *won't* = *will not*; *shan't* = *shall not*; *aren't* = **am not**, as well as *are not*; non-standard \**ain't* for *isn't* or *aren't*; informal *innit* for *isn't*; *dunno* for *don't know*.

In Scottish English, *n't* is pronounced 'nee' (transcribed as *nae* or *ny*, e.g. *didnae* or *didny*, *cannaie* / *canny*, etc.).

2. When followed by *rather*, *as soon* or *sooner*, **I'd** (or *you'd, he'd*, etc.) stands for *I would*:  
I'd rather wait here if you don't mind.

However, when preceding *better* (and less frequently, *best*), it represents **had**.

You'd better go now.

3. Deriving from the relaxed pronunciation of the contraction of *have* to 've [əv] following *would, could, should, might*, etc., there is an increasingly frequent erroneous sound association with 'of'.

He'd \*of come if he'd had time. [=He would **have** come ...]

I could \*of done it if I'd tried.

He should \*of seen me there

'We might \*of been better off without all this nonsense.' (MS, 100)

This casual practice often produces non-standard forms represented in print form as *had've / had of / had a* followed by a past participle. This 've is *redundant*, as the following examples demonstrate.

If \*he'd've come, I'd've paid him all the money.

(i.e. *If he \*had have come ... I would have paid him ... for standard English:*

*If he had come, / If he'd come, I would have paid him all the money. Or: ... I'd've paid him.)*

If I \*had've given it to them they would've spent it. [= *If I had given*]

If I had \*of given it to them. [= *If I had given*]

Had it \*of been my car they bumped into, I would've complained.

[= *Had it been my car... / If it had been ...* ]

4. *-in' = -ing*, e.g. *waitin'* for *waiting* (This relaxed pronunciation has been given special media prominence over the past few years by the retiring Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan.)

\*\*\* For readers of this Sample:

*The reference abbreviations for examples refer to the Bibliography of 190 novels, plays and biographies. It is available for consultation at:*

[www.briansteel.net/writings/spokenenglishbibliography.pdf](http://www.briansteel.net/writings/spokenenglishbibliography.pdf)

#### Exercise 4.1 Examples for study

1. 'The vet's away ... These things always happen on Saturday nights.' (WH, 161)
2. 'How's he earn his living?'  
'No idea.' (DS, 26)
3. Who loses anything by that? Maybe I risk going to hell. Well, I'll risk it. What's it got to do with anyone else? (EW, 1962: 226)
4. I don't know if there'll be enough soup for everyone.
5. I'm not sure if we're ready for that yet.
6. 'What'd he do wrong, Ed?' (WW, 205)
7. 'You ought to have rung up or something. And then I'd've been prepared.' (JOR, 65)
8. 'You want one?'  
'No, I don't, I'd've asked, if I'd wanted a cuppa tea.' (AS, 50)
- 9.. Keith spoke very much as if his lines had been written for him; I had already noticed his aloof trick of substituting 'I cannot', 'I do not', 'I would not', for the more natural 'I can't', 'I don't, I wouldn't.' (PHJ, 45-46)

10. 'You oughtn't to be doing it.' (CPS, 107)
11. 'Don't ask me cause [=because] you won't like what I say.'
12. 'There're a couple of things she should know ...' (CF, 441)
13. 'I am asking, aren't I?' (AS, 51)
14. 'I am beautiful, aren't I?' (DHE, 245)
15. 'Do you think you'll get something?'  
'I wouldn't be here if I didn't.' (LLP, 234)
16. 'Ah'm glad Ah didny buy a ticket for that one.' (WM, 1985: 55) [Scottish English]
17. 'Do you want to make some money?'  
'Who doesny want to make some money?' (WM, 1985: 58) [Scottish English]
18. 'I hope you \*ain't [=are not] an Oprey [=Opera] singer ...' (PC, 89) [AmE]
19. 'She made you smile. So she \*ain't all bad.' (TWO, 1988: 585)
20. 'That why you cried?'  
'I dunno, suppose so. (FY, 153)
21. 'You wouldn't 'of said she was without refinement,' Mrs Poulter remembered.  
(PW, 1969: 13)
22. If I could have gone in that day I'd \*a [=would have] told him – junk 'em [*throw them away*], Steve, we can afford it. (AM, 82)
23. 'If he'd \*of lived, he'd \*of been a great man.' (FSF, 128)  
[=*had lived ...would have been*]
24. 'No kiddin'? You look too young.' (LLP, 81)
25. 'We'll be goin' now, Laurie, love.' (DHE, 16)
26. 'Ah, don't cry yet; I'm not goin' to the ends of the earth.' (CC, 68)

## Exercise 4.2

Other fused spoken pronunciations of parts of verbs groups are as follows:

In informal and popular English (particularly in American English and in pop songs), the combination of *have* or the abbreviation *'ve* and the preposition *to* may be fused with some preceding verbs to produce spoken forms which are **transcribed into print by writers** as:

<i>coulda</i>	= <i>could have</i>
<i>woulda</i>	= <i>would have</i>
<i>shoulda</i>	= <i>should have</i>
<i>musta</i>	= <i>must have</i>
<i>oughta</i>	= <i>ought to</i> (or <i>oughter</i> - BrE)
<i>gonna</i>	= <i>going to</i>
<i>gotta</i>	= <i>got to</i> [See Exercise 4.7.]
<i>wanna</i>	= <i>want to</i>

Note also: *gimme* = give me

*Note:* The pronoun *you*, is very commonly pronounced as *yuh* [yʊ]. It is sometimes written as *ya*.

## Further Examples for Study

1. 'Yes sir, she had a small throat, anybody coulda [=could have] reached around it ...' (HL, 172)
2. I coulda kissed him.
3. I woulda done it for you.
4. \*I'da done it for you.
5. You oughta be more careful.
6. 'And you oughter see the place! Not worth five-and-twenty shillings.' (JBP, 241)
7. You oughter be ashamed of yourself.
8. I've gotta leave now.
9. I'm gonna fix that bully!
10. 'We're gonna miss you, boy,' I said.' (HL, 56)
11. 'So ... you gonna tell me what he wanted?' (DJW, 6)
12. 'How long I gotta sit here chained up ...?' (TWO, 1988: 243)
13. 'Well, you wanna know something?' (TWO, 1988: 108)
14. 'Hey,' Stradlater said. Wanna do me a big favor?' (JDS, 1958: 32) [=Do you want to ...]
15. Willie put out his hand and laid it on the flask, 'Gimme that thing,' he said. (RPW, 88)

### Exercises 4.3 – 4.4 Condensed Sentence Structures

As has been evident in other chapters, conversational sentences are frequently characterised by the absence of a main finite verb or by a condensed verb group. Apart from those already illustrated in other chapters, the following broad groups of such sentences will be encountered.

(For interrogative sentence patterns with no main finite verb, see also Exercise 2.1.)

#### Exercise 4.3 Context-dependent Responses

Some responses depend for part of their meaning on the language context or on the dialogue situation, which are assumed to be understood by both listener and speaker, and therefore ‘taken for granted’. In this way, unnecessary repetition of some basic sentence elements is avoided.

(See also Exercise 2.5 for ‘echo repetition’ sentence patterns.)

##### *to be*

(See also Exercise 4.4.)

1. ‘My payment?’  
‘Here. On the desk. Actually, I intended to give you the money all the time.’ (TR, 57)
2. ‘Is that necessary?’ he said.  
‘Very.’ (DHL, 1946: 163)
3. ‘I was almost full anyway, weren’t you, Ruby?’  
‘Just about,’ I murmur and we slink out of the kitchen quickly. (KAT, 229)
4. ‘How’s she doing?’  
‘Fine’. (LLP, 245)
5. ‘He was annoyed that I told you.’  
‘He has no right to be,’ (JF, 255)
6. ‘You’re both drunk.’  
‘No, we’re not. At least Gus may be a bit. I am just straightforwardly boring.’  
(JO, 1973: 294)

##### *to have and modal verbs*

7. ‘Did you love him when you married him?’  
‘I suppose I must have done.’ (DS, 21)
8. ‘I believed you.’  
‘Well, you shouldn’t have. I usually lie.’ (NM, 101)
9. ‘Didn’t you?’  
‘Didn’t I what, sir?’  
‘Ask me to repeat what I’d already said.’ (AW, 28)
10. ‘Does Stark know it?’  
‘No, he doesn’t.’ (RPW, 347)
11. ‘We had teams all over the desert trying to find out what happened.’

- ‘And did you?’ (TR, 210)
12. ‘They make up the rules as they go along.  
‘But doesn’t everyone?’ (RMO, 135)
13. ‘I don’t care what you think of me.’  
‘Why should you?’ (WSM, *The Narrow Corner*, 170)
14. ‘You’re her only friend and you can help by being brave. You will, won’t you?’  
(JW, 48)
15. ‘They oughtn’t to let her run around the country this way.’  
‘Who oughtn’t to?’ inquired Daisy, coldly. (FSF, 16)

#### Miscellaneous cases:

16. ‘Ginge [= *Ginger*]. What trade you going to apply for?’  
‘Driver.’ (AW, 47)
17. ‘This doesn’t have anything to do with the Hospital. It should, but it doesn’t.’ (SD, 21)
18. ‘How long have you got?’  
‘Not long, actually.’ (LLP, 135)
19. ‘I don’t know enough, and no one else here seems to.’ (DF, 17)
20. ‘You just make it up as you go along.’  
‘Make up what?’ (RPW, 257)
21. ‘That doesn’t fool me.’  
‘I’m not trying.’ (JF, 699)
22. ‘I’ve got things to do tomorrow.  
‘Such as?’  
‘Feed the dog for one thing.’ (TS, 1978: 74)

The following series of idiomatic verbless *if* ‘stub-clauses’ owe their origin to the same principle of spoken language economy:

*if so; if not; if ever; if that; if at all; if anything; if nothing else*

23. Perhaps I was unfair with you. If so, I’m sorry.
24. You must pay the money by this Friday. If not, they’ll take you to court.
25. ‘Unfortunately, he had an ... accident yesterday, and he will not climb for many years, if ever.’ (TR, 89)
26. We only have enough petrol for another 50 miles, if that.
27. ‘I’ve got too much self-confidence, if anything, not too little!’ (LRB, 83)
28. The job would provide them with food for three months if nothing else.

#### Exercise 4.4 Other Ellipses of *to be*, *there is / there are* and Auxiliary and Modal Verbs

Other spoken sentences (statements and questions) may imply an ellipsis of the verb *to be*, *there is / are*, *to have*, *to do*, and *would / will* (and, often, the ellipsis of a relevant subject pronoun). (See also Exercise 5.4.)

1. [I'm] Glad to see you.
2. Sorry to hear that.
3. Delighted to be able to help.
4. 'I don't know where the thermometer is. Broken, probably.' (JU, 2003: 301)
5. 'I'll leave you, then. Better if we're not seen together.' (DHE, 174)
6. 'Marianne not down?' Pop said. 'Kids off to school? Going to be a beautiful day.' (HEB, 6)
7. 'I still don't like it,' snapped Edean.  
'What's the matter?' Shannon mocked. 'Losing your nerve?' (FF, 343)
8. 'I just dropped by for a check-up.'  
'Heart bothering you?' (EKG, 123)
9. Cliff: (*having cut her bandage, he starts tying it*). That too tight?  
Alison: Fine, thank you. (JO, 1960: 29)
10. '... I'm married.'  
'A grave error of judgement.' (GG, 1978: 29)
11. 'Lucky you came along when you did.' (RRO, 142)
12. 'Well, I still prefer reading. Old-fashioned of me, I know.' (BA, 9)
13. 'Any chance of a cup of tea, Bunt?' George is trying to imitate the way he thinks happily married couples speak to each other. (KAT, 175)
14. 'Yes, but there must have been other stuff we've forgotten. Surely.'  
'No way of knowing, is there?' (KA, 1992: 224)
15. 'You been in an accident?' he said disbelievingly.  
'Sort of.' (DF, 254)
16. 'Heard anything about me going yet?'  
'No. Still a few ends to be tied up. Getting fed up with us, are you?'  
'I'd like to go home.' (LDA, 208)
17. 'Want some?' says Josh, offering a piece of the chocolate-covered biscuit.  
(DL, 1985: 243)
18. 'You ever miss the good old days?' (TC, 34)
19. '... he resigned. And you know why?' (RPW, 256)
20. 'Like some coffee, Dr Vaisey? Drink?' [= *Would you like ...*]  
'Neither, thank you.' (KA, 1992: 163)
21. See you on Monday.
22. Have a cigarette?

#### Non-standard ellipses of the auxiliary verb *to have*:

23. I \*seen it. / I \*done it. / I \*been waiting for you.
24. 'We just \*bin [= *been*] sittin' here waiting for you to get home.' (AS, 29)

## Exercises 4.5– 4.11 Special Uses of *to be*, and of Auxiliary and Modal Verbs

### Exercise 4.5 Miscellaneous Spoken Uses of *to be*

#### *I am to* + verb for a duty or something planned or arranged

1. ‘You know what you’ve got to do, Vlasta.’  
‘I’m to put this in a Glass Board envelope and mark it ‘Urgent, Personal. For the Attention of the Ambassador Only’’. (LDA, 191)
2. ‘Ah,’ Brett gave her a sly grin. ‘But she actually *said* ‘maybe’. I’m to call her.’ (MM, 53)
3. ‘Hilda said she might be a bit late, but we weren’t to wait for her.’ (LPH, 29)  
[= *should not*]
4. You are not to make any mess in the dining room.

#### The present progressive tense of *to be* as a variant for *to be going to* or as a refusal:

5. ‘Shall we dance this?’ he said ...  
‘I’m not dancing this one.’ I said airily, ‘I’ve laddered my stocking. I want to stop before it goes any further.’ (PHJ, 4)

#### Or for prohibitions:

6. You’re not having any more junk food this week, Susan.

#### Verbal idioms with *be*: *to be sure / certain to*, *to be bound to*, *to be supposed to*, *to be liable to*, *to be likely / unlikely to*

7. ‘Be sure to open these three crates of axles that came in Saturday, won’t you?’ (AM, 334) [= *make sure to*]
8. ‘There’s bound to be trouble tomorrow when the evictions begin.’ (SH, 428)  
[= *certain*]
9. ‘You know how Uncle Buck dislikes that, and how it is bound to count against your final grade.’ (GV, 1997: 68) [= *certain*]
10. ‘She’s supposed to be coming with us.’ (KAT, 152) [= *is scheduled to*]
11. ‘... you’re being called to the Bar, aren’t you?’  
‘I’m supposed to be ... But I don’t intend to go on with it.’ (JBP, 55)
12. ‘When are you supposed to be on duty?’  
‘Noon.’ (MM, 127)
13. ‘Wasn’t there anyone out the back?’  
‘There was supposed to be.’ (LLP, 318)  
[This is close to: *There should have been; ought to have been*]
14. ‘If he finds out about my two nervous breakdowns, he’s liable to lock me up and throw away the key.’ (WW, 353) [= *he will probably*]
15. It is likely he’ll retire soon. / He’s likely to retire soon.
16. The champion is unlikely to be beaten this year.

#### Exercise 4.6 *to get (got, gotten)*

**a)** In addition to standard meanings of *to receive* or *to obtain*, the verb *to get* (plus *got* and *gotten* – esp *AmE*) is a frequent colloquial variant for passive *to be* and for *to become* with a reference to a change of state, etc.

1. He gets tired easily.
2. He got fired. [=dismissed]
3. 'Have you any children?'  
'I had a little boy. He got run over.' (LRB, 266) [= *by accident*]
4. As he's gotten older, he looks more and more like the Indian on an old nickel [*coin*]. (WW, 121) [*AmE*]
5. 'You're suddenly pretty interested in this issue.'  
'I've gotten involved with some people –' (RRO, 75)

**b)** Even more frequent is the colloquial use of invariable *got* or *have got to* as variants for *to have* and *to have to*.

6. 'We got some good news and some bad.' (LLP, 48)
7. 'What's she got to do with anything?' (RRO, 269)
8. 'How long have you got?'  
'Not long, actually.' (LLP, 135)
9. 'Is that all you've got to say – yes?' (JC, 142)
10. 'I haven't got any more money.' (JC, 202)
11. 'You got yourself another girlfriend?' ...  
'No.' (JC, 40)
12. I got to go now.
13. 'I gotta go.' (DJW, 2)
14. 'Don't you remember?'  
'I guess I do. Josh. There's something you got to know.' (MR, 434)
15. 'That's not a bad idea.'  
'You've got to be joking.' (JH, 165)
16. 'You got to believe that.'  
'All right.' (RPW, 400)

Note the different semantic values in the following example:

17. 'You've got to be grateful for the moments that you get, I think.' (CMS, 185)

**c)** *to arrive / come*

18. Paul opened his eyes and mumbled, 'What happened? ... How'd I get here?' (JC, 561)
19. 'Tommy Kelly get in yet?'  
'I haven't seen him, but I just got here myself.' (AM, 333)

**d)** *to understand* (colloquial)

20. 'Get it? You got it? Good. Because I got it. And they know I got it. Their number, that is.' (GV, 1997: 300)  
[Gore Vidal's word play is on the multiple meanings of colloquial *get / got*.]

### Exercise 4.7 Other Uses of *to do*

#### For emphasis:

1. 'I remember it.'  
'You do remember something, then!' (BA, 360)
2. 'Steff, I can't trust what you say because I don't know what happened between us.'  
'But I do.' (BA, 387)
3. 'I never did finish my MA ...' (DL, 1985: 63)
4. 'Ah yes, she mentioned you.'  
'She did? Angelica?' (DL, 1985: 285)
5. 'I hate rejection, you know.'  
'Don't we all,' agreed Evita. (JC, 510)

#### With imperatives:

6. 'You are very late,' she said.  
'Do go on eating!' (DHL, 1946: 145)
7. 'Oh, honey, do shut up, will you?' (GV, 1967: 77)
8. 'Don't you take any notice of her,' Ronnie repeated. 'She's like that.' (JR, 105)
9. 'And *don't* you go thinking you can work out who took it ...' (HRFK, 95)
10. Oh no you don't! [= *You are not getting away with that.*]
11. 'Why don't we all go down there for Christmas?' suggested Marguerite. (SH, 283)
12. Why don't you shut up? [See also Exercise 2.1.]

#### Other uses:

13. 'Well, what do I call you?' I asked, feeling a little embarrassed. [= *should*]  
'Why, Tony, of course,' the Earl replied. (ET, 149)
14. 'Will it be resignation or do I throw you out, Mr Parfitt?' [= *shall; do I have to*]  
'Damn you, Kane, I'll resign.' (JA, 373)
15. I don't see her surviving this crisis. [= *can't*]
16. Do I hear any support for my proposal? [= *can*]
17. 'I don't want Ramsey knowing you're there ...' (CF, 407) [= *to know*]

#### *esp AmE:*

18. 'What *you* want don't [= *doesn't*] matter one hoot in hell.' (GV, 1967: 8)
19. 'What she don't know don't hurt her,' Mr Duffy said. (RPW, 17)
20. 'Well, I gotta worry about it too, don't I?'  
'Since when do you worry about anything, Pat?' (AM, 368)
21. 'Huh? I didn't even ask you yet.' (TP, 43)

## END OF Chapter 4 Sample

The remaining exercises in this chapter are:

**Exercise 4.8 Special Uses of *will* and *would***

**Exercise 4.9 Uses and Variants of *should***

**Exercise 4.10 Special uses of *may* and *might***

**Exercise 4.11 Special uses of *can* and *could***

**Exercise 4.12 Variations in Tense Usage**

There is also a General Sample of this e-book, with an Introduction and a full Contents list, at:  
[www.briansteel.net/writings/spokenenglishsample.pdf](http://www.briansteel.net/writings/spokenenglishsample.pdf)

A WORD document version of this General Sample of *Insights into Spoken English* is available from the author (Brian Steel) at [ompukalani@hotmail.com](mailto:ompukalani@hotmail.com)