

Wherewithal: a Hidden Construction

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There is something grammatically unusual about some of the constructions we've discussed: the ordinary syntax of English does not prepare us for *the very poor* used as a NP, for the last word in *the week after next*, for the apparent number agreement mismatch in *a mere six hundred dollars*, or for the missing article in *distinguished actor Charleton Heston*. A "grammar checker" application in a word processor that was based on a "core" grammar of English would in principle be able to recognize these as beyond the core. But there are also constructions that no grammar checker (or only extremely subtle ones) would detect, constructions that are covert, in the sense that their structures have apparently nothing unusual about them, yet they communicate something that goes beyond what a simple parse could predict. Consider the sentences in (1). We will first describe some of the features of these sentences, and then build the argument that they point to the need for a special construction to predict these features.

(1)

- a. I don't have the money to take a vacation.
- b. I don't have the money for such luxuries.
- c. We lack the staff to take on such a job.
- d. Where can I find the cash to buy something that expensive?
- e. Do we have the resources to manage our new assignment?
- f. Do we have the resources for such an undertaking?
- g. We don't have the fuel to make it to the next town.
- h. I hope they give us the funds to carry out the project.

—There is no easy explanation for the presence of the final infinitive VP or purposive *for*-phrase in the sentences in (1): there is no lexical head that would independently, i.e., in other contexts, be described as selecting an infinitive complement. This is in sharp contrast to a noun like *intention* in *I had the intention to take a vacation*;

—These sentences have a verb whose meaning is in the general domain of 'having' (here, *have*, *lack*, *find*, *give*, *provide*).¹

—The noun is construed as a resource,² and the interpretation concerns the sufficiency of this resource for carrying out the activity indicated in the infinitive complement.

—The 'possessor' entity in the semantics of the verb (the subject of *have* or *lack*, the recipient entity in the semantics of *give*, *provide* or *deny*) is construed as controlling the subject of the infinitive VP. That is, the VP cannot be understood as an infinitival relative on the noun it follows.

¹ Perhaps a way to characterize the semantic context of the noun should indicate 'access' rather than 'having': for many of these, an existential formulation works as well, as in *There isn't the cash to carry this out*

² This includes "inner resources" like *guts*, *courage*, *balls*, *gall*.

—The noun is preceded by the definite article³, and the context does not enable either a direct or an indirect anaphora interpretation;

—The apparent NP constituent, e.g., *the cash to buy something that expensive*, is not a self-standing NP that is capable of being interpreted on its own. The sentences in (2) are unacceptable on the interpretation that the bracketed phrases are NPs:

(2)

- a. *We wasted [the time to finish the job].
- b. *I spilled/ignited [the fuel to take us to the next town].
- c. *We fired/praised [the staff to do the job].

—A particularly important feature of this construction is the omissibility of the infinitive or *for*-phrase complement under anaphoric recoverability conditions. In familiar conditions of anaphoric omissibility, there is some lexical item which licenses the omission. Each of the sentences in (3) is understood as having an argument with an anaphoric or contextually presupposed interpretation.

(3)

- a. We lost.
- b. I've got an explanation.
- c. Let me explain.
- d. I wonder who the father is.
- e. My proposal is similar.
- f. She has already arrived.

In the contexts for each of the sentences in (3), there is some entity which would ordinarily be realized as a complement or relatum whose identity is contextually understood: the contest that we lost, the mystery that needed explanation, the child whose paternity is in question, a proposal to which my proposal is similar, the destination at which she is expected.

Now consider the conversations in (4)-(6).

(4)

- a. Are you going to take on the new project?
- b. No, we can't. We don't have the staff.

(5)

- a. Can you join us on the trip to Hawaii?
- b. Where am I going to find the cash?

(6)

- a. Do you think he's ready to face down the boss?

³ A small number of nouns, e.g., *room* and *time*, can also occur, through a related construction, without the article. *We don't have time for this.*

- b. Nah, he doesn't have the guts.

In each of the above cases, the task for which the 'resources' would be essential is understood in the context.

The existence of this construction makes it possible to explain the ambiguity of the NP *the cash* in sentence (7a) below and its non-ambiguity in (7b).

(7)

- a. Where did you get the cash?
b. Where did you stash the cash?

Both sentences allow the possibility that some quantity of cash is context-topical; however, sentence (7a), by also being interpretable as an instance of the **Wherewithal** construction, can be used where there has been no previous mention of any cash but only of some activity for which an amount of cash would be necessary. For example, (7a) could be a reaction to the news that the first speaker had just bought a new car.

The name we give to this construction⁴ comes from the fact that the noun *wherewithal* (meaning 'resources') appears to occur only in this construction. Among the 48 instances of *wherewithal* in the British National Corpus we find as its governing verb *have* [20 instances], *provide* [7], *give* [5], *lack* [3], *acquire* [2], *find* [2], and one each of *deny*, *need*, *offer*, and *winkle out*. One has *with* (*the man with the wherewithal to do it*), one was an existential expression (*there would not even be the wherewithal to ...*), one with *support* (*soil supports vegetation and the wherewithal to live*), and one that just seems weird.

In the case of the Wherewithal construction, there are many aspects of the construction that have to be specified in terms of semantic construal: nouns that designate things that can be understood as resources, and verbs or other contexts that indicate availability of or access to the resource. In many of the instances of this construction the verbs or nouns that appear meet such conditions straightforwardly, but in each case it is probably not possible to make a complete list.⁵

⁴ On Nancy Ide's suggestion.

⁵ There should be something to say about possible modifiers of the nouns welcomed by this construction: *needed*, *requisite* and *necessary* are common, but what else? Paraphrases with *enough* have many of the properties of this construction, but without the definite article. In this case the infinitive complement and its omissibility can be attributed to the adjective *enough*.