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The degree of grammaticalization of *gotta*, *gonna*, *wanna* and *better*: A corpus study

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Abstract

The paper studies the degree of grammaticalization of the structures *gotta*, *gonna*, *wanna* and *better*. The study presumes that the semantics of these structures – more precisely their modal polyfunctionality (i.e. the ability to express deontic and epistemic meaning at the same time) – has an impact on their morphosyntactic properties. Using corpora (predominantly the British National Corpus and the Corpus of Contemporary American English) and web forums, the paper studies in detail the level of independence of *gotta*, *gonna*, *wanna* and *better* from their respective auxiliaries (have and be) and the development of the operator properties of these structures typical for central modals (i.e. inversion in questions, compatibility with clausal negation and occurrence in elliptical contexts). It demonstrates that *gonna* and *gotta* are partially grammaticalized, especially with respect to the independence of their auxiliaries, but they do not syntactically behave as modals. The verb *wanna* behaves as a modal morphologically but not syntactically. On the other hand, *better* is grammaticalized to a high degree, and it does demonstrate both the morphology and syntax of central modal verbs.

Keywords

grammaticalization, operator properties, agreement, *gotta*, *gonna*, *wanna*, had better

Introduction

Modal verbs belong to a part of grammar currently experiencing significant changes, prompting linguists to focus on this part of grammar from various perspectives (Krug, 2000; Collins, 2009; Leech et al., 2009). Among changes frequently mentioned in connection with the grammaticalization of modals is the emergence of phonetically reduced structures such as *gotta*, *gonna*, and *wanna*. Leech et al. (2009, p.105), using data from Krug (2000, p.175) claim that these structures are constantly progressing in the British National Corpus. Despite the fact that the literature focusing on this topic is plentiful, scholars rarely provide any explanation of the stimuli leading to the formation of such structures. Therefore, this paper does not approach the issue from the descriptive perspective only but also aims to provide a possible explanation for the rise of such forms. Then the hypothesis concerning

the rise of such forms will be challenged by a corpus study.

In Machová (2014, pp.87), I proposed a hypothesis stating that the emergence of such phonetically reduced forms is fully predictable and based on the **modal polyfunctionality** of their ‘mother’ structures. I explained in detail why marginal modals such as *dare*, *need*, *shall* and *ought* demonstrate non-standard morphosyntactic behaviour and discussed briefly the formal properties of structures such as *be able*, *be to*, *had better*, *be going*, *have got to*, and the like. This paper is a follow-up study focusing in detail on four structures, *have got to*, *be going*, *had better* and *want*, and their phonetically reduced counterparts *gotta*, *gonna*, *better*, and *wanna*, respectively.

In the first section, the paper presents the hypothesis. Secondly, the mother structures *have got to*, *be going*, *had better* and *want* are analysed from the perspective of their

syntax and semantics. Then follows the corpus analysis, which studies to what extent the phonetically reduced forms *gotta*, *gonna*, *better*, and *wanna* are dependent on the accompanying auxiliaries *have (had)*, *is*, and the auxiliary *do*. Finally, the study analyses to which extent these structures demonstrate syntactic structures typical of auxiliaries (inversion in questions, an ability to combine with sentence negation etc.).

1. Hypothesis

Polyfunctionality is the ability of a modal element to express more types of meaning, more precisely deontic (permission, obligation or ability) and epistemic (probability) at the same time. Polyfunctionality does not apply only to English modals but is a property of modal verbs in many other languages as well – for an analysis of, for example, German modal verbs, see Heine (1995, pp.17).¹ Polyfunctionality is common for all central modal verbs, as well as for some marginal elements such as *need*, *have to*, etc. The meanings are exemplified in (1a-b).

- (1)a. *He may go home now.* deontic (permission)
 b. *He may well be at home now.* epistemic (probability)

The hypothesis claims that polyfunctionality has an impact on the morphology and syntax of modals in English. More precisely, polyfunctionality in English is closely related to **the absence of agreement** (in English visible only with the 3rd person singular) – i.e. polyfunctional elements (including central modals) do not show any agreement morphology, as in *he must/*musts*, *she can/*cans*. Furthermore, polyfunctionality also triggers **operator properties**, known also as NICE properties in the descriptive approach – see Huddleston and Pullum (2002). In more formal terms, central modals appear in the INFL/T slot, unlike lexical verbs that appear in a VP, as discussed by Haegeman (1994), among many others. As a result, a modal polyfunctional element inverts in questions, can be followed by the negative particle *n't* and appears in question tags or short answers – for examples, see (2a-d).

- (2) a. *Can you speak Chinese?*
 b. *She can't speak Chinese.*
 c. *She can't speak Chinese, can she?*
 d. *No, she can't.*

Several pieces of evidence suggest a correlation between polyfunctionality and morphosyntactic properties, one being an example of the marginal modal *need* in (3a-b), demonstrating its polyfunctional and monofunctional varieties.

- (3)a. *He needn't be in his office now.*
 epistemic and deontic readings
 b. *He doesn't need to be in his office now.*
 deontic reading only

In (3a), *need* is polyfunctional and, as visible from the example, does not demonstrate any agreement morphology. At the same time, it is in the INFL/T node and demonstrates operator properties – namely the combination with the clausal negative particle *n't*. On the other hand, (3b) shows that its counterpart in VP does not permit polyfunctional interpretation.

From the syntactic perspective, such change in morphosyntactic behaviour may be explained as a process of grammaticalization, as understood by, for example, Roberts and Roussou (2003, pp. 194). In their view, grammaticalization is defined as the movement upwards in the syntactic tree. In the case of *gotta*, *gonna*, *wanna* and *better*, their mother structures drop the auxiliary and then move from a lower position into the INFL/T node. As a result, they demonstrate the morphosyntactic properties of central modals (i.e. absence of agreement and NICE properties). Grammaticalization of these elements is also accompanied by a change of category – in this case the element acquires a new part of speech; *gotta*, *gonna*, *better*, and *wanna* may be regarded as new emerging modals.

Another issue is the sequence of the model *polyfunctionality – absence of agreement – operator properties*. The question which arises in relation to the treatment of *gonna*, *gotta* and *wanna* is whether the meaning triggers the changes in grammar, or the new formal structures result in semantic changes. There are advocates of both approaches; Traugott and Dasher (2002, p.283) hypothesize that grammaticalization is actuated by semantic changes, whereas formal approaches suggest that the grammatical change triggers the semantic

¹ An extensive cross-linguistic study on polyfunctionality has been carried out by van der Auwera, Ammann and Kindt (2005, pp.247) and van der Auwera and Ammann (2013).

change; see Roberts and Roussou (2003, pp. 194). More precisely, Roberts and Roussou (2003) claim that the movement up the syntactic tree results in the changes in meaning, i.e. in their approach the sequence of the changes would be *absence of agreement - operator - polyfunctionality*. Despite the fact that this theory looks attractive, its practical application seems less feasible. In this way, we could conclude that any element can become grammaticalized, i.e. it can undergo the same structural reduction as *gotta*, *wanna*, or *gonna*. However, structures such as *start - *starta*, *plan - *planna*, *prefer - *prefera*, *hope - *hopa* are non-existent.

To clearly trace the temporal order of changes is difficult. Traugott and Dasher (2002, p.149) claim that *have got to* acquired its epistemic reading in the 20th century - such dating is, unfortunately, too imprecise. However, the corpus shows that the first environments where the structure was potentially epistemic can be traced much earlier - see the following example:

(4) *What articles did he purchase, sir. Puf. Pufpface New fine clothes, an extravagant villain; he **has got to** be as proud as Lucifer.*
[COHA: 1812: FIC: Miser]

As for the reduced form, epistemic *gotta* starts to appear in 1910s, according to Corpus of Historical American English (COHA). Therefore, the example of *gotta* is the illustration that the meaning preceded the form. According to my working hypothesis, the sequence *absence of agreement - operator properties* is triggered by potentiality of the polyfunctional reading. More precisely, once there is a context where the element can be interpreted as polyfunctional, the formal changes start to follow. Only later does the polyfunctional reading spread in its frequency.

2. Syntactic status of *have got to*, *be going*, *had better* and *want*

The reduced forms *gotta*, *gonna*, *wanna* and *better* originated from the forms *have got to*, *be going*, *want* and *had better*, respectively. Syntactically, the structures *be going*, *have got to* and *had better* consist of an auxiliary *be* or *have (got)* in the INFL/T node and a following verb (*going*), particle *to (have got to)* or adjective (*better*);² see Table 1:

Auxiliary (Operator), INFL/T node	modal part
<i>be</i>	<i>going</i>
<i>have (got)</i>	<i>to</i>
<i>had</i>	<i>better</i>
∅/do for non-affirmative contexts	<i>want</i>

Table 1. Syntactic structure of *be going to*, *have got to*, *had better* and *want to*

In a sentence, the auxiliary is in the INFL/T node, and as a result takes the subject-verb agreement and at the same time functions as a syntactic operator (it inverts in questions and is followed by *n't*). However, I claim that this auxiliary is only an integrating element not contributing in any way to the meaning of the structure. In other words, the modal meaning is conveyed only by *going*, *to* and *better*. Despite the fact that this view might go against the traditional view and might even seem counterintuitive at first, there are good reasons for such an analysis. For example, when the structure *have got to* is considered, it has the same meaning as *have to*, or *be to* - see the following set of sentences:

- (5) a. *He has got to study hard.*
 b. *He has to study hard.*
 c. *He is to study hard.*

Despite the fact that the sentences (5a-c) might differ stylistically, from the perspective of modality, they are synonymous, as they primarily denote deontic modality (more precisely necessity). The only difference is the auxiliary used; in the case of *be to*, it is the auxiliary *be*; in the case of *have got* and *have*, it is the auxiliary *have*, which lands in INFL/T in the first case and in VP in the second case. The meaning is thus on the modal part *to*. The same holds for structures *be going* and *had better*. More precisely, I claim that the modal parts are *going* and *better*. The auxiliaries are semantically redundant, and therefore, are frequently dropped in the structures *gotta* or *gonna*, as will be shown later.

3. Semantic status of *be going*, *have got to*, *had better* and *want*

This part shows that all the analysed structures are polyfunctional, i.e. they

² In the case of *want*, there is no integrating auxiliary; the meaning is conveyed by the lexical verb, which,

when necessary, is combined with the auxiliary *do*, which is inserted into INFL/T.

express both epistemic and deontic meaning. Concerning *be going*, its default use is to denote future predictions, i.e. epistemic modality. At the same time, *be going* has recently started to be used in the deontic sense as well, as exemplified in (6b) in Collins (2009, p.148).

- (6) a. *It is going to rain.*
 b. *You're going to try and be bit earlier.*

Whereas in (6a) *be going* expresses future prediction – i.e. epistemic modality – in (6b) *be going* carries the deontic meaning of advice or order. I am not aware of sources that would discuss the meaning of *be going* with respect to its non-future meanings. Such examples can be, however, found in the corpus – see the following sentence, taken from a teacher-student interaction:

- (7) *You are going to decide now, by looking at your graph how you could improve this piece of work [...]* [BNC: 1992: F7R:S_classroom]

In this example *be going* is likely to be interpreted as an order, rather than the future reference (which is, moreover, not compatible with adverbial *now*). Polyfunctionality also occurs with *have got to/have to*, as this structure expresses primarily the deontic meaning of obligation, as shown in (8a). However, this semi-modal has recently developed an epistemic usage as well, as shown in (8b), taken from Leech et al. (2009, p.109):

- (8) a. *The students have (got) to submit their homework in time.*
 b. *This has got to be some kind of local phenomenon.*

Besides *be going* and *have got to*, the structure *had better* is polyfunctional as well. Its default meaning is deontic, as being a synonym for *should*, as in (8a). Denison and Cort (2010, pp. 349) demonstrate that *had better* has also an epistemic reading, providing an example in (9b):³

- (9) a. *You had better go now.*
 b. *The annual parade is in September. The weather had better be good.*

Want is not generally regarded as polyfunctional, at least not in Standard English. It expresses volition; still, *want* seems to be currently developing other meanings as well. Collins (2009, p.152) provides an example of a deontic *want* in (10a). Westney (1995, p.32) shows an example of the epistemic use of *want* in (10b).

- (10) a. A: *Do you want tap water or this*
 B: *Just normal water*
 A: *It's it's Spa*
 B: *Solpadeine is is uh*
 A: *What You want to use the tap water then*
 b. *They want to be pretty stupid if they believe everything he says.*

This shows that the structures are at least marginally polyfunctional, though not yet standard speech. Taking this into consideration, this paper presumes that the phonetically reduced forms *gotta*, *gonna*, *wanna* and *better* are results of the emerging polyfunctionality of their mother structures (*have got*) *to*, (*be*) *going*, (*do*) *want* and (*had*) *better*. More precisely, there is a tendency of the polyfunctional modal elements *going*, *to*, *want* and *better* to be non-agreeing and to move to a higher INFL/T position, which is in mother structures realized by the auxiliaries *have*, *be* and *do* that, however, do not convey any modal meaning. Such development is thought to occur in several steps:

0. Formation of reduced (non-agreeing) forms *gotta*, *gonna*, *wanna* and *better* with auxiliaries pronounced in the full form
 → *He has gotta go.*
 1. The auxiliary is reduced into 've, 's, 'm, 'd
 → *He's gotta go.*

important, providing a wider (deontic) context for it. However, the issue of polyfunctionality is based on the fact that if there is a context where a modal is epistemic (and deontic), it is regarded as polyfunctional. In other words, a wider context, or a contextual frame can (and frequently does) disambiguate the meaning, but if there is *any* context where the sentence *It had better be important* is interpreted epistemically (and there is), *had better* must be regarded as epistemic. For more information on the role of context, see Heine (1995).

³ Another author defending the existence of the epistemic meaning is Mitchell (2003, pp.129). On the other hand, some authors deny the existence of the epistemic reading of *had better* – for example Collins (2009, pp. 19) and Westney (1995, p.183). Denison and Cort themselves (2010, p.369) doubt the epistemic interpretation of Mitchell's sentence *It had better be*

2. The auxiliary is dropped altogether

→ *He gotta go.*

3. Structures *gotta*, *gonna*, *wanna*, *better* acquire the operator position themselves – they are syntactically in INFL/T.

→ *He gotta not go.*

→ *Gotta he go?*

Furthermore, notice that the structures formed in step 2 and 3 are inherently non-agreeing

**He gonnas/wannas/gottas/betters.* In the following sections, I will study to what degree the relevant structures *be going*, *have got to*, *had better* and *want* are grammaticalized in this respect; i.e. which steps 1–3 they allow for.

4. Corpus analysis

The corpus analysis is divided into two parts. First, the paper ascertains to what extent the structures *gotta*, *gonna* and *better* are independent of their auxiliaries, i.e. if the structure is preferred to be used with the full auxiliary (11a), abbreviated auxiliary (11b) or without it (11c):

(11) a. *S/he has gotta relax.* Step 0

b. *S/he's gotta relax.* Step 1

c. *S/he gotta relax.* Step 2

The second part of the research focuses on the syntactic properties of the abbreviated forms *gonna*, *gotta*, *wanna* and *better*. Based on the previously presented hypothesis, I assume that these structures should move to INFL/T and gradually develop operator properties; more precisely they should be followed by the negative *n't*, invert in questions, or appear in question tags.

4.1. Methodology

For the purpose of this study, I will predominantly use the following corpora: Corpus of Contemporary American English/COCA, British National Corpus/BNC, Corpus of Historical American English/COHA and Corpus of American Soap Operas/SOAP. In isolated cases, I will also use a web search engine.

The first part studies the status of the auxiliary, and the search is limited solely to a corpus search in the BNC and COCA. The aim is to ascertain tendencies in the relation of a structure to its auxiliary, and for the sake of simplicity, the search was limited

only to declarative sentences.⁴ The subject is limited to the third person singular, more precisely to *he* or *she* subjects. An example of search strings is as follows (for the case of *gotta*):

(12) a. *he has got ta [v*]*

b. *he's got ta [v*]*

c. *he's got ta [v*]*

The same search was performed for the subject *she*. The sentences were individually checked, and the examples that do not relate to the studied area were discarded, despite following the search string; e.g. the result *he better understands [...]* clearly does not relate to the phrase *had better*, but *better* functions here as an adverbial, modifying a verb.

The second part of the analysis focuses on the ability of a free-standing structure *gotta*, *gonna*, *wanna* and *better* to form questions by inversion with subjects and negative sentences with *not*. For this purpose BNC and COCA were searched using the following strings (in case of *gotta*):

(13) a. *got ta he [v*]*

b. *got ta not [v*]*

The examples were then manually processed and checked. However, since some strings did not show any results, a web search engine was also used in isolated cases. The results of such searches were not processed into a chart, since the data from this source may be unreliable. Accidental examples from the web search engine are used in order to outline the possible future development of the structure. In some cases, further and more detailed searches were carried out (for example in COHA), but these are described in detail in respective sections.

4.2. Gotta

4.2.1. Auxiliary reduction and omission

According to Table 2, it is obvious that *gotta* is grammaticalized to the extent that the auxiliary is pronounced in full in zero cases

⁴ Despite the fact that the (in)dependence of the structure of its auxiliary may be different in various sentence types (i.e. declarative, negative sentences and questions), the search in declarative sentences will be sufficient to ascertain the basic tendencies in terms of the structure behaviour.

- i.e. in declarative the auxiliary in the full form does not occur.⁵

	BNC		COCA	
s/he has gotta +V	0	0 %	0	0 %
s/he's gotta +V	155	94 %	169	94 %
s/he gotta +V	9	6 %	11	6 %

Table 2. Occurrence of *gotta* in the BNC and COCA in affirmative sentences

In the vast majority of cases, the auxiliary is obviously present, though reduced. Structures without an auxiliary are infrequent. When analysing the corpus data, there is one interesting fact. In the BNC the auxiliary used with *gotta* is only *have*, as expected, however, in the COCA, clausal negation of *gotta* is much more frequently formed with *don't* or *ain't* than with its mother auxiliary *haven't*. More precisely, the structure *haven't gotta* has only 1 result in the COCA, whereas *don't gotta* shows 19 results and *ain't gotta* occurred in 17 cases - an example given in (14a-b).

(14) a. *You don't gotta test me.* [COCA: 2011: FIC: Bk:WorldsGreatest]

b. *You ain't gotta say that.* [COCA: 2005: SPOK: PBS_Tavis]

In my opinion, this documents that *gotta* constitutes a separate unit and is in fact completely independent of its auxiliary.

4.2.2. Operator properties

As shown, *gotta* is not frequently used without its auxiliary. Therefore, it cannot be expected that the operator properties will be developed to a great extent yet. Concerning question formation, there is no evidence in the corpora or in web forums that *gotta* would invert in questions.

⁵ Whereas the auxiliary in the full form does not show any results for this third person, both corpora give few results of the full auxiliary for the second person, i.e. *you have gotta* (5 results for BNC and 1 result for COCA). Therefore, the form with the full auxiliary is existent, however, very limited - for the string with the reduced auxiliary (i.e. *you've gotta*), there are 600 results in BNC and 250 for COCA - this means less than one per cent.

As far as the negative is concerned, the corpora do not reveal any example of clausal negation attached to *gotta*; however, research in websites reveals that structures as in (15) are not rare.

(15) a. *Sometimes you just gotta not worry so much about money and just get xp.* [IPS Community - Forum]

b. *You gotta not care about what people think in general about you.*

[Morning Brew - Article]

Still, these examples do not reliably prove that *gotta* functions as an operator, as *not* can alternatively constitute a phrasal negation. A few cases of *gottan't/gottn't* (in the main clause as well as in the question tag) can be found in various web discussions - as shown in (16), but their number is not significant.

(16) a. *We Gotta Get Out Of This Place, Gotta'n't we?*

[The Partridge Family Bulletin Board: General Chit-Chat - Forum]

b. *Otherwise I know now why we gottn't a new patch from Activision.*

[Thread: Temporary File Database - Forum]

To conclude, *gotta* is not used with the full auxiliary, i.e. the structure is already grammaticalized to a certain extent. Moreover, it is frequently used with the auxiliary *don't* or *ain't*, which only supports the statement that an auxiliary plays no role in the modal meaning of the structure. At the same time, however, its usage with a zero auxiliary is still rather marginal, though existent. As far as the operator properties are concerned, there is no reliable data that would confirm that *gotta* functions as an operator in present-day English.

4.3. Gonna

4.3.1. Auxiliary reduction and omission

As for *gonna*, the results are similar to *gotta* - see Table 3. The most frequent use is with the reduced auxiliary. Especially the COCA, however, shows that the dropped auxiliary is actually more frequent than the auxiliary pronounced in the full form. Moreover, the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA) shows that since the 1930s the use of the structure *he gonna* has risen. Therefore, more independence on the auxiliary may be expected in the future.

	BNC		COCA	
s/he is gonna +V	8	1 %	10	1 %
s/he's gonna +V	585	98 %	982	93 %
s/he gonna +V	8	1 %	68	6 %

Table 3. Occurrence of *gonna* in the BNC and COCA in affirmative sentences

4.3.2. Operator properties

Concerning operator properties, *gonna* is not frequently used without its auxiliary, and as a result of this, it is not prone to demonstrate operator properties, as the omission of the auxiliary is thought to be a necessary prerequisite for that. As far as question inversion is concerned, there are no examples in the corpora or in web forums that would prove the existence of the structures, as in (17):

(17) **Gonna he stay here tonight?* [Not attested]

Concerning negation, the corpora do not attest to the existence of *gonna* being an element followed by clausal negation – i.e. **gonnan't*. In some web forums, however, we may find sentences as in (18a–b).

(18) a. *Hello pastor, your article talks much of wisdom and inspiration, i gonna not miss this again, thanks and more blessings.*

[Beware: The Silent Relationship Killer – Comments]

b. *Tomorrow is a friend's birthday party i think i gonna not eat anything all day tomorrow and prepare for the food there...*

[Nutritional Ketosis / High Fat, Low Carb – Forum]

They are rather rare and maybe close to idiosyncratic occurrences, but such examples may foretell future development tendencies.

To conclude, *gonna* is used with the reduced auxiliary. The cases with a full auxiliary are extremely rare. The occurrences with the omitted auxiliary are also rare, although there is a clear developmental tendency towards this kind of behaviour. Concerning the operator syntax, there are not enough attested examples that would prove that *gonna* behaves syntactically as a modal.

4.4. Wanna

4.4.1. Operator properties

Wanna (in contrast to *want*) already copies the morphology of central modals, i.e. it does not demonstrate any agreement morphology, nor does it occur with the *to* infinitive – see (19a–b).

(19) a. *She wants to leave.*

b. *She wanna leave.*

Wanna originates as a verb not combining with any auxiliary, and therefore it will be analysed only in terms of its syntactic properties (i.e. steps 0–2 are not applicable). It does not occur in question inversion in any of the analysed corpora. Concerning negation formation, the corpora shows an overwhelming majority of the auxiliary *do*, however there are some cases in the corpora as well as in internet blogs and articles when *wanna* is followed by *not*, as in (20a–b).

(20) a. *You wanna not fight out in the alley.*

[COCA: 2007: FIC: Analog]

b. *I kinda overate yesterday, and I wanna not eat as much today.*

[What should I eat? I'm a fruitarian – Question]

However, as mentioned previously, it does not confirm that these sentences demonstrate an example of clausal negation, as these can be interpreted as phrasal negations. Therefore, I conclude that despite behaving as a modal on the morphological level, its syntax still copies the structures typical of lexical verbs.

4.5. Better

4.5.1. Auxiliary reduction and omission

Data for *had better* are available in Table 4, which shows that there are significant differences between British and American English. As far as the BNC is concerned, the structure can be used with the auxiliary in the full or reduced form; the version with the omitted auxiliary is rather rare. In the COCA, on the other hand, the full auxiliary is the least frequent form. The reduced auxiliary is used most often; however, the variant with zero auxiliary occurred in one-third of the cases. The structure without the auxiliary is, therefore, fully acceptable in American English.

	BNC		COCA	
s/he had better	66	43 %	136	18 %

+V				
s/he'd better +V	79	53 %	371	51 %
s/he better +V	6	4 %	224	31 %

Table 4. Occurrence of *had better* in the BNC and COCA in affirmative sentences

4.5.2. Operator properties

The structure *had better* seems to be by far the most grammaticalized structure, i.e. it is most independent of its auxiliary *had*. Therefore, it is expected that its operator properties will be the most developed of all elements.

As far as question formation is concerned, no occurrences of *better* being inverted with the subject of a sentence were found. Concerning negation, in corpora there are two ways of negating the structure *had better* – namely *hadn't better* and (*had better not*). According to the COHA, the negation *hadn't better* has a declining frequency, and when the two versions are compared, *hadn't better* is much less frequent than (*had better not*) – 4/28 occurrences for the BNC and 4/1,248 occurrences for the COCA. Obviously, the position of negation itself supports the development of *better* as an operator.⁶ Moreover, structures SUBJ + *better* + *not* + V are not infrequent in the BNC or COCA – see the examples in (21a–b):

- (21) a. *I better not put these on the table.*
[BNC: 1993: KPU: S_conv]
b. *You better not leave me here!* [COCA: 1994: FIC: BilingualRev]

In these cases, *better* most probably functions as the operator of the sentence as there is no agreement morpheme on the following lexical verb – see example (22a–b).⁷

- (22) a. *He better not go to Cheryl's again!*
[BNC: 1992: KBY: S_conv]

⁶ It may be argued that (*had better not*) is an example of phrasal negation. However, due to the practically non-existing alternative *hadn't better* in American English, it is much more probable that (*had better not*) is an example of clausal negation.

⁷ A counter argument might be that the operator of the sentence is *had*, despite being covert. However, it is not a property of the English language to drop operators – as in **He reading a book at the moment* (apart from African American Vernacular English).

- b. *You better not be joking, Daniel Kelleher.*
[COCA: 2011: FIC: Bk: MaineNovel]

Despite the fact that Collins (2009, p.18) gives an example of *better* combined with *n't* as in (23), neither the corpora nor the web analysis proved the existence of such examples:

- (23) **We better go, bettern't we.* [Not attested]

Another property of the operator is its appearance in short answers and elliptical contexts. The corpus (mostly the COCA) showed that *better* does occur in such environments, as exemplified in (24a–c):

- (24) a. *He better take care of that watch.*
Ms-FREYBERGER: *He better.* [COCA: 1999: SPOK: CBS_SatMorn]
b. *The evangelist cried out. "Christ save me!"*
"He better, nobody else will!" [COCA: 1993: FIC: Bk:Homeland]
c. *You will not leave it on the bathroom sink in the men's room someplace, please.*
Ms-MAPEL: *He better not.* [COCA: 2007: SPOK: NBC_Today]

In addition, *better* shows that it is grammaticalized to such an extent that it copies the positions reserved exclusively for modals, as in (25a–b).

- (25) a. *If that item is on the test, we better have taught it.*
[COCA: 1990: NEWS: WashPost]
b. *And next time you appear before me, Mr. Kenyon, you better have done your homework.*
[SOAP: 2002: AMC]

Such examples occurred 6 times in the COCA, but 16 times in the SOAP, which means that such occurrences are far from being idiosyncratic uses.

The last area where *better* demonstrates operator behaviour is shown in sentences in (26a–b):

- (26) a. *Better he stay where he is.* [COCA: 2008: FIC: Bk: DarkestPleasure]
b. *Better they be magicians than men.*
[COCA: 2010: FIC: Analog]

Due to the absence of the agreement in the third person singular, it must be concluded

that *better* again functions as an operator. Most probably the original structure of the sentence is SUBJ + *better* + V, in (26a-b) *better* is fronted for emphasis.

As has been shown, the use of an isolated *better* is quite common, especially in American English. As far as syntactic properties are concerned, it has been shown that *better* is already in the INFL/T node, and therefore, behaves as an operator – in terms of the formation of negation, despite the fact that the form *bettern't* has not been attested. It clearly appears in elliptical contexts, and it is combined with a perfective infinitive; this is a property typical only of central modals.

Conclusion

The aim of the paper was to evaluate the degree of grammaticalization of the structures *gotta*, *gonna*, *wanna* and *better*. First, it studied the level of (in)dependence of these structures from their auxiliary, and second, it analysed to what extent the structure develops operator properties. The analysis showed that the modals *gonna* and *gotta* demonstrate a similar level of grammaticalization – they are used with the

reduced auxiliary, but independent use is rare. They do not demonstrate operator properties; however, occurrences in some web discussions might imply such future development. As far as *wanna* is concerned, despite behaving as a modal in its morphology, it does not show operator properties, apart from the sparse use of negative structures in web discussions. On the other hand, it can be said with a high degree of confidence that *better* is independent of its auxiliary and already copies the syntax of central modals in most environments. The analysis also showed that the dependence of the structures is tightly connected with the syntactic behaviour – more precisely, *better*, which is most independent of its auxiliary, demonstrates a high degree of operator behaviour, whereas structures dependent on their auxiliary do not yet syntactically behave as modals.

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