

# Lennon's wordplay reveals different meanings of have

Peter  
Trudgill



email: newsdesk@tarchant.co.uk

John Lennon's moving 1970 song called *Mother* begins: "Mother, you had me, but I never had you".

These lyrics, as so often with Lennon's writing, are rather clever. The words play on the fact that the verb "to have" in English has two different meanings.

We understand very well what the different senses are here: his mother had him, in the sense of giving birth to him; but he never had her, in the sense of having her around him. John Lennon was brought up by his aunt; and then his mother was killed in an accident when he was 17.

These two different functions of the verb have are labelled "dynamic have" and "stative have" by grammarians of English. Dynamic have involves some type of action or event, as in having coffee with your breakfast, or having a good time, or having a shower - or having a baby. Stative have implies possession: it describes some kind of state or situation, as in having blue eyes, or having a new car, or having a cat - or having a mother.

Grammatically, these two haves behave differently in the traditional English of England. When asking a question involving stative have, we form the question by



John Lennon, who penned the song *Mother* in tribute to his mum Julia, who was killed in an accident when he was 17.

Picture: PA

starting it with the verb *has* itself, as for example in "Have you (got) any coffee in the cupboard?" (Younger people normally put in the *got*, but older Norfolk people don't.)

But when asking a question involving dynamic have, we start the sentence with "do", as in "Do you have (any) coffee with your breakfast?"

If you were to form a question based on stative have and start it with *do*, you might actually be misunderstood. For instance, if you said "Do you have coffee in the cupboard?", you might get a reply, at least from an older English person, along the lines that a cupboard is a pretty odd place to drink your coffee in.

But that would not be true of the USA.

Americans don't make this grammatical distinction, and they are quite capable of asking "Do you have beer in the fridge?"

This way of forming questions with stative have is becoming rather more common in many parts of England amongst younger people nowadays.

For the time being, though, older British people will still understand the joke about the Englishwoman who was asked by an American "Do you have children?" and replied "Frequently!"

**Prof Trudgill will be taking a break from his regular Monday EDP column to carry out research for new academic works. We hope he will be returning in a few months.**