



- c. I mean don't hesitate to come back, because at the end of the day  
I'd **rather** you know too much than not enough  
(1991 *Conversations* [BYU-BNC: KB7 S\_conv])
- d. He wanted twelve shillings. I said we'd **sooner** sleep under the  
hedges.  
(1978 Macdonald, *The Rich Are With You Always*  
[BYU-BNC: HPo W\_fict\_prose])

The purpose of the present chapter is to complement Van linden's (2015) study of developments in the history of American English with an investigation of BETTER, RATHER, and SOONER in the history of British English through the end of the nineteenth century, from the perspective of constructionalisation. Following Denison and Cort (2010) and the other authors cited here, I use the forms BETTER, RATHER, and SOONER to generalise over the various morphological forms such as *had/d better*, *would/d/had rather*, and *would/d/had sooner* and to distinguish them from the adverbs *better*, *rather*, *sooner*.

Van linden (2015) focuses on grammaticalisation as evidenced in COHA by reduction in morphophonological form of the auxiliaries *had* and *would*, and of the standard of comparison *than*. She concludes that the three comparative modals 'are overall developing in the same direction' (2015: 221), despite heterogeneity in structure and meaning. She also establishes a grammaticalisation cline BETTER > SOONER > RATHER (2015: 223), based on the fact that in her data BETTER shows the highest erosion of auxiliaries, SOONER the second highest, and RATHER the least. My perspective is that of Construction Grammar (e.g. Croft 2001; Goldberg 2006) and constructionalisation and constructional changes (Traugott and Trousdale 2013). Since the basic architecture of Construction Grammar consists of form-meaning pairings, I consider meaning as well as form. Comparison of the grammaticalisation and constructionalisation approaches shows that they lead to different perspectives on directionality. Since BETTER, RATHER, and SOONER have variously been said to form a 'set', 'group', or 'class', I assess whether they are best viewed as forming a single subschema of modality, or as members of different subschemas. In this case I conclude with Van linden (2015) that RATHER and SOONER form a set distinct from BETTER (see also Traugott 2016b: 119).

The structure of this chapter is as follows. In Section 4.2, I introduce elements of the constructional model that are key to the argument. Data and methodology are outlined in Section 4.3. Section 4.4 introduces the

main characteristics of the comparative modals in Present-day English (PDE) and the similarities and differences identified in earlier work. Section 4.5 outlines the main historical morphosyntactic and semantic developments of the constructions *BETTER*, *RATHER*, and *SOONER* until the eighteenth century. Section 4.6 details the uses of the three modals from the beginning of the eighteenth century to the turn of the twentieth as evidenced by the *Old Bailey Corpus* (OBC). Section 4.7 addresses the question of how the three micro-constructions were organised in late Modern English (lModE). Section 4.8 compares the grammaticalisation and constructionalisation approaches, especially with respect to directionality, and Section 4.9 concludes.

## 4.2 Data and Method

Whereas Van linden (2015) cites early examples from van der Gaaf (1904), I explore evidence for early developments in the electronic version of the *Middle English Dictionary* (MED) and from a number of electronic databases that reflect relatively informal early Modern English (Culpeper and Kytö 2010), including *A Corpus of English Dialogues 1560–1760* (CED) and the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence Sampler* (CEECS). The main analysis is based on the *Old Bailey Corpus* (OBC). OBC is a balanced subset of 13.9 million words for the years 1720–1913 of the 113 million word *Proceedings of the Old Bailey* (OBPO, 1674–1913) selected to provide evidence of spoken language of the time: ‘[s]ince the proceedings were taken down in shorthand by scribes in the courtroom, the verbatim passages are arguably as near as we can get to the spoken word of the period’ (OBC website: ‘About the project’).

Searches were conducted for *better*, *rather*, *sooner* preceded by an auxiliary, not only those that have been attested in other works (*'d*, *had*, *might*, *should*, *would*), but also *can*, *could*, *may*, *must*, *shall*, and *will*. Further searches targeted particular uses, such as that of *have V-en* for ‘past tense’, or a complement clause immediately following *better*, *rather*, *sooner*.<sup>1</sup> Data for most of the searches were sparse, so the study is necessarily largely qualitative. By contrast, Van linden’s study is quantitative, based on the far larger database of COHA (400 million words).

Only examples in which *auxiliary + better/rather/sooner* is followed by (*not*) *V* (see (1a)), *different subject (not) V*, or complement clause were counted. ‘Different subject’ refers to a subject of *V* that is different from that of the

<sup>1</sup> As discussed in Section 4.4, *have V-en* is often counterfactual and modal rather than past tense.

auxiliary, as in *I'd rather you know* (1c). Coding was conducted manually, based on evidence of plausible paraphrases. The parameters coded for were: ± modal, if + modal, ± advisability; ± animate subject (of the auxiliary), if + animate, person and number. Examples with zero auxiliary and zero subject are covered at length in Van linden (2015) and are not included here.

### 4.3 A Constructional Approach

The main tenets of Construction Grammar models that are relevant to the present chapter are that a construction is a form-meaning pairing and that constructions are types that are hierarchised taxonomically (see e.g. Goldberg 1995, 2006; Croft 2001) in what has come to be known as a 'vertical network'. There is no fixed set of hierarchical levels. The set used here is: i) macro-schemas: the super-ordinate level of abstraction; ii) schemas: abstract sets with several members; iii) subschemas: groupings within a schema; and iv) micro-constructions: item-specific types like BETTER, RATHER, SOONER. Micro-constructions may have morphosyntactic alternations or allostructions ('variant structural realizations of a construction that is left partially underspecified', Cappelle 2006: 18). For present purposes, in the case of BETTER these allostructions are *had better*, *'d better*; in the case of RATHER *would rather*, *had rather*, *'d rather*, *should rather*, *will rather*; and in the case of SOONER *would sooner*, *had sooner*, *'d sooner*, *should sooner*, and *will sooner*.<sup>2</sup> Token utterances that are the data for hypothesising constructions are termed 'constructs'. (Sub)schemas in this vertical network may be enriched by 'horizontal' ones that capture the facts that schemas and subschemas 'may be partly motivated in relation to [their] neighbours' (Van de Velde 2014: 147) and that 'structurally different elements can fulfil the same function' (2014: 141).<sup>3</sup> The combined vertical and abstract network is modelled in Figure 4.1 (Cxn is short for construction; the horizontal line shows a horizontal relationship between subschemas).

The form-meaning pairing is a sign that consists of features: minimally, on the form side, syntax, morphology, phonology, and on the meaning side, semantics, pragmatics, and discourse function (Croft 2001), although not all are necessarily specified for all constructions. Historically, what we find is that features can change individually (see Hilpert 2013). Traugott

<sup>2</sup> Other auxiliaries like *might* and *must* were not attested in my data, and so are not cited among allostructions, but might be for other data.

<sup>3</sup> See also Traugott (2018).

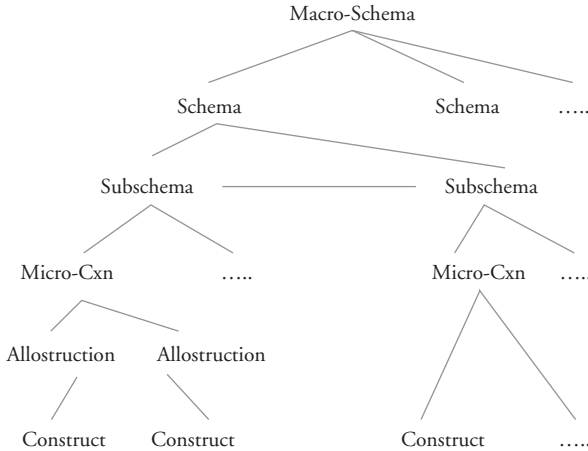


Figure 4.1 Model of a constructional hierarchy

and Trousdale (2013: 26) call changes to individual features ‘constructional changes’. Accumulations of constructional changes may lead to constructionalised, the development of a  $\text{form}_{\text{new}}\text{-meaning}_{\text{new}}$  construction (Traugott and Trousdale 2013: 22).

Hüning and Booij (2014: 592–3) have suggested that:

From a diachronic point of view, it is not the status of the ‘grammaticalizing’ element that is interesting (is it still a word or an affixoid or already an affix?); what is worthy of note is the emergence of a new construction, a new constructional (sub)schema, and its place within the network of constructions.

In this spirit, the questions addressed in this chapter are:

- RQ<sub>1</sub> – What evidence is there of the emergence of the three micro-constructions under consideration?
- RQ<sub>2</sub> – Do the three micro-constructions form one subschema in the ‘vertical’ hierarchy of modality or belong to different subschemas, as Van linden (2015) suggests, and have a ‘horizontal’ relationship?
- RQ<sub>3</sub> – What does a constructional approach add to a grammaticalisation approach to the data?

#### 4.4 BETTER, RATHER, and SOONER in PDE

Here I outline some of the main characteristics of the BETTER, RATHER, and SOONER micro-constructions in PDE to serve as points of comparison with the earlier data.

Among similarities, with respect to meaning, all three comparative modals are weakly deontic, i.e. relatively low on a scale of assessments about the desirability of states of affairs.<sup>4</sup> With respect to form, all three are adverbs ending in comparative *-er*. All three can occur with *had* or *'d* and exhibit the properties of auxiliaries (e.g. they do not occur with *do*) (Van linden 2015: 201). 'Past tense' of all three modal comparatives is formed with *have V-en*, as in the case of core modals (e.g. *I could/might/should have left yesterday*). Contemporary examples are rare, but include those like (2).

- (2) a. 'Oh, Doctor,' threatened Fakrid, 'you'd **better** *have* come up with something. For your own sake.'  
(1993 Roberts, *The Highest Science* [BYU-BNC: FRo W\_fict\_prose])
- b. Not that there haven't been mornings when he'd **rather** *have* stayed in bed.  
(1985–1994 *Central Television News* [BYU-BNC: K1V W\_news\_script])
- c. No groom she knew would ever have left his bride at the altar. He'd **sooner** *have* had a heart attack and died.  
(1996 Douglas, *The Southern Review* [COCA])

Denison (1998: 140) regards *have* in such constructs as 'a signal of unreality' and Van linden (2015: 206) argues that such uses are counterfactual rather than past tense. This analysis seems correct for (2b) and (2c), but not for (2a). The latter exemplifies past in the future (relative tense). This is perhaps because **BETTER** is future-oriented. A further similarity is that all can be used without an auxiliary or a subject (Van linden 2015).

Despite these similarities, there is a distinct asymmetry between **BETTER** and the other two. **BETTER** in (1a) and (1b) is an advice modal that can be paraphrased by *should/lought to/it would be advisable if*, but **RATHER** and **SOONER** in (1c) and (1d) are preference modals that can be paraphrased by *would prefer to/it would be preferable if*. In the case of **BETTER**, advice or at least suggestion of a better outcome is based in the speaker – see (3).

- (3) You **had better** leave.

Van der Auwera and Plungian (1998: 80) call this 'participant-external necessity' – the speaker, not the subject *you*, suggests the action X is

<sup>4</sup> Whereas deontic modality is traditionally associated with obligation, I adopt Van linden and Verstraete's (2011) characterisation of deontic modality as involving desirability rather than obligation (see also Narrog's (2012) identification of deonticity with volition).

advisable. However, in the case of RATHER and SOONER, preference is based in the syntactic subject – see (4).

- (4) You **had rather/sooner** leave.

This is what van der Auwera and Plungian (1998: 80) call ‘participant-internal necessity’ – the subject *you* has a preference/wants one thing more than another. Although most works on modals mention desire and sometimes advisability, few mention preference. An exception is Narrog (2012), who includes preferential modality among subcategories of modality. Van der Auwera and De Wit (2010: 142) suggest the link between advisability and preference is volition and desire: ‘preference can be understood as comparative volition: one wants one thing rather than another’.

BETTER is often used performatively, whereas the other two are not: *You’d better leave* can be a directive, whereas *You’d rather leave* cannot. This presumably is related to participant-external modality. Especially in contemporary English, BETTER is subjective in the sense of being based in the speaker’s attitude or perspective (Traugott 2010: 32).<sup>5</sup> *You had better X* means ‘I think you ought to X in the future (of speech time)’. The speaker, not the subject *you*, suggests the future action X. As Mitchell (2003: 143) points out, in using BETTER, the ‘speaker is [...] deciding that the advice should be acted on’. Unlike BETTER, RATHER and SOONER are not directive. *You had rather X* is normally an assertion about what the speaker thinks or knows the addressee to prefer at the present regarding possible future states of affairs.

BETTER, RATHER, and SOONER are also different with respect to form and distribution. Given its meaning, in the case of BETTER the subject of *had* is also the subject of V, as in (1a). Different subject as in *\*I had better you stayed home* is unattested. However, both RATHER and SOONER allow a different subject as in (1c) and (5), and even occasionally a complement clause, at least in writing. In (5) note the different subject in the first complement clause:

- (5) They **would rather** *that you paid interest on your overdraft* than that they paid interest on theirs.

(1988 Buckland, *Debt Collection Made Easy*  
[BYU-BNC: CDo W\_commerce])

A further distinction is that BETTER never occurs (and never has occurred) with *would*. But RATHER and SOONER occur with both *would* and *had*;

<sup>5</sup> Van der Auwera and De Wit (2010: 134–5), however, find that some examples of BETTER in the Brown family are non-subjective.

therefore reduced *'d* is potentially ambiguous. Finally, BETTER does not occur with a standard of comparison, but RATHER and SOONER do.

A striking development based on bare BETTER (without auxiliary) has been noted. Nothing comparable is based on bare RATHER and SOONER. It is the development of BETTER as an auxiliary that is partially aligned to the core modals, although the core modal category was established by the seventeenth century (Warner 1993), has not been added to since, and is well known to be in decline (see e.g. Krug 2000; Leech 2013; and elsewhere). This partial alignment involves use of BETTER with the negative *n't* clitic (cf. *shouldn't*, *wouldn't*), rather than *do*-support.<sup>6</sup> Denison and Cort quote an internet example that illustrates use of the tag *bettern't*:

- (6) lol well you **better** start staying in then **betternt** you!!!!!! lol  
 (<http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=81374563>, accessed 13 August 2007; Denison and Cort 2010: 380, fn. 13)

A search of *Google Books* reveals that it has been cited in the literature on language acquisition at least since 1887 – see (7).

- (7) I recollect his beginning an interesting talk over early English, upon a child's saying to me, '**Bettern't** we go out now?'  
 (1887 Scott, *Life of William Barnes* [[https://books.google.com/books?id=ACtXAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA204&dq=bettern't&hl=en&sa=X&ved=oahUKEwjEi-r87-nLAhVS3WMKHSunD\\_s4HhDoAQgbMAA#v=onepage&q=bettern't&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=ACtXAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA204&dq=bettern't&hl=en&sa=X&ved=oahUKEwjEi-r87-nLAhVS3WMKHSunD_s4HhDoAQgbMAA#v=onepage&q=bettern't&f=false)]; accessed March 2016)

However, the occurrence of *bettern't* is sporadic. There is only one example in COHA (8), and it is in a fictional passage representing dialect.

- (8) '[. . .] You stay here.' I shifted, uncomfortable in his eyes. '**Bettern't** you? I got some vinegar to rack off an' you kin help me mos' likely.  
 [. . .]' (1935 Barnes, *Edna His Wife* [COHA])

Despite differences in meaning and in distribution, the comparative modals BETTER, RATHER, and SOONER have been regarded as a set. Denison and Cort (2010: 350) refer to 'a group of phrasal items of similar shape', but acknowledge that *would* was preferred with *rather* and *sooner* from earliest times, so *had'd* does not occur equally frequently with all of the comparative modals. Van der Auwera and De Wit (2010: 144) refer to

<sup>6</sup> However, some uses with *do*-support do occur, e.g. *You better don't go there without us* (van der Auwera *et al.* 2013: 143–5). Compare *You needn't go* and *You don't need to go*. This and other factors lead van der Auwera *et al.* to propose a different analysis from that of Denison and Cort (2010).



the comparative modals as a ‘class’ and passingly suggest that they form a ‘(marginal) paradigm’ (2010: 128). Quirk *et al.* (1985: 141) suggest they belong to a larger category of ‘modal idioms’ that includes *had/d better* and *would/d rather*, along with *have got to* and *be to*. However, Van linden (2015: 221) regards them as members of two types, a BETTER modal and two preference modals, RATHER and SOONER, with differences linked to their earlier semantics and syntactic histories. Among the main theoretical questions raised by Construction Grammar for the historical linguist is how to conceptualise the ways in which constructions come into being (see Hilpert 2013), and whether at the level of the micro-construction or of the schema (Traugott and Trousdale 2013). As indicated above, whether or not the comparative modals can usefully be considered a schema from the perspective of Construction Grammar is one of the topics of the present chapter.

#### 4.5 The Rise of Modals BETTER, RATHER, and SOONER

As Denison and Cort (2010) and Van linden (2015) point out, from the beginning the three comparative modal constructions under discussion have had rather different distributions. BETTER was the last to develop. I therefore start with brief comments on precursors of RATHER and SOONER. Both were adverbs in Old English (OE) and both could collocate with *would*.<sup>7</sup>

##### 4.5.1 *The Origins of Comparative Modal RATHER*

In OE the precursor of RATHER was the comparative of temporal *hræpe* ‘quickly, straightaway’ and was used with the meaning ‘sooner (in time), instead’. By ME it had come to be used mainly with the meaning ‘on the contrary, instead’. It could also mean ‘indeed, actually’, and, in the context of a modal, ‘preferably’ (*MED rather*). In eModE it also appears as an intensifier, e.g. *rather clever*.<sup>8</sup> All but the temporal meanings are currently still in use.

Early entries for *rather* in the sense ‘preferably’ appear with *will* (9a), *would* (9b), and *should* (9c). *Had* appears only in very late ME (9d). In all cases, the preference originates in the syntactic subject. It is therefore a ‘participant-internal’ modal. *MED* cites eleven examples, of which

<sup>7</sup> Periods in the history of English are roughly Old English (OE, 650–1100), Middle English (ME, 1100–1500), early Modern English (eModE, 1500–1700), late Modern English (lModE, 1700–1970), Present-day English (PDE, 1970–).

<sup>8</sup> For the history of intensifier *rather*, see Rissanen (2008).

none has an explicit standard of comparison. The standard is, however, pragmatically inferable from prior context, and might be present in a fuller citation – see examples in (9).<sup>9</sup>

- (9) a. þe zeongere zeaf soch answe<sup>r</sup>e,  
 the younger gave such answer  
**Raþir** ich **wolle** þe slean mid mine spe<sup>r</sup>e.  
 rather I will thee slay with my spear  
 ‘The younger man gave an answer like this: “I would rather kill you with my spear.”’  
 (c1300 Lay. *Brut* (Otho C 13) 1967 [*MED rathere* adv. comp. 2b])
- b. I nam no þef To breke mi treuþe oþain mi lord;  
 I NEG-am no thief to break my troth against my lord  
**Raþer** ich **wald** hing bi a cord.  
 rather I would hang by a rope  
 ‘I am no thief who would break my trust against my lord. I would rather hang by a rope.’  
 (c1330(?a1300) *Arth. & M.* (Auch) 2324 [*MED rathere* adv. comp. 2b])
- c. Ich **sholde raþere** sterue:  
 I should rather die  
 ‘I would rather die.’  
 (c1400(?a1387) *PPL.C* (Hnt HM 137) 7.290 [*MED rathere* adv. comp. 2b])
- d. Thowght vnkyndnes haith kyllyd me . . .  
 though unkindness has killed me  
 Yett **haid** I **rether** dye for his sake.  
 yet had I rather die for his sake  
 ‘Though his unkindness has killed me, yet I would rather die for his sake.’  
 (?c1500 *Grevus Ys* (Sln 1584) 87 [*MED rathere* adv. comp. 2b])

RATHER was well established as a modal by the end of the sixteenth century (with both *would* and *had*), in so far as paraphrases such as *would prefer/it would be better if seem* appropriate for examples like (10).

- (10) I **would rather** be torn with wild Horses, than forsake my Religion.  
 (1571 CED: D1TNORFO [Traugott 2016b: 115])

<sup>9</sup> In BYU-EEBO, which became available after this chapter was written, the majority of examples with RATHER in the 1470s have a standard of comparison.

While there is only one example of *had better V* in Shakespeare, there are sixty of *had rather V*, mostly with first-person pronoun subjects, but some second- and third-person pronouns and full NP subjects appear as well. This suggests RATHER was constructionalised as a modal by Shakespeare's time, the very end of the sixteenth century and very beginning of the seventeenth.

As the examples in (9) above show, modal RATHER is often used with negative semantic prosody (Stubbs 1995). In other words, it is often preferred with a semantically negative verb such as *die* and *tear*. This is still a characteristic of RATHER in PDE, but not as strongly so.

#### 4.5.2 The Origins of Comparative Modal SOONER

Like RATHER, SOONER has temporal origins. The precursor of SOONER was ME *soner* 'sooner'. Unlike in the case of RATHER, the temporal semantics is still transparent to contemporary speakers, which sometimes leads to ambiguity even in PDE. As in the case of RATHER, temporal *soner* came in ME to be used in a way that implies preference (at least to a present-day reader) in the context of a human subject, modal *would*, *should*, or *had*, and a standard of comparison. As with RATHER, the modality is based in the subject's perspective and is participant-internal, the preference is oriented to the time of the current state of affairs, and *would* is preferred over *had*.

MED (*some* adv.) cites six examples, none of which appear with *had*, and four of which include a nominal or adjectival standard of comparison. Example (11a) exemplifies comparison of NPs ('poor people', 'hypocrites') and (11b) clausal comparison.

- (11) a. For god wole **sonere** here many pore rīzhtfully  
 for god will sooner hear many poor rightfully  
 crynge vengauce þan a lord & many ypocritis.  
 crying vengeance than a lord and many hypocrites  
 'For God would sooner hear many poor people crying vengeance  
 than hear a lord and many hypocrites.'

(?c1430(c1400) *Wycl. Serv. & L.* (Corp-C 296) 240

[MED *some* adv.comp. 5d]

- b. He [...] **sonner** **wolde** suche thre [...] Hafe youe  
 he sooner would such three have given  
 than so forgone that euydence.  
 than so forgone that evidence

‘He would have preferred that three people like this had given rather than refrained in that way from giving that evidence.’

(?1457 Hardyng *Chron. A* (Lnsd 204) p. 743  
[*MED* *some* adv. comp. 5d])

Examples of *Aux. sooner* *V* appear in sixteenth-century texts, suggesting it was established as a modal by that time. Like RATHER, it tends to be used with negative semantics – see (12).

- (12) Nay I meane to follow yee: I will **sooner** leese my life, then fight of you till this dinner be done.  
‘No, I intend to follow you: I would sooner lose my life than fight you till the end of this dinner.’ (1595 CED: D1CWARNE)

#### 4.5.3 *The Origins of Comparative Modal BETTER*

According to Denison and Cort (2010: 351–3), the source for comparative modal BETTER is the ME adjective *betere* ‘better’ in a subjunctive impersonal copula construction that can be characterised as NP<sub>oblique</sub> BE<sub>subjunctive</sub> Adjective + clause. An example is (13), which is a comment about what the narrator assesses would be literally and objectively ‘better’ for a father, given Christian tradition and contemporary mores.

- (13) A mon **were** **betere** for is sunne be[o] sori and  
a man would-be better for his son be sorry and  
vnssriue þanne issriue wiþoute sorinesse.  
unshriven than shriven without sorriness  
‘It would be better for a man if his son were sorry and not receive the sacrament than to receive the sacrament without being sorry.’

(a1325 *SLeg.* (Corp-C 145) 131/91 [*MED* *unshriven* ppl. a;  
Denison and Cort 2010: 352])

This example is similar in its impersonal structure to the Latin proverb that accompanies (9c) in *MED*: *Melius est mori quam male uiuere* ‘It is better to die than to live badly’. The English version of (9c), however, has a first-person subject in a RATHER construction. It appears that in the fourteenth century, if they were used with modal meaning, *rather*, *sooner*, and *better* were all preference modals. Their morphosyntax is, however, very different, as highlighted by the difference between first-person subject, auxiliary *should*, and adverb *rapere* in (9c), but impersonal copula with adjective *betere* in (13).

During the ME period a systemic change occurred: the loss of impersonal constructions (Allen 1995). Constructs like (13) came to be expressed with different syntax, such as *It were/would be better for a man's son to be sorry*, as in (14).

- (14) I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that **it were better** my mother had not borne me.

'I myself am not particularly honest, yet I could accuse myself of such things that it would have been better if my mother had not given birth to me.'

(Shakespeare, *Hamlet* III.i.1814 [OSS])<sup>10</sup>

By the fifteenth century a new form *had better* with adverb *better* had begun to be used, but it is rare through the seventeenth century. There are no examples of *had better V* in CED period 1 (1560–1599), only one in Shakespeare (in *Henry VIII*, 1613 [OSS]), and only two in CEECS (1418–1680), e.g. (15). Meaning still indicates preference modality. In (15), as in (13), the preference is still presented as based in general mores rather than the personal opinion of the speaker/writer, and the subject is third person.

- (15) A man **had better** take upon him to perswade twenty learned men that are not 'propositi defensores', then one suche.

'A man would do better to try to persuade twenty learned men that are not "defenders of the proposition", than a person like this.'

(1600 Whitgift, *Letter to Hutton*

[CEECS: HUTTON; Traugott 2016b: 112])

Semantic similarities between examples like (13) and (9c) show that modal expressions with *better* were at first semantically similar to those with *RATHER* and *SOONER*. The difference was mainly structural. Since the form has changed, but there has been no significant change in meaning, the shift to personal subject illustrated by (15) is a constructional change. Discussing the structural shift from impersonal copula with adjective *better* to personal *had* with adverb *better*, van der Gaaf (1904: 52, cited in Van linden 2015: 196) proposes that *BETTER* might have been analogised to *I had lever* 'I would prefer'. On the other hand, Denison and Cort (2010: 353–4) suggest *BETTER* might have been analogised to *RATHER*. Analogy may have been a partial factor where the shift from adjective to adverb is concerned, enabled by use of the same form for adjective and adverb. But it

<sup>10</sup> Since OSS, the online Shakespeare, numbers lines sequentially from Act 1.i on, I have added act, scene, and line number from SHC (Craig 1951).

does not appear to have been so with respect to the auxiliary, since *would* does not collocate with *better*. Van der Gaaf's hypothesis seems better supported by the data.<sup>11</sup>

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, however, *had better* appears slightly more frequently (six examples in CED period 4 (1680–1719), five of them with personal subjects). There is evidence of semantic divergence: speakers began to use *had better* in ways that can be understood as advisability rather than (or as well as) preference, as in (16).

- (16) a. Pray, Gentlewoman be pleased to wear your Mask, till we're got out of this Road of Foppery; I **had better** have gone Ten Miles about.  
(1696 Manley, *The Lost Lover* [CED: D4MANLE];  
'I would have preferred to/I would have been better advised to')
- b. I ordered my Husband to come and fetch me Home at such an Hour, but he never came; but he **had better** have come: For I made him Court me a whole Week afterwards, before I'd let him come to Bed to me.  
(1714 Ward, *Whole Pleasures of Matrimony* [CED: D4FWARD];  
'he would have been better advised to/he would have preferred to')

Denison and Cort (2010: 366) suggest that in the copula contexts 'the action sought is beneficial to the subject and is also wished for by the speaker'. One would not mention that one thinks it is better for the subject that they should do/have done something unless one wished them to do/have done it. Over time the invited inference of the speaker's wish/desire became semanticised (Denison and Cort 2010: 367). This is reasonable. But examples like those in (16), which are ambiguous, suggest that the advisability reading arose in the context of *had better* as well as of the copula construction.

*Had better* was firmly entrenched as a modal expression by the early eighteenth century. This change is a constructionalisation, since the new form is now linked to a new meaning. It is used not only to express advisability, but to direct others' behaviour and announce decisions

<sup>11</sup> Indeed, van der Gaaf's hypothesis appears to be supported by BYU-EEBO. There are 196 hits for *I had leuer* and four for *I had lever* prior to 1600. However, a careful analysis is needed to argue for analogy since many examples introduce a complementation rather than *V*, e.g.:

- (i) **i had leuer** that my wyf and chyl dren shold suffre moche hurte  
'I had rather that my wife and children should suffer much hurt'  
(1481 Caxton, *Reynart the Foxe* [BYU-EEBO])
- (ii) **i had leuer** to deye presently than to lyue without to be aduenged on them  
'I had rather die immediately than live without being avenged on them'  
(1481 Caxton, *Eracles and Godefrey of Boloyne* [BYU-EEBO])

about one's own (Mitchell 2003: 143). Recently it has been extended to express hope (van der Auwera *et al.* 2013: 124; Van linden 2015: 194).

Despite the fact that it was used as a modal later than RATHER and SOONER, BETTER rapidly came to be the dominant 'semi-modal'. It is not only far more frequent from the eighteenth century on, in PDE it is more reduced in that use of the standard of comparison has been almost completely lost. This is a counterexample to the hypothesis that older forms are likely to be more grammatical than younger forms (see e.g. Bybee *et al.* 1991).

The changes discussed in this section precede in time those that Van linden (2015) investigates: the various kinds of reduction that are typical of repeated use and frequency effects (e.g. Bybee 2003). While they are excellent examples of grammaticalisation as form reduction, they can also be thought of as constructional changes affecting the form of the constructions.

#### 4.5.4 *Summary of the Changes Discussed in This Section*

To summarise the developments discussed so far, RATHER and SOONER emerged as preference modals by the sixteenth century. Although there were impersonal copula constructions with the adjective *better* and preference readings during this period, modal BETTER with *had* did not become entrenched until the eighteenth century, when it became highly productive and rapidly came to be used more frequently than the older comparative modals and as an advice modal.

I now turn to a small study of the development of the three modals in the period 1720–1913, the period of greatest growth, as represented in OBC.

### 4.6 BETTER, RATHER, and SOONER in OBC

The most striking fact about the use of BETTER, RATHER, and SOONER in OBC is that there are no instances of 'd with *better* or *rather*, and only two with *sooner*. Given that 'd outnumbers the full forms in IModE and British PDE (van der Auwera and De Wit 2010; van der Auwera *et al.* 2013), one might expect evidence of gradual cliticisation such as is found in the *Corpus of Late Modern English Texts (Extended Version)* (CLMETEV). For example, van der Auwera *et al.* (2013: 128) find two examples of 'd *better* in CLMETEV period I (1710–1780), thirty in period II (1780–1850), and 120 in period III (1850–1920). The absence of 'd forms in OBC is noteworthy because certain scribes of the *Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, especially during the eighteenth century, represented the phonological contraction *n't*

Table 4.1 Occurrence of auxiliaries with BETTER, RATHER, and SOONER in OBC

	<i>had</i>	<i>'d</i>	<i>would</i>	<i>should</i>	<i>will</i>	TOTAL
BETTER	975	0	0	0	0	975
RATHER	69	0	137	3	1	210
SOONER	2	2	53	1(?)	2	59
TOTAL	1,046	2	190	3	3	1,244

(Huber 2007). There are ten examples of *n't* with auxiliaries in OBC, the last in 1898, but the first nine all occur in the period 1726–1739. In OBC past tense and past participle *-ed* are variably represented as cliticised (e.g. *hang'd* in (24b) below; also *clapp'd* and *cry'd* in the same trial (t17400903-6)),<sup>12</sup> and cliticised *is* in *there's* and *it in 'tis*. We may conclude that cliticisation of *had* and *would* in the early period was not a factor about which the scribes were conscious, perhaps because it did not occur often in the trial setting, or perhaps because it had no perceived social value. Absence of the clitic in the later OBC is probably related to increased editorial control and formality in the later period (Huber 2007). Table 4.1 summarises the findings in OBC with respect to combinations of auxiliaries with BETTER, RATHER, and SOONER.<sup>13</sup>

#### 4.6.1 BETTER in OBC

The 975 instances of *had better ... V* in OBC all have advisory meaning. Evidence is paraphrasability by *should/ought to/it would be advisable if*. In a few nineteenth-century examples *had better* is in fact paraphrased by participants in the trial with *should* and *should recommend*, e.g. (17).

- (17) to prevent all further dispute and trouble between you, you **had better** leave; I **should recommend** you to do so (t18570615-709)

Although deonticity is generally fairly weak, in some instances, especially when *had better* is followed by *or*, it can be interpreted as a threat, and therefore relatively high on the scale of deonticity – see (18).

<sup>12</sup> Trials in OBC are identified by a reference number consisting of 't' (trial), year, month, day, and, after a hyphen, the line number in the transcribed text. So this reference should be read as 'trial, 1740, September 3, line 6'.

<sup>13</sup> SOONER may be temporal in the one example with *should* (see (28b) in Section 4.6.3 below), and is thus not included in the totals of this table.



- (18) there was some conversation, in which he said I **had better** give him the money, **or** he would take action in Chancery, (t18701212-92)

In the first ten years of the trials (1720–1730), there are six examples of modal *had better*. Of these, two have first-person subjects, e.g. (19a), and three have second-person subjects, e.g. (19b). There is one example of a third-person subject (19c), but this is in an indirect speech report of an original second-person utterance.

- (19) a. we struck a Bargain, and went to a Gin Shop, and I thought I **had better** do so than wander about the Street all Night, (t17260114-5)
- b. Tis a long way, (says she) and you **had better** drink before you go any further, for fear you should faint upon the Road. (t17241204-68)
- c. I said, if there was any danger, he **had better** go out of the way, (t17261012-7)

In these examples the advice given is based on the speaker's point of view, not general mores, and is therefore subjective. In (19b) the speaker expresses the opinion that the addressee should drink and in (19c) the speaker reports giving his opinion that the addressee should go out of the way.

The examples in (19) are representative of the corpus as a whole, as overt animate pronoun subjects are preferred (946 out of the 975 examples of *had better*). Second-person pronouns predominate (430 examples). That this is not due to the trial context is suggested by comparable figures for the use of second-person subjects in COHA (Van linden 2015: 208–9). There are 221 first-person examples (155 singular *I*, sixty-six plural *we*). Third person ranks in between with a total of 295 examples. The sole example with subject *it* does not occur until 1872 (see (20)). Here *it* refers to the clause *whether this would amount to larceny*.

- (20) Mr. Justice Lush [...] has rather grave doubts whether this would amount to larceny. He thinks it **had better** be left to the Jury, and take their opinion on the facts. (t18720923-675)

A search of OBC shows that no auxiliary other than *had* occurs with *better*. There is only one example of *better* without an auxiliary (21).

- (21) 'Very well, then, **you better** stop a little bit;' (t18610408-369)

Use of an overt standard of comparison with *BETTER* ceases to be attested in OBC in the 1850s. The last example of the structure *BETTER V than Clause* is (22).

- (22) I thought I **had better** make sure of one **than** lose both,  
(t18530103-193)

The very last example in the corpus with a standard of comparison is dated 1854 and compares two NPs. Loss of an explicit standard of comparison by the mid-nineteenth century is consistent with Denison and Cort's (2010: 355) finding based on different data that a standard of comparison has not been used since the nineteenth century in British English. The COHA data suggest that in American English it had been all but lost by the early part of the nineteenth century (Van linden 2015: 215–16).

In sum, over the course of the trials, **BETTER** comes to be used in OBC much the same way as it is in PDE. The main exception is absence of examples with reduced 'd.

#### 4.6.2 RATHER *in OBC*

In OBC there are ninety-five hits of *had rather*. In one example *rather* means 'instead', in twenty-five others it is a degree modifier (e.g. *had rather too much to drink*) or quantifies an indefinite noun (e.g. *had rather a suspicion*), so only sixty-nine exemplify comparative modal uses. Of these, five have a different subject, e.g. (23c).

- (23) a. Upon which he said he **had rather** have given 100 l. than I should have said any such Thing of his Sister. (t17251208-55)  
 b. Wells answered, he did not value dying, for he **had rather** die, than live and starve, but for the Disgrace. (t17400116-46)  
 c. but his Mother said, She **had rather** *he* should die quietly than go thro' that barbarous Operation. (t17320906-25)

In OBC *would rather (X) V* is twice as frequent as *had rather (X) V* (137 compared to sixty-nine instances). Examples (24a)–(24c) are typical examples. A fourth, with clausal complement (24d), is less typical.

- (24) a. I **would rather** have given 500 l. than this Thing should have happened; (t17431012-31)  
 b. No; he would not tell, he **would rather** die than tell, – he **would rather** chuse to be hang'd; (t17400903-6)  
 c. the prosecutor said at the station he **would rather** take them into the back yard than charge them. (t19020210-190)  
 d. I **would rather** *that the House should fall down, and knock his Brains out*, than he should be hanged. (t17431012-37)

Note how similar examples (23a) and (23b) are to (24a) and (24b) with respect to content and form. This suggests that *would rather* and *had rather* were in variation.

Even though historically *would* was preferred with *rather* over *had* (see Section 4.5.1 above), the earlier trials evidence a modest preference for *had*. This is followed by a shift from *had* to *would* over time. RATHER occurs occasionally with additional auxiliaries. There is one instance with *will* (25a), and three with *should* (25b). In (25b) note the person switch changing the perspective from the speaker's evaluation of *you* to vocalise the addressee.

- (25) a. No, I know myself innocent; and **will rather** go over the herring-pond than offer to make it up; (t18270712-192)  
b. Said I, if you have murdered your Children it is a crying Sin; it is a Sin against the Holy Ghost, and if that is your Case. I **should rather** die than live. (t17431012-29)

With respect to an explicit standard of comparison, this continues to be used with RATHER throughout OBC, as the examples above attest.

Many examples of RATHER demonstrate negative prosody, particularly the collocation with *die* (see (23b), (24b), (25b)). In this it is different from BETTER (there are no occurrences of *had better die*). RATHER is also relatively more strongly associated with morphological negation than BETTER. In OBC only 49/975 (5 per cent) examples of *had better* are followed by *not*, compared to 16/69 (23.1 per cent) of *had rather*, and 25/137 (18.2 per cent) of *would rather*. Example (26) is an example with *had*.

- (26) I told her I **had rather** *not* have any thing to do with her, (t17750111-23)

On the whole, uses with *not* occur later than those with negative prosody. In OBC the first example of *had rather not* is dated 1767, and of *would rather not* 1812, whereas those with negative prosody are attested from the 1730s on.

#### 4.6.3 SOONER in OBC

Throughout its history, modal SOONER occurs less frequently than RATHER. In OBC there are only two examples of *had sooner*, the second a repetition of the first. However, there are fifty-three examples with *would*, e.g. (27a) from the same trial as (24b) above. Seven of these collocate with past tense/counterfactual *have*, e.g. (27c).

- (27) a. He said he did not take it himself, but that a Woman gave it him; and he **would sooner** die than discover ['reveal'] who the Woman was. (t17400903-6)
- b. I said I considered the mare worth a great deal more money, and I **would sooner** give him the 135*l.* and keep the mare (t18610408-286)
- c. My mother **would sooner** *have* given him £20 than he should have done this; (t19020909-669)

There are two examples with *will* (28a) and one with *should* (28b), which is possibly a temporal use.

- (28) a. but you know a man **will sooner** spend 50 l. than pay 18 d. wrongfully; (t17870418-118)
- b. I do not know any man I **should sooner** put confidence in, (t17750531-1)

As mentioned in the introduction to Section 4.6, *SOONER* is the only one of the three comparative modals under discussion that appears in OBC with reduced '*d*', and only in two examples. These are presented in (29).

- (29) a. No says the Deceas'd, And if I had I'd **sooner** let you know it than serve it upon you. (t17350911-99)
- b. he said, he'd **sooner** spend 50 l. rather than submit to a villain. (t17551022-31)

In the case of (29a), an earlier witness cites the deceased's words with the full auxiliary, so '*d*' in (29a) must be understood as the reduced form of *would*, not *had*:

- (30) The Deceased answered, No Sam, and if I had I **would sooner** let you know of it, than serve it upon ye. (t17350911-99)

Like *RATHER*, *SOONER* continues to be used with an overt standard of comparison throughout the corpus, e.g. (27a)–(27c), (28a), (29a)–(29b), and (30).

#### 4.6.4 *Summary of Similarities and Differences among the Comparative Modals in OBC*

All three modals occur with auxiliary *had*. All three share weak deontic modality (desire). Nevertheless, the differences are quite significant, and

Table 4.2 *Differences between BETTER and RATHER, SOONER in OBC*

	BETTER	RATHER, SOONER
Options for Auxiliary	<i>had</i>	<i>would</i> (preferred), <i>had</i>
Options for X	Neg	Neg, DS, <i>Comp-S</i>
Standard of comparison	No	Optional
Participant-external	Yes	No
Subjective	Usually	No
Directive	Usually	No

group RATHER and SOONER together vis-à-vis BETTER. I summarise the differences in Table 4.2 (DS is short for ‘different subject’).

In the next section I discuss the implications of these similarities and differences for the question whether the comparative modals form a subschema of modals.

#### 4.7 The Schematic Status of the Comparative Modals

It seems uncontroversial that each expression can be viewed as a micro-construction: each is an idiosyncratic form-meaning pairing, the meaning of which is not predictable from its parts. The question addressed in this section is whether or not the three micro-constructions are best regarded as singletons or as being organised hierarchically within the higher-level Deontic Modal construction from the eighteenth century on. As Hilpert (2013: 191) comments, whether to label a group of constructions that share similarities but also differences under one abstract form-meaning set or (sub)schema might seem ‘like an open-ended exercise in lumping and splitting’. The overarching similarities in surface form favour a lumping approach. But RATHER and SOONER have always been distinct from BETTER in distribution, and, although there was initially some semantic overlap in terms of preference, by the beginning of the eighteenth century a distinct division of labour had occurred, which favours a splitting approach for lModE.

RATHER and SOONER continue from ME times to express preference; they scale the state of affairs preferred/desired by the syntactic subject, an internal participant. The principal speech act involved is assertion. In the case of BETTER, the source of advice continues from the impersonal copula precursor to be external to the subject (first Biblical advice, social mores,

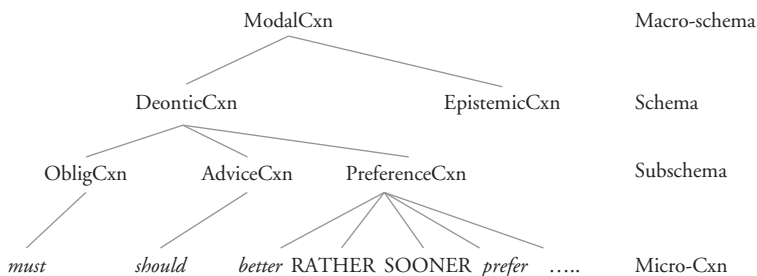


Figure 4.2 Partial constructional network of eMoDE comparative modals

later the speaker). To the extent that the speaker has come to be understood as the external advisor, *BETTER* has been subjectified. The principal speech act involved is directive. *BETTER* scales the speaker's advice (e.g. speaker strongly advises/desires that a certain action be taken).

The null hypothesis would be that each micro-construction is independent of the others, and simply happens to have similar form. This is implausible since speakers make generalisations across similarly structured expressions (Goldberg 2006). Given their closeness in distribution and meaning, *RATHER* and *SOONER* can be argued to form a subschema. It therefore seems best to postulate a small loosely related family of micro-constructions, the network relations of which have changed. Whereas in *ME* *better* was a contentful adjective in a copula construction, it came to be a procedural adverb with auxiliary *had* by the end of the seventeenth century, along with *RATHER* and *SOONER*. They have all become more similar with respect to formal reduction. They have, however, become distinct with respect to semantics. They originally all expressed preference semantics and were individual members of a weakly deontic external participant PreferenceCxn, as are *favour* and *prefer*, as represented in Figure 4.2. Note that *better* is not yet identified as the auxiliary, hence the lower case.

However, by the eighteenth century *BETTER* had come to be used as a member of the AdviceCxn subschema along with *should*, *might as well*, *recommend*, and *suggest*, but since advice implies preference and there are some overlaps between the subschemas, especially in the earlier stages, a horizontal link between the AdviceCxn and the PreferenceCxn can be postulated, as in Figure 4.3.

In addition, there are external network links that relate constructions to others at greater and lesser degrees of formal and contentful similarity (see Fried and Östman 2005). All three micro-constructions

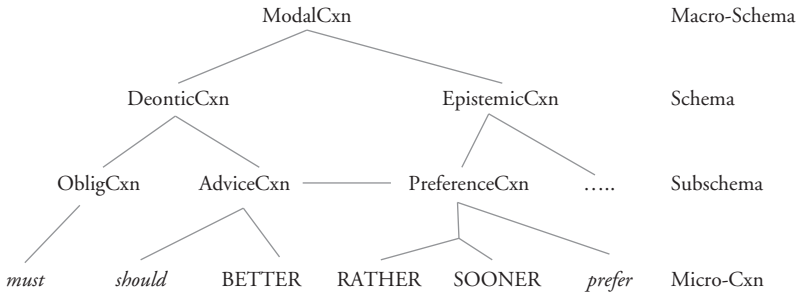


Figure 4.3 Partial constructional network of IModE comparative modals

are linked to positive scalars. This is especially clear in the case of RATHER, since the form *rather* is used as a degree modifier (*rather good*). In OBC there are twenty-five examples of *rather* with *should* that scale a verb of cognition or locution (e.g. *think, believe, suppose; say, swear, attribute*), as in (31).

- (31) *Canwell*. Did not Davis take the Lace, and put it upon me.  
*Frances Coverley*. I **should rather** think Davis took it; I had never  
 seen her before, she looked like an ill Person. (t17420909-29)

This appears to be a modalised variant of e.g. *I rather think* (ninety instances). Here the degree meaning (‘somewhat, not completely’) predominates. Given the difference in meaning and distribution from examples in Section 4.6.2, I have considered usages such as (31) to exemplify the degree rather than the modal meaning of *rather*, although degree converges with preference for the state of affairs expressed by the proposition. Scales entail alternatives and therefore contrast. In the case of BETTER, alternatives are now weak implicatures, since use with comparative *than* has been lost. But in the case of RATHER and SOONER contrast is still often overt.

Especially in the nineteenth century, *better* with zero subject and zero auxiliary had links to the proverb register, and may in fact have originated there (Denison and Cort 2010: 360–3; van der Auwera *et al.* 2013: 141–2). With the decline of use of proverbs, this network link has become weak or even (for many speakers) non-existent.

#### 4.8 Comparison of the Grammaticalisation and Constructional Approaches

Clearly, reduction and erosion affected all three constructions. This is what Van linden’s (2015) grammaticalisation approach has highlighted. From

the perspective of grammaticalisation defined as reduction, they are indeed all undergoing similar changes.

To understand the history of the three comparative modals in depth, however, it is important to recognise other kinds of change as well. One is the constructional schematic reorganisation whereby three basically similar modals were split into BETTER versus RATHER and SOONER. Another is the extent to which BETTER has changed. As mentioned in Section 4.5.3, the most recent comparative modal, BETTER, is the most productive and has undergone the greatest amount of change, i.e. it is the most entrenched (Barðdal 2008). It has been used in increasingly subjective ways, as measured by the extent to which it is used to express the speaker's opinion rather than to draw on a social norm. Speakers have explored the possibility of using it like a core modal (see examples (6)–(8) in Section 4.4). On the other hand, the older comparative modals, RATHER and SOONER, have coexisted stably since ME with little or no difference in meaning. SOONER has consistently been the less frequent of the two.

The high productivity of BETTER is in fact a problem for the grammaticalisation analysis. As Bybee *et al.* (1991) argued, normally 'older grams' are more frequent than newer ones. BETTER is newer (as a comparative modal) than RATHER and SOONER, and far more frequent. Another problem is that there is no clear 'coevolution of meaning and form' (Bybee *et al.* 1994: 20): the meaning of RATHER and SOONER remains stable despite reduction of the *would/had* auxiliary, occasional use with a zero subject, and gradual decline in use of the standard of comparison.

As mentioned in Section 4.1, Van linden (2015) posits a cline of grammaticalisation: BETTER > SOONER > RATHER. This is on the grounds that SOONER shows the greatest reduction of auxiliaries *would* and *had*. But in terms of productivity, understood as generality, it has always been and continues to be the least productive and most likely to be ambiguous with the original temporal. From this perspective, even on a grammaticalisation analysis, it is not only the least frequent but it is also the least bleached. On a constructional analysis it is less highly constructionalised as a modal (however marginal) than RATHER and both less so than BETTER. Therefore from a constructional perspective RATHER is closer to BETTER than SOONER.

#### 4.9 Conclusion

The three comparative modals are currently marginal members of the procedural modal system in several respects. Advice modality is marginal



within the deontic system and preference more so. The three micro-constructions are procedural, but have a complex morphosyntactic structure unlike that of other procedural modals in English. Despite the smallness and marginality of the micro-constructions, they are instructive for historical linguistics.

In answer to RQ<sub>1</sub>, posed in Section 4.3, What evidence is there of the emergence of the three micro-constructions under consideration?, there is clear evidence of the rise of new meaning-form pairings consisting of an original comparative and an auxiliary, *had* in the case of BETTER (eighteenth century), *would, had, and should* in the case of RATHER (fourteenth century), and *would, will, and had* in that of SOONER (sixteenth century).

In answer to RQ<sub>2</sub> in Section 4.3, Do the three micro-constructions form one subschema in the ‘vertical’ hierarchy of modality or belong to different subschemas, as Van linden suggests, and have a ‘horizontal’ relationship?, I have argued that although they originally all had preference semantics, post-constructionalisation, BETTER diverged and belongs to a different advice subschema. They are, however, ‘partly motivated in relation to [their] neighbours’ (Van de Velde 2014: 147), and so can be analysed as having a horizontal relationship.

With regard to RQ<sub>3</sub> in Section 4.3, What does a constructional approach add to a grammaticalisation approach to the data?, it is essentially a semantic analysis in addition to the formal one. Focusing on grammaticalisation and phonetic erosion of the auxiliaries and of *than*, Van linden (2015: 221) concludes that the three comparative modals are converging and ‘overall developing in the same direction’, more rapidly in American than in British English. On the other hand, from a constructionalisation perspective, in which both form and meaning are of equal importance, the division of labour that emerged in the eighteenth century appears to be increasing and leading to greater divergence. Although constructionalisation has to account for the erosion of auxiliaries and loss of *than*, the various other factors that have led to contemporary uses of the three modals need to be accounted for as well. Once they have come into being, constructions are subject to grammaticalisation understood as reduction of form (Trousdale 2010), and to other factors as well, such as semantic constructional changes.