Try come look at this construction!

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Abstract
The *try get* construction, used by some speakers of Hawai‘i English, consists of the bare form of the verb *try* immediately followed by the bare form of another verb, as in *We’ll try get some coffee tomorrow*. In this paper, I first describe the usage of this construction, showing that it behaves essentially identically to the widespread *go get* construction described most notably by Zwicky (1969) and Pullum (1990). I then analyze the syntax of the *try get* construction adopting Bjorkman’s (2016) proposal for the *go get* construction.

Keywords
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1. Introduction
This paper describes and analyzes a construction used by some speakers of Hawai‘i English in which the bare form of the verb *try* is immediately followed by the bare form of another verb. For speakers with the construction, all three of the following sentences are grammatical:

(1) a. We’ll *try get* some coffee tomorrow.
    b. We’ll *try to get* some coffee tomorrow.
    c. We’ll *try getting* some coffee tomorrow.

In most other varieties of English, only (1b) and (1c) are accepted. I term the construction found in (1a) the *try get* construction, following the example of the *go get* construction analyzed most notably in Zwicky (1969) and Pullum (1990) and more recently in Bjorkman (2016).

In this paper, I describe the usage of the *try get* construction and argue that the construction functions in basically the same way as the *go get* construction as analyzed in Bjorkman (2016). I also present examples of three verbs in a row (e.g. *try go get*) and explain the sentences in terms of the analysis given.

The structure of the paper is as follows: In section 2, I briefly describe the sources of the data. In section 3, I discuss prior literature on phenomena related to the *try get* construction. In section 4, I describe the basic facts of the *try get* construction in Hawai‘i English in comparison to the *go get* construction found in most English varieties. In section 5, I apply the analysis of the *go get* construction in Bjorkman (2016) to the *try get* construction. Finally, in section 6, I provide concluding thoughts.
2. Sources of the data

This description and analysis of the try get construction applies to Hawai‘i English. As I discuss further in the next section, I distinguish between Hawai‘i English and Pidgin or Hawai‘i Creole English, another widely spoken language in Hawai‘i. I constructed the example sentences drawing heavily from the description and analysis of the go get construction in Bjorkman (2016). The grammaticality judgments are drawn from my intuitions as a native speaker of Hawai‘i English who uses this construction. I consulted a few other native speakers of Hawai‘i English to corroborate my judgments. Not all speakers of Hawai‘i English that I consulted accepted the try get construction, but the speakers that did accept it provided the same judgments as me. In particular, the two speakers with whom I consulted the most were a male in his early 20s and a male in his mid 50s, both from Honolulu. I avoided consulting people who speak both Pidgin and Hawai‘i English in order to avoid confusion with regard to grammaticality judgments. However, most of the people that I asked perceived my examples of try get construction as characteristic of Pidgin, regardless whether they spoke Pidgin or used the construction.

3. Prior literature on the try get construction

There is no prior literature specifically discussing the try get construction in Hawai‘i English. However, a few sources have mentioned uses of try in Hawai‘i and elsewhere that may be related to this construction. Before discussing these sources, a brief clarification of the linguistic situation in Hawai‘i is in order. Two varieties are of particular relevance here. The first is a local variety of English, which I refer to as Hawai‘i English following Sato (1991); Drager (2012). The English language first arrived in Hawai‘i with Captain James Cook in 1778 (Wilson 1998; Drager 2012; Carr 2019). Although the Indigenous language of Hawai‘i, ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i (Hawaiian) enjoyed widespread literacy and was widely spoken by both Native Hawaiians and children of immigrants until the late 19th century, the spread of English accelerated following the overthrow of the independent Kingdom of Hawai‘i by American businessmen in 1893 (Wilson 1998; Drager 2012). A wealthy White minority sought to Americanize Native Hawaiian and immigrant populations, outlawing Hawaiian language education in 1896 as well as shutting down schools teaching other languages like Japanese (Wilson 1998; Drager 2012). In 1900, only around 5% of the population of Hawai‘i, mostly White people, spoke English as a native language (Carr 2019:xiii). Over the ensuing century, ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i neared extinction while Hawai‘i English has become widely spoken (Wilson 1998; Drager 2012).¹

The second language relevant to the current discussion is Pidgin, an English-based creole influenced by the native languages of sugar plantation workers from the mid-19th to early 20th century, including Hawaiian, Japanese, Cantonese, and Portuguese. Pidgin is also known to linguists as Hawai‘i Creole, Hawai‘i Creole English, or Hawai‘i English Creole (Drager 2012). Although Drager (2012) discusses Hawai‘i English and Pidgin as separate varieties, other linguists have described these as points on a dialect continuum (Reinecke and Tokimasa 1934; Sato 1991).

The focus of this paper is on the try get construction as used in Hawai‘i English. However, this construction is quite possibly related to uses of try found across the wider swathes of the English–Pidgin continuum. Reinecke and Tokimasa (1934:123) describe the use of try as an imperative auxiliary, citing the following example:

¹I include this history because it is under-discussed, and because it gives a sense of the parallel but distinct history of English in Hawai‘i in relation to Pidgin, which is better known and more often discussed by linguists.
(2) Mr. Reinecke, try read this page.

According to the authors, using *try* is “a trifle less polite” than using the equivalent imperative with *please* (Reinecke and Tokimas 1934:123). Their description does not differentiate between Pidgin and Hawai‘i English.

Carr (2019:155) cites the observations in Reinecke and Tokimas (1934) and provides her own brief description. She claims that *try* can be used in polite requests in place of *please* or if you *please* in other English varieties. She provides the following example:

(3) A: Will you have anything else?
   B: Yeah, try pass da rice.
   ‘Yes, please pass the rice.’

She notes that this usage is found in everything from the (lower case) pidgin speech of immigrants through what she calls “Hawaiian Near-Standard English.” However, *try* is not simply a stand-in for *please* as Carr (2019) suggests. For instance, the following sentence is utterly ungrammatical:

(4) * Pass the rice try.
   ‘Pass the rice please.’

The co-occurrence of *please* and *try* would also suggest that these words differ in their syntactic status.

(5) Please try pass the rice.

This sentence is not ungrammatical, but it seems a bit unlikely, perhaps due to differences in register between the somewhat formal use of *please* and the much less formal *try get* construction.

Examples (2) and (3) are grammatical in both Hawai‘i English and Pidgin, so depending on the speaker and context the sentences may be instances of the *try get* construction as analyzed here. However, the grammar of Hawai‘i English and Pidgin are distinct enough for their uses of *try* to warrant separate analyses. Another reason to discuss these usages separately is that neither Reinecke and Tokimas (1934) nor Carr (2019) provide examples of this use of *try* in sentences that are not imperative, whereas the construction described here can be used in other types of sentences, such as declaratives and interrogatives.

Phenomena similar to the *try get* construction in Hawai‘i English seem to occur elsewhere, in places like Australia, the United Kingdom, and Singapore. Kjellmer (2000) identifies a construction consisting of any form of the verb *TRY* followed by a bare infinitive and suggests that this construction may be an example of emergent language change in English. In a corpus search, he identifies 47 occurrences of *try*, *tries*, *tried*, and *trying* followed by a bare infinitive, of which 38 belong to the “Australian news” and “UK spoken” categories. Some examples from the corpus include the following (Kjellmer 2000:116):

(6) In response, the BLP has been holding private meetings at a St Philips-based retreat to try clarify its election tactics and to brush up its public image.

(7) Try not give them anything to eat or drink.

(8) Lady Thatcher would not add to her comments last night but supporters insisted that she was not trying oust Mr. Major.

(9) The ground still trembles from time to time as Irya tries remember the earthquake which left her and her 14-year-old Sasha orphans early on Sunday morning.
As these examples show, the TRY + bare infinitive construction that Kjellmer (2000) identifies allows any form of the verb TRY. In contrast, in the try get construction discussed here, try must be in its bare form. Therefore, only example (6) and example (7) are grammatical in Hawai‘i English. In example (7), the second verb give is negated. While this sentence strikes me, as a Hawai‘i English speaker, as slightly unnatural, my judgment improves if not is emphasized. The availability of negating the second verb seems to be a point of divergence between this example, if it can indeed be considered an example of the try get construction, and the go get construction discussed at length later in this work. It does not seem possible to negate the second verb in the go get construction, as shown below:

(10) *Come not yell at me later if it doesn’t work out!  
    ‘Don’t come yell at me later if it doesn’t work out!’

A quick online search for examples of try with a bare infinitive confirms the findings of Kjellmer (2000). I found occurrences of such examples in Australia and the United Kingdom, as well as Singapore:

(11) Try see it on a sunny day  (TripAdvisor; from Melbourne, Australia)  
(12) Try get other hotels  (TripAdvisor; from Singapore)  
(13) Need to try get to places like this for Christmas  (Twitter; from Scotland, UK)

These examples are grammatical in Hawai‘i English, but it is uncertain whether these speakers have the try get construction or another superficially similar construction.

4. Comparison of the try get and go get constructions

This section describes restrictions on the try get construction in Hawai‘i English. The basis for this discussion is prior literature on the more widespread go get construction, which consists of the bare form of the motion verbs come or go immediately followed by the bare form of another verb, as in the following examples from Bjorkman (2016:54):

(14) a. Go me a coffee!  
    b. I expected him to come visit again soon.  
    c. Every morning I go buy a coffee.

Quite a few authors have discussed the go get construction, including Perlmutter (1968), Zwicky (1969), Shopen (1971), Carden and Pesetsky (1977), Pullum (1990), Jaeggli and Hyams (1993), Pollock (1994), Cardinaletti and Giusti (2001), Wulff (2006), and Bjorkman (2016). Many of these authors compare this construction to the go & get construction, examples of which are provided below, adapted from example (14):²

(15) a. Go and get me a coffee!  
    b. I expected him to come and visit again soon.  
    c. Every morning I go and buy a coffee.

²Pullum (1990) uses the ‘&’ symbol to represent the reduced pronunciation of and. However, the go & get construction seems to be available regardless whether the and is reduced or full.
According to Pullum (1990), many of the earlier works on these constructions were written without any reference to the contributions of prior authors. My discussion draws primarily from Zwicky (1969), Pullum (1990), and Bjorkman (2016); I summarize some of the main observations from these works and demonstrate that the try get construction in Hawai‘i English exhibits the same restrictions as the more widespread go get construction.

Note that while I refer to the construction in example (14) as the go get construction following Pullum (1990), Zwicky (1969:430) refers to it as the go fish construction. Also, just as Pullum (1990) analyzes the go get construction in relation to the go & get construction, it may be fruitful to discuss the syntax of the try get construction in Hawai‘i English in relation to the more widespread try and construction, described most recently by Tyler (2018). Indeed, both Zwicky (1969) and Pullum (1990) also discuss the try and construction. However, I leave these comparisons as a topic for future work.

The basic restriction for the use of the go get construction is that neither verb can have any overt inflection. Citing Pullum (1990), Bjorkman (2016:55) divides this restriction into two conditions. First, the inflection condition refers to the restriction of the construction to bare inflectional contexts. Second, the identity condition refers to the requirement that both verbs have the same inflection. These conditions are demonstrated in the following examples from Bjorkman (2016:55):

(16) a. Come visit us next week.
   b. I want to go take a nap.
   c. Birds will come play in your birdbath.
   d. Her supervisor demanded that she go buy a replacement.
   e. I/you/we/they go get the paper every morning.

The sentences in example (16) demonstrate that the go get construction occurs in a wide variety of grammatical contexts, including imperatives, to-infinitives, modal complements, subjunctives, and non-3rd-person-singular present tense verbs. However, all of these examples are unified by the fact that the verbs occur in their bare forms. As shown in the following examples, again copied from Bjorkman (2016:55), changing the form of either or both verbs results in ungrammaticality:

(17) a. * She goes gets / go gets / goes get the paper every morning.
   b. * Our neighbour came left / come left / came leave a note on our door.
   c. * Clare has gone bought / go bought / gone buy the newspaper already.
   d. * Susan is coming having / come having / coming have lunch with us.

Thus, these examples demonstrate both the inflection condition, in that the construction is limited to contexts resulting in the bare forms of each verb, and the identity condition, in that both verbs have the same morphological form, that is, their bare form.

The same conditions apply to the try get construction in Hawai‘i English, as seen in the following examples (adapted from Bjorkman (2016:55)):

(18) a. Try bring the book over here.
   b. I wanna try eat at the new Korean food court.

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3 According to Bjorkman (2016:55), this bipartite division between the inflection and identity condition originates in Pullum (1990). However, I could not find any reference to the identity condition in Pullum (1990). Meanwhile, Zwicky (1969:431) points out the identity condition in noting that both verbs “must have identical affixes.”
c. He will **try use** the recipe you gave him.
d. She asked that I **try finish** my dinner before grabbing dessert.
e. I **try sit** at the same table every day.

Again, we see the *try get* construction occurring in a variety of grammatical contexts, all unified by the fact that they use the bare form of the verb. When either or both verbs have overt affixes, the sentences are ungrammatical:

(19)  
\begin{enumerate}
\item * She tries sits / try sits / tries sit at the same table every day.
\item * He tried brought / try brought / tried bring the book over here.
\item * She is try taking / trying take a nap.
\item * He has tried eaten / try eaten / tried eat healthier food.
\end{enumerate}

There is a striking contrast between example (18e) and example (19a): the verbal form that goes with the 1st person subject in (18e) is bare, and the sentence is grammatical; in contrast, the verbal form that agrees with the 3rd person subject in (18e) bears the -s morpheme, and the sentence is ungrammatical. All the other examples in (19) are ungrammatical, also, because one or both of the verbs bear suffixes, hence are not in the bare form.\(^4\)

Contra prior analyses of the *go get* construction, Bjorkman (2016) rejects a purely syntactic explanation for the inflection and identity conditions, instead arguing that these restrictions are sensitive to the surface morphology of each verb (Bjorkman 2016:54). She provides a few lines of evidence to support this assertion. First, sentences containing *do*-support result in bare forms of the two verbs in the *go get* construction, thus “rescuing” such examples from being ungrammatical. Compare the following examples from Bjorkman (2016:56) with examples (17a) and (17b):

(20)  
\begin{enumerate}
\item Does she **go get** the paper every morning?
\item Did our neighbour **come leave** a note on our door?
\item She doesn’t **go get** the paper every morning.
\item Our neighbour didn’t **come leave** a note on our door.
\end{enumerate}

The same *do*-support rescuing pattern occurs with the *try get* construction in Hawai‘i English:

(21)  
\begin{enumerate}
\item Does she **try sit** at the same table every day?
\item Did he **try bring** the book over here?
\item She doesn’t **try sit** at the same table every day.
\item He didn’t **try bring** the book over here.
\end{enumerate}

These sentences can be compared with sentences (19a) and (19b).

The fact that morphological restrictions are at play is also supported by the behavior of the *try get* construction with irregular verbs like *be*. The examples are adapted from Bjorkman (2016:57).

(22)  
\begin{enumerate}
\item Lacrosse players get examined by doctors after head injuries.
\end{enumerate}

\(^4\)The following sentence is grammatical:

(i) She is trying taking a nap

But it is grammatical for a reason irrelevant to this discussion: here, the verb *trying* takes a gerund (*taking*) as its complement.
b. Lacrosse players try get examined by doctors after head injuries.

(23)  

a. Lacrosse players *be / are examined by doctors after head injuries.

b. * Lacrosse players try be / are examined by doctors after head injuries.

In example (22), the syntactic environment of the sentence results in usage of the bare form of the verb get, so that the try get construction is acceptable. In example (23), the same syntactic environment results in usage of an inflected form of be, so that the try get construction is not acceptable. Thus, usage of the try get construction is licensed not by the syntactic environment, but the specific morphological form of the verb that is used.

For speakers with the try get construction, it is grammatical to combine the try get and go get constructions, resulting in three consecutive uninflected verbs. For example, the following sentences are grammatical:

(24)  

a. I’ll try go cook some rice tomorrow.

b. I’ll go try cook some rice tomorrow.

(25)  

a. Try come bring me the remote.

b. Come try bring me the remote.

There is a semantic difference between (8a) and (8b), and between (8c) and (8d). In (8a), the thing that will be attempted is “going to cook some rice,” whereas in (8b), the person will “go” first, and then attempt to cook some rice. There is an analogous difference between the meanings of (8c) and (8d).

So far, I have found no verbs in Hawai’i English that behave like try, come, and go in terms of the inflection and identity conditions. There seems to be no restriction on which second verb is used. Next, I describe Bjorkman’s analysis of the go get construction in general terms.

5. Analyzing the try get construction

A syntactic analysis of the go get and try get constructions must account for the following restrictions: both verbs must be bare, and they must be compatible with the broader syntactic environment (Bjorkman 2016:59). In this section I first summarize the syntactic analysis of Bjorkman (2016) for the go get construction, and then show how it can also apply to the try get construction in Hawai’i English. I also provide a derivation for sentences combining both the go get and try get constructions, as in examples (24) and (25).

In Bjorkman’s proposal, the syntax assigns multiple potentially conflicting features to the verbs, one resulting from the broader syntactic environment and another feature she initially posits as feature [F] that results in the bare form of the verb. The derivation only succeeds when the requirements of both the broader syntactic environment and the [F] feature converge on a single realization of the verbs. While the assignment of multiple potentially conflicting inflectional features is broadly incompatible with Minimalist syntax, it can be accommodated within the mechanism of Reverse Agree (Wurmbrand 2011; Zeijlstra 2012).

First, Bjorkman argues that the go get construction is not selecting specifically for uninflected forms. Instead, Bjorkman argues for a feature [INFL:DIR] that results in imperative morphology, which happens to correspond to bare morphology in English. Bjorkman draws a semantic link

Try try would be a bit odd, possibly due to semantic or processing restrictions. Thanks to Professor Larry Horn for pointing this out.
between motion verbs such as *come* and *go*, and imperativity. This semantic link is tenuous or absent in the case of the verb *try*, which suggests that some other feature, not necessarily imperative, may be at work in the *try get* construction. However, for the sake of consistency and simplicity I assume that the verbs have the feature [\textsc{infl:\dir}] which results in the imperative form of the verb.

Second, Bjorkman claims that the syntax of the sentence can assign two potentially conflicting feature sets to the same verb. The sentence below will help illustrate this point using the *go get* construction (adapted from Bjorkman (2016:61)).

(26) I will go visit my aunt.

According to Bjorkman, *go* and *visit* bear two feature sets: that of the imperative [\textsc{infl:\dir}] as well as the tense feature [\textsc{infl:\future}] (or perhaps [\textsc{infl:\non-past}]). The sentence is only grammatical if the two feature sets converge on the same morphological realization of the verb. The same reasoning applies if the verb *go* is replaced with *try*. Thus, if the two feature sets result in conflicting morphological forms of the verb, then the derivation fails. In sentences where the derivation succeeds, the verbs are underspecified, meaning their morphology can correspond to more than one feature set. In this way, the inflection condition is upheld by selecting for sentences in which the verb forms match the uninflected form.

Finally, Bjorkman’s analysis uses Reverse Agree to account for the identity condition that results in the same uninflected form for both verbs. Reverse Agree differs from Chomsky’s Agree by positing that interpretable features higher in the sentence allow for the valuation of uninterpretable features lower in the sentence. This type of analysis is well-suited to explaining sentences and languages in which the inflectional features occur on multiple verbs in a clause (Bjorkman 2016:62-63). Given that the usage of the *try get* construction patterns with the *go get* construction, I assume that the analysis given by Bjorkman basically works for the *try get* construction as well.

The sentences with three consecutive verbs are at least compatible with Bjorkman’s analysis. The example in (27) shows a sentence with three verbs, and the (simplified) structural representation provided in (28) shows the relevant Agree relations using arrows.\footnote{The phrase *Every day* is ignored for simplicity, as are other details such as the base position of the subject.}

(27) Every day I try go buy a coffee.

Although Bjorkman (2016) succeeds at capturing the properties of the *go get* construction, and by extension of the *try get* construction, her positing of an uninterpreted [\textsc{infl:\dir}] imperative feature is fairly stipulative. The observed patterns required some mechanism to force the verbs to be bare, so she argues that it is an imperative feature despite the fact that these constructions are not limited to imperative sentences. In future work it would be important to explore potential alternatives to Bjorkman’s proposal that derive the bareness of verbs in other ways.
Drager (2012:69) mentions that “the grammatical structures found in Hawai‘i English are said to be the same as those found in ‘standard’ American English,” and that “very little work has examined” syntactic variation in Hawai‘i English. This investigation of the try get construction provides a starting point for examining syntactic differences between Hawai‘i English and other varieties. It may also be interesting to investigate how this construction varies among speakers of Hawai‘i English, especially considering the coexistence of Hawai‘i English and Pidgin.

The try get construction is one of several syntactic variation phenomena involving try, such as try and (Tyler 2018) and tryna (Gonzalez 2020). In further work it would be interesting to examine these phenomena together in order to determine what makes try and its equivalents in other languages special. Moreover, try and the motion verbs come and go share similarities in the try get and go get constructions. It may be worthwhile to find out why these verbs behave similarly, and whether any other verbs belong to this group.

References


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