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/'ll*, *would/'d* 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

Loureiro-Porto (2010) and Van linden et al. (2011). Finally, more so than before, English expressions of modality have been studied from a cross-linguistic perspective (e.g. Mortelmans et al. 2009).

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[1] 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[2] 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

(4)   Mitchell (2003)
         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.

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

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)[3] – 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 *dis*agree 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).[4] 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.[5]

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

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

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

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

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 ($p < 0.0001$)[6] 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.

	spoken		written unreported		written reported direct		written reported indirect		written reported free indirect		total
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
had better	12	6	50	25	93	46.5	26	13	19	9.5	200
'd better	50	25	7	3.5	131	65.5	6	3	6	3	200
better	128	64	14	7	49	24.5	2	1	7	3.5	200
BETTER	190	31.67	71	11.83	273	45.5	34	5.67	32	5.33	600
had best	0	0	4	12.12	23	69.7	5	15.15	1	3.03	33
'd best	10	8.77	2	1.75	102	89.47	0	0	0	0	114
best	1	11.11	2	22.22	6	66.67	0	0	0	0	9
BEST	11	7.05	8	5.13	131	83.97	5	3.21	1	0.65	156

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)

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.

	1710-1780		1780-1850		1850-1920	
	n	n/million	n	n/million	n	n/million
had better	59	19.42	234	40.88	290	46.39
'd better	2	0.66	30	5.24	120	19.19
better	3	0.99	13	2.27	47	7.52
Total BETTER		21.07		48.39		73.1
had best	6	1.98	16	2.80	18	2.88
'd best	0	0.00	7	1.22	8	1.28
best	0	0.00	1	0.17	3	0.48
Total BEST		1.98		4.19		4.64
Total	70	23.04	301	52.59	486	77.74

Table 5: Frequencies of BETTER and BEST constructions in the CLMETEV

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.

	BNC written	COCA written	BNC spoken	COCA spoken
had better	5.14	3.41	3	2.03
'd better	17.08	9.53	46.7	7.71
better	3.38	13	39.16	18.35
Total	25.6	25.94	88.86	28.09

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.

	better	*'d better*	*had better*
Written	13	9.53	3.41
Spoken	18.35	7.71	2.03

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

	'd better	*had better*	*better*	*had better*
Written	17.08	5.14	3.38	
Spoken	46.7		39.16	3

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.

	'd better	*better*	*had better*	*better*
LOB	27		8	5
FLOB	19		6	6
BNC written	17.08		5.14	3.38
BNC spoken	46.7	39.16	3	

Table 9: Frequency of *'d better*, *better* and *had better* in LOB, FLOB
and the BNC

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.

	better	*had better*	*'d better*	*had better*	*better*
Brown			15	11	10
Frown		12	11		10
COCA written	13		9.53	3.41	
COCA spoken	18.35		7.71	2.03	

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.

<div align="center">
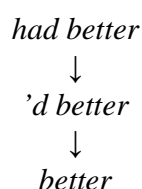
had better

↓

'd better

↓

better

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Figure 1: The history of BETTER

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).

	1710-1780			1780-1850			1850-1920		
	n	n/mil	%	n	n/mil	%	n	n/mil	%
had better	59	19.42	92.19	234	40.88	84.48	290	46.39	63.46
'd better	2	0.66	3.13	30	5.24	10.83	120	19.19	26.26
better	3	0.99	4.69	13	2.27	4.69	47	7.52	10.28
Total BETTER	64	21.07	100.00	277	48.39	100.00	457	73.1	100.00

Table 11: Frequency of *had better*, *'d better* and *better* in the CLMETEV
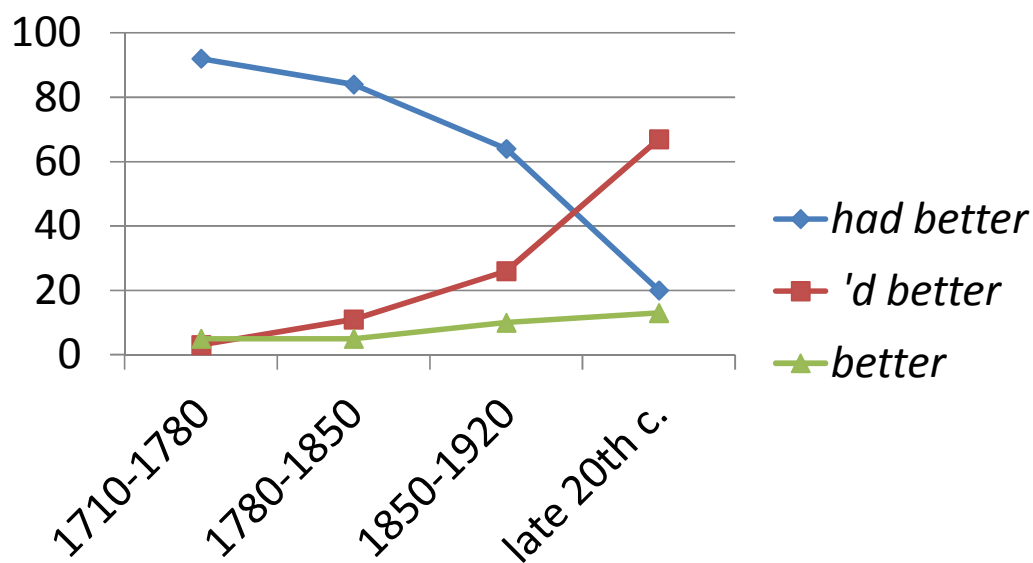
Figure 2: Evolution of the share of *had better*, *'d better* and *better* in the total of BETTER constructions in written British English (from 1710)

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).

	1SG	1PL	2 SG & PL	3 SG & PL	Totals
had better					
LOB + FLOB	2	3	2	7	14
Brown + Frown	1	1	8	13	23
'd better					
LOB + FLOB	15	9	20	2	46
Brown + Frown	6	2	14	4	26
better					
LOB + FLOB	0	1	10	0	11
Brown + Frown	3	1	14	2	20

Table 12: Frequency of 1st, 2nd and 3rd-person subjects with *had better*, *'d better* and *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 *had better* are 3rd-person ones, both 1st and 2nd person subjects are more usual with *'d better*, and 2nd-person subjects overwhelmingly predominate with *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.[7]

	1SG			1PL			2SG/PL			3SG/PL			Totals	
	n	n/mil	%	n	n/mil	%	n	n/mil	%	n	n/mil	%	n	%
							had better							
written	64	0.64	14.25	47	0.47	10.47	86	0.86	19.15	252	2.51	56.12	449	100
spoken	4	0.33	12.9	1	0.08	3.23	4	0.33	12.9	22	1.84	70.97	31	100
							'd better							
written	475	4.73	31.86	266	2.65	17.84	617	6.14	41.38	133	1.32	8.92	1491	100
spoken	203	16.98	42.03	96	8.03	19.88	163	13.63	33.75	21	1.76	4.35	483	100
							better							
written	22	0.22	16.79	20	0.2	15.27	77	0.77	58.78	12	0.12	9.16	131	100
spoken	116	9.7	36.71	33	2.76	10.44	150	12.55	47.47	17	1.42	5.38	316	100

Table 13: Frequency of 1st, 2nd and 3rd-person subjects with *had better*, *'d better* and *better* in the BNC

	1SG			1PL			2SG/PL			3SG/PL			Totals	
	n	n/mil	%	n	n/mil	%	n	n/mil	%	n	n/mil	%	n	%
							had better							
written	90	0.28	8.23	140	0.44	12.81	167	0.52	15.28	696	2.17	63.68	1093	100
spoken	7	0.09	4.22	24	0.29	14.46	38	0.47	22.89	97	1.19	58.43	166	100
							'd better							
written	776	2.42	25.40	573	1.79	18.76	1229	3.83	40.23	477	1.49	15.61	3055	100
spoken	115	1.41	18.25	116	1.42	18.41	275	3.37	43.65	124	1.52	19.68	630	100
							better							
written	341	1.06	14.98	238	0.74	10.46	1349	4.21	59.27	348	0.9	15.29	2276	100
spoken	103	1.26	9.80	147	1.8	14.00	627	7.68	59.71	173	2.09	16.48	1050	100

Table 14: Frequency of 1st, 2nd and 3rd-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 3rd-person subjects and that both 1st and 2nd-person subjects are very normal for *'d better*. They also confirm that in the case of *better* there is a predominance of 2nd-person subjects in American English, but in British English only in written texts. In British spoken English the combined share of singular and plural 1st-person *better* is roughly the same as that of 2nd-person *better*. Both tables also disconfirm the possible conclusion from the numbers in Table 12 that 3rd-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 3rd-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* 1st-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 3rd-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 1st-person and 2nd-person subjects to 3rd-person ones, whereas – conversely – *had better* 'specialized' for 3rd-person subjects.

	1SG			1PL			2SG/PL			3SG/PL			Totals		
	n	n/mil	%	n	n/mil	%	n	n/mil	%	n	n/mil	%	n	n/mil	%
							had better								
1710-1780	8	2.63	13.56	3	0.99	5.08	22	7.24	37.29	26	8.56	44.07	59	19.42	100
1780-1850	40	6.99	17.09	56	9.78	23.93	64	11.18	27.35	74	12.93	31.62	234	40.88	100
1850-1920	61	9.76	21.03	53	8.48	18.28	89	14.24	30.69	87	13.92	30.00	290	46.39	100
							'd better								
1710-1780	0	0.00	0.00	0	0.00	0.00	2	0.66	100.00	0	0.00	0.00	2	0.66	100
1780-1850	1	0.17	3.33	3	0.52	10.00	25	4.37	83.33	1	0.17	3.33	30	5.24	100
1850-1920	17	2.72	14.17	34	5.44	28.33	61	9.76	50.83	8	1.28	6.67	120	19.19	100

Table 15: Frequency of 1st, 2nd and 3rd-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 2nd-person instances of the *better* construction often have no explicit subject.[8] 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 2nd person. The result of the manual analysis can be found in Table 16.

1SG		1PL		2SG/PL		3SG/PL		Unclear		Total	
n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
19	21.11	13	14.44	42	46.67	6	6.67	10	11.11	90	100

Table 16: Frequency of 1st, 2nd and 3rd-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, 2nd-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.

<div align="center">

SUBJECT *had better*
↓
SUBJECT *'d better*
↓
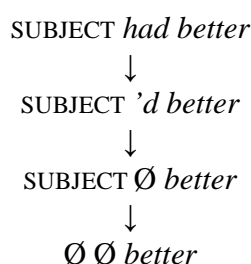SUBJECT Ø *better*
↓
Ø Ø *better*

</div>

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.

	explicit subject		zero subject		total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
1710-1780	0	-	3	100.00	3	100
1780-1850	0	-	13	100.00	13	100
1850-1920	0	-	47	100.00	47	100

Table 17: Zero subjects for Ø *better* in the CLMETEV

(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-proverbial 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).
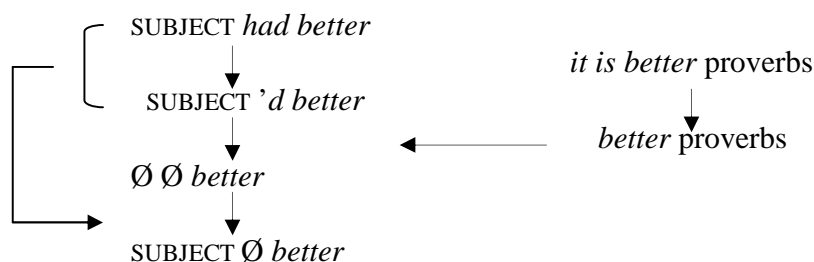
Figure 4: The history of BETTER

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) a. http://sebastians-pamphlets.com/*better*-dont-run-a-web-server-under-windows/
          Accessed on Oct 10, 2009
      b. *Better* Don't Talk!
          http://www.dosinc.org.au/reviews14.html, Accessed on Oct 10, 2009

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.
             http://www.steptalk.org/node/49294, accessed on Sept 28, 2011
       b.   You *better* don't fuck with me.
             http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/snoopdogg/signs.html, accessed on Sept 28, 2011

(42)   so I *better* don't do anything
       www.education.miami.edu/isaac/public_web/ignore.htm, accessed on Sept 28, 2011

(43)   he *better* doesn't wear street clothes
       http://www.thewrestlinggame.com/wrestling/news/cm_punk_unrecognisable.asp.
       accessed on Sept 28, 2011

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
       http://www.catplaza.org.uk/preparation_delivery, accessed on Sept 28, 2011

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.

	Standard of comparison			No standard of comparison			Total		
	n	n/million	%	n	n/million	%	n	n/million	%
				had better					
1710-1780	20	6.58	33.90	39	12.84	66.10	59	19.42	100
1780-1850	13	2.27	5.56	221	38.61	94.44	234	40.88	100
1850-1920	6	0.96	2.07	284	45.43	97.93	290	46.39	100
				'd better					
1710-1780	0	0.00	0.00	2	0.66	100.00	2	0.66	100
1780-1850	0	0.00	0.00	30	5.24	100.00	30	5.24	100
1850-1920	8	1.28	17.02	39	6.24	82.98	47	7.52	100
				better					
1710-1780	1	0.33	33.33	2	0.66	66.67	3	0.99	100
1780-1850	6	1.05	46.15	7	1.22	53.85	13	2.27	100
1850-1920	8	1.28	17.02	39	6.24	82.98	47	7.52	100
				Total BETTER					
1710-1780	21	6.91	32.81	43	14.2	67.19	64	21.07	100
1780-1850	19	3.32	6.86	258	45.1	93.14	277	48.39	100
1850-1920	22	3.52	5.73	362	57.9	94.27	384	61.42	100

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
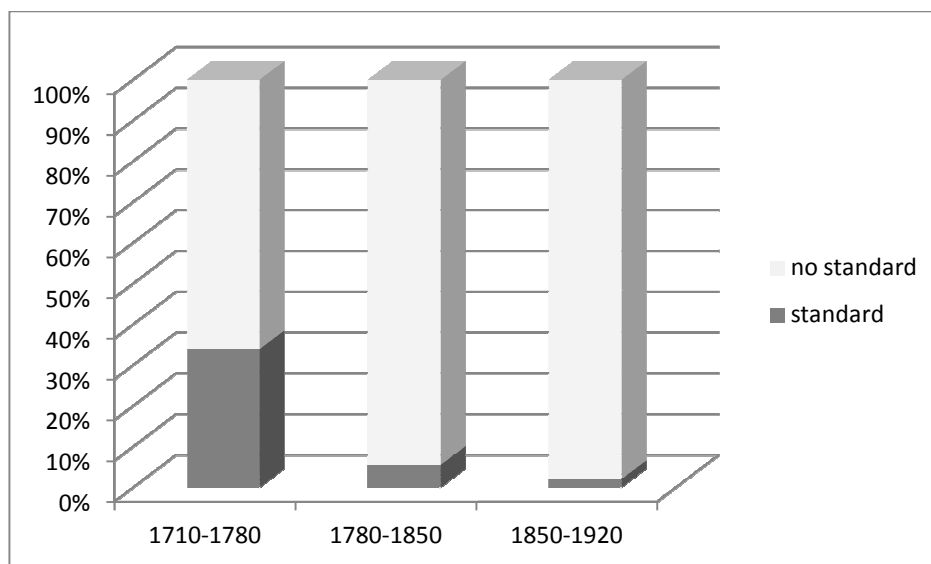constructions.

Figure 5: The share of the standard of comparison with *had better* in the CLMETEV
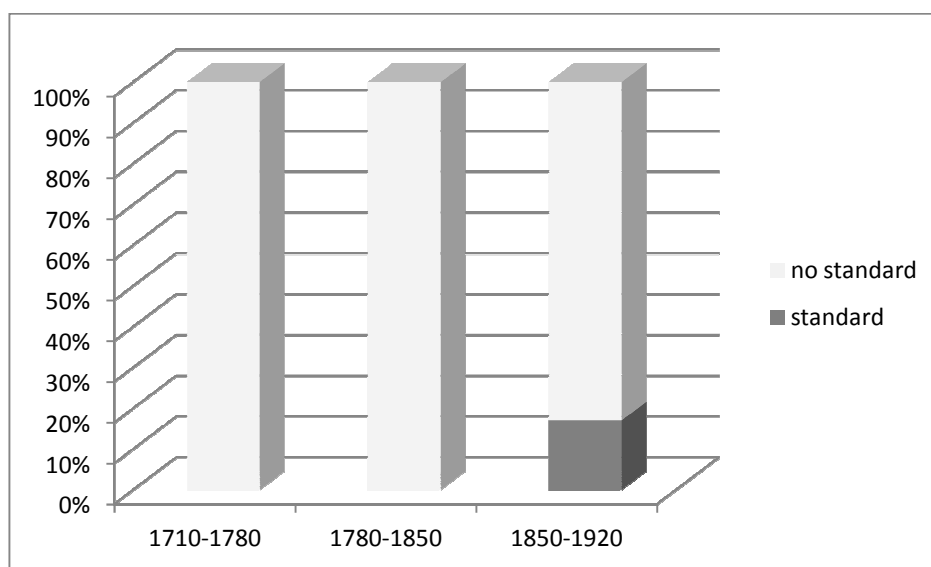

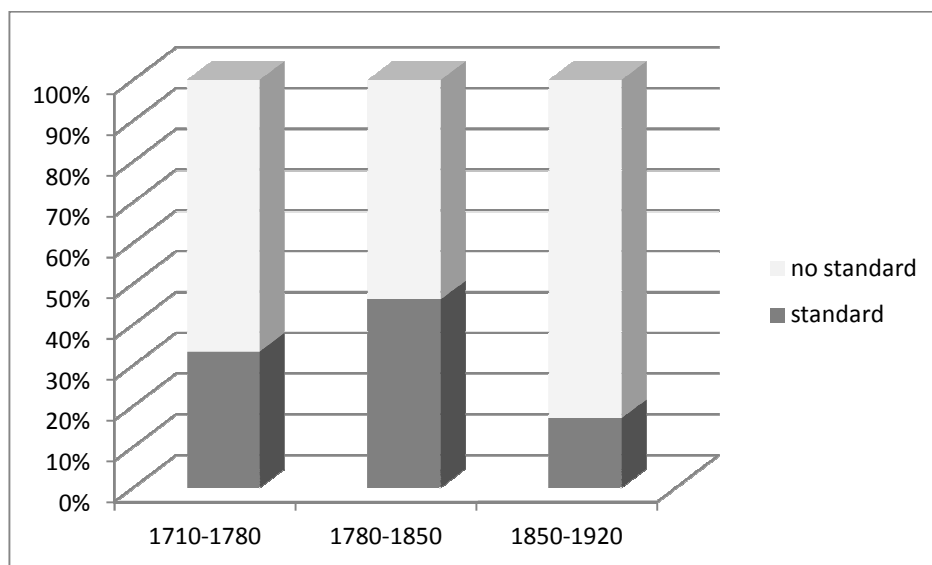Figure 6: The share of the standard of comparison with *'d better* in the CLMETEV

Figure 7: The share of the standard of comparison with *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]
          we   can   that better   not   do
      c. Wir   sollten   das   besser   nicht tun.   [GERMAN]
          we   should   that better   not   do
      d. Mir   voltn   dos   beser   nisht geton.   [YIDDISH]
          we   would   that better   not   done
          'We had better not do that.'

(48) a. Je   zou   best   met   de   trein   reizen.   [DUTCH]
          you   should best   with   the   train   travel
      b. Do   kinst   it   bêst   mei   de   trein   reizgje. [WEST FRISIAN]
          you   can   the   best   with   the   train   travel
      c. Du   fährst am   besten mit   dem   Zug.   [GERMAN]
          you   travel at.the best   with   the   train
      d. Du   forst   tsum   bestn   mit   der   ban.   [YIDDISH]
          you   travel to.the best   with   the   railroad
          'You had better travel with the train.'

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

[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 BNC*web* 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.

[6] 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).

[7] 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).

[8] 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)

[9] 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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