

From reduction to conventionalization: *gonna* and *gotta*

In studies and models of grammaticalization, the focus has often been on how a lexical item gradually acquires new meanings and (grammatical) functions (e.g. Heine 2002, Diewald 2002). It is also well known that grammaticalization comes with a rise in frequency and, potentially, phonetic reduction (Bybee 2006). But the story does not end here. A phonetically reduced form of the grammaticalized item may become conventionalized and thus become a competing variant of its source form.

I argue that this is the case with the contractions *gonna* and *gotta* in English. Derived from the semi-modals *going to* and *have got to*, they are instances of univerbation, which I take to be a process comprising reduction and conventionalization.

Univerbation is complete when the new form (*gonna*) is used and perceived as a single item, independent of its source form (*going to*). Both *gonna* and *gotta* are already conventionalized in that they are not restricted to rapid speech (Pullum 1997) and have a standard ("correct") spelling, but they are still usually regarded as a sub-variant of *going to* or (*have*) *got to*.

A multivariate analysis based on the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (SBC) shows that the factors determining the choice of *gonna* over *going to* are fundamentally different from those determining phonetic reduction, suggesting that the increasing preference of *gonna* over *going to* is a lexical choice rather than a tendency to phonetic reduction. The diachronic trend is from restricted to unrestricted use of *gonna*.

For *gotta*, the case is not quite so clear. It trails behind *gonna* in the univerbation process, and may eventually succumb to the more frequent HAVE *to*.

An experimental study in which participants heard and repeated sentences containing the full or contracted forms was run at the University of Victoria. It corroborates the above findings and sheds light on some new aspects of the phenomenon.

References:

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