Emerging modals revisited

Comparing English emerging modals in the spoken BNC1994 and BNC2014

Hanna Mahler (Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, Germany)

Prior research on the emerging modals *gonna*, *gotta*, and *wanna* (e.g. Krug 2000, Lorenz 2012, 2013, Hopper & Traugott 1993:3) has shown how these reduced forms underwent a grammaticalisation process and became established in the English language. Krug (2000), working partially with the BNC1994, provides an account of those verbs from Old English to the 20th century. However, there is no account of how the emerging modals have developed in spoken British English thereafter.

In 2017, the spoken component of the BNC2014 was published, providing an opportunity to study ongoing changes in spoken British English. The corpus makes it possible to follow the trajectory of the emerging modals from the 1994 datasets onwards. This study will therefore address the following research question: Comparing the BNC1994 and the BNC2014, how has the distribution of the emerging modals *gonna*, *wanna*, and *gotta* developed and how can their development be explained?

To address this question, corpus searches within the spoken components of the BNC1994 and the BNC2014 were conducted. To aid comparability of the datasets, only the demographically sampled sub-corpus of the BNC1994 was used, as the BNC2014 was designed to emulate this part of the older corpus. The analysis of the emerging modals included their frequency per million words as well as the percentage realised as the reduced variant (hence "contraction rate").

My results concerning the change in real time differ greatly between the variables. *Gonna* has the highest normalised frequency and contraction rate, but both appear to be lower in the BNC2014. This supports the hypothesis by Krug (2000:175) that *gonna* has reached its saturation stage. *Gotta* shows a highly significant decrease in real time and appears to be falling out of use, which might be related to the re-organisation of the modal verb system in general (Leech 2003). *Wanna* is the only variable exhibiting a significant increase of contractions pmw and is therefore the only item that can still be regarded as an 'emerging' modal.

In the BNC2014, contraction rates further show a decreasing apparent-time pattern, with the two youngest groups (aged 0-14 and 15-24) contracting all the modals less frequently than older speakers. This development might partially be related to the phenomenon known as "adolescent peak" (Tagliamonte & D'Arcy 2009) but could also be caused by preadolescents being underrepresented in the data. Comparing the contraction rates for male and female speakers revealed that men's contraction rates were significantly higher in both corpora, except for *gonna* in the BNC2014. This disappearance of gender-related differences lends further support to the hypothesis that *gonna* completed its grammaticalisation process.

This study therefore contributes to our understanding of the development of emerging modals in spoken British English by offering a real-time and apparent-time analysis of their trajectories. It provides insights into how grammaticalising forms behave as they near the completion of their change. Furthermore, it exemplifies the usefulness of large-scale corpora for the diachronic study of sociolinguistic phenomena in general.

References

Hopper, Paul & Elizabeth Closs Traugott. 1993. *Grammaticalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University press.

Krug, Manfred G. 2000. *Emerging English modals: A corpus-based study of grammaticalization* (Topics in English Linguistics 32). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Leech, Geoffrey. 2003. Modality on the move: The English modal auxiliaries 1961-1992. In Roberta Facchinetti, Manfred G. Krug & Frank Palmer (eds.), *Modality in contemporary English* (Topics in English Linguistics 44), 223–240. Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Lorenz, David. 2013. *Contractions of English semi-modals: The emancipating effect of frequency*. Freiburg: Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg dissertation.

Lorenz, David. 2013. From reduction to emancipation: Is gonna a word? In: Hilde Hasselgård, Jarle Ebeling & Signe Oksefjell Ebeling (eds.), *Corpus perspectives on patterns of lexis* (Studies in Corpus Linguistics 57), 133–152. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing.

Tagliamonte, Sali & Alexandra D'Arcy. 2009. Peaks beyond phonology: Adolescence, incrementation, and language change. In: *Language* (85), 58-108.