Have went?

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Have went?[1]

An invitation to contribute to questions studied by the 'Bridging the Unbridgeable Project' at the Leiden University Centre for Linguistics

The previous issue of *English Today* announced the start of a regular feature on questions of English usage and other relevant issues that are being studied in the research project 'Bridging the Unbridgeable: Linguists, Prescriptivists and the General Public' that is being carried out at the University of Leiden Centre for Linguistics. The first question we would like to have feedback on from readers of *English Today* relates to the acceptability of *have went*. The topic was inspired by a number of spontaneous comments from people who had contributed to the attitudes survey I reported on in that issue, and in particular in connection with the disputed sentence *I could of gone to that party* (http://bridgingtheunbridgeable.com/2012/05/07/attitudes-survey/).

In their responses, several speakers, all of them American teachers aged between 55 and 64, informed us that they regularly 'hear[d] people say have went, not have gone'. One of them specifying that she 'teach[es] in Oklahoma' noted that '[s]ome of my students also say, and write, "I have went"'. A much younger informant, aged 27 and also a teacher, even indicated that she used *have went* herself. More strikingly, in her response she attributed a different meaning to *have went* compared to *have gone*:

> 'I could have went to the party...'. This would probably be in reference to a get-together that I missed for one reason or another. I envision myself continuing the sentence with a reasoning of why I didn't go to the party. For example, 'I could have went to the party, but I had another commitment.' The sentence is unacceptable, because I think it should read 'have went' instead of 'of gone'. When something is gone, I think of it as empty. I wouldn't say, 'I gone to the store'. I would say, 'I went to the store'. Went implies going to a certain place.

Have went is clearly not standard English usage, and was already recognised as such by English grammarians from the beginning of the eighteenth century on. It was also criticised in the very earliest English usage guides, the British English *Reflections on the English Language* by Robert Baker (1770) and the American *A Grammatical Corrector* published by Seth T. Hurd in 1847. Today, however, it is no longer included in usage guides such as Fowler's *Modern English Usage* (1996) or Garner's *Modern American Usage* (2006).

The extremely interesting – and unsolicited – information that we thus retrieved from the attitudes survey we carried out raises various questions. Is usage of *have went* on the increase today, at the expense of *have gone*? Has it perhaps never disappeared from the language, despite criticism in normative grammars and usage guides? Is its use more typical of American than of British usage today? In this light it might be interesting to note that Jane Austen adopted the feature to characterise the language of her non-standard (British) English speaking character Lucy Steele. There are two instances of *have went* in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811):

> It would have been such a great pity to **have went** away before your brother and sister came [spoken].
>
> after all the troubles we **have went** through lately [a letter].

Lucy Steele, in other words, not only used *have went* in speech but also in writing, just as one of my modern – American – informants observed for her students.

Hurd, in 1847, wrote that this 'gross and very common error [was found] in the southern part of Ohio, in Pennsylvania, and to some extent throughout the Middle and Southern States',

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adding that usage was not limited to 'the illiterate only, but [was also encountered] among the educated, with whom it is an *unpardonable blunder*, as they must know it is a palpable violation of one of the plainest principles of the language' (p. 42). Is this still so today, is the use of *have went* a local phenomenon, and if it is, do educated and uneducated speakers use it indiscriminately? And finally, particularly in the light of the comment from the last informant quoted above, are teachers becoming more tolerant of *have went*?

These are questions we are very much interested in for our research. We welcome all feedback, which we invite readers to present in the relevant form published on our project's blog at http://bridgingtheunbridgeable.com/english-today/. The form is anonymous, and we will gratefully acknowledge any input we may receive.

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Note

1 This item from the 'Bridging the Unbridgeable' project is a contribution to the wider English Language Initiatives (ELI) series announced in English Today Issue 29.2, for which further suggestions are invited.