Ask a linguist

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M;et (@Piceapicea) asks "Why is the grammar of the proverb 'Needs must' so odd? Needs must… what? Be acknowledged?"

There are many sayings, such as this one, that we often use without really thinking about their actual content. Consider 'Cheap at half the price' – of course an item would be cheap if it were half price; should the saying really be 'Cheap at double the price'? That would be a bargain! Most common sayings, however, are at least grammatically correct, yet the phrase 'Needs must', on examination, is very difficult to break down into its constituent parts.

The full phrase, according to the Oxford Living Dictionary, is 'Needs must when the devil drives', meaning that it is sometimes necessary to do something unpleasant when the situation forces you to. 'Needs' is the noun/subject in this case (although it can also be used as a verb, e.g. 'He needs a new coat'). This still, however, leaves the question of the word 'must'. Normally, it is a modal verb like 'should', 'might' or 'ought', which accompanies another verb to define the urgency or probability of an action. These verbs cannot, normally, be used on their own, which is why the phrase 'Needs must' feels, somehow, wrong.

Let's take a look back to earlier English usage to try to find an answer. If we look at Old English, we find that the verbs we now use only as modals were often full verbs in their own right. Sentences such as 'I would you go home' were perfectly acceptable, even though we would say 'I would like you to go home' nowadays. Shakespeare makes use of this form of the modal 'must' in Othello:

"Be it as you shall privately determine / Either for stay or going, the affairs cry haste / And speed must answer, you must hence tonight."

The extra verb we would expect in modern English usage – 'go' – was implicit in earlier varieties of English, as with 'Needs must'.

The actual phrase does, indeed, date back to the 15th century, and the earliest record of it is from a book by John Lydgate, Assembly of Gods, written around 1420:

"He must nedys go that the deuell dryves."

Shakespeare also uses a version of it in All's Well that Ends Well:

"My poor body, madam, requires it: I am driven on by the flesh; and he must needs go that the devil drives."

The grammar of these two examples, however, is different yet again from our 'Needs must'. In these older quotations, the pronoun 'he' becomes the subject, thereby turning 'needs' into an auxiliary verb (like

Adrian Lester and Rory Kinnear in a National Theatre production of Shakespeare's Othello

"Be it as you shall privately determine / Either for stay or going, the affairs cry haste / And speed must answer, you must hence tonight."

Shakespeare uses the form of the modal 'must' in this speech from Othello.

'have', 'do' or 'be') that gives us more information about 'must' and 'drives'. So, the question is – where have the main verb 'go' and the pronoun 'he' gone? Unfortunately, this is not clear! ¶

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