



# A Syntactic Portrayal of Primary Auxiliary Verbs in O. Henry's *The Gift of the Magi*

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## ABSTRACT

This is a brief analysis of the primary auxiliary verbs in the classic short story *The Gift of the Magi* authored by O. Henry. It typically portrays how the primary auxiliary *be*, *do* and *have* are constructed and distributed within the sentences of O. Henry's *The Gift of the Magi*. This analysis employs qualitative syntactic approach. The data analyzed for the sentences containing the primary auxiliary verbs *be*, *do* and/or *have* in *The Gift of the Magi*. The data gathered using non-participatory observation were analyzed using distributional method. The result of the analysis confirms that the primary auxiliary verbs bear grammatical meaning, signal aspect, or form voice. They Among the three primary auxiliaries identified with sentences of the short story, the primary auxiliary *be* appears most dominant, mostly distributed directly behind the subject.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As generally acknowledged, the basic sentence in the English language comprises two immediate constituents. One of the two constituents is the noun phrase, which functions as the subject. The other is the verb phrase, functioning as the predicate. The verb phrase by default follows its sister, the noun phrase which bears grammatical function as the subject. (Aarts, 2013; Burton-Robert, 2016; Fenn and Schwab, 2018; Olmen, 2023)

A verb phrase must contain a verb. Verbs can be classified into three main categories. The first category is commonly called lexical verbs. Verbs belonging to this category is also called full verbs. They are open class verbs, which are sensitive to affixes. These verbs can serve only as main verbs. The second category is modal auxiliary verbs. Verbs belonging to this category can only function as auxiliary or helping verbs. The third category is called primary verbs or primary auxiliary verbs. Unlike lexical verbs (which can act only as main verbs) and modal auxiliary verbs (which can only serve as helping verbs), primary verbs can bear dual functions. These verbs can serve as main verbs or as helping verbs. (Quirk et al, 1985; Greenbaum and Nelson, 2002; Azar and Stacy, 2009; Burton-Roberts, 2016)

Three verbs belong to the third category. The three verbs are *be*, *do* and *have*. As lexical verbs, *be*, *do* and *have* have lexical meaning and function as the main verbs in sentences. As the main verbs, they typically have power to control the presence or absence of complements. The verb *do*, for instance, subcategorizes for a noun phrase as the object. When acting as auxiliary verbs,

*be*, *do* and *have* do not have lexical meaning and cannot function as the main verbs. However, they bear grammatical meaning, signal aspect, voice, or emphasis. *Be* as an auxiliary verb, for example, can indicate progressive aspect or passive voice. (Frank, 1993; Quirk et al, 1985; Miller, 2008; Finegan, 2014)

The dual functions of *be*, *do* and *have*, as briefly cited above, reveal that these three verbs are of paramount importance, making several questions come up. One of the question has to do with the construction and distribution of the primary auxiliary verbs within the sentences of O. Henry's classic short story *The Gift of the Magi*. The authors assume that this short story, to a certain extent, mirrors the use the English language.

This inquiry aimed to answer the question of how *be*, *do* and *have* as primary auxiliary verbs are constructed and distributed within the sentences of O. Henry's *The Gift of the Magi*. This means that through finding and discussion presented in section 3, the authors shed some light on the primary auxiliary verbs, specifically those found in the classic short story.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This inquiry is qualitative in nature. Data source is the short story entitled *The Gift of the Magi* authored by O. Henry. The story talks about a young couple Jim and Della. The young couple are poor, but they individually resolve to give each other an interesting gift on Christmas Eve. The wife Della sells her beautiful long hair, which she loves and Jim her husband is proud of, to buy a platinum chain for Jim's gold watch. Meanwhile, the husband Jim sells his treasured gold watch to buy jeweled combs for Della's beautiful long hair.

The data for this inquiry are written sentences in O. Henry's short story *The Gift of the Magi*. The method employed to collect the data is non-participatory observation. The authors, as the leading instrument, function as an observer, in line with Creswell (2009), Suwartono (2014), Mahsun (2017), and Tusting (2023). There were two main activities at this stage. The authors observed the sentences in the short story used as the data source to have an overall picture of the data, and then they marked all primary auxiliary verbs in the sentences picked up, before they proceeded to data analysis.

As customary in research, data analysis is carried out after data collection was completed. With distributional method proposed by Sudaryanto (2015), which is also called intralingual method (Mahsun, 2017) in mind, the authors analyzed the data of research. By referring to Creswell (2009), Suwartono (2014) and Mahsun (2017), the authors went through several steps in analyzing the data of this research. First, the author organized and prepared the data for analysis. Second, the authors read all through the sentences, whose primary auxiliary verbs were already marked. Third, the authors did detailed analysis with a coding process. Fourth, the authors used the coding process to generate a description of the primary auxiliary verbs. Fifth, the authors advanced a narrative description of the primary auxiliary verbs. Sixth, the authors made an interpretation to draw conclusion from the analysis.

### 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Observation on O. Henry's classic short story *The Gift of the Magi* resulted in finding a number of sentences containing the primary auxiliary verbs *be*, *do* and *have*. The result and discussion on the primary auxiliary verb *be* is presented in section 3.1. Result and discussion about the primary auxiliary verb *do* is presented in section 3.2, followed by result and discussion about the primary auxiliary verb *have* in section 3.3.

#### 3.1 The Primary Auxiliary Verb *Be*

One of the forms of the primary auxiliary verb *be* can be observed in the sentence presented as (1) below. As a matter of fact, two verbs constitute the predicate of sentence (1). One of two verbs is *is*, which functions as the primary auxiliary verb. The other is the lexical verb *subsiding*, which is the main verb.

(1) The mistress of the home is gradually subsiding.

The primary auxiliary verb in (1) is constructed and distributed through specific grammatical rules which govern tense, aspect, and word order. The primary auxiliary verb *be* changes its form to *is* to meet the grammatical rule that the verb need to agree in person and number with the noun phrase functioning as the subject. The primary auxiliary verb *is* is syntactically constructed as the finite verb carrying the tense, present. In terms of distribution, the primary auxiliary verb *is* appears immediately before the adverb *gradually* and main lexical verb *subsiding* to form the present continuous aspect. Another form of the primary auxiliary verb *be* can be observed in (2).

(2) They were thinking seriously

Like in (1), the primary auxiliary verb in (2) is constructed and distributed through specific grammatical rules which govern tense, aspect, and word order. The primary auxiliary verb *be* changes its form to *were* to meet the grammatical rule that the verb need to agree with the noun phrase which functions as the subject *they*. The primary auxiliary verb *were* is syntactically constructed as the finite verb, sensitive to person and number. It carries the present tense. In terms of distribution, the primary auxiliary verb *were* stands immediately before main lexical verb *thinking* to form the present continuous aspect and the adverb *seriously*. Another form of *be*, whose construction and distribution have something in common with those in (1) and (2) is presented in (3).

(3) She was ransacking the stores

The primary auxiliary verb in (3) is also constructed and distributed through specific grammatical rules which govern tense, aspect, and word order. The primary auxiliary verb *be* changes its form to *was*. The change is required to meet the grammatical rule that the verb need to agree with the noun phrase as as the subject, which is the singular third person *she*. The primary auxiliary verb *was* is syntactically constructed as the finite verb, sensitive to person and number. It carries the present tense. In terms of distribution, the primary auxiliary verb *was* stands immediately before main lexical verb *ransacking* to form the present continuous aspect and the noun phrase *the stores* as the object. Another form *be* found in O. Henry's *The Gift of the Magi* is presented in (4).

(4) She had been saving every penny.

As can be observed, there are two primary auxiliary verbs in (4). One of them is *been*. The other is *had*. The primary auxiliary verb *be* in (4) changes its form to *been*. The change is required to meet the grammatical rule that *be* which is in construction with the past form of the primary auxiliary verb *have* and the continuous form of the main verb need to be in the past participle form. The primary auxiliary verb *been* is syntactically constructed as the non-finite, in the sense that it is not sensitive to person and number. In terms of distribution, the primary auxiliary verb *been* stands immediately before main lexical verb *saving*, which forms the present continuous aspect and the noun phrase *every penny* as the object.

The auxiliary *had* in (4) is the past form of the past tense form of the primary auxiliary verb *have*. This auxiliary establishes the perfect aspect and places the action in the past. The primary auxiliary *had* is positioned right after the subject *she* to carry the past tense. It fulfills the role of the primary auxiliary for the past perfect base. Two forms *be* found in O. Henry's *The Gift of the Magi* is presented in (5). One of the form is the same as the one presented in (3).

(5) Its possessor was being paid \$30 per week.

As a matter of fact, there are two primary auxiliary verbs in (5). The two auxiliaries are *was*, the past form of *be* and *being*, which indicates the continuous aspect. They construct the sentence's past continuous and passive voice. The auxiliary *was* occupies the highest auxiliary slot and structurally requires the verb that follows it to appear in its present participle form. The auxiliary *being* is selected by *was* and takes the subsequent main lexical verb in its passive participle form *paid*, which stands immediately before the noun phrase *\$30 per week*. One primary auxiliary, whose form is the same as the one in (1), can be observed in (6).

(6) Life is made up of sobs.

The primary auxiliary verb in (6) is constructed and distributed through specific grammatical rules which govern tense, aspect, and word order. The primary auxiliary verb *be* changes its form to *is* to meet the grammatical rule that the verb need to agree in person and number with the noun phrase *life* as the subject. The primary auxiliary verb *is* is syntactically constructed as the finite verb carrying the present tense. In terms of distribution, the primary auxiliary verb *is* appears immediately before the verb main verb *made up*, which is in the past participle form. Another auxiliary in the passive construction can be observed in (7-10).

(7) He was called "Jim".

(8) The income was shrunk to \$20.

(9) Within forty minutes her head was covered .

(10) At 7 o'clock the coffee was made.

As can be observed, in sentences (7-10) have the same form of *be*, namely *was*. In these sentences the auxiliary *be* changes its form to *was* to signal past tense and to agree with the singular noun phrase as the subject. To meet the grammatical rule of a passive construction, the auxiliary *was* is in construction with the past participle form *called* of the verb *call* in (7), with the past participle form *shrunk* of the verb *shrink* in (8), with the past participle form *covered* of the verb *cover* in (9), and with the past participle

form *made* of the verb *make* in (10). The primary auxiliary verb *be* in sentences (11-12) also changes its form to signal past tense.

- (11) His eyes were fixed upon Della.  
 (12) Maybe the hairs of my head were numbered

The auxiliary *were* in (11-12) is past form of *be*. The primary auxiliary verb *be* changes its form to *were* to signal past tense and to agree in number with the noun phrase *his eyes* as the subject in (11) and to agree with the noun phrase the hairs of my head as the subject in (12). It stands immediately before past participle form *fixed* of the verb *fix* in (11) and before the past participle form *numbered* of the verb *number* in (12), which subsequently appears before "Jim". The auxiliary *were* and the main verb in the past participle form *fixed* in (11) and *numbered* (12) signal a passive construction. The primary auxiliary verbs can also be observed in (13-15).

- (13) The "Dillingham" had been flung to the breeze  
 (14) It surely had been made for Jim.  
 (15) She had been prepared

As a matter of fact, two primary auxiliaries appear in (13-15). The two auxiliaries are *had* and *been*. *Had*, which follow the noun phrase as the subject, signals past tense. *Been*, which stands behind *had*, is the past participle form of *be*. The auxiliaries *had* and *been* shift the main verb *fling* into *flung* in (13), the main verb *make* into *made* in (14), and the main verb *prepare* into *prepared* in (15) to the past perfect passive. The primary auxiliary verb can also be observed in (16).

- (16) This dark assertion will be illuminated later on.

The primary auxiliary *be* in (16) takes the bare infinitive form to agree with the modal auxiliary *will*, which it immediately follows. The primary auxiliary *be* modifies the following main verb *illuminated* to create passive voice.

### 3.2 The Primary Auxiliary Verb *Do*

Besides the primary auxiliary *be*, which was explicated in (1-16) above, the primary auxiliary verb which is used in O. Henry's *The Gift of the Magi* is the auxiliary *do*. One of the forms of the primary auxiliary verb *do* can be observed in the sentence presented as (17) below.

- (17) You don't know what a nice-what a beautiful nice gift I've got for you.

As a matter of fact, *do* in (17) acts as the primary auxiliary. The primary auxiliary *do* is combined with the negative marker *not* to form the contraction *don't*. It is constructed as an inflected verb and distributed to carry tense and host the negative to support the sentence's grammatical requirement that main lexical verbs in English cannot directly attach to *not*. The primary auxiliary *do* is distributed to precede the main verb *know*, structurally preventing *know* from having to move or directly attach to the negative marker *not*. The construction and distribution of the primary auxiliary verb *do* like those in (17) can be observed in (18).

- (18) I don't think there's anything.

The primary auxiliary *do* in (18) are obviously paradigmatic with the primary *do* in (17). Like in (17), the primary auxiliary *do* in (18) is combined with the negative marker *not* to form the contraction *don't*. The primary auxiliary *do* appears the sentence's grammatical requirement that main lexical verbs in English cannot directly attach to *not*. The primary auxiliary *do* in (19-20) and the one in (17-18) are paradigmatic, the forms they take are different.

(19) Twenty dollars a week doesn't go far.

(20) Jim doesn't kill me.

The primary auxiliary *do* in (19-20) is combined with the negative marker *not* to form the contraction *don't*. However, the auxiliary *do* shifts its form to *does* to agree in person and number with the noun phrase as the subject. The primary auxiliary *do* appears the sentence's grammatical requirement that main lexical verbs in English cannot directly attach to *not*. The presence of auxiliary *do* requires the main verb *go* in (19) and the main verb *kill* in (20) to take the bare infinitive form. In (21) below, the past form of the auxiliary *do* can be observed.

(21) It did not exactly beggar description.

The primary auxiliary *do* in (21) shifts its form into *did* to encode past tense. It immediately follows the subject *it*, with which it agrees in person and number. The presence *do* taking the form *did* requires the main verb *beggar* to take the bare infinitive form.

(22) Don't look at me that way.

(23) Don't make any mistake, Dell.

As can be obviously observed, the primary auxiliary verb in (22-23) is *do*. The primary auxiliary is constructed as the base form *do* combined with the negative particle *not*, and is distributed to the sentence-initial position to carry tense and facilitate the negative imperative. The primary auxiliary *do* assumes the morphological and grammatical burden of the sentence (the present tense). Therefore, the main verb that the auxiliary governs *look* in (22) and *make* in (23) is forced into its bare infinitive form.

### 3.3 The Primary Auxiliary Verb *Have*

Besides the primary auxiliary *be* and the primary auxiliary *do*, the primary auxiliary *have* is present in O. Henry's *The Gift of the Magi*. One of the forms of the primary auxiliary verb *have* can be observed in the sentence presented as (24) below.

(24) Perhaps you have seen a pier-glass.

It goes without saying that *have* in (24) functions as the primary auxiliary verb. The primary auxiliary *have* is constructed and distributed through specific grammatical rules governing tense, aspect, and word order. It follows and agrees with *you* as the subject and requires the main verb *see* to appear in the past participle form *seen*, which establishes the perfect aspect. The primary auxiliary *have*, whose position is after the subject *you* in (24), establishes the present tense. Another occurrence of the use of *have* as the primary auxiliary can be seen in the sentence presented as (25) and the sentence presented as (26).

- (25) Her face had lost its colour.  
 (26) Della, being slender, had mastered the art.

Like in (24), the primary auxiliary verb *have* in (25) directly appears after the noun phrase as the subject. However, the primary auxiliary *have* in (25) conjugates its form to *had* to establish the past tense. This primary auxiliary requires the main verb *lose* to appear in the past participle form *lost*, which establishes the perfect aspect. The primary auxiliary *have* in (26) is paradigmatic with the primary auxiliary in (25). It changes its form from *have* to *had* to establish the past tense. This primary auxiliary forces the main verb *master* to appear in the past participle form *mastered*, establishing the perfect aspect. Structured as the primary auxiliary *have* in the past form plus the main verb *lose* in (25) and *master* in (26), the verb phrases (*had lost* and *had mastered*) are instances of the past perfect tense. Two other occurrences of the use of *have* as the primary auxiliary verbs can be observed in (27-28).

- (27) Expenses had been greater than she had calculated.  
 (28) One was Jim's gold watch that had been his father's and his grandfather's.

The primary auxiliary *have* in (27-28) stands after the noun phrase as the subject and changes its form to *had* to establish the past tense. This primary auxiliary requires the main verb *be* to be in the past participle form *been*. The main verbs in (27-28) are copula verb (*be*), different from the main verbs (non-copula) in (25-26), but the primary auxiliary occupy the same slot, before the main verb. The verb phrase consisting of the past participle form (*been*) of the main verb *be* and past form (*had*) of the primary auxiliary *have* is in the past perfect tense. The primary auxiliary *have* preceded by a modal auxiliary can be observed in (29-31).

- (29) Della would have let her hair hang out of the window.  
 (30) Jim would have pulled out his watch.  
 (31) The tresses that should have adorned the coveted adornments were gone.

The primary auxiliary verb *have* in (29-31) stands between modal auxiliary and the main verb. More specifically, the primary auxiliary *have* is positioned between the modal auxiliary *would* and the main verb *let* in (29), between the modal auxiliary *would* and the main main verb *pulled* in (30), between the modal auxiliary *should* and the main verb *adorned* in (31). It is the primary auxiliary verb *have* in (29-31) which requires the main verb to be in the past participle form. In the three sentences (29-31), the modal auxiliary, the primary auxiliary and the main verb build the verb phrase. The primary auxiliary verb *have* also appears in the sentence presented as (32) below.

- (32) I couldn't have lived through Christmas without giving you a present.

In (32), the primary auxiliary *have* functions as the perfect aspect marker. This primary auxiliary is constructed as the bare infinitive *have*. It stands after *couldn't*, which is the past form of the modal auxiliary *can* and hosts the negative marker *not*, which is contracted to *-n't* and is attached to the end of the modal auxiliary *could*. The primary auxiliary *have* requires the main verb *live* following it to be in the past participle form. The sequence of words consisting modal plus *have* plus past participle (*couldn't + have + lived*) is a verb phrase. Two other sentences containing negative marker *not* are presented as (33) and (34).

(33) Jim had not yet seen his beautiful present.

(34) He had not arrived at that patent fact yet.

In (33) and (34), the primary auxiliary *have*, which directly stands after Jim as the subject in (33) and directly follows *he* as the subject in (34), is finite and therefore conjugates its form to *had* to establish the past tense. The negative marker *not* directly follows the primary auxiliary. The past form of the primary auxiliary (*had*) requires the main verb *see* to be in the past participle form *seen* in (33) and the main verb *arrive* to be in the past participle form *arrived*. Between the past form of the primary auxiliary (*had*) plus *not* and the past participle form of the main verb (*seen*) in (33) appears *yet*, which functions as the adverb. However, the insertion of the adverb *yet* the sentence does not change the construction and distribution. The verb phrase constituted by the three words structured as *had* plus *not* + past participle form of the main verb is in the past perfect tense. The primary auxiliary *have* can be observed in two complex sentences presented as (35) and (36) below.

(35) *Had the Queen of Sheba lived in the flat across the airshaft, Della would have let her hair hang out of the window.*

(36) *Had King Salomon been the janitor, Jim would have pulled out his watch.*

As a matter of fact, the primary auxiliary *have* appears in the conditional (subordinate) clauses *Had the Queen of Sheba lived in the flat across the airshaft* in (35) and *Had King Salomon been the janitor* in (36). The primary auxiliary *have* in the subordinate clause of the complex sentence (35) conjugates its form to *had* to establish the past tense and so does the primary auxiliary *have* in the subordinate clause of the complex sentence (36).

The primary auxiliary *have* in changes its form to *had* to establish the past tense. In (35), the main verb is forced to be in the past participle form (*seen*) by the primary auxiliary (*had*). Meanwhile, in (36), the main verb is forced to be in the past participle form (*been*) by the primary auxiliary (*had*). Past perfect tense is formed by the primary auxiliary in the past tense (*had*) and the main verb in past participle form (*lived*) in (35). In (36), the past perfect tense is formed by the primary auxiliary in the past (*had*) and the main verb in the past participle (*been*).

As can be observed, the subordinate clause in (35) has its own subject (the Queen of Sheba). The subordinate clause in (36) also has its own subject (King Salomon). Unlike in (24-34), where the primary auxiliary *have* stands behind the subject, the primary auxiliary *have* in (35-36) is positioned before the subject. The two clauses are conditional clauses without *if*, where the primary auxiliary (*had*) is constructed via subject-auxiliary inversion.

(37) "You've cut off your hair?" asked Jim, laboriously, as if he had not arrived at that patent fact yet

In (37), the primary auxiliary *have* does not change its form (present). However, it shortens its form to *-'ve*. The primary auxiliary *have*, which is shortened to *-ve*, is constructed as part of a statement with a question mark. This sentence is constructed with inverted syntax. It reveals that Jim is struggling to process what he sees. Even though the primary auxiliary is constructed as part of the statement with a question mark, it controls the main verb to be in the past participle form (*cut*). The verb phrases

constituted the primary auxiliary *have* plus the main verb in the past participle form (cut) form the present perfect tense.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

As presented in the analysis, the primary auxiliary verbs *be*, *do* and *have* are used in the O. Henry classic short story *The Gift of the Magi*. The three primary auxiliaries contribute significantly constructing some of the sentences in the short story. The primary auxiliary *be* typically conjugates its form to *is*, *was*, *were*, *being*, or *been* to agree with the noun phrase as the subject and/or establish continuous aspect or passive construction. The primary auxiliary *do* appears in the form of *do*, *does* or *did* followed by negative marker *not* (shortened to *n't* with *do* or *does* hosting it). The primary auxiliary *have* take the form *have* or *had* to establish the perfect aspect in the verb phrase. The primary auxiliary *have* plus past participle form of the main verb form the present perfect tense. The primary auxiliary *had* plus past participle form of the main verb result in the past perfect tense.

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#### Authors' Contribution

*Wa'özisökhi Nazara* conceived the study, developed the theoretical framework, conducted the textual analysis, interpreted the findings, and drafted the manuscript. *Yusmalinda* contributed to the research design and assisted in the analysis and interpretation of the data. *Wisewarna Nazara* revised and proofread the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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