

I had better go or I'd better go?

A Corpus-Based Analysis of the Evolution of *better* Constructions in American English

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In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the study of modality in English. While this has led to the uncovering of “a number of interesting developments” (van der Auwera et al. 2013: 119), Mitchell (2003: 130) criticizes that research has focused on a “formally distinct set of modal auxiliary verbs”, thus disregarding “the much broader range of modal expressions that qualify to be described as such”. Cort and Denison (2010: 349) specifically highlight that modal expressions, such as *had better*, have received little attention. To fill this gap, van der Auwera et al. (2013) explore the occurrence of three so-called “comparative modals”, *had better*, *'d better*, and *better* (see examples 1-3).

- (1) I **had better** go to my chamber and weep. (COHA, 1827)
- (2) I **'d better** go in and shut up all snug. (COHA, 1847)
- (3) I guess I **better** go away from it. (COHA, 1880)

They find that in British English the use of the contracted form *'d better* rises from 1710 onwards, while the use of *had better* declines. The authors do not conduct a comparable analysis of American English, nor do they examine usage frequencies in the second half of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century.

The present paper aims to complement van der Auwera et al.'s (2013) analysis by providing new insights into the historical development of *better* constructions in American English as well as the contexts these constructions occur in. We investigate the occurrence of *had better* and *'d better* as well as their negated forms between 1820 and 2019, using data from the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA; Davies 2010). COHA allows us to analyze and compare frequencies of *better* constructions diachronically and across different genres.

First results confirm that the contracted form *'d better* as well as its negated counterpart *'d better not* exceed *had better* and *had better not* in frequency at the beginning of the 20th century. However, the data shows a general decline of all investigated *better* constructions from the middle of the 20th century onwards. Moreover, our results indicate not only that *had better* is clearly preferred over *'d better* in newspapers, magazines and non-fiction books but also that *had better* and *'d better* co-occur with different lexical verbs.

References

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