Nonstandard *gotta* in British English

Nadina CEHAN*

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1. Introduction

It is impossible to arrive at a definition of what nonstandard is unless its opposite, the standard, has already been defined. In this article I adopt Trudgill's definition of standard English. It is

> that variety of English which is usually used in print, and which is normally taught in schools and to non-native speakers learning the language. It is also the variety which is normally spoken by educated people and used in news broadcasts and other similar situations. The difference between standard and nonstandard, it should be noted, has nothing in principle to do with differences between formal and colloquial language, or with concepts such as 'bad language'. Standard English has colloquial as well as formal variants, and Standard English speakers swear as much as others (Trudgill 2000: 5–6).

In addition, standard English is "frequently considered to be *the* English language, which inevitably leads to the view that other varieties of English are deviant from a norm, due to laziness, ignorance or lack of intelligence" (idem: 8; Balhorn 1998: 57). Standard English, therefore, can be identified as that variety of English that is coded in grammars and dictionaries, used in formal speech and writing, and in education.

Nonstandard English should not be regarded as a variety inferior to the standard. It is, nonetheless, associated with speakers from under-privileged, low-status groups. Nonstandard varieties "are often held to be 'wrong', 'ugly', 'corrupt' or 'lazy'" (ibidem: 8). In principle, any variety or dialect of English other than the standard is an instance of nonstandard English.

In what follows, I will focus on *gotta*, the nonstandard counterpart of *have got to*. The assignment of nonstandardness is not completely arbitrary, although not all sources consider *gotta* a nonstandard form. In general, it is viewed as a contraction of *got to*. However, the *Cambridge Dictionary* (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/gotta) assigns it the label "not standard" and explains it is the "short form of *have got to*". *Merriam-Webster Learner's Dictionary* notes that "with or without *have*, *gotta* is very casual, and should only be used in informal

* "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași, Romania (cehan_nadina@yahoo.co.uk).

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conversation or when writing a representation of informal conversation" (http://www.learnersdictionary.com/qa/what-does-gotta-mean-and-how-is-it-used). *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage* (Peters 2004: 229) notes that "[t]he *got to* construction is so familiar in speech that the words seem to coalesce, and are sometimes written as *gotta*" (idem). An empirical linguistic study by Krug (1998) evinced that *gotta* is becoming a modal verb despite it being generally rejected in written language[1]. All things considered, despite the manifold views on the subject, I will consider *gotta* as belonging to nonstandard English.

The article will deal with *gotta* from the point of view of orthography and grammar. Its behavior will be investigated through the use of two corpora (the BNC and the GB sub-corpus of GloWbe) and in computer-mediated language, motivated by the use of the latter corpus, which covers language on the Internet.

2. Orthography and identity: *gotta* as a nonstandard spelling form

In previous research, nonstandard spellings were given several labels. Androutsopoulos (2002: 520) identified six different types of nonstandard spellings. *Gotta* concomitantly belongs to two of these, namely to phonetic spellings (i.e. representations of standard pronunciation not covered by standard orthography) and to colloquial spellings (i.e. the representation of reduction phenomena typical of colloquial speech). In Shaw's typology (2008: 43) *gotta* belongs to a category called "representation of spoken forms". It is therefore assumed to represent spoken English better than its standard counterpart.

To write *gotta* instead of *got to* or *have got to* is a choice which reflects the writer's stance in relation to text, context and readership. It is, in other words, an expression of identity, whether the writer's or the character's he/she created (Weber 1986: 418). I will start by considering the presence of *gotta* in literary works.

Taavitsainen & Melchers (1999: 13) noted that in fiction

> nonstandard forms are mostly found in dialogues and they are used as a powerful tool to reveal character traits or social and regional differences; that is what they 'do' in texts. Thus the function of nonstandard language in literature is to indicate the position and status of the character, and often such features are used for comical purposes.

(also Weber 1986: 421 and Balhorn 1998: 65–66). There are many examples in the BNC where literary or written dialect is present. The corpus examples below contain *gotta* as well as other elements typical of nonstandard and colloquial language rendered in writing:

(1) Most nights, yeah. I *gotta* pass, 'cause I'm in the team. (BNC AT4 W_fict_prose)
(2) It's a big space. Ya *gotta* belt it out, lady. (BNC ATE W_fict_prose)
(3) You ent *gotta* clothe 'em, you know. They shoulda brought that with them. (BNC CAB W_fict_prose)

[1] I may add that the version of Microsoft Word which I have used to write the present article consistently identified *gotta* as a mistake.

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(4) In the church, waitin' and watchin'? We *gotta* keep together. OK? (BNC CJF W_fict_prose)
(5) Like I was sayin' earlier,' she prattled on, 'yer *gotta* be so careful wiv kids.' (BNC EA5 W_fict_prose)

Phonetic spelling or 'eye dialect' is a useful term here in analyzing the deviant spellings in examples (2) – (6). 'Eye dialect' was defined by Bowdre (1964: 1) as consisting of "words or groups of words which for any one of a number of possible reasons have been spelled in a manner which to the eye is recognizably nonstandard, but which to the ear still indicates a pronunciation which is standard". According to Bowdre, in order for a form to be classified as eye dialect, it needs to have been deviantly spelled by the writer to cause a calculated effect. In literature, the effect of nonstandard spellings such as *gotta*, '*cause*, '*em*, *shoulda*, *waitin'*, *watchin'*, *sayin'*, *yer* or *wiv* is that they shape a character's features through his/her language, while orthographically signaling the nature of spoken versus written language. One may add that just like nonstandard language in general, which is dependent on the existence of a recognized standard, the eye dialect's existence also depends on a "reasonably well-standardized system of spelling." (Bowdre 1964: 8) Or, as Chapman puts it, "[t]he conventions governing links between sight and sound cannot be developed until there is some agreement about orthography. It follows that deviant spelling will not be effective until a norm is honored." (1984: 32–33) In addition, "since the semiotic potential of a [language variety] rendering is primarily indexical, effective renderings depend more upon readers' fluency in standard written English than on their familiarity with spoken varieties." (Balhorn 1998: 59)

For a nonstandard or colloquial orthographic form to be recognized and associated with a known standard in the mind of the reader, three concurrent factors are involved: context, similarity of appearance, and similarity of pronunciation (Bowdre 1964: 65–68 and Weber 1986: 420). As far as context is concerned, the reader may expect a certain word, which depends on the text that precedes and follows it. In terms of similarity of appearance, some kind of association must be possible between the standard and the nonstandard forms. For instance, nonstandard *gotta* has the first part in common with *got to*, while the second part is similar with other nonstandard spellings which double a consonant to represent only one phoneme, such as *wanna*, *gonna* and *otta*, where the double consonant is followed by *a* indicating the unstressed vowel /ə/. This last letter also falls in line with other variant spellings which have become conventional, such as *shoulda, woulda, hafta, ya* and *sorta*. Finally, in terms of similarity of pronunciation, *gotta* is thought to be identical with *got to* in normal speech. (Bowdre 1964: 91)

It may be possible to claim, then, that one or even several nonstandard spelling norms have in fact surfaced. As Sebba asserted, "deviant spellings are limited to those which *do* conform to existing sound-to-spelling rules. They are 'deviant' not because they fail to conform to a sound-to-spelling rule, but because they conform to the *wrong* one." (2003: 154; also Sebba 2003: 157 and Sebba 2007: 31).

As far as the individual writer manufacturing his/her own identity through spelling is concerned, Sebba noted that "[o]rthography […] is an ideal site for ideological struggle and rebellion of various kinds" (2003: 152), especially since the printed text is an area where standardization is strictly imposed. On the one hand, a

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departure from standard orthographic norms may signal distance from or complete negation of the dominant culture. However, if adopted by a group, such a choice may gain the status of an anti-standard that functions as an expression of social and cultural identity (Androutsopoulos 2002: 515). Moreover, nonstandard spellings can also produce or increase particular relationships between the writer and his/her audience, without it being related to a challenging cultural attitude. Nevertheless, since the corpora used (the BNC and GloWbe) exist only in orthographic form, "we have no [direct] knowledge of the motivation of the authors or transcribers for [spelling *gotta*] rather than the fuller form [*have got to*]" (Leech et al. 2009: 105).

As Crystal (2011: 62) commented:

> [the] situation turns out to be quite complex. What factors might promote the use of nonstandard spelling, capitalization, or punctuation? It could be any of several reasons. The writers might be ignorant of the standard usage. They might know it, but not be bothered to use it. They might be bothered, but don't have keyboard skills up to the task of typing it correctly. They might think they've typed it correctly, when actually they haven't, and failed to read their message through before sending it. They might make a conscious decision not to bother with the standard form, because they feel it is unimportant. They might, consciously or unconsciously, use the nonstandard form in order to accommodate to the usage of their peers. They might deliberately use it to create a special effect. Or some combination of these factors might apply.

Nevertheless, Shaw (2008: 43–44) argued that in computer mediated communication (CMC)

> […] spelling can show the actual variant used by the speaker. In all non-standard spelling we can speak of self-representation, and in this last type of regularization [of irregular spellings] we can add self-revelation. The writer not only shows us a persona, but also reveals some assumptions about pronunciation which give information about their actual speech.

In writing, *gotta* represents spoken English better than *got to* or *have got to* can. Its choice may be seen as an expression of identity, of opposition to standard norms, of difference, although one may never know exactly why a writer uses it. Nevertheless, in order for *gotta* to be recognized as a nonstandard form it needs to approximate standard spelling close enough and not to look completely alien to the reader. It also needs to converge with other nonstandard spellings of certain idioms. In this, one may read the formation of a norm parallel to the standard.

3. *Gotta* as nonstandard grammatical form

Standard *have got to* with an obligation meaning is documented to have entered English in the 19th century, but it must have existed in spoken English well before (Krug 2000: 61–62). Now it is fifty percent more frequent than *must* (idem: 63). As for *gotta,* it may be classified as an 'emerging modal' (Krug 2000: 3–5), somewhere in between an auxiliary and a lexical verb. Its form demonstrates that there is a very high degree of bonding between *got* and *to* in its source, standard *have got to*. It is definitely the case that *gotta* does not behave like core English modals. First, it does not allow inversion, especially for formulating questions. No sentence of the type *"*Gotta* you go?" could be found in either the BNC or GloWbe

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GB. Instead, in order to formulate questions, the full auxiliary *have* is preserved, as in:

(6) … was it a slipped disc or is it gone or *have* you *gotta* go back for any more tests or anything like that… (BNC K71 S_speech_unscripted)
(7) *Has* just one of us *gotta* write it… (BNC JND S_unclassified)
(8) And *have* we not *gotta* take care that… (BNC F7G S_meeting)

Second, *gotta* cannot be negated in the manner that a core modal can, i.e. by attaching *not* to it. In other words, **gottan't* or even **gotta not* have not been attested. Instead, an auxiliary (*ain't* or *haven't*) is needed to help in the formation of negation. Some instances found in the two corpora are:

(9) Oh well Ange if you *ain't gotta* pay for it I'd bloody take it. (BNC KB6 S_conv)
(10) … we don't have to sort of, *ain't gotta* take really too much muck… (BNC KC0 S_conv)
(11) I *haven't gotta* wa—(BNC KBA S_conv)

Third, *gotta* cannot be replaced by a proform, as in *"I *gotta* go, *gottan't* I?" Instead, a different auxiliary has to be used:

(12) … you *gotta* put these in *ain't* you? (BNC KCT S_conv)
(13) (SP:PS0SX) Yeah, he'd need to be wouldn't he? (SP:PS0SY) *Gotta* be, *ain't* he? (BNC KE0 S_conv)
(14) **Gotta** be C *innit*? (BNC KCU S_conv)

In (14) the use of the invariant tag *innit* "attests on the one hand to the opacity of the reduced auxiliary […] and indicates that *gotta* is not a full-fledged central modal syntactically." (Krug 2000: 94)

Moreover, *gotta* cannot combine with the perfect like core modals can. If sentences such as "I *must have left* it in the car" and "You *ought to have told* her" are well-formed and easy to find, no example of the type *"*Gotta have told* her not to make dinner" could be found in the two corpora (see also Krug 2000: 107-109).

Also in terms of form, *gotta* may retain the auxiliary *have* (full or contracted), but it can also stand on its own. The distributions of these structures as well as other combinations for *gotta* found in the two corpora are shown in Charts 1 and 2 below:

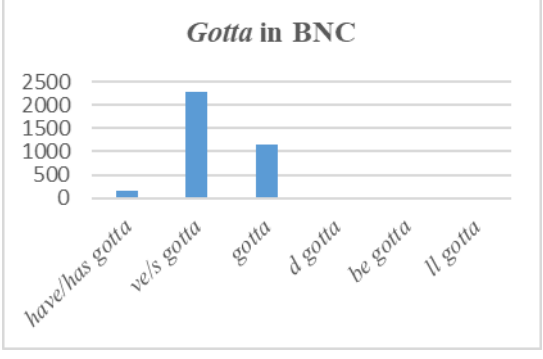


Chart 1**.** *Gotta* in the BNC. Raw numbers: *have/has gotta*: 167, *ve/s gotta*: 2281, *gotta*: 1154, *d gotta*: 23, *be gotta*: 33, *ll gotta*: 2.

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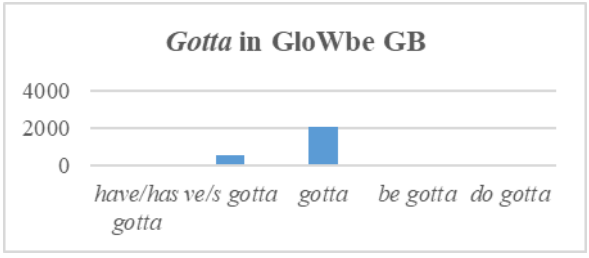


Chart 2. *Gotta* in GloWbe GB. Raw numbers: *have/has gotta*: 26, *ve/s gotta*: 549, *gotta*: 2102, *be gotta*: 5, *do gotta*: 4.

If it can be agreed that despite their inadequacies the two corpora allow for a view of *gotta*'s development through time, then it can be said that *gotta* was in the 1990s in a phase of behavior similar to that of a lexical verb while at the same time developing a modal-like syntactic behaviour. It co-occurrs with *had / would ('d)* and *will ('ll)* in the BNC, as in:

(15) some paint work *had gotta* be dealt with (BNC KCL S_conv)
(16) He'*d gotta* have these tests for this other kidney. (BNC KCT S_conv)
(17) (SP:PS0FS) I thought he said he'*d gotta* go somewhere? (BNC KCT S_conv)
(18) I've got ta do the homework, it'*ll gotta* be in tomorrow, normally gets a week! (BNC KBF S_conv)
(19) I said to her come on I said come on you'*ll gotta* start trying to be strong… (BNC KCP S_conv)

GloWbe GB, on the other hand, contains none of the possibilities noted above but, on closer examination, it does retain some examples of *gotta* combining with the auxiliary *do*, which reminds of *gotta*'s lexical verb stage:

(20) OK I *do gotta* own up to that! (GloWbe GB G punk77.co.uk)
(21) *don't* nobody *gotta* know (GloWbe GB B thctalk.com)
(22) you *don't gotta* believe nothin' you don't like. (GloWbe GB G guardian.co.uk)

Pullum found that *do gotta* is an American phenomenon (1977: 89).

It may also be the case that the relationship between *gotta* and its auxiliary *have* has been disintegrating, for which reason the introduction of *be* (examples from the BNC) or *do* (examples from GloWbe) is necessary in order to produce negation:

(23) He said nothing, he said you *ain't gotta* cook Jeanie and Rob have invited us down (BNC KCP S_conv)
(24) I *ain't gotta* go in tomorrow (BNC KCT S_conv)
(25) you *don't gotta* spend a fortune (GloWbe GB G ...owtheboat.blog.co.uk)

It must also be noted that *gotta* can be followed by a noun phrase. Although this is a very rare phenomenon, it is quite striking:

(26) Dave, Dave, Dave, I've *gotta* big one (BNC KNV S_conv)
(27) *Gotta* lot of love (BNC KNV S_conv)
(28) (SP:PS55C) Oh, I *gotta* joke (SP:PS55B) You *gotta* a joke? (BNC KPG S_conv)

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(29) (SP:PS46W) I got one. (SP:PS46V) whose *gotta* good one? (BNC JJR S_classroom)
(30) 'You *gotta* picture,' Selwyn announced. 'I got a picture,' Harry confirmed (BNC APU W_fict_prose)
(31) I *gotta* question it's not Attitude related. (GloWbe GB G wwedvdnews.com)
(32) *Gotta* smoke? (GloWbe GB G daysarenumbers.net)

In such cases *gotta* clearly retains its original sense of possession from which it developed into the vastly more frequent modal idiom observed today (Krug 2000: 73).

From a semantic perspective, *gotta* is mostly deontic:

(33) … if somebody else has said it before you you've *gotta* think quick and think of something else. (BNC FM7 S_unclassified)
(34) I can't be seen not to be going it, I've *gotta* go with this. (BNC JJL S_tutorial)
(35) Good musicianship requires listening... ya' *gotta'* make it seamless (GloWbe GB B mudcat.org)
(36) … I am very high maintenance when it comes to tea, but you *gotta* do it right!! (GloWbe GB B myrandomblurb.co.uk)

Extremely few examples were found where a clear epistemic meaning could be discerned:

(37) … it's *gotta* be the CPU innit? (BNC KCY S_conv)
(38) It *gotta* be acid cuz the X is gone (GloWbe GB G ntk.net)

One may conclude that *gotta* is still very far from being a fully-fledged modal but it tends to join a new class of quasi-modals alongside *wanna* and *gonna* (and possibly others). In fact, it is only on semantical grounds that *gotta* is said to be an emerging modal. This somehow misdirects one's attention away from *gotta*'s syntactical behavior which is not modal-like at all.

4. Computer-mediated communication: *gotta* on the WWW

This section is warranted by the use of GloWbe, a corpus made up of asynchronous web material. First, I will present the most important facts regarding GloWbe pertaining to the present research. Second, I will make some general statements about computer-mediated communication (CMC). Finally, I will present the research results related to *gotta* on the Web.

I have used GloWbe's Great Britain subcorpus exclusively, although GloWbe as a whole is designed to enable comparison between twenty different national varieties. The Great Britain subcorpus contains 387,615,074 words. 60 percent of the texts in GloWbe come from blogs evincing fairly informal language, while 40 percent come from a variety of more formal text types (Davies and Fuchs 2015 and Loureiro-Porto 2017). Despite its enormous size and text type diversity, GloWbe Great Britain cannot be said to represent British English in general. It is above all a genre-specific corpus, where certain web registers display similar or identical features to their traditional, non-web counterparts, while others are nonexistent outside the web (Biber and Egbert 2016: 131; cf. Crystal 2011: 77 for an opposing argument).

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CMC (Computer-mediated communication), which is what the web is made up of, is frequently compared with face-to-face communication and writing. It was found that "CMC resembles both written language and oral conversation" (Baym 2008: 523; also Crystal 2011: 19, 32; Collot and Belmore 1996; Al-Sa'Di and Hamdan 2005: 421). Although there are many ways in which CMC is closer to written language in general, it "can be marked by colloquial and nonstandard spellings that foreground phonetic qualities" (Baym 2008: 525), which brings CMC closer to speech. In the use of modals, Yates (1996) found that CMC is statistically comparable to speech (1996: 45).

> Many of the 'errors' [and therefore of the nonstandard features] that make online interaction more like speech than writing can be understood as efforts to create a friendly, informal, conversational tone, which in turn gives rise to playfulness (Baym 2008: 526; Crystal 2011: 73).

Nevertheless, like the literary dialect, nonstandard language used online also relates to the creation of an identity protected however by the writer's anonymity on the Web.

Sebba (2007) envisioned CMC as a "partially regulated" space where writers are free to "do their own thing" (also Shaw 2008: 42). To some extent, CMC is "an environment where norms are suspended" (Baym 2008: 526). Some written features are distinctive to CMC among which the use of nonstandard or deviant spellings, some of them recorded as far back as the 17th century, others since the 19th. (Crystal 2011: 5)

We have seen that according to the data retrieved from GloWbe and the BNC, to regard *gotta* as the nonstandard form of *have got to* is an oversimplification, as it can still combine with the auxiliaries *have/'ve/has/'s*, as well as with *do* or *be*. But it may be useful to see where CMC stands as compared with spoken and written English from the point of view of the presence or non-presence of auxiliaries.

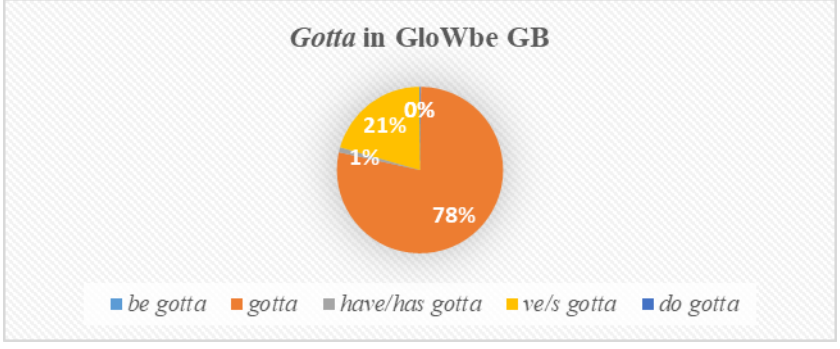


Chart 3. *Gotta* on its own and accompanied by auxiliaries in GloWbe GB. Raw numbers: *be gotta*: 5; *gotta*: 2102; *have/has gotta*: 26; *ve/s gotta*: 549; *do gotta*: 4

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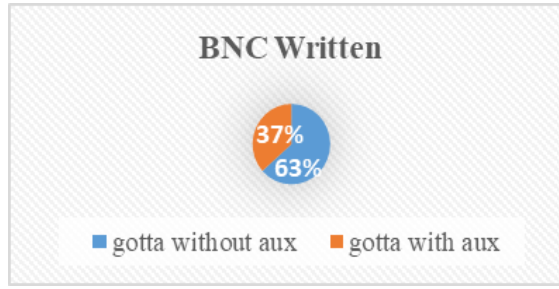


Chart 4**.** *Gotta* in the BNC written subcorpus. Raw numbers: *gotta* without auxiliaries: 130; *gotta* with auxiliaries: 75

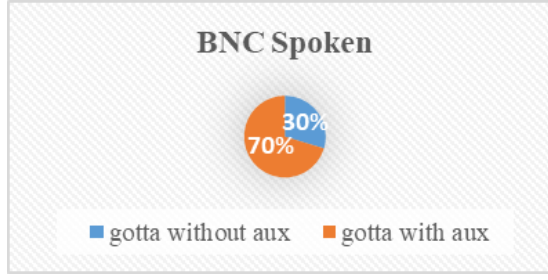


Chart 5**.** *Gotta* in the BNC spoken subcorpus. Raw numbers: *gotta* without auxiliaries: 1024; *gotta* with auxiliaries: 2432

As can be seen from the charts above, *gotta* on the web behaves more like *gotta* in the written part than like *gotta* in the spoken part of the BNC. This is hardly suprising, as *gotta* in the written part is mostly found in fiction. But that spoken *gotta*'s behaviour in the BNC should differ to such an extent from its behaviour on the web is quite unexpected, even taking the 30-year time span into consideration. (The BNC covers the 1990s, while GloWbe covers 2012-2013).

Ellipsis of the subject is a common occurrence in CMC (Crystal 2011: 46). Here, the data retrieved from the BNC and GloWbe show that in CMC there is a slightly higher preference for omitting the subject (see Charts 6, 7, and 8), which may indicate that CMC is overall a more colloquial variety of English, even as compared to spoken English in general. This may also be a historical development since the 1990s.

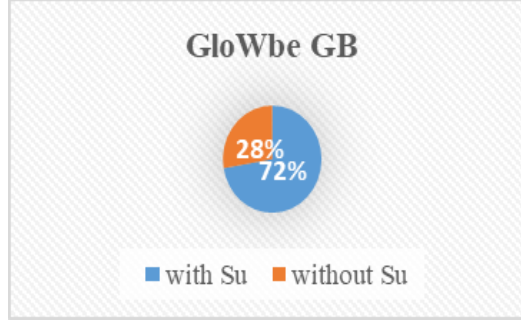


Chart 6**.** Percentages of *gotta* with and without a preceding subject in GloWbe GB.

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Raw numbers: *gotta* with subject: 1943; *gotta* without a subject: 744

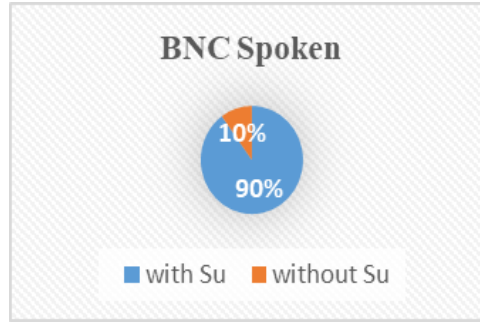


Chart 7. Percentages of *gotta* with and without a preceding subject in the BNC spoken subcorpus. Raw numbers: *gotta* with subject: 3110; *gotta* without a subject: 346

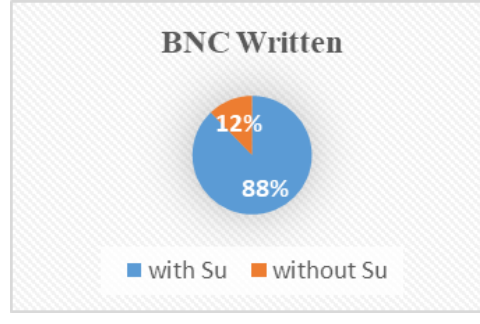


Chart 8. Percentages of *gotta* with and without a preceding subject in the BNC written subcorpus. Raw numbers: *gotta* with subject: 180; *gotta* without a subject: 25

To sum up, nonstandard spelling features of online English can be ascribed to writers creating an online identity of their own. On the other hand, it is surprising to find that *gotta*'s behaviour on the Web sometimes differs completely from its behavior in spoken English, sometimes conforms to printed written English, and at other times it aligns with a general tendency in the language as a whole. Auxiliary-less *gotta* is by far the most frequent form of *gotta* in CMC (see Chart 2), which may be explained by the writers' need to write as fast as possible, ignoring redundant elements like auxiliaries and subjects, which can be retrieved, if need, from the surrounding context.

5. Conclusions

Nonstandard *gotta* in British English is chiefly a grammatical and a spelling matter. In terms of grammar, *gotta* may be called an 'emerging modal' almost solely on semantical grounds. In the future, we can expect *gotta* to be increasingly used with an epistemic reading, as "the extension from agent-oriented (or, more specifically, deontic) to epistemic modality is a well-trodden path in the history of the English modals as well as crosslinguistically." (Krug 2000: 91)

In terms of spelling, *gotta* can be said to be an eye dialect form, or a phonetic spelling of standard *got to* (or *have got to*). It is a better rendering in writing of standard pronunciation. Its online use makes CMC closer to dialogue written in

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fictional works, which may actually be its source. Online writers using *gotta* may feel they are better rendering the way they speak in writing. However, Charts 3 to 5 clearly indicate that auxiliary-less *gotta* is predominantly a written phenomena. It may be the case that we are witnessing the slow formation of a written norm on the web which attempts to render into writing the way writers perceive how they speak, not the way they may actually speak. In so doing, online writers try to build an online identity for themselves which expresses friendliness and openness.

> The world of sound is represented in written language more directly than any other sense can be. The origin of alphabetic writing in an attempt to give visual shape to the sounds of speech means that there is an intimate and more immediate connection between the two codes than between another aspects of human experience. The passage of time has in most languages widened the gap between then and made it impossible to achieve a perfect reproduction in visual form without going beyond the conventions of regular orthography. (Chapman 1984: 238)

The use of *gotta*, along with other nonstandard forms such as *wanna*, *gonna*, *otta*, *shoulda*, *woulda* and others, can be regarded as an attempt to bridge the gap between speech and writing and to faithfully represent one's own voice.

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Abstract

The article deals with the nonstandard *gotta* from the point of view of orthography and grammar. Using two corpora, the BNC and the GB sub-corpus of GloWbe, the convergence of *gotta* with other nonstandard spellings is discussed alongside its grammatical behavior (in terms of inversion, negation, auxiliary use), which is different from that of the core English modals. However, on semantic grounds alone, *gotta* can be considered an emerging modal. The final section of the article is dedicated to *gotta* in computer-mediated language, motivated by its presence in the latter corpus, which covers *gotta* on the Internet. It is concluded that *gotta* may also be seen as an illustration of an emerging orthographical norm that represents actual speech due to the freedom conferred by the Internet which creates the ripe communicative context for such a norm to surface.

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