

You have to read this

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I'VE MENTIONED before the notion of "collocation" – words that "go together", like "spick" and "span". In the Catholic context, I talked about "Mass" collocating with such words as "Sunday", "High" and "serve". I was reminded on Thursday, the Feast of the Ascension of the Lord, of another Catholic collocation. "Holy day of ... ?" *obligation*, of course. I'll shorten it to HOO, to save space. "Obligation" was often used for Sundays too. Your "Sunday obligation".

The word seems to be going out of fashion. If you type it into Google Ngrams, a word-frequency display based on the scanning of more than five million books, you'll see a huge dip in frequency of use since 2000. But "obligation" is not alone. Its core meaning of "must" is also going out of fashion – that is, "must" in its sense of obligation.

There are two main uses of "must" in English. One is logical necessity: "This must be the entrance, as I can't see any other way in." The other is obligation: "Seat belts must be worn", "You must reply by the end of the month". You're obliged to do it. I'm only talking about the latter sense here.

How do I know "must" is going out of fashion? In my world there's a field called "corpus linguistics". A corpus is a large collection of recorded language, spoken or written. The largest corpora contain billions of words, and represent various times and places. One of these is called the "Diachronic Corpus of Present-Day



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Spoken English" (diachronic = historical), and this shows changes in English between the 1960s and 1990s, in a variety of settings, such as everyday conversation, radio discussions and sports commentary.

The change in "must" is truly dramatic: a 55 per cent drop in conversational use. And if you type "must" into Google Ngrams, you can see the steady decline there too – and that's in written English. By contrast, "have to" increased by over 30 per cent. Do you feel this change? Here's a pair of sentences that illustrate the difference between these two verbs.

You really must do it.

You really have to do it.

The first is authoritative: I'm telling

you. The second is more sympathetic: I think you should.

Why the change? It seems to be part of a social trend in which equality and mutual respect are playing an increasingly important role. "It's not up to me to tell you what to do" sort of thing. It's an acknowledgement of personal responsibility, or perhaps an avoidance of strong commitment: "I must do x" being replaced by the weaker "I have to do x".

So, if "obligation" is out, what could be in? I rather like "opportunity", which has been steadily increasing its use, especially as a plural. Ngrams shows a huge increase in "opportunities" in recent decades. The word has been in English since the Middle Ages, and it's common in Bible translations. I just did a search in the daily Mass readings listed on lectionaryreadings.co.uk, and found 22 instances, such as Judas looking "for an opportunity to betray him" (Matthew 26:16, NJB). It has a wide range of positive collocations, such as "splendid", "unique", "ample", "enormous", "equal", "excellent", "exciting", "golden", "great", "marvellous", "perfect", "unique", "once in a lifetime" ... – though also "lost", "missed", "wasted".

Yes, a HOO is an exciting, marvellous opportunity to encounter Christ. So maybe we need a new collocation now: holy days of opportunity.

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