

# СОВРЕМЕННЫЕ НАПРАВЛЕНИЯ ЛИНГВИСТИКИ



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## QUASI-MODAL VERBS IN AMERICAN ENGLISH

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**Abstract.** The article analyzes such a unique linguistic phenomenon as structural-systemic simplification, indicating the process of autonomization of American English in the macrosystem of World Englishes. Linguistic simplification is the dynamic process of separating American English from British English. Simplification of any language is based on the strategy of speech production in the communicative register. The article focuses on the aspect of grammatical simplification of the language on the material of some quasi-modal verbs. The urgency of the research is quite obvious and can be explained by the need for a comprehensive study of the structural-systemic simplification of American English, which underlies its autonomy in the macrosystem of World Englishes. The scope of the study embraces structural-systemic simplification, while the research object includes the grammatically competitive quasi-modal units *be going to* and *gonna*; *have to* / *have got to* and *gotta*; *want to* and *wanna*. The aim of the article consists in the need to analyze the impact of linguistic simplification on the autonomization of American English in the system of global English. In connection with this aim, the main tasks of the article are: a) to outline the sociohistorical and sociocultural aspect of the isolation of American English in the macrosystem of World Englishes; b) to identify the extralinguistic prerequisites for the formation of grammatically competitive quasi-modal units; c) to describe the grammaticalization of quasi-modal verbs, as well as to predict the possibility of its status segregation in the communicative register. The theoretical significance of the article can be attributed to the possibility of providing new data in the field of linguistic variantology of the English language regarding the position of American English in the macrosystem of World Englishes.

**Keywords:** language simplification; quasi-modal verbs; macrosystem of World Englishes; language autonomy; processuality; diversification; prototypical grammatical constructions

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## КВАЗИМОДАЛЬНЫЕ ГЛАГОЛЫ В АМЕРИКАНСКОМ ВАРИАНТЕ АНГЛИЙСКОГО ЯЗЫКА

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**Аннотация.** Статья посвящена анализу такого уникального языкового явления, как структурно-системное упрощение, указывающего на процесс автономизации американского английского языка в макросистеме *World Englishes*. Языковое упрощение представляет собой динамический процесс разграничения между американским вариантом английского языка и британским английским. Кардинальные изменения в структуре любого языка базируются на стратегии речепроизводства в коммуникативном регистре. В статье акцентируется аспект грамматического упрощения языка на материале некоторых квазимодальных глаголов. Актуальность статьи очевидна и объясняется необходимостью всестороннего исследования структурно-системного упрощения американского английского, лежащего в основе его автономизации в макросистеме *World Englishes*. Объектом исследования является структурно-системное упрощение, в то время как предметом – грамматически конкурентные квазимодальные единицы *be going to* и *gonna*; *have to* / *have got to* и *gotta*; *want to* и *wanna*. Цель статьи заключается в необходимости анализа влияния языкового упрощения на автономизацию американского варианта английского языка в системе глобального английского. В связи с поставленной целью основными задачами статьи являются: а) установление социоисторического и социокультурного аспекта обособления американского английского в макросистеме *World Englishes*; б) выявление экстралингвистических предпосылок формирования грамматически конкурентных квазимодальных единиц; в) описание грамматикализации квазимодальных глаголов, а также представление возможности статусной сегрегации американского английского в коммуникативном регистре. Теоретическую значимость статьи можно определить восполнением лакуны в области лингвистической вариантологии английского языка относительно занимаемой позиции американского английского в макросистеме *World Englishes*.

**Ключевые слова:** упрощение языка; квазимодальные глаголы; макросистема «World Englishes»; автономизация языка; процессуальность; диверсификация; прототипические грамматические конструкции

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## Introduction

In the second half of the twentieth century, linguistics finally formed the idea of the macrosystem of World Englishes, which fixed the autonomy of various variants of the English language. Although British English served as the base language for the systematic division into discrete components, it is not the primary language in the World Englishes macrosystem. Perhaps all variants of English have attained the status of equal languages in this rather extensive multi-level language group. The process of autonomisation of variants of English is now quite dynamic.

Obviously, the British and American Englishes are the most studied from a comparative perspective. In the field of comparative studies, when comparing these two language variants, a fairly rich material has been collected on phonological, morphological, lexical and grammatical discrepancies. Researchers, as a rule, appeal to the phenomenon of “language simplification”. However, in the process of active development of theories and practices within various linguistic disciplines and directions, a whole range of interpretations of this concept has developed, and it is not always about simplification. More precisely, simplification refers to a more complex process involving the divergence of language systems: lexico-semantic, grammatical, syntactic, etc. Apparently, there are diversification processes characteristic of the diverse development of English language variants, which leads to their obvious linguistic divergence.

Language simplification is characterised mainly by processuality, as it is based on a certain communicative strategy, which implies the unfolding in time of the process of speech formation, in which an eclectic set of operations is presented: making a certain intonation pattern, avoiding the merging of consonants, changing the semantic content of certain lexical units, “restructuring” grammatical and syntactic structures, etc. At the same time, variants of linguistic behaviour vary within different language communities. The communicative and functional process of language simplification taking place in American English leads to results fixed in its speech-language system.

Therefore, language simplification is a communicative-cognitive, procedural strategy aimed mainly at generalizing the facts of language and speech. All language systems and subsystems are simplified, but this process is most clearly and obviously represented in the lexical and semantic system of a particular “variable” language. Any simplification in speech is aimed at creating comfortable conditions for the communicative act carried out by the interlocutors. Thus, it is obvious that communication between British people and emigrants from other countries will represent a certain systematic linguistic simplification of an intentional nature, which is so necessary to facilitate communication carried out in different communicative spheres. Gradually, some speech simplifications are

fixed in the language, therefore becoming fixed in the linguistic usus.

Simplified communicative registers can be conventionally represented as follows: the subject-initiator of simplification possesses speech-language resources either fully or insufficiently. In the first case it is the mother tongue and hence a fairly high linguistic competence, in the second case it is the lexifier language and hence insufficient, perhaps even low linguistic competence.

The process of language simplification is the most important factor of autonomisation of English language variants in the World Englishes macrosystem, which is necessary for the dynamic development of the language and for its qualitative change in the modern world, a kind of language adaptation to modern globally acceptable conditions of intercultural communication. It is paradoxical that the supposed simplification of language sometimes leads to more complex relations between languages in the World Englishes macrosystem.

When analysing the systemic and structural simplification of quasi-modal units in the American variant of English, it is necessary to take into account the studies of leading Russian and Western linguistic scholars in the fields of: a) contact variantology, ethno-linguistics and sociolinguistics: A. O. Barinova, E. S. Gritsenko [2024]; E. S. Gorodova [2016]; Z. G. Proshina [2020]; M. Revinsky [2000]; A. D. Schweitzer [1995a, 1995b]; J. L. Dillard [1980]; D. Crystal [2003]; E. Finegan, J. R. Rickford [2004]; D. Simpson [1986], etc.; b) linguocognitology, pragmalinguistics and communicative linguistics: I. G. Zhirova [2023, 2020]; A. V. Kravchenko [2021]; N. Chomsky [2006]; J. R. Hurford [2011], etc.; c) general theory of language: S. G. Ter-Minasova [2019]; V. Feshchenko [2022]; G. Harman [2024]; N. Chomsky [1972, 1986]; P. Collins [2009]; N. Goodman [1943]; A. J. Thomson, A. V. Martinet [1986], etc.

The key methodological principle in the article is linguistic structuralism, which views language as a holistic system, whose simplification is a dual transformation based on prescriptive and descriptive grammar.

The paper uses methods of linguistic analysis: a) descriptive, which allows to create a holistic picture of the object under study, b) structural, which analyzes the relationship between quasi-modal verbs in the modal language system, c) interpretive, involving theoretical and analytical processing of empirical material. In addition to the methods of linguistic analysis, general scientific methods are also used: analysis, synthesis and generalization.

## Systemic and structural simplification of the American version of English

The dynamic development of the American variant of English predetermined a partial systemic and structural simplification of the language, which represents an ingenious evolutionary programme for the emergence and development of this variant of English.

At the same time, linguistic simplification is intralinguistically motivated and indicates changes in the inventory of phonological, morphological, lexical and grammatical units constituting the language system, thus strengthening the diversification potential of American English.

American English has largely been shaped artificially, under the deliberate influence of language normativity, standardisation and unification [Crystal 2003].

At present, there is a clear language policy: on the one hand, American English acts as a means of self-identification of the already fully formed American nation; and on the other hand, with the increasing number of migrants, primarily from Latin American countries, there is an obvious course for further democratisation and liberalisation of the language under the influence of mainly Spanish-speaking countries. It seems that language policy in the United States allows us to subdivide the grammar of American English into a) prescriptive: explanatory and more objectively motivated, historically linked to British English; and b) descriptive: communicatively oriented and more national subjective, partly already formed in the United States, yet still continuing to be modified by political, economic and cultural processes.

Thus, generativism introduced to a certain extent an objective criterion set of indicators for evaluating grammar, or rather semantic grammar, in the language system of American English. At the same time, interpretivism presupposes a somewhat grammatical dialogicality, according to which grammar, while sometimes being an overly structured system of language, is communicatively quite flexible, fluid, hybrid and to some extent unpredictable, which is characteristic, as a rule, of dynamically flowing, large-scale communication.

Interpretive grammar takes into account the epistemological approach according to which meaning is formed and reproduced by members of linguistic communities. This is the competitiveness of two grammars coexisting within one language (American English): prescriptive and descriptive, which allows us to partially explain their synchronous variability.

It should be noted that N. Chomsky proposed to introduce such a parameter as “simplicity measure” (simplicity metric) – “a way of comparative evaluation of proposed alternative grammars” [Chomsky 1972: 33]. According to the philosophy of language, “the more a system allows us to minimize the set of principles underlying it, the more broadly the structure of internal relationships in a given system can be represented” [Goodman 1943: 107]. Therefore, the range of grammatical constructions allowed in the language is wider under the condition of less strict grammatical regulation, which is quite characteristic of communicative-oriented grammar. Obviously, a less regulated grammar is descriptive grammar, since it is based on an anthropo-oriented communicative-functionalist approach. Functionalism takes into account the possibility of several forms of realisation of grammatical meanings, while communicativism mainly aims at a simplified, largely optimal way of grammatical choice in the

communicative act.

For example, in the communicative use of the grammatical system of the modern American version of the English language, the following quasi-modal grammatical pairs are fixed: *be going to* and *gonna*; *have to / have got to* and *gotta*; *want to* and *wanna*. Grammaticalization, being a purposeful source of generating “innovative” forms, led to the expansion of the inventory of simplified grammatical tools formed on the basis of already existing, well-known constructions: *be going to*, *have to / have got to*, *want to*. In the communicative register of some speech-language communities, simplified grammatical means – *gonna*, *gotta*, *wanna* – compete with them.

The prototypical grammatical constructions of *be going to*, *have to / have got to*, *want to* have undergone significant phonetic simplification of *gonna*; *gotta*; *wanna*. At the same time, *firstly*, phonetic “erosion” / phonetic distortion has an obvious systemic, typed, analog character, *secondly*, lexical forms have been optimized (shortened); *thirdly*, syntactic structures have been simplified, up to their complete loss.

The grammatical system of a language, as rules, has a rigid, most stable character and, therefore, is less susceptible to innovative changes than, for example, the lexical-semantic system. Grammatical forms and categories are quite stable and not prone to dynamic changes. Nevertheless, there is also a more intensive accumulation of some grammatical changes nowadays, as many socio-cultural factors cannot but have a significant influence on language. Therefore, there is an expansion of grammatical variation, influenced primarily by the need to simplify some grammatical forms and syntactic constructions within communication.

The regular functioning of grammatical doublets leads to the consolidation of simplified forms in the language, which gradually displace historically formed grammatical constructions. In such a case it is a matter of social acceptability of grammatical innovations. At the same time, there is a change in the volume of semantic content of the compared grammatical forms in the language, which is explained by some mismatch of their communicative functions. At the same time, it can be stated that innovative grammatical forms are characterised by the expansion of the volume of semantic content under the influence of individual inter-grammar, formed in the speech behaviour of a particular linguistic person belonging to a particular linguistic collective.

At the same time, historically and comparatively new, communicatively conditioned grammatical forms in common use are idiolects, heterogeneous formations within the variation potential of the language. The consolidation of innovative forms in the language is preceded by a period of inter- and intra-individual variation. A linguistic personality, as a rule, in the process of language acquisition gets acquainted with the established (conservative) and new grammatical forms and under the influence of the dominant speech behavior in the language community to which he/she belongs, the choice of one or another grammatical variant takes place.

Obviously, it is important to determine the status of some grammatical constructions *be going to*, *have to* / *have got to*, *want to* and their reduced, abbreviated (simplified) forms *gonna*; *gotta*; *wanna*. Thus, within the framework of modern communicative-oriented grammar, these verb constructions occupy an intermediate position between full-meaning verbs and auxiliary verbs. At the same time, in the modality system of English some quasi-modal verbs are qualified as semantically weakened idiomatic expressions.

In the grammar of American English, under the influence of socially conditioned speech-language political correctness, a decrease in the use of modal verbs and an increase in the use of quasi-modal verbs can be traced. The political correctness of linguistic behavior implies that modal verbs act as sufficiently strong markers of obligation, necessity, and confidence, which indicates an obvious social stratification and hierarchy. That is why participants in the communicative process, in order to establish linguistic social equality, prefer modalized verbs and their doublets in informal communication. This ultimately leads to a narrowing of the gap between oral and written communication.

Of course, it is necessary to consider the process of grammaticalization, which represents “the loss of an independent lexical meaning by a word (or word form) and the transformation of such a desemantized lexical unit into a grammatical indicator” [Revisky 2000: 16]. Grammaticalization precedes linguistic simplification as an obvious linguistic change. Thus, full-valued verbs initially lack modal meanings, however, in some specific statements a sign of modality appears, which leads to their semantic convergence with the actual modal verbs.

For example, in the semantics of the quasi-modal verb expression *be going to*, there is a gradual development of modality, which is explained by the addition of markers (indicators) of intentionality and futurity to the original meaning of “movement” (movement observed in space). Therefore, in this grammatical construction, the process of andantive (gradual and step-by-step) semantic modification of meaning is fixed: the primary meaning of *movement* + the indicator of *futurity* + the indicator of *intentionality*. It is obvious that the development of modality is associated to a greater extent with intentionality, one of the features of which is purposefulness, implicitly fixed in the preposition *to*. There is an obvious syntactic change in this construction, leading to a strengthening of the function of the auxiliary modalized verb.

So, in this case we are talking about a certain inferential information completeness with the help of an infinitive complement: *be going to do smth*. The inferential information about the speaker’s intention is derived from the implicit one. Later, within the framework of the category of modality, under the influence of a descriptive approach to grammar, a new, communicatively conditioned, abbreviated colloquial form *gonna* was formed. Therefore, we are talking about the synchronous variability (grammatical doublet) of *be going to* and *gonna*. The appearance of the reduced form of the modalized verb *gonna* is provoked by the

structural simplification of the prototypical construction of *be going to*.

In general, a similar process of grammaticalization of the initially full-fledged verb *to have* in diachronic terms is observed in the phased formation of the modal-deontic meaning of *obligation*. The verb *to have* is treated differently in different grammars: some linguists refer this verb to modal verbs (or rather, to modal expressions) [Thomson, Martinet 1986: 139–141], while others – to quasi-modal units [Collins, 2009]: a) semi-modal (*have got to*, *have better*, *would rather*, etc.) and lexico-modal (*have to*, *be going to*, *want to*, *need to*, *be able to*, *be about to*, etc.).

Thus, there is a change not only in lexical, but also in syntactic semantics of the lexico-modal (quasi-modal) verb *to have*. A change in the syntactic behavior of this verb leads to its partial modalization, therefore, to a) a change in the grammatical status in the language, as well as b) a reduction in the distant syntagmatic environment (cf.: *have smth to do smth* / *have to do smth*).

However, the grammaticalization process of this verb has not been completed at this stage. To preserve the sense of possessiveness, the lexical composition was expanded by adding the verb phrase *got – have got smth* to the grammatical structure. At the same time, there was also a process of partial modalization of an already new grammatical construction, in which the penetration of the verb *got* into the quasi-modal verb *have to* ==> *have got to do smth* is observed.

Thus, there is once again a logical explanation for the appearance of the verb word form *got* in the grammatical construction. This results from the phonetic simplification of the structure of the word *have*, since at the junction of the joint use of personal pronouns with this verb in the colloquial register, there is a formal contraction of sounds at the phonetic level (phonetic contraction) *I have* ==> *I’ve*.... To preserve the phonetic stability of the grammatical structure, an additional word was required, the most successful of which turned out to be the word form *got*. At the same time, the appearance of *got* in the grammatical construction of *have to do smth* predetermined the formation of the modalized idiomatic expression *have got to do smth*. The simplification of this quasi-modal idiom to the word-form *gotta* is indicative of an inherent evolutionary process that takes place under the influence of extra- and interlinguistic factors in American English. These factors underly the systemic and structural reduction of the language and some semantic devaluation of linguistic systems and subsystems in the spoken communicative register.

It is necessary to consider the semantic dynamics of the semantic development of the verb *want*, borrowed into English from the Scandinavian language: *vanta* – insufficiency, small amount (pre-modal meaning) [Online Etymology Dictionary].

With time, the meaning of *insufficiency* was replaced by the meaning of *necessity*. The semantic shift is explained by the causal relationship of the two meanings, since *insufficiency* implies the *need* to somehow make up for the alleged deficiency. At the same time, the meaning of *necessity* already demonstrates

the modal potential of this verb. Further, the meaning of *necessity* underwent a new semantic update related to the clarification of this meaning. We are talking about a *desirable necessity*, while logically emphasizing the lexeme *desirable*. A new meaning of *desirability* is fixed in the verb, which in turn already indicates a quasi-modal generalized meaning of “weakened expression of will”.

Gradually, in the process of grammaticalization of the verb *want*, the modality is actualized, since the possibility of an infinitive complement increases, due to the need to clarify and concretize a new object of modal relations: *want to*. Further, within the framework of the communicative functionality of the American version of the English language, there is an obvious functional distancing of the new reduced word form *wanna* from its prototype *want to*.

Therefore, as part of the further development of the category of modality, there is a synchronous functioning of grammatical doublets of both full-fledged and abbreviated forms of quasi-modal verbs, indicating the increasing influence of the grammaticalization process on the American version of the English language.

### Conclusions

In conclusion we summarize some of the results of our scientific essay devoted to the study of the structural and systemic simplification of grammatically competitive quasi-modal verbs (*be going to*, *have to* / *have got to*, *want to* and their reduced, simplified forms *gonna*; *gotta*; *wanna*) in the American version of the English language.

The analysis establishes, *firstly*, the coexistence of grammatically competitive units in American English,

which indicates their synchronic variation, which in turn has an inter- and intra-individual character.

*Secondly*, in the American version of the English language, there is a separation of the integral grammar into prescriptive and descriptive, which ultimately is the determining factor in the doublet of quasi-modal verbs.

*Thirdly*, the grammaticalization process, which affects the development of grammatical constructions presented in the paper, demonstrates a step-by-step semantic simplification of *be going to*, *have to* / *have got to*, *want to* due to their desemantization, which in turn led to the optional elements of these verbal expressions, and subsequently to the unconditional simplification of the phonetic appearance (*gonna*; *gotta*; *wanna*), as well as the appearance and gradual strengthening of the modal factor.

*Fourthly*, the consolidation of quasi-modal meaning is associated with the semantic development in the structure of these grammatical constructions of such modalized meanings as intentionality and desirability (expression of will).

*Fifthly*, the structural simplification of these constructions has a multifactorial character, indicating a close interaction between the mechanisms of grammaticalisation, including the change of the infinitive marker, the erasure of some morphemic boundaries, leading further to some phonetic reductions.

*Sixthly*, it is clear that the grammaticalization of quasi-modal grammatical constructions is not an arbitrary transformation, but has a systematic, typed character.

Therefore, the simplification of quasi-modal verbs is dictated by the necessity to meet the speech needs of communication participants.

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