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Had better, ’d better and better: Diachronic and transatlantic variation*

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1. Introduction

The first decade of the 21st century has seen a number of interesting developments in the study of modality in English. First, there has been a strong interest in recent changes in the frequency of use of different members of the English verbal modal system, with the observation of a general decline in the frequency of the core modals (can, could, may, might, shall, should, will/will, would/would and must) and a rise in the frequency of so-called semi- or quasi-modals, such as have to, be able to, be going to, and be supposed to. A key author in this domain is Geoffrey Leech (Leech 2003; Leech et al. 2009: 71-117; Leech this volume), but see also Millar (2009) and Aarts (in print, this volume), who brings also non-verbal modal constructions into the picture. Second, more so than before, there have been studies of verbal modal constructions in varieties of English other than British English. In this domain a central figure is Peter Collins (Collins 2009a, 2009b, 2009c), but there is also work by Dollinger (2008), Biewer (2009), Bao (2010), Deuber (2010), van der Auwera et al. (2012), and others. Third, more than before, and as a consequence perhaps of an awareness of the frequency shifts already referred to, attention has gone to markers of modality other than the core modal auxiliaries. Manfred Krug has done pioneering work on have (got) to and want to in his book on “Emerging English modals” (Krug 2000). Since then, detailed studies have been done on marginal modals such as need (Taeymans 2006; Loureiro-Porto 2009; van der Auwera and Taeymans 2009) and quasi-modals such as need to (Nokkonen 2006), be to (Goldberg and van der Auwera in print) and be supposed to (Noël and van der Auwera 2009), and also on non-verbal expressions of modality – Van linden (2012), for example, concentrates on expressions with ‘modal-evaluative’ adjectives such as essential, necessary, and appropriate, and verbo-nominal expressions of modality (e.g. have need, there is need) have been explored by
The present study on *had better*, *'d better* and *better* fits all aspects of this picture in the following way. First, we will examine these three modal constructions from a historical point of view: we will review the earlier work by van der Auwera and De Wit (2010) on frequency changes in the second half of the 20th century and we will place these changes in a wider time frame, that is, we will go back to the start of the 18th century. The timely arrival of the study by Denison and Cort (2010) obviated the need to go back further in time, because they established that though the constructional history of *had better* can be traced back to Old English, it was only in the 18th century that the pattern began to be combined with inanimate and dummy NP subjects, read ‘began to be used in an auxiliary-like fashion’ (Denison and Cort 2010: 354-355).

Second, we will add an English-internal comparative perspective. As in van der Auwera and De Wit (2010), we will compare British and American English, but in the present contribution we will do so on the basis of data from much larger corpora. The pilot study was based on the Brown family of corpora, i.e., LOB, Brown, FLOB and Frown, whereas the current study will get its present-day data from the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), which have the additional advantage that they also contain spoken data. Third, the *had better*, *'d better* and *better* constructions are, of course, peripheral modal constructions. That is to say, they are traditionally classified as falling outside the ‘core modal’ category and even the ‘marginal modal’ category (*dare, need, ought to* and *used to*), and are often listed instead together with *have to, be able to, be going to, be supposed to, be bound to*, etc. as members of a somewhat open-ended category referred to as semi-modals, quasi-modals or periphrastic modals (Depraetere and Reed 2006: 272). Fourth, we will briefly look at the English constructions from a cross-linguistic, more specifically West Germanic perspective.

We will not deal with all four aspects separately or in consecutive sections, however. Our main aims in this chapter are to document the frequency of the three constructions in present-day English more accurately than has so far been achieved (by Leech 2003, Leech et al. 2009 and van der Auwera and De Wit 2010) and to complement Denison and Cort’s (2010) diachronic study with “older” frequency data, which will be sourced from the “Extended Version” of the Corpus of Late Modern English Texts (CLMETEV) (De Smet 2005, 2008), so as to trace the development of *had better* from the time it had become grammaticalized as a modal construction. The structure of this chapter is as follows. In section 2 we will review some of the literature on *had better*, *'d better* and *better*, and take a position in the debate on their meaning. Section 3 discusses the difference in frequency between the BETTER group of constructions and a parallel BEST group in present-day British and American English, as well as their frequency development in British English from the start of the 18th century. Section 4 compares the frequencies of the three BETTER constructions in the two geographical present-day varieties and again historically in the British variety. Section 5 looks at the frequency distribution of the person category of the subjects of the BETTER constructions, serving as a preamble to section 6, where we consider the incidence of subjectless *better* and its place in the history of the BETTER constructions. In section 7 we reflect on the word class of the word *better* and of the verb following it in the three constructions. Section 8 examines the extent to which the BETTER
constructions are still accompanied by a than clause. Section 9 contains a short postscript on BETTER constructions in other West Germanic languages. Section 10 is the conclusion.

2. Some background: BETTER as a deontic and optative comparative modal

Van der Auwera and De Wit (2010: 127) coined the term ‘comparative modals’ for a family of morphosyntactic configurations with a moderate degree of formal and semantic homogeneity, cf. (1). The family has two superlative members (with best), a handful of comparative ones, in the more narrow sense of ‘comparative’ (with better, rather or sooner), and also some equative ones (with as or just as).

(1) ‘Comparative modals’ (van der Auwera and De Wit 2010)
   a. had best, ’d best
   b. had better, ’d better, better
      would rather, ’d rather, had rather, should rather
      would sooner, ’d sooner, had sooner, should sooner
   c. would (just) as soon as
      may (just) as well
      might (just) as well

The homogeneity is far from perfect, but van der Auwera and De Wit (2010: 127) argue that this classification is better than the ones that have been proposed (as in (2)) or assumed (as in (3) and (4)) in the literature.

(2) ‘Modal idioms’ (Quirk et al. 1985: 141-142)
   had better, ’d better, better
   would rather, ’d rather, had rather, should rather
   have got to, be to
   and ‘might be placed in the same category’ (idioms) (Quirk et al. 1985: 142):
   had best, ’d best
   would (just) as soon as
   may (just) as well
   might (just) as well

(3) Palmer (1979: 164-165)
   had better, ’d better, better
   would rather, ’d rather, had rather, should rather
   let’s

   had better, ’d better, better
   might (just) as well
These other groupings all leave out a few constructions (e.g. the sooner ones) or include constructions that are more distantly related (have got to and be to for Quirk et al. 1985; let's for Palmer 1979).

All of the constructions in (1) are rather rare, but the three with better are among the least rare. If we put had better, 'd better and better together – and we will then refer to them with small capitals, this BETTER family is the most frequent one. Van der Auwera and De Wit (2010: 130-131) report on frequencies found in the corpora of the Brown family, documenting written British and American English of the 60s and 90s. These frequencies are reproduced in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>LOB UK 60s</th>
<th>FLOB UK 90s</th>
<th>Brown US 60s</th>
<th>Frown US 90s</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BETTER</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RATHER</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(JUST) AS WELL</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BEST</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AS SOON AS</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOONER</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Frequencies of the comparative modals, clustered on the basis of the adverbial

This paper focuses on the BETTER constructions, though we will include observations on the BEST constructions (had best, 'd best, and best) as well.

The BETTER part of Table 1 overlaps with the (had) better parts of Table 4 in Leech (2003: 229) – and of the bar chart in Figure 5.2 in Leech et al. (2009: 97) – and van der Auwera and De Wit (2010: 130) consequently agree with Leech (2003: 230) that there is a decline in the frequency of BETTER, both in the UK and the US, in the latter half of the 20th century. This is at odds with “an overall significant increase in the use of semi-modals” (Leech et al. 2009: 98), but the BETTER numbers in Table 1 are small and it will therefore be interesting to see whether the Late Modern English data can confirm that they are indicative of a longer downward trend.

Before we turn to our observations on past and present frequencies of the BETTER constructions, however, a few words on their meaning might be in order. Linguists that have worked on BETTER agree that they express advice and the majority also explicitly say that at least the typical use involves advice given by the speaker (or writer) (Palmer 1979: 69, 1990: 82; Jacobsson 1980: 52; Perkins 1983: 63; Declerck 1991: 355; Westney 1995: 181; Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1996; Denison and Cort 2010: 366; van der Auwera and De Wit 2010: 132). A clear example is shown in (5).

(5) “You had better go,” he said.
    (BNC HWA 3747)

There is, however, a second use, illustrated in (6).
(6) Helen Mirren stars in this week’s biggie: Prime Suspect about a female detective who gets her big break chasing a murderer. It dominates the schedules with two, two-hour slots on Sunday and Monday, so it had better be good. For once, it seems it will be.

(BNC H84 142)

In our opinion, there is no sense in which the speaker gives advice here and we consequently do not agree with those, like Collins (2009a: 77), who consider better to be “essentially monosemous”. Instead, we agree with Mitchell (2003: 145) that in examples like this one (but (6) is not one that Mitchell discusses) what is at stake is not the speaker’s advice but the speaker’s hope. In (6) the writer expresses his/her hope that a scheduled two-part TV show will be worth watching. Van der Auwera and De Wit (2010: 133) called this an ‘optative’ use, to distinguish it from the advice use, which they considered to be ‘deontic’. We will adopt the same terminology here. ‘Optative’ is the accepted term for a grammatical mood that indicates a wish or hope. Mitchell (2003: 145) makes reference to wishes as well, saying that what is involved in such cases is “a wish that a proposition whose truth is unknown turns out to be true’. We disagree with him, however, when he connects this with epistemic modality, calling it ‘epistemic volition’. To our mind, this is too much of an extension of the notional category of epistemic modality, which we would like to restrict to judgements of the (un)certainty or probability of a proposition (cf. van der Auwera and Plungian 1998: 81). Wishing something to be true is quite different from judging it to be true.

Denison and Cort (2010: 370) disagree with Mitchell as well, but in a different way, holding that examples of what we have termed the optative use ‘incorporate simultaneously an epistemic and a deontic element’. Discussing a longer version of an example Mitchell selected from the BNC, which we will reproduce here as (7), they detect – in addition to ‘I hope it’s important’, which they agree with Mitchell is epistemic in nature – ‘two linked meanings: that someone (here the addressee) is in some way responsible for the situation, and that that person should endeavour – or should have endeavoured – to produce a favourable outcome (plus perhaps the suggestion that they will suffer adverse consequences otherwise)’.

(7) “Kurt here. I have urgent information. There have been serious developments. Can we meet? You’d want to know at once.”

[...]

“I’ll meet you in the lobby of the Frankfurter Hof half an hour from now. It had better be important.”

(BNC ARK 2630)

We do not want to dispute the presence of such a ‘deontic element’, which Denison and Cort (2010: 371) further characterize as a ‘retrospective obligation’ – note, not as a piece of advice. In the case of our example (6) the writer probably holds the programmers of a particular television network responsible for ensuring an enjoyable programme, but of course the show has long been scheduled and (6) is not a piece of advice addressed to the programmers to replace it if a certain condition is not met. We are disputing, however, that the hope or wish element is epistemic, for the reason we have specified.
Denison and Cort (2010: 374) note that what, no doubt for convenience, they continue to call ‘epistemic uses’ – but which according to them also incorporate a deontic element – come later than the deontic ones, ‘a classic symptom of grammaticalization among modals’. They call an example dating from 1712 an ‘unusually early’ one, but they do not provide any evidence for this. Testing this hypothesis constitutes another reason for why we will include data from a Late Modern English corpus.

3. The present and past frequency of BETTER and BEST

When one compares the frequencies of the BETTER and BEST constructions in the second half of the 20th century, it is very clear that the BETTER constructions are overwhelmingly more frequent than the BEST ones. Table 1 in section 2 shows this to be the case in each of the four Brown family corpora. As a matter of fact, the BEST construction is attested only in Frown, i.e. in American English of the nineties, with two instances. Given the overall extreme rarity of BEST, and the size of the corpora in this family (one million words each), this need not, of course, mean that BEST only occurs in American English, and not in British English, nor that it showed up in American English only very recently. Instead, it is a very clear invitation to study the spread and relative frequency of BETTER and BEST in larger corpora.

For a synchronic comparison with the FLOB and Frown frequency data in Table 1, we turned to the BNC (close to 100 million words overall, roughly 90% written and 10% spoken) and the COCA (close to 400 million words, roughly 80% written and 20% spoken). Tables 2 and 3 present the frequencies of the BETTER and BEST constructions in the spoken and written parts of the BNC and the COCA, respectively. We include absolute frequencies (n) as well as normalized frequencies (per million words), to allow easy comparison of the frequency data sourced from all the corpora used in this study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Spoken</th>
<th></th>
<th>Written</th>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n/million</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n/million</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n/million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>had better</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>449</td>
<td>5.14</td>
<td>480</td>
<td>4.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>’d better</td>
<td>483</td>
<td>46.70</td>
<td>1491</td>
<td>17.08</td>
<td>1974</td>
<td>20.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>better</td>
<td>405</td>
<td>39.16</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>7.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total BETTER</td>
<td>88.86</td>
<td></td>
<td>25.60</td>
<td></td>
<td>32.31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>had best</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>’d best</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>1.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>best</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total BEST</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Frequencies of BETTER and BEST constructions in the BNC
Table 3: Frequencies of **BETTER** and **BEST** constructions in the COCA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Spoken</th>
<th></th>
<th>Written</th>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n/million</td>
<td></td>
<td>n/million</td>
<td></td>
<td>n/million</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>had better</strong></td>
<td>166</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>1093</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>1259</td>
<td>3.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>’d better</strong></td>
<td>630</td>
<td>7.71</td>
<td>3055</td>
<td>9.53</td>
<td>3685</td>
<td>9.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>better</strong></td>
<td>1499</td>
<td>18.35</td>
<td>4170</td>
<td>13.00</td>
<td>5669</td>
<td>14.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total BETTER</strong></td>
<td>28.09</td>
<td></td>
<td>25.94</td>
<td></td>
<td>26.38</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>had best</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>’d best</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>0.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>best</strong></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total BEST</strong></td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data from the BNC (Table 2) and the COCA (Table 3) show, first, that the **BETTER** constructions are indeed vastly more frequent than the **BEST** constructions and, second, that the latter do not just occur in American English but also in British English. British examples are (8), illustrating **had best**, and (9), illustrating both **’d best** and **best**.

(8) “Well, well! Now my clerk and I,” he trumpeted, “would like to question each of you alone. Though,” he smiled at the girl, “Mistress Philippa and Geoffrey **had best** stay together. Master Colebrooke, there’s a chamber below. Perhaps our guests could wait there?”

(BNC written K95 180)

(9) he’s ever so posh, and we’re chatting away telling me all about pension, telling me all about the pension and that you see so I said to him would you like a tea? Oh I should love one, ooh, so I thought, **best** not give him a bleeding mug I **’d best** get my best china out, you know?

(BNC spoken KCP 6270)

Other observations are that both **BETTER** and **BEST** are significantly more frequent in British than in American English according to Fisher’s exact tests \((p < 0.0001)\) and that the higher frequency of **BETTER** in British English compared to American English is purely attributable to a much higher frequency in the spoken register. In both geographic varieties there is very little difference between the overall frequencies of **BEST** in the spoken and written registers (1.07 vs. 1.66 per million in the BNC; 0.15 vs. 1.14 in the COCA). In American English there is also very little register variation in the case of **BETTER** (28.09 spoken vs. 25.94 written). In British English, however, the frequency difference between the two registers is huge in the case of **BETTER** (88.86 spoken vs. 25.60 written). This is not equally true of all three forms of **BETTER**, but we will postpone being more precise about this until the next section.

Something that Tables 2 and 3 do not reveal, but which becomes immediately apparent when scrolling through the corpus concordance lines, is that in written language both **BETTER** and **BEST** mainly occur in represented speech. To show this, we have quantified the BNC data for this parameter. The results are presented in Table 4.
Table 4: Spoken language vs. reported and unreported written language in the BNC (based on samples of 200 if total n in Table 2 >200)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>spoken</th>
<th>written</th>
<th>written</th>
<th>written</th>
<th>written</th>
<th>total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>unreported</td>
<td>reported</td>
<td>direct</td>
<td>indirect</td>
<td>free indirect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>had better</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>46.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'d better</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>65.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>better</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>24.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BETTER</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>31.67</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>11.83</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>45.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>had best</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12.12</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>69.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'d best</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8.77</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>89.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>best</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11.11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22.22</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>66.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BEST</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7.05</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5.13</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>83.97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notice that only just over 5% of all written instances of the BEST construction and less than 12% of the written instances of BETTER occur outside reported speech contexts in written texts and that 84% of all instances of BEST and 45.5% of all instances of BETTER occur in directly reported speech in written texts. If one adds the percentages of the instances in spoken language to the latter two percentages, this results in very high figures for both BETTER and BEST (77% and 91%, respectively). One cannot conclude from them that BETTER and BEST are more typical of spoken language than of written language, because reported speech is an inherent part of written language, but one could conclude that they are both cognitively entrenched as conversational features. Collectively, language users clearly use the comparative modal constructions most when representing speech in their writing.

Interestingly, some of the British had best constructions occur in represented speech in ‘historical fiction’, i.e. present-day fiction set in the past, as in (8) above, and some represented speech examples of ’d best have a distinct dialectal flavour, as in (10).

(10) “Whatever th’thinks, th’d best mind th’self. Miss Jarman’s gaffer now old Mister’s dead.”

(BNC written C85 1162)

This might suggest that BEST constructions are ‘signs of the past’, i.e. that they were once more frequent than they are now. To answer this question, as well as the one formulated in section 2 about whether the recent decline in the frequency of BETTER (Table 1) might be part of a longer downward trend, we have studied the frequency of BETTER and BEST constructions in the CLMETEV, a corpus of Late Modern English data, containing slightly over 15 million words. Table 5 presents their absolute and normalized frequencies in the three components of this corpus, roughly covering the 18th century, the first half of the 19th century and the second half of the 19th century.
The normalized totals for better and best in Table 5 clearly show a rise in the frequency of both constructions in the course of the Late Modern English Period (respectively, from 21.07 to 73.1 tokens per million words, and from 1.98 to 4.64). However, when compared with the normalized frequencies for the written part of the BNC in Table 2 (25.60 for better and 1.66 for best), the normalized figures in Table 5 indicate that both the better and the best constructions were more frequent in the 19th century than they are now (with 19th-century figures of 48.39 and 73.1 for better and 4.19 and 4.64 for best), though in the case of extremely low-frequency best the difference is of course small. The ascent of the two constructions must therefore have been halted at the start of the 20th century, followed by a fairly steep decline, especially in the case of better. A comparison of the frequency of better in the CLMETEV (Table 5) and the LOB (Table 1) indeed suggests that the late-20th-century decline in the frequency of better, which is obvious from a comparison of the LOB and FLOB figures in Table 1, is likely to have started before the second half of the 20th century, given the comparatively large difference between the frequency in the last CLMETEV subcorpus (73.1), which spans the period from 1850 to 1920, and in the LOB (40), which contains early-1960s data. Note, however, that the relative shares of better and best constructions remained relatively constant across the 18th-20th centuries; none of the changes in the proportion of better vs. best constructions proved statistically significant.

In sections 4 to 8 below we will leave extremely low-frequency best behind and zoom in on better, ’d better and better.

4. The present and past frequency of had better, ’d better and better

Biber et al. (1999: 487) claim that the better modals are “considerably more common” in UK English than in US English. We observed in the previous section, on the basis of a comparison of Tables 2 and 3, that this is true only of spoken language. While the differences between the totals for the written parts of the BNC and the COCA are negligible (25.60/million for the BNC and 25.94/million for the COCA), the differences between their spoken parts are significant (88.86/million for the BNC and 28.09/million for the COCA). In this section, however, we want
to have a closer look at the frequencies of the individual BETTER constructions. Does Biber et al.’s claim hold for each of them and do they occupy the same frequency rank in both registers in each variety? For convenience, we have extracted the normalized frequencies of the BETTER constructions from Tables 2 and 3 and we repeat them here in Table 6.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BNC written</th>
<th>COCA written</th>
<th>BNC spoken</th>
<th>COCA spoken</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>had better</td>
<td>5.14</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>’d better</td>
<td>17.08</td>
<td>9.53</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>7.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>better</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>39.16</td>
<td>18.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>25.94</td>
<td>88.86</td>
<td>28.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Normalized frequencies of the BETTER constructions in the BNC and the COCA

Table 6 reveals that the higher British than American frequency claim only holds for ’d better in both registers (written BNC 17.08 vs. COCA 9.53; spoken BNC 46.7 vs. COCA 7.71). Better is considerably more frequent in American than in British writing (COCA 13 vs. BNC 3.38), and had better is more or less equally rare in both registers in both geographic varieties. The table also shows that there are intervarietal differences between the relative frequency positions of the three constructions. In the COCA, in both written and spoken data, the better construction is most frequent, whereas in the BNC, again in both written and spoken data ’d better is most frequent. In American English the three constructions occupy the same frequency rank in both registers, while in British English, had better is slightly more frequent than better in writing, but drastically less frequent than it in speech. Tables 7 and 8 rearrange the numbers from Table 6 to make this clearer, arranging them from left to right in descending order of frequency.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>better</th>
<th>’d better</th>
<th>had better</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Written</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9.53</td>
<td>3.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spoken</td>
<td>18.35</td>
<td>7.71</td>
<td>2.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: Normalized frequency of better, ’d better and had better in the COCA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>’d better</th>
<th>had better</th>
<th>better</th>
<th>had better</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Written</td>
<td>17.08</td>
<td>5.14</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spoken</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>39.16</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8: Normalized frequency of ’d better, better and had better in the BNC

For British English, these frequencies correspond to what was found in the LOB and FLOB corpora. Table 9 juxtaposes the BNC frequencies with those in LOB and FLOB. Since the latter are written corpora, the BNC figures to compare them with are those for the written part.
For American English, the Brown and Frown figures show a different hierarchy, but it should be kept in mind that these figures are very low. Table 10 contrasts them with the COCA frequencies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>better</th>
<th>had better</th>
<th>'d better</th>
<th>had better</th>
<th>better</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brown</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frown</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COCA written</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9.53</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COCA spoken</td>
<td>18.35</td>
<td>7.71</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10: Frequency of better, 'd better and had better in Brown, Frown and the COCA

The relevance of the frequency ranking of the individual BETTER constructions resides in the extent to which they provide confirmation for the grammaticalization cline represented in Figure 1, which Denison and Cort (2010: 354) suggest to be observable diachronically.

As a potential textbook case of the phonological reduction that is often involved in grammaticalization, had better would be the older form and better the younger one, the had part having become reduced to Ø with 'd as an intermediate form. In Britain, the language now prefers the mid stage construction 'd better, both in the written and the spoken register, while written and spoken US English favours the youngest form better. If frequency can be related to grammaticalization, the frequency ranking of the individual BETTER constructions in American English represented in Table 7 (when read from right to left) suggests that American English has gone furthest down the grammaticalization path shown in Figure 1 in that the oldest construction is used the least and the youngest one the most. The frequency ranking for British English in
Table 8, on the other hand, suggests that British English is lagging behind. In spite of the fact that compared to Americans the British make much more use not only of ‘d better but also of better in spoken language, they use better less often than ‘d better, unlike Americans. In addition, better is the least frequent construction in written English in Britain, while it is the most frequently used one in American written English.

The grammaticalization scenario shown in Figure 1 is still in need of diachronic empirical substantiation, however. For British English, we have tested it on the Late Modern English data from the CLMETEV. Table 11 adds relative frequencies to the absolute and normalized ones given in Table 5. The data tentatively confirm the proposed scenario, in that the supposed source construction, had better, starts off with the highest relative frequency (92.19%) and is steadily encroached upon by the constructions that form later stages on the grammaticalization path, viz. ‘d better and better respectively. Figure 2 shows these developments in a graph, with the vertical axis indicating the relative share of each of the three constructions (%). It adds the present-day English data to the picture, which continue the tendencies observed for the Late Modern data to such an extent that ‘d better has overtaken had better. Fisher’s exact tests indicate that the changes from the first to the second Late Modern English subperiod are not statistically significant for any of the BETTER constructions, but the changes from the second to the third subperiod are significant (highest p-value < 0.008), as are those from the third subperiod to present-day English (highest p-value < 0.03).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1710-1780</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>1780-1850</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>1850-1920</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n/mil</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n/mil</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n/mil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>had better</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>19.42</td>
<td>92.19</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>40.88</td>
<td>84.48</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>46.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘d better</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5.24</td>
<td>10.83</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>19.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>better</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>7.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total BETTER</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>21.07</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>48.39</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>457</td>
<td>73.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 11: Frequency of had better, ‘d better and better in the CLMETEV
It is interesting to point out that the data in Table 11 reveal that the dominance of ‘d better in British English (Table 9) only came about in the second half of the 19th century, the frequency in the third CLMETEV period being almost quadruple that in the second period (a rise from 5.24 to 19.19 tokens per million words). Noteworthy, too, when comparing the frequencies for the individual constructions in the written register in Table 2 with those for the third period in Table 11, is that the observation made in section 3 on the frequency drop of better between the turn of the 20th century and the second half of that century also holds for each of the three constructions, but that it is especially had better which has seen a quite spectacular fall in its frequency (from 46.39 tokens per million words in the last CLMETEV period to 5.14 tokens in the written part of the BNC). The decrease in the frequencies of ‘d better and better is much smaller (respectively, from 19.19 to 17.08 and from 7.52 to 3.38).

Finally, having discussed the frequency and the frequency development of the various formal variants of better, we can now briefly turn to the frequency and the diachrony of the meanings of the better constructions. In section 2, we noted that better is basically used to express advice, but that it is also used to express the speaker’s hope that some state of affairs be realized. The three sets of 200 manually-checked BNC instances that already provided part of the input for Table 4 confirm that this latter, optative, use occurs much less frequently than the deontic use. Only 9 of the 200 had better cases are optative, only 2 of the ‘d better cases, and only 5 of the better cases. (11) to (13) provide an example of the optative use of each of the three constructions, supplementing the ones for had better already supplied in (6) and (7).
(11) As Philip ran across to her he heard a crash. It sounded like his bike falling over. Lee must have banged into it in the dark. It had better be that and not him having another of his scenes.  
(BNC written ABX 3083)

(12) “Take my hand. That’s it. They won’t be long.” The pain came and crushed her away. “My God,” said Emma, “they’d better be quick. Just hold on. Hold on, darling. It’s going to be all right.”  
(BNC written GUM 1982)

(13) Is this on pause, I better be on pause. Oh my god, it isn’t.  
(BNC spoken KNY 1718)

In the Late Modern English data this optative use is even less frequent; in fact, we found only one example, which is given in (14).

(14) I haven’t any energy left. I don’t understand things. This had better be the end of it. Let’em sell the stock and take him down,” said the old man, pointing feebly to the wooden midshipman, “and let us both be broken up together.” (CLMETEV 1848 Dickens, Dombey and son(s))

The data thus show that the deontic advice meaning is diachronically prior to and invariably more frequent than the optative meaning, which is in line with Denison and Cort’s (2010: 374) findings.

5. The subjects of had better, ’d and better

The semantic-pragmatic value of advice that is typical of the better constructions can be directed at a first, second or third person, either singular or plural, as illustrated in (15) to (19).

(15) “Poor darling, I’d better go and put her out of her misery.”  
(BNC written JYC 3382)

(16) The figure to keep in mind is 12. Below this value the F.I. indicates that the text is comprehensible; above 12 the F.I. indicates that you had better shorten your sentences or use less elaborate words or both.  
(BNC written FEU 1704)

(17) Now anybody who er who would like to see more sex on television better give us a ring now I suppose O nine O four six four six four one  
(BNC spoken HV0 1552)

(18) The voice at the other end was slightly husky but very clear. “It’s Tristram. He’s been arrested in New York. Better not talk on the phone, had we?”
(BNC written AB9 40)

(19) They'd better get their act together first.
(BNC written A99)

The optative use of *better* most naturally combines with 3rd-person subjects, as in (20) and (21), since hopes or wishes addressed at either oneself or the hearer will usually amount to advice. It is not impossible for a 'retrospective obligation' (see above) to be directed at a 1st or 2nd person, however, as (22) and (23) show.

(20) Somewhere behind the east wing of the castle glass shattered. Menzies had better come out soon.
(BNC written A0N 629)

(21) “It’s come quick, the winter.” “And it better not go quick.”
(BNC written B1N 1345)

(22) “For all our sakes, I had better be wrong.”
(internet example; http://www.suspensemagazine.com/ReligionDebunked.html, accessed on 1 October 2011)

(23) I’d walked away to check the markers and I had 127 to the hole and Lee said it was 147 – and that’s a difference between an eight and a seven – so I said, “You got it wrong.” Now Trevino’s eyesight is great, but his eyeballing isn’t as good as mine. He says, “You’d better be **** right.” He dug into the bag and pulled out an 8-iron.
(BNC written ASA 869)

Contrary to what one might expect (van der Auwera and De Wit: 136), inanimate 3rd-person subjects are not restricted to the optative use of *better* of the kind illustrated in (6), (7) and (21). The *it had better* sentence in (24) is an unmistakable piece of advice.

(24) “Well, as long as it’s put back where you found it. Come to that, it had better go straight into the soiled linen. But I don’t want any of your chaps taking it away. Laundry disappears fast enough as it is.”
(BNC written G3E 2560)

The pilot study suggests that the choice with respect to person is also related to the choice between *had better*, *’d better* and *better* (van der Auwera and De Wit 2010: 137-138). This is shown in Table 12, which contains figures that were mined from Tables 6, 8 and 9 in that study and which conflates the figures for LOB and FLOB and those for Brown and Frown in an attempt to make the frequencies observed there more illuminating (but note that they are frequencies per two million words).
Table 12: Frequency of 1\textsuperscript{st}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd}-person subjects with \textit{had better}, \textit{'d better} and \textit{better} in LOB/FLOB and Brown/Frown

Table 12 suggests that there are no major differences between British and American English. In both varieties at least half of all subjects of \textit{had better} are 3\textsuperscript{rd}-person ones, both 1\textsuperscript{st} and 2\textsuperscript{nd} person subjects are more usual with \textit{'d better}, and 2\textsuperscript{nd}-person subjects overwhelmingly predominate with \textit{better}. In spite of the conflation of the 1960s and 1990s data, some of the cells in this table still contain extremely low figures, however, which urges us once again to look at frequency data from the two larger corpora. Tables 13 and 14 present a breakdown per person of the subject of the numbers presented in Tables 2 and 3.\textsuperscript{7}
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1SG</th>
<th></th>
<th>1PL</th>
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<th>3SG/PL</th>
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<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n/mil</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n/mil</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>had better</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>written</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>8.23</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>12.81</td>
<td>696</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>63.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>spoken</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>14.46</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>0.47</td>
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</tr>
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<td>'d better</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>written</td>
<td>776</td>
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<td>573</td>
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<td>18.76</td>
<td>1229</td>
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<td>better</td>
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<td>1349</td>
<td>4.21</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>spoken</td>
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<td>1.26</td>
<td>9.80</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>14.00</td>
<td>627</td>
<td>7.68</td>
<td>59.71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 14: Frequency of 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>-person subjects with had better, 'd better and better in the COCA

Tables 13 and 14 confirm for both British and American English that only had better has a high proportion of 3<sup>rd</sup>-person subjects and that both 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>-person subjects are very normal for 'd better. They also confirm that in the case of better there is a predominance of 2<sup>nd</sup>-person subjects in American English, but in British English only in written texts. In British spoken English the combined share of singular and plural 1<sup>st</sup>-person better is roughly the same as that of 2<sup>nd</sup>-person better. Both tables also disconfirm the possible conclusion from the numbers in Table 12 that 3<sup>rd</sup>-person subjects are extremely unusual with 'd better and better. In American English they even account for 15 to almost 20% of all instances.

The Late Modern English data for had better and 'd better are presented in Table 15; the data for better are not included as these all have a zero subject in the CLMETEV (see section 6). Table 15 shows that the low frequency of 3<sup>rd</sup>-person subjects with 'd better in the BNC (8.92% in written data) goes back to even lower frequencies in the CLMETEV (to maximally 6.67%). The CLMETEV numbers also indicate that with 'd better 1<sup>st</sup>-person subjects rose gradually in frequency in the course of the Late Modern English period, from 0% up to a combined share of 43%, with plural forms (34 out of 120 instances, 28.33%) being twice as frequent as singular forms (17 out of 120, 14.17%). The high share of 3<sup>rd</sup>-person subjects with had better in the BNC reflects an increase in frequency with regard to the Late Modern English period, in which the three person categories take up similar shares. What seems to have happened is that 'd better, whose share of BETTER has risen quite dramatically since the end of the Late Modern English period (see Figure 2), started to favour 1<sup>st</sup>-person and 2<sup>nd</sup>-person subjects to 3<sup>rd</sup>-person ones, whereas – conversely – had better 'specialized' for 3<sup>rd</sup>-person subjects.
Table 15: Frequency of 1\textsuperscript{st}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd}-person subjects with had better and ’d better in the CLMETEV

6. The zero subject better construction

In the pilot study (van der Auwera and De Wit 2010: 138-139) it was noted that 2\textsuperscript{nd}-person instances of the better construction often have no explicit subject. This was the case for all of the LOB, FLOB and Brown constructions (5, 5 and 8 attestations), though not for any of the Frown cases (6 attestations). An example presented there is (25).

(25) Drewitt hesitated. “I would like to go on.” “I wouldn’t like you to. So that’s it! Better get your uniform on and report to the duty sergeant.”

(FLOB L07 67)

Zero subjects were not included in the frequency counts in Tables 13 and 14 (since these counts were performed automatically and something that is not realized cannot be found and counted automatically). We will therefore return to the sample of 200 BNC instances of better that provided part of the input for Table 4 to get an idea of the proportional share of zero subjects and to test the hypothesis that they are restricted to 2\textsuperscript{nd} person. The result of the manual analysis can be found in Table 16.

Table 16: Frequency of 1\textsuperscript{st}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd}-person zero subjects with better in a sample of 200 instances from the BNC

Table 16 tells us that the better construction indeed often leaves the subject unexpressed, more precisely in almost half of all cases in the sample (90 of the 200 instances). They do not do so exclusively for the second person, however. Indeed, 2\textsuperscript{nd}-person instances, though they represent the largest share, account for less than 50% of the instances in the sample. The combined share
of 1st-person singular and plural cases amounts to 35%. (26) to (29) illustrate 1st and 3rd-person cases.

(26) They talked a bit more, but Harry was tiring quickly. He seemed to be having difficulty with the second pint, and had only drunk a third of it when he looked at his watch. “Better be on my way, you know, Charlie. Not as young as I was.”
(BNC written GUF 524)

(27) “Come here, m’dear. Don’t like to see you upset like this. Better do something about it, hadn’t we?”
(BNC written EVC 3086)

(28) Better put her seat-y belt on hadn’t she?
(BNC spoken KB7 15869)

(29) The dedication to their appearance of stars such as the luminous, fiftyish, Catherine Deneuve, sixtyish socialites such as Marie Helene de Rothschild or Helene de Mortemart and political wives such as Bernadette Chirac and Claude Pompidou, may be much more than simple vanity and may involve no self-admiration at all. It is more a standard, a form of self-reliance, a determination that if one has to go in the end, better be correctly dressed.
(BNC written AJU 1043)

What is the origin of the zero subject better construction? Theoretically, one could conceive of it as a fourth stage in the grammaticalization path in Figure 1, repeated as Figure 3 with indications of the subjects and with Ø for unexpressed auxiliary and/or subject.

```
SUBJECT had better ↓
SUBJECT ’d better ↓
SUBJECT Ø better ↓
Ø Ø better
```

Figure 3: A possible origin of the zero subject better construction

From an ‘ontogenetic’ angle, it is not to be denied that speakers with a constructional repertoire containing SUBJECT had better, reduced SUBJECT ’d better and more reduced SUBJECT Ø better could take the reduction one step further and produce Ø Ø better. However, from a ‘phylogenetic’ perspective the hypothetical development represented in Figure 3 has no obvious empirical backing. Table 17 shows that all of the early better attestations have zero subjects (Ø Ø better). (30) and (31) are two examples.
Table 17: Zero subjects for Ø better in the CLMETEV

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>explicit subject</th>
<th>zero subject</th>
<th>total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1710-1780</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1780-1850</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850-1920</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(30) If such the plague and pains to write by rule, better, say I, be pleased and play the fool. (CLMETEV 1733-34 Pope, An essay on man)

(31) Malooney’s ball missed the red on its first journey up the table by about a foot, but found it later on and sent it into a pocket. “Ninety-nine plays nothing,” said Dick, who was marking. “Better make it a hundred and fifty, hadn’t we, Captain?” “Well, I’d like to get in a shot,” said the Captain, “before the game is over. Perhaps we had better make it a hundred and fifty, if Mr. Malooney has no objection.” (CLMETEV 1909 Jerome, They and I)

Better therefore did not occur with a subject before it occurred without one (see also the listing of the “main stages” in the history of BETTER in Denison and Cort 2010: 364) and there must consequently be some other causal factor explaining the development of subjectless better. Denison and Cort (2010: 358-362) provide us with a plausible one. They draw attention to the it is better to pattern, which occurs in a clipped format (without it is and with the bare infinitive) in proverbs from the 17th century onwards. (32) and (33) are two of the clipped examples, both dating from 1742, the first with a to-infinitive and the second with a bare infinitive.

(32) Better to die a beggar than live a beggar.

(33) Better have it than hear of it.

Arguably, the example in (30) has a proverbial touch to it too, as does one more example from the 1710-1780 subperiod (out of 3 examples in total). In the 1780-1850 subperiod, 3 out of 13 examples are clearly proverbial, and in the final 1850-1950 subperiod, only 2 out of 47 examples.

The diachronic hypothesis is that the non-proverbal Ø Ø better structures were generalized from the Ø Ø better proverbs. Denison and Cort (2010: 362) phrase this as follows: ‘[i]t seems plausible that the pattern of sentence-initial better in proverbs may have helped to license the superficially identical structure for modal BETTER’. After that, better was combined with subjects, just like had better and ’d better. Figure 4 offers a correction to Figure 3, switching around the temporal order of SUBJECT Ø better and Ø Ø better, and including the two hypothesized analogical operations (the horizontal arrows).
It is important to keep in mind that Figure 4 does not show us the full story of BETTER. Going back further in time might well show a general it is better origin for both developments. For the proverbial pathway this is obvious: proverbial it is better just uses a general it is better pattern. As to had better, Poutsma (1928: 159) is confident that it “stands for” were better, “which in its turn represents a still older me were better”, and the OED s.v. better (adj. and adv.), sense 4, suggests that this ultimately goes back to it is better. For some hypotheses on how early had better relates to early it is better, see Denison and Cort (2010: 351-354).

7. The category of better, and of the verb that follows it

Though for most speakers the kind of better we are considering in this paper is now likely to be a relatively non-transparent component of the verbal BETTER constructions, one would assume that the word better going back to SUBJECT had better was originally an adverb, because of its position in the middle field, between a finite and a non-finite verb. The better of it is better, on the other hand, is obviously an adjective. In zero better proverbs like (33) above, on the other hand, better precedes a bare infinitive, just like it does in the had/d better constructions, so it was already more of an adverb there, and this is likely to have facilitated the first of the two analogical operations referred to in the previous section. In the present section we will offer a few more considerations on the categorial status of better and the following verb.

Consider, first, example (34), which goes back to Sturtevant (1947: 104), who heard it from a “neighbor boy”, and which lived on in the linguistic analyses of Palmer (1965: 49), Visser (1969: 1827) and Jacobsson (1980: 49).

(34) I better go now, bettn’t I?

In (34) better must be an auxiliary. This is a sensible analysis: the typical modal construction has a modal auxiliary followed by an infinitive and the had and ’d-less construction only has better in front of the infinitive. Consequently, speakers – and learners – could analyse better as a verb. But interestingly, further examples like (34) have not been documented in any corpus and they are also extremely rare on the ever so generous internet (cp. Denison and Cort 2010: 380). Nevertheless, the example of the “neighbor boy”, and the importance attributed to it by linguists, suggests that the potential of analysing better as a verb is real.9
Other analyses are possible as a result of the fact that English makes no morphological
distinction between an infinitive, an imperative, and an indicative present other than a third
person singular form. In all patterns discussed so far the verb that follows better is taken to be an
infinitive. However, if the base form get is an imperative in (35a), why could speakers not take it
as an imperative in (35b), or in (25) above?

(35)  

a. Get your uniform on.
b. **Better** get your uniform on.

Note also that English imperatives allow explicit subjects and that get is an imperative in (36a),
too. Hence, speakers could consider get as an imperative in (36b) as well.

(36)  

a. You get your uniform on.
b. You **better** get your uniform on.

Of course, under this analysis better would be an adverb again.

To decide on the categorial status of get in (35b), one could look at the negation. If get is
an infinitive, one expects **not**, as in (37a), and if get is an imperative, one expects **don’t**, as in
(37b) or (37c).

(37)  

a. **Better** not get your uniform on.
b. Don’t **better** get your uniform on.
c. **Better** don’t get your uniform on.

If the type shown in (37c) occurs, it does not actually prove that get is an imperative though. It
could also be a clipped version of (38) and semi-clipped (39), in which case (don’t) get in (37c)
would be an indicative.

(38) It is **better** that you don’t get your uniform on.

(39) **Better** you don’t get your uniform on.

It turns out that the corpora consulted only have attestations of the type shown in (37a). This
means that at least in these corpora there is no evidence for the imperative and indicative
analyses. Interestingly, the type illustrated in (37c) is widely attested on the internet, yet the one
shown in (37b) is not found at all. (40) presents two examples of the (37c) type.

(40)  

    Accessed on Oct 10, 2009
b. **Better** Don’t Talk!

The fact that only the type shown in (37c) is found favours seeing it as a clipped version of it is
**better that**. Otherwise, there should have been at least some attestations of the type in (37b).
There are also no better doncha V attestations, with a prohibitive doncha that would suggest that the verb in the positive counterpart, better V, is imperative.

Further evidence for the possibility of the indicative analysis is a you better don’t pattern, frequently found on the internet, also in the first and third person.

(41) a. You better don’t go there without us.
b. You better don’t fuck with me.

(42) so I better don’t do anything

(43) he better doesn’t wear street clothes

For some internet users ‘d better allows a non-infinitival analysis of the ensuing verb too, but apparently only for the second person, in which case it is unclear whether don’t V is imperative or indicative.

(44) you’d better don’t take unnecessary risks

Many of the structures briefly discussed in this section are of course considered substandard, but that appreciation does not disqualify us from indicating BETTER’s potential for change.

8. The standard of comparison

When one offers advice with a BETTER construction, can one express what it is the advisable state of affairs is better than? According to Jacobsson (1980: 52), Mitchell (2003: 140) and Denison and Cort (2010: 355), this was perfectly possible in the earlier history of the language, but it has become ungrammatical in present-day English. Judging from van der Auwera and De Wit (2010: 140) and Collins (2009a: 78), this statement is probably too strong. Of the 140 BETTER sentences in the Brown family corpora two sentences express the standard of comparison. Such sentences also occur in the BNC and the COCA, but they are no less rare there. Only eight examples were found in the BNC (in a total of slightly over three thousand BETTER expressions), and sixteen in the COCA (in a total of over ten thousand relevant expressions). (45) and (46) are two examples.
(45) “I’m sorry, Mr Beamish, but he’ll be away all day and I thought I’d better come along rather than leave it till tomorrow.”

(BNC written G3S 2565)

(46) Let’s say violating sovereignty, all of those are the roots of the feeling of humiliation that is generating hate, criminal tendencies, violence in the region. So I think that we’d better try to solve those problems rather than fighting against the selection and expression and the result of those roots.

(COCA, spoken)

The Late Modern English data are more in line with what has been observed in the literature. Table 18 presents the diachronic development of the expression of the standard of comparison for the three BETTER constructions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard of comparison</th>
<th>1710-1780</th>
<th>1780-1850</th>
<th>1850-1920</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>n/million</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n/million</td>
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<tr>
<td>had better</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6.58</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>12.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1710-1780</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>38.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850-1920</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>45.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>had better</td>
<td>1710-1780</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1780-1850</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850-1920</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>6.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>better</td>
<td>1710-1780</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1780-1850</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850-1920</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>6.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total BETTER</td>
<td>1710-1780</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6.91</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1780-1850</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>45.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850-1920</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>362</td>
<td>57.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 18: Frequency of the standard of comparison in the CLMETEV

The data in Table 18 bear out an overall decline of the expression of the standard of comparison over time, from 32.81% to 5.73% of all the BETTER constructions. It appears that it is especially the had better construction that is responsible for this downward trend; the decrease from the first subperiod to the second is statistically significant, with Fisher’s exact p < 0.005. The data for the better construction show some fluctuation across the three subperiods, but none of the changes are significant (Fisher’s exact p > 0.05). For ’d better, we can note even an increase in the expression of the standard of comparison to 17.02% in 1850-1920, which is significant (Fisher’s exact p < 0.02). Figures 5 to 7 visualize these developments for each of the BETTER constructions.
Figure 5: The share of the standard of comparison with *had better* in the CLMETEV

Figure 6: The share of the standard of comparison with *’d better* in the CLMETEV
In addition, it can be noted that throughout the 1710-1920 time frame the bare *better* form was much more hospitable to the standard of comparison than the full *had better* form (see Table 18, first versus third set of data). This ties up nicely with the hypothesis that one of the source constructions of bare *better* is that of the proverbial *better* expressions since these, judging from the examples given in Denison and Cort (2010: 360-361), always expressed the standard of comparison.

9. A West Germanic postscript

The expression of advice with a modal construction containing the concepts of ‘better’ or ‘best’ is not unique to English. In the languages of Europe the strategy is also found in other West Germanic languages (but see also Patard 2011 for French). (47) and (48) illustrate *better* and *best* constructions in Dutch, West Frisian, German and Yiddish. Afrikaans does not seem to allow this strategy (except as calques from English) and neither do North Germanic languages (they use ‘rather’ type constructions).

(47)  a. We *kunnen* dat *beter* *niet* doen. [DUTCH]
b. Wy *kinne* dat *beter* net dwaan. [WEST FRISIAN]
c. Wir *sollten* das *besser* *nicht* tun. [GERMAN]
d. Mir *voltn* dos *beser* *nisht* geton. [YIDDISH]

‘We had better not do that.’
These few illustrations by no means show all the relevant construction types and the area of comparative modals in the other Germanic languages has been studied even less than the English ones (but see Byloo et al. 2010 for Dutch, Vanderbiesen 2011 and Vanderbiesen and Mortelmans 2011 for German, and Mortelmans and Vanderbiesen 2010 for a comparison of English, Dutch and German). Nevertheless, it is clear that the other languages use auxiliaries other than have and that the superlative type allows phrasal patterns (‘the best’, ‘at best’, ‘to best’). It is also clear that the superlative type is not as marginal as it is in English. In addition, none of these languages shows anything like successive stages on a grammaticalization path the way English does. So even here, in this very marginal corner of the grammar of English modality, it would seem that modality is more grammaticalized in English than in the other West Germanic languages (see Mortelmans et al. 2009).

10. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have looked at and contrasted the English comparative modals from a present-day synchronic and a diachronic perspective. We have observed that constructions with better (had better, ‘d better and better) are invariably more frequent that those with best (had best, ‘d best and best), both across geographic varieties (British and American) and time (Late Modern English and present-day English). Homing in on the better constructions, we found that there is now considerable geographic variation in the case of the ‘d better and better constructions, but not in the case of the had better construction, which is the least frequent construction in both British and American English. Detailed corpus counts revealed that the ‘d better construction is much more frequent in British English than in American English, in spoken language even more so than in written language. The better construction is also more frequent in British English in spoken language, but in written data it is about four times less frequent in British English than in American English. In this way we have qualified Biber et al.’s (1999) general claim that the better modals are much more common in UK than in US English.

The Late Modern English data revealed that all three better constructions increased in frequency from the 18th to the start of the 20th century. On the other hand, their comparison with present-day data suggests that the drop in the frequency of better that previous research established to have taken place in the latter half of the 20th century was part of a longer downward trend. The comparison of the historical and present-day synchronic data also showed
that the dominance of 'd better among the BETTER constructions in present-day British English is a recent development. The evolution of the relative frequencies of the three BETTER constructions in the diachronic corpus adduced evidence for the grammaticalization scenario proposed in Denison and Cort (2010), i.e. had better > 'd better > better. The absence of expressed subjects with better in our historical data supports the claim that this is not a mere case of phonological reduction, but that analogy with a subjectless, explicitly comparative, proverbial construction was involved in the development of better. This is substantiated by the incidence of an expressed standard of comparison in these data. Present-day distributional evidence suggests that language users are still divided on the categorial status of better and that this may be a cause for further reanalysis and change. In the postscript it was suggested that the BETTER and BEST constructions fit the general picture of the higher grammaticalization of modality in English as compared to the other West Germanic languages.

Notes

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1 Here, and throughout this chapter, we are using the term ‘construction’ in a non-theoretical sense. It is not part of our objectives to argue either in favour or against treating had better, 'd better and better as three separate constructions in a Construction Grammar.

2 However, like in the previous studies, our ambition is not aimed at statistical sophistication, largely for its lack of relevance: in most cases the frequency differences are big enough to make statistics unnecessary or they would concern details that detract from the generalizations. We will therefore only make sparing reference to test results for statistical significance.

3 Leech’s (2003) figures are (unexplainably) different, though.

4 The COCA keeps expanding. At the time the data for this chapter were sourced (June 2010) it counted 402 million words. At the time of writing (September 2011) the counter stood at 425 million. The version of the COCA used covers the period 1990-2010. The BNC covers the period 1980-1993.

5 The absolute frequencies were arrived at through queries in both the BNC and the COCA for had/’d better/best (not) immediately followed by an infinitive, and for better/best (not) immediately followed by an infinitive and not preceded by either a verb or to. The BNC was searched using the Zurich BNCweb Query System. Both tables will contain some noise. The normalized frequencies in the Total columns of Tables 2 and 3 naturally come quite close to the normalized Written frequencies because in both the BNC and the COCA the proportion of written texts is much larger than the proportion of transcripts of spoken discourse.
We use Fisher’s exact tests (Pedersen 1996) to test for statistical significance because they are reliable for low frequency data and do not make distributional assumptions that are not justified in dealing with natural language data (see Stefanowitsch and Gries 2003: 217–218).

The figures for 1st and 2nd-person subjects were arrived at by adding I, we and you immediately before the search strings mentioned in note 5. In the case of had better and ‘d better the figures for 3rd-person subjects are the difference between the totals in Tables 2 and 3 and the sums of 1st and 2nd-person subjects. Since this difference also includes zero 1st and 2nd subjects in the case of better (see below), the figures for 3rd-person subjects in this case are the outcome of searches for he, she, it, this and they, immediately followed by better and an infinitive. The 3rd-person figures for better are therefore a (very probably only slightly) low approximation (compare the frequencies for better in Table 13 with those in Table 16 below).

Zero subjects are possible for best structures, too. Of the total of 9 best attestations in the BNC 6 are without subject, as illustrated in (a) (see also (9)).

(a) He looked up at the sky. It had suddenly become darker. “Best be movin,” he said and they swung open the gate and set off at a jaunty pace back up the lane towards the main road. (BNC written CAB 197)

Denison and Cort (2010) call their paper ‘Better as a verb’, but this is a little misleading. What they mean is that all of the BETTER constructions are like modal verbs.

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Corpora


COCA = Davies, Mark, compiler (n.d.) *Corpus of Contemporary American English*, Brigham Young University, Provo UT.

FLOB = Mair, Christian, compiler (1997) *Freiburg/LOB Corpus of British English*, University of Freiburg, Freiburg.

