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Two Situations Where *Had Better* Can Be Used

Kenji SONODA

**Abstract** The objective of this article is to argue that *had better* should be used only in connection with a particular situation, and usually in connection with a situation where there is a sense of urgency. These are exactly what we Japanese tend to overlook whenever we use this VP. This article explores how *had better* is defined in current dictionaries, then complement, or enlarge upon, what these dictionaries failed to mention, or neglected mentioning, and discusses the extent to which a large number of examples of *had better* in the COBUILD ON CD-ROM are used in connection with a particular situation and a situation that has a sense of urgency.

**Key Words** had better, a particular situation, urgency

1. Introduction

First of all, let us take a look at how *had better* is currently defined in the COBUILD 3, the LDOCE 4, and the OALD 6.

The COBUILD 3 defines this VP as follows:

(1) You use *had better* or 'd better when you are advising, warning, or threatening someone, or expressing an opinion about what should happen.

And it gives the following examples:

(2) a. It's half past two. I think we had better go home.
   b. You'd better run if you're going to get a ticket.
   c. He'd better not fool me.

The LDOCE 4 is not much different:

(3) a. used to give advice about what someone should do or to say what you should do or need to do.
   b. used to threaten someone.

The following examples are shown in this dictionary. ((4a,b,c,d) correspond to (3a) above, while (5) corresponds to (3b).)

(4) a. I'd better go and get ready.
   b. I think you'd better ask Jo first.
   c. Better just check she's okay.
   d. You had better not tell Oliver.

(5) You'd better keep your mouth shut.

The OALD 6 defines *had better* like (6), giving examples like (7). Comparing *had better* with *should* and *ought to*, this dictionary adds that *had better* can also be used in relation to a situation that is happening now (8), and an example similar to (7b) is given as its example in the dictionary.

(6) used to tell sb what you think they should do.

(7) a. You'd better go to the doctor about your cough.
   b. We'd better leave now or we'll miss the bus.
   c. You'd better not do that again.
   d. The best thing to do in a situation that is happening now.

What these three dictionaries commonly say is that *had better* is used in suggesting something, giving advice, giving a warning to someone, or threatening someone. In addition, *had better* can also be used in ordering someone (9d), although any reference to it cannot be found in these dictionaries. The following are my own examples of various uses of *had better* from the COBUILD ON CD-ROM.

(8) *Had better* can also be used to say what is the best thing to do in a situation that is happening now.

1. "Then perhaps I'd better not make you get up at all," Linus suggested.
   b. "But I'd better warn you it's not drinking water. Even if it was, you wouldn't want to drink it, would you?" He gave a throaty laugh.
   c. "You'd better not be thinking of carrying a 35mm camera to scenes of crime," Mason warned, half in fun and wholly in earnest.
   d. "Then you better come with me," he ordered.
   e. "I may need you."

The explanation given in (8) and also all of the examples that have been given so far in this paper imply

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clearly that *had better* is limitedly used, and that it cannot be used in all situations. Indeed, *had better* seems to be used only in reference to a particular situation, and it does not seem to be used in a situation that has general reference. Moreover, this VP seems to be usually used in a situation that has a sense of urgency. The enlargement upon these two points will be seen in the following.

**2. Two Situations Where Had Better Can Be Used**

Before proceeding to the main topic, I will make a brief mention of some forms of *had better*. Of the five forms, *had better*, 'd better, better, had best and better* *had*, the contracted form 'd better is most popularly used. The form *had better* is not used as often as the form 'd better. Better seems to be a little less frequently used than *had better*, and *had best and better had* are hardly used. To be specific, in the COBUILD ON CD-ROM, 'd better is found in 93 instances (65%), *had better* in 29 instances (20%), and better in 22 instances (15%). *Had best and better had* are used only once. The *had in had better* has nothing to do with the past, and *had better* suggests present or future. And the reason why the *had in had better* is often contracted to 'd or disappears altogether would be that this *had* has become almost meaningless now and it has become quite possible to communicate without recourse to the full form.

### 2.1 A particular situation

Murphy (1994:70) says that unlike *should, had better* is used "only" for a particular situation and that it is not used for things in general:

(10) We use *had better* only for a particular situation (not for things in general).

And he gives the following example:

(11) It's cold today. You'd better wear a coat when you go out.

Turton and Heaton (1996:51) say to the same effect:

(12) *Had better* is used in informal styles when you give someone strong advice about what to do in a particular situation.

Murphy (1994:70) says that when we talk about things in general, we can use *should*:

(13) I think all drivers *should* wear seat belts. (in general—not "had better wear")

Turton and Heaton (1996:51) also say that in a general situation *should, ought to or it would be better to* can be used:

(14) a. Parents *should* teach their children to be kind to animals.

b. Rather than complain and risk upsetting her, *it would be better to say nothing*.

It should be added here that all the 146 examples of *had better* in the COBUILD ON CD-ROM have to do with a particular situation, and not with a general situation.

### 2.2 A sense of urgency

*Had better* is usually used in a situation that has a sense of urgency. Turton and Heaton (1996:51) say:

(15) The situation usually exists at the moment of speaking and so there is usually a sense of urgency in the advice.

And they give the following examples:

(16) a. You'd better hurry or you'll miss the bus.

b. You'd better ring your parents—just in case they're worrying about you.

Swan (1995:234) also says that *had better* is used in an urgent situation:

(17) *Had better* refers to the immediate future. It is more urgent than *should or ought*.

And he gives the following example:

(18) "I really ought to go and see Fred one of these days." "Well, you'd better do it soon—he's leaving for South Africa at the end of the month."

In the COBUILD ON CD-ROM, approximately 21 examples of *had better* out of 29 are used in situations where there is a sense of urgency. In the examples of 'd better, approximately 68 examples out of 93 are used in situations in which there is a sense of urgency, and in the examples of *better, approximately 17 examples out of 22 are used in connection with urgent situations. There are examples in the CD-ROM where the sentences other than the *had-better* constructions are not given, and in them it is unclear whether they are used with regard to an urgent situation. True, not all the examples have to do with urgency. But this may not be a large problem if we consider that Turton and Heaton are saying that there is "usually" a sense of urgency in the advice, and that they are not saying "always."

Furthermore, looking at the examples of *had better* in the COBUILD ON CD-ROM, one cannot help feeling that a sense of urgency is all the more felt by using such adverbs as *soon, now, quick smart, tomorrow, etc., by using such verbs as leave, hurry, fly, get started, etc., or by using such conjunctions as *before and or, or by using expressions other than those in had-better constructions. Of course, a sense of urgency can be recognized without using such words or phrases at all. But their presence can certainly add to a sense of
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urgency. The following are those examples from the CD-ROM.

2.2.1 Words and phrases that contribute to a sense of urgency

2.2.1.1 Soon, pretty soon, now, quick smart and tomorrow

These words have to do with time or speed. They point to the present time or immediate future, at which time things should be done.

(19) a. Only Caddick of the seamers should survive and he had better get Wickets soon.
b. I'd better give Cutler a tinkle pretty soon.
c. Well, you had better go to your lodgings now.
d. You better get over here quick smart. We're in deep-shit trouble.
e. The funeral is next Monday. Now then, you had better see Jones the gravedigger about a funeral tomorrow.

2.2.1.2 Hurry, go, leave, get out, get along, slow down, fly, start and get started

These verbs suggest that urgent action is needed.

(20) a. But if anyone really wants the 68-piece Aynsley Elizabeth dinner set... they'd better hurry.
b. You'd better go. You've done enough damage.
c. "Right," said the bride, frowning. "We'd better leave."
d. It's true what Giles says, you can't reason with nature. We'd better get out.
e. Well, I'd better be getting along.
f. You'd better slow down a bit, Hoppy.
g. When Brookie wrote home and said she was living with an artist, I thought I'd better fly over and look for myself.
h. Better start making some more babies? England gunna need 'em.
i. Oh, well, I think we'd better get started.

2.2.1.3 NPs

There is a sense of urgency is alarm, precaution or ambulance.

(21) a. I gave him a wave to keep him away, and then said, "We'd better go over to the Reception and raise the alarm."
b. Whatever, she had better take extra precautions. She would rather not give bad luck any further opportunities.
c. Celia arrived at the house within 20 minutes; she took one look at me and said we'd better call an ambulance.

call an ambulance.

2.2.1.4 Straight and fast

These words mean "directly" or "at great speed."

(22) a. "I think I'd better go straight back to my digs," I said.
b. Listen, kid, you'd better sober up fast.

2.2.1.5 Before, or and in case

The conjunction before restricts time, and demands that something be done before a certain time, while the conjunction or warns or advises someone that a problem will arise if a thing required will not be done. The conjunction in case suggests the possibility of something happening.

(23) a. You had better hurry up and make those notes before you catch your death of cold, dear!" one of the women called out after her.
b. "You are drunk! You had better give me an explanation of how you got this suitcase and get out of here before I call the police!" the priest demanded angrily.
c. I think I'd better get you to your lodgings before the weather worsens," he shouted out against the rising clamour of the storm.
d. Terrible mistake, someone spilled my drink, someone else's urine sample, never touched the stuff in my life and all further questions had better be addressed to my lawyer or I'll sue.
e. There's a lot of blood. I'd better stay, I'd better stop here in case someone turns up.

2.2.1.6 The repeated use of the same words and the exclamation point (!)

A sense of urgency is felt all the more strongly if, for example, a name is repeated with the exclamation point (!):

(24) "You'd better come too..., Mr Ryan!" They approached the turf stock once more. "Mr Ryan!"

2.2.1.7 Words and phrases other than those in the *had-better* constructions

At times a sense of urgency can be recognized by words or phrases other than those in *had-better* constructions.

(25) a. The fires were getting closer and closer to where I was working and we decided we had better get out of the office.
b. I hear children getting anxious. I'd better let you go. Good luck.
c. We'd better get a move on, though, it's getting late.
d. "You'd better get it from there," shrieked
my landlady. "I don't want to have it nest-
ing in my drawers.
e. Mason paused, and then decided he had bet-
ter make explicit what else had crossed his
mind as he spoke. His face was suddenly for-
mal.
f. You'd better come into the front room. I've
got the kettle on ready for a cup of tea.
g. The Maryland State Police were arriving.
"You better go out and escort them in," he
ordered the agent who'd just questioned him.
h. Nell sprang to her feet purposely, added
briefly, 'I'd better let you go to bed.'
i. "When I say 'chaff,' Daren, you better give it
to me," Parsons said irritably.

3. Conclusion
In this article, I have argued that it is in connection
with a particular situation, and usually in relation to
a situation that has a sense of urgency that had bet-
ter can be used. With this in mind, let us consider the
following examples from a Japanese reference book
on English composition:

(26) a. *YOU had better read English-language pa-
pers if you want to learn English.
b. *YOU had better practice speaking English
with your friends so that you can help for-
eign travelers when they come to Japan.
These had-better constructions have general reference,
and they are not used in connection with a particular
situation. In addition, no sense of urgency is to be rec-
ognized here. These sentences are incorrect. However,
we tend to write these sentences quite readily, using
had better in all cases whether the situation is par-
ticular or not. That will certainly be what we have to
be careful about when we use had better.

Notes
1. All the following examples in this article are from
the COBUILD ON CD-ROM unless otherwise stated.
2. Kawakami M. and J. D. Monkman, Correcting Errors
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