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Comparative modals: (Dis)similar diachronic tendencies*

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Abstract

This article examines modal expressions with the comparative adverbs *better*, *rather* and *sooner* in American English, and assesses to what extent they have grammaticalized. The corpus data offer evidence that the three comparative modal groups exhibit considerable phonetic reduction in the 1810–2009 period studied. Analysis of several aspects of the constructions, such as subject types, temporal reference and comparative meaning, reveals which conditions promoted this erosion. However, the data also indicate that the three groups are semantically and constructionally quite heterogeneous. In fact, this article proposes a grammaticalization scenario for the *rather* and *sooner* structures that is different from the one posited for the *better* structures.

1. Introduction

While research on modality in English has long been biased towards modal auxiliaries (e.g. Coates 1983; Dollinger 2008; Goossens 1985; Klinge 1993; Palmer 1979, 1990; Plank 1984), some recent studies have focused on more marginal coding types of modality. Some of these have become rather frequent in Present-Day English, like the so-called semi- or quasi-modals, such as *need to*, *be able to*, *be going to*, and *be supposed to* (Leech 2003; Leech *et al.* 2009: 71–117), or the 'emerging' modals *have* (*got*) *to* and *want to* (Krug 2000). Far less frequent are non-verbal constructions of modality such as expressions with modal adjectives like *essential* and *appropriate* (Van linden 2012), and verbo-nominal expressions of modality (e.g. *have need*, *there is need*) (Loureiro-Porto 2010). This article focuses on an underdescribed set of (infrequent) modal expressions that is based on yet another part of speech type, namely

comparative adverbs,[1] and describes the development of constructions with *better*, *rather* and *sooner* in American English in the past two centuries. Specifically, it investigates to what degree these "comparative modals" (van der Auwera & De Wit 2010: 127) have grammaticalized, and to what extent they have retained elements of their source construction. Examples taken from the *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA) are given in (1) to (3).[2]

(1) Anyway, it's not safe. You*'d* all *better* come with me and the children to my family in North Carolina. (COHA, 1939)

(2) For me, I*'d rather* spend My life in fighting for my rights than live Berobbed of them a month. (COHA, 1861)

(3) If they've got many such fellers there as one Ginneral Blair there is here from that State, I*'d sooner* take my chance in the woods forty miles above Downingville, fighting bears and wolves and catamounts, than come within gun-shot of one of these Carolina giants. (COHA, 1833)

[1] For *better*, it might be argued that its lexical core is adjectival rather than adverbial (cf. Denison & Cort 2010: 350), but in the modal constructions studied here, its function is adverbial.

[2] It should be noted here that recently one of the comparative adverbs studied, namely *rather*, has been argued to be lexicalizing (in specific dialects) rather than grammaticalizing as part of a modal idiom. Klippenstein (2012), for example, reports on main verb uses of *rather* as far back as the late 1500s, and finds that it starts showing verbal morphology in the late 1800s in texts with varying degrees of standardness. Wood (2013) presents a synchronic study of three American English dialects, some of which also use — and mark — *rather* as a past participle, e.g. *I would've rathered gone to a small school* (Wood 2013: 75). I thank one of the anonymous referees and editor Geoffrey Thompson for drawing my attention to these studies.

As can be seen in (1) to (3), the adverbial forms combine with an auxiliary verb and a clausal complement to form 'modal idioms' (cf. Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 113, 196; Quirk *et al.* 1985: 137, 141–143). These idioms show a number of auxiliary-like features from the earliest data on. Among these, I will show that the written evidence indicates that phonetic reduction (cf. Lehmann 1995: 306) or erosion progresses significantly in the 1810–2009 time frame under investigation here. The study of several aspects of the comparative modal constructions, such as subject types, temporal reference and comparative meaning, will reveal which factors promoted this erosion.

While my data indicate that the three comparative modal structures largely move in the same direction, they also suggest that they are semantically and constructionally more heterogeneous than has been assumed in previous studies. Van der Auwera & De Wit (2010: 127), for instance, included them in their family of "comparative modals", which consists of morphosyntactic configurations with a moderate degree of formal and semantic homogeneity together with superlative members with *best* (e.g. *had best*) and equative ones with *as* or *just as* (e.g. *would (just) as soon as*).[3] However, the data studied here demonstrate that there are clear differences between structures with *better* on the one hand (referred to as the BETTER modals in the remainder of this article), and those with *rather* and *sooner* on the other (referred to as the RATHER modals and SOONER modals respectively). For one thing, the BETTER modals stand out as having different semantics from the RATHER and SOONER modals. As illustrated in (1), the BETTER modals generally express advice (Declerck 1991: 355; Denison & Cort 2010: 365–366; Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 196; Jacobsson 1980: 52; Palmer 1979: 69, 1990: 82; Perkins 1983: 63; van der Auwera & De Wit 2010: 132). Moreover, it has been suggested that they typically express recommendations for specific occasions rather than general advice, and that the speaker

[3] Van der Auwera & De Wit (2010: 127) provide a more coherent classification of these structures than earlier proposals (e.g. Palmer 1979: 164–165; Quirk *et al.* 1985: 141–142; Mitchell 2003; see van der Auwera *et al.* 2013 for an overview).

expects realization of the recommended action (Mitchell 2003: 141, 143; Westney 1995: 182). In addition to this deontic meaning, they can also express 'optative' semantics (van der Auwera & De Wit 2012: 133, cf. Mitchell 2003: 145),[4] as in (4), where the speaker expresses her hope that her urine will not come out too quickly.

(4) Blinking, bewildered, she'd accepted defeat. "It *better* not come out as fast as I usually pee," she said, looking worried for the first time. (COHA, 1995)

Unlike the polysemous BETTER modals, the RATHER and SOONER modals express preference or comparative volition on the part of the subject of the sentence, such as the *I*-person in (2) and (3) (e.g. Declerck 1991: 356; Denison & Cort 2010: 350; Palmer 1990: 167; van der Auwera & De Wit 2010: 142; Van der Gaaf 1912: 385, 392).[5] I will show that a number of dissimilarities in the diachronic and current tendencies of the three types of comparative modals, e.g. regarding retention of comparative meaning, can actually be related to this difference in semantics between the BETTER modals and the preference modals.

Other differences between the BETTER modals and the preference modals relate to their constructional disparity. This disparity will be revealed by examining expressions without an overtly expressed subject, which invariably feature a zero auxiliary (like the *better* form in (4)). While the data confirm the grammaticalization path proposed for the BETTER modals by van der Auwera *et al.* (2013) on the basis of British English data, they prompt an alternative scenario for

[4] I thus disagree with Collins (2009: 77), who considers *better* to be "essentially monosemous", and with Denison & Cort (2010: 370), who state that examples like (4) "incorporate *simultaneously* an epistemic and a deontic element" (see van der Auwera *et al.* (2013: 123–125) for more details on the analysis of examples like (4) in terms of optative semantics).

[5] As pointed out by an anonymous referee, Wood (2013) proposes a formal semantic analysis of *would/might/could rather*, and suggests that modal expressions with *sooner* could be given a similar treatment.

the preference modals, which I will propose in Section 4, acknowledging the differences in the constructional history of the three comparative modal groups identified in previous studies.

The structure of this article is as follows. Section 2 concentrates on the constructional history of the BETTER, RATHER and SOONER modals presented in previous research. Section 3 briefly accounts for the selection of corpus and data. Section 4 presents the main findings of this study, homing in on the (development of the) form of the auxiliary items combining with the comparative forms, the subject referents of the comparative modals, the temporal reference of the comparative modal expressions, and the presence of comparative meaning. As a development shared by the three comparative modal groups, the data point to increasing phonetic reduction in specific conditions. Dissimilar tendencies include semantic reduction of the original comparative meaning and the constructional development of the three groups, which is why I will posit an alternative grammaticalization pathway for the preference modals. Section 5, finally, formulates conclusions and some questions for further research.

2. The constructional history of the comparative modals

Previous studies have traced the diachronic origin(s) of the BETTER, RATHER and SOONER modals back to Old English. When we compare these accounts, the most important difference appears to be that the BETTER modals have direct diachronic links with impersonal verb syntax, whereas the RATHER and SOONER modals do not, that is, they go back to constructions with nominative subjects, and have at best only indirect links with impersonal constructions. Crucially, this difference is assumed to affect the further grammaticalization of the three comparative modals.

The constructional history of the BETTER modals is reconstructed in Denison & Cort (2010), who use data from the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, the *Middle English Dictionary* and Visser (1963–73). The stages they distinguish in the diachrony of BETTER,

which run fairly parallel to those of the much more frequent LEVER constructions,[6] are given in (5a) to (5d) together with their date ranges (Denison & Cort 2010: 351–364), and examples are given in (5a') to (5d').[7] As illustrated by (5a'–c'), the clausal complement could be a *that*- or *to*-clause.

(5)	(a)	(h)it	is	better	+	clause	(+ *than*)		OE to PDE
	(b)	NP_{obj}	is	better	+	clause	(+ *than*)		OE to 1470–85
	(c)	NP_{subj}	BE	better	+	clause	(+ *than*)		1303 to 1647
	(d)	NP_{subj}	HAVE	better	+	(to)	+ V_{inf}	(+ *than*)	*c*1410 to PDE

(5') (a) Forðy *is betere* ðæt mon læte sume hwile weaxan ðæt idelgielp

'Therefore it is better to let grow that vain glory a while.' (YCOE, (894) CP 62.457.22)

(b) Hit is awriten ðæt *him wære betere* ðæt hi no soðfæstnesse weg ne ongeaten, ðonne hi underbæc gecerden, siððan hi hine ongeaten

'It is written that it were better for them that they do not see the way of faithfulness, than that they turn back after they see it.' (YCOE, (894) CP 58.445.32)

(c) "Sir," seyd Merlion, "*ye were bettir* to gyff me a gyffte that ys nat in youre honde than to lose grete rychesse."

'"Sir," said Merlin, "you had better give me a gift that is not in your hand than lose great riches."' (PPCME, (*a*1470) Malory Wks. (Win-C) 30)

[6] The most important difference between the BETTER and LEVER constructions is that *lever* is never found in the (6a) construction, and that it was lost in the 18th century (see Denison & Cort 2010: 354).

[7] Examples marked with YCOE come from the *York-Toronto-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Old English Prose* (Taylor *et al.* 2003), and those marked with PPCME come from the *Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Middle English, Second Edition* (Kroch & Taylor 2000).

(d) *Thou haddest better* have gold or fee

"You had better have gold than land tenure." (*a*1500(*a*1400) Cleges (Adv 19.1.11) 425, cited in Van der Gaaf 1904: 53) (my translation)

The predecessor constructions in (5a) and (5b) are impersonal or subjectless constructions with a third person singular copular verb and optional expletive subject *(h)it* (examples (5a') and (5b') lack overt subjects, if the postverbal *that*-clauses are not assumed to function as such) (e.g. Denison 1993: 61–66; Elmer 1981; Visser 1972: §903). Personal subjects appear only in stage (5c) dating back to Early Middle English. In stage (5d), they combine with the verb HAVE,[8] according to Van der Gaaf (1904: 52) through analogy with the *I had lever* construction. Denison & Cort (2010: 354) note that in time, the HAVE form becomes restricted to the past tense form *had*, which later gets phonetically reduced to *'d* and finally is dropped altogether. They also adduce other types of evidence to cast the developments undergone by BETTER in terms of grammaticalization.

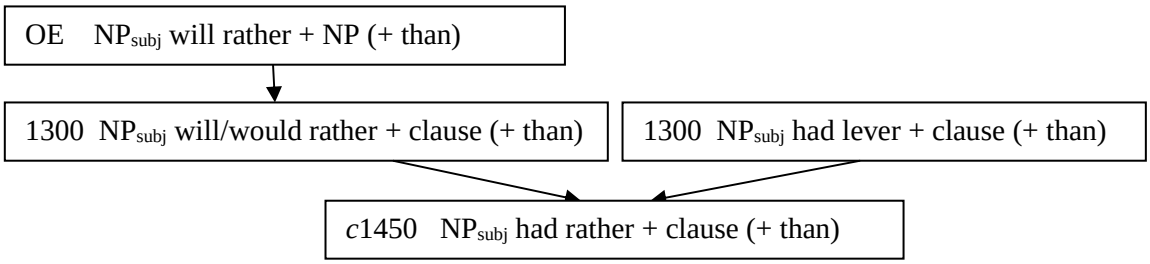
Whereas the BETTER modals originated in impersonal copular constructions, the preference modals go back to personal subject constructions, as detailed by Van der Gaaf (1912). Specifically, when identifying the Old English source construction of the RATHER modals (1912: 385), he cites example (6) from Ælfric's Grammar, in which *rather* is combined with the volitional verb *will*:

(6) *magis* swyþor: *magis hoc uolo, quam illud*: swyþor oþþe hraðor ic wylle þis, þonne ðæt

'I will more or rather this than that' (1000–1050 ÆGram 241.2) (my translation)

[8] More specifically, they nearly always combined with the form *had* (or *hadst*), called a past subjunctive form in the *OED*.

However, the earliest examples of *will (would) rather* followed by clausal complements attested in ordinary texts (unlike (6)) surface around 1300, as in (7).[9] By the same time, LEVER — which is found in impersonal constructions like (5b) from Old English on — had developed the *I had lever* construction, and Van der Gaaf (1912: 393) explains the appearance of *had rather* in the middle of the 15th century as a blend of the *would rather* and *had lever* construction, cf. (8).[10] His account is visualized in Figure 1.[11] It should be noted that the clausal complements could be bare infinitives, as in (7)–(8), or finite clauses (with or without complementizer *that*), as in (9).



[9] In a constructional account *avant la lettre*, Van der Gaaf (1912: 381–388) points out that in Middle English *will (would) rather* occurred in three types of constructions, namely (a) *rather than betray my country, I will die*, (b) *rather will I die than betray my country*, and (c) *I will rather die than betray my country*. In Old English, type (a) was expressed by *ær + willan*, type (b) by *ær + willan* and *mā + willan*, and type (c) by *mā + willan* and *swiþor + willan*. As *mā + willan* and *swiþor + willan* were lost by Middle English, Van der Gaaf (1912) argues that *will (would) rather* replaced these idioms expressing preference in type (c), which we are mainly concerned with here. In types (a) and (b), it competed with *ær + willan*, and for a while the two comparative items were also often found together in the same expression (1912: 389–390).

[10] Van der Gaaf (1912) convincingly shows that *had rather* is a later development than *would rather*, and thus goes against authors who had defended the reverse chronological order, e.g. Hall (1881), Stoffel (1887), Storm (1892–1896: 708), Jespersen (1894: 226–227) and Franz (1900: 346).

[11] Figure 1 does not include *shall/should rather*, which appeared around the same time as *had rather* (Van der Gaaf 1904: 163), since these forms did not form a developmental stage (and are not found in the COHA data).

Figure 1. The constructional history of the RATHER modals (based on Van der Gaaf 2012)

(7) heo nolde christinedom a-fongue, he seide heo *wolde raþer* tuyrne aȝen in-to hire owene londe.

'She did not want to embrace Christianity, he said she would rather return to her own land.' (1280–1290 S. E. Leg 110, 134, cited in Van der Gaaf 1912: 387) (my translation)

(8) Yet *haid* I *rether* dye For his sake ons agayne

'Yet I had rather die for his sake once again.' (*c*1450 *Reliquiæ Antiquæ* I, 72, cited in Van der Gaaf 1904: 51) (my translation)

(9) They … *wolde rather* that the paix were letted thanne he shulde be delivered and come hoome

'They would rather that the peace was impeded than that he should be rescued and come home.' (1440 Wars Eng. In France (1864) II 457, cited in Van der Gaaf 1912: 387) (my translation)

The SOONER modals only appeared at the end of the 16th century, cf. (10) below. While the positive term *sona* 'soon, immediately' had no comparative form in Old English, *soner* is found occasionally in Early Middle English and more frequently by the end of Middle English (Van der Gaaf 1912: 392). Van der Gaaf (1912: 392) argues that with the appearance of *sooner*, the form *rather*, which was originally used in two different senses, relating to time ('sooner, more quickly') and to preference, began to transfer the time-related meaning to *sooner*, as illustrated in (11), while it preserved the preference meaning. Subsequently, *sooner* also developed preference semantics, and it is found to form an idiom with *will (would)* in Early Modern English (only in type (c) constructions, see note 9), cf. (10). I assume that it also came to combine with the *had* auxiliary through analogy with RATHER.

(10) the childe is often brought to take most wholsom things by hiding them in such other as haue a pleasant tast: which, if one should beginne to tell them the nature of Aloes or Ruburb they should receiue, *woulde sooner* take their Phisicke at their eares then at their mouth. (*c*1583 Sidney, Apology for Poetry 172, 29, cited in Van der Gaaf 1912: 392)

(11) Nan þing ne flið mon *sonre* þenne his aȝen heorte.
'One doesn't flee anything more quickly than one's own heart.' (PPCME, ?*c*1225 *Ancr.* (Cleo C.6) II. 39)

While the discussion so far has indicated that the BETTER and preference modals differ in their constructional history, I will show in this article that their further developments do not run entirely parallel either. The difference hinges on the development of comparative modal constructions without an auxiliary form, like in (4) above and in (12).

(12) MEGAN: A toast to Intertop.
GUZMAN: I *rather* toast the devil. (COHA, 1985)

With the BETTER modals, the zero constructions with expressed subject, as in (4) (NP_{subj} Ø *better* in Figure 2), are diachronically preceded by zero constructions without expressed subject like (13) (Ø Ø *better* in Figure 2) (van der Auwera *et al.* 2013). Van der Auwera *et al.* (2013: 141–142) assume that the latter constructions have generalized from clipped variants of *it is better to* proverbs like (14), which occurred (without *it is*) from the 17th century onwards and often had bare infinitival complements rather than *to*-infinitives (cf. Denison & Cort 2010: 360–364). As the final stage in the development of BETTER, the zero construction also came to combine with overt subjects through analogy with *had better* and *'d better* (van der Auwera *et al.* 2013: 141). Figure 2 presents the grammaticalization scenario of BETTER ensuing the stages given in (5), symbolizing the two hypothesized analogical operations with horizontal arrows.

(13) If such the plague and pains to write by rule, *better*, say I, be pleased and play the fool. (CLMETEV 1733–1734 Pope, *An essay on man*, cited in van der Auwera *et al.* 2013: 141)

(14) *Better* to wow [woo] over middin, nor [than] over mure. (*a*1628 in M. L. Anderson *Proverbs in Scots* (1957) no. 320, cited in Denison & Cort 2010: 361)

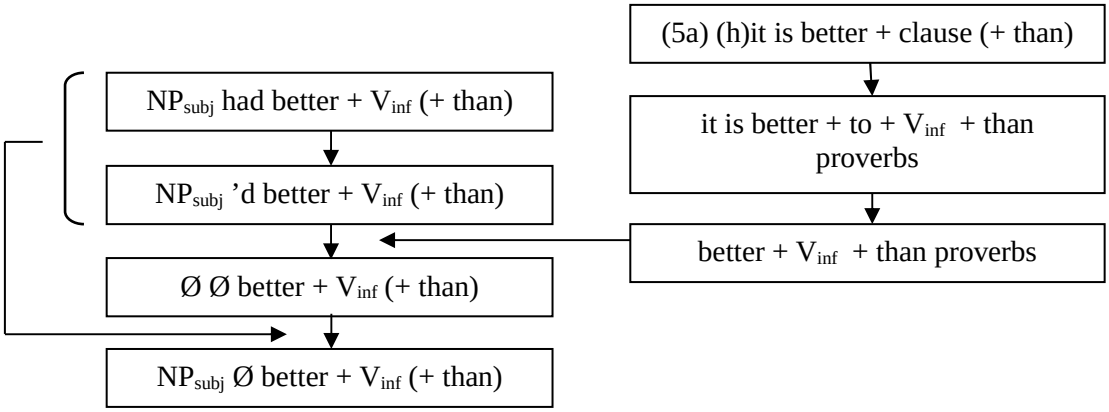


Figure 2. The development of BETTER as of (5d) (adapted from van der Auwera *et al.* 2013: 142)

For the preference modals, research on the further development of the comparative modal constructions is lacking, and no hypotheses have been formulated. (However, for a hypothesis on the lexicalization of *rather*, see notes 1 and 19.) Although they show the same variety of auxiliary types in Present-Day English as BETTER (in fact, they have one more full auxiliary form, i.e. *would*), it is unlikely that they developed the most reduced form along the same lines, since they have no direct links with impersonal constructions. This is tentatively confirmed by the data presented in Sections 4.1 and 4.3, and I will propose a grammaticalization scenario for the preference modals in Section 4.3.2 that is different from the one for BETTER in Figure 2.

3. Data and methods

The data used in this study were retrieved from the *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA), compiled by Mark Davies (2010–). This is a corpus of American English of over 400 million words, covering the period 1810–2009. In this corpus, I looked for examples of *better*, *rather* and *sooner*, immediately followed by a bare infinitive, by *not* + infinitive, or by *just* + infinitive, and I made exhaustive extractions per decade. In presenting the findings, however, I will use five subperiods only, each consisting of four decades. Table 1 indicates the number of words for each COHA subperiod, the total number of examples extracted per adverb, and the absolute (n) and relative (%) frequency of examples in which they are used in a modal construction. What may strike the reader immediately is that from 1850 onwards above 83% of the *better* examples constitute modal expressions, whereas with *sooner* almost the opposite is the case, with overall less than 20% modal constructions. Of the *rather* examples, I also had to discard a large number of cases, between 70% and 80% per subperiod.

Table 1. The dataset for BETTER, RATHER and SOONER in the COHA (1810–2009)

Subperiod	Number of words in COHA	*better*			*rather*			*sooner*		
		modal		total	modal		total	modal		total
		n	%	n	n	%	n	n	%	n
1810–1849	37,928,868	7	58.33	12	139	28.90	481	12	18.46	65
1850–1889	73,101,943	44	83.02	53	234	30.19	775	4	4.04	99
1890–1929	92,012,278	110	94.83	116	157	23.68	663	13	17.81	73
1930–1969	96,883,887	146	94.81	154	64	21.55	297	4	11.43	35
1970–2009	106,305,048	77	89.53	86	77	34.07	226	5	19.23	26
Total	406,232,024	384	91.21	421	671	27.48	2442	38	12.75	298

It should be noted that the queries used precluded systematic study of the type of complementation found with the RATHER and SOONER modals. Whereas the BETTER modals invariably took and still take non-finite complements (mostly bare infinitives, but also *to*-infinitives in some Early Modern counterfactual expressions of the type *you had been better to* …) (cf. Denison & Cort 2010: 352–355), the preference modals have always had the option of taking a finite complement, as in (9) above and (15)–(16) below (see also Collins 2009: 19). In addition, as noted by Wood (2013: 85), the preference modals are also found in Exceptional

Case Marking or 'raising-to-object' constructions (17) (see Wood 2013 for more details). However, not specifying that the adverbs are to be followed by an infinitive would inevitably have yielded even more noise than the queries I used.

(15) "Sorry to interrupt the conference, sir, but I'*d rather* you told us what you saw and heard." "Yes, of course," Pierce said. (COHA, 2004)

(16) "Don't you want to risk it, Smith?" "Of course I want to go, but there are some who hesitate." "Who are they?" "I'*d sooner* you would find it out from themselves." "That's it, eh? Mutineers on board." (COHA, 1913)

(17) I *would rather* him call me by my first name than be called Mom (Wood 2013: 63 (17a))

4. The development of the comparative modals in American English

This section presents the main findings of the development of the BETTER, RATHER and SOONER modals in American English from 1810 until 2009. It shows that the three comparative modal families are largely developing in the same direction, but at different paces and to different degrees, which can be linked back to their distinct basic semantics and constructional history. Across the time frame, the three modal families exhibit many auxiliary-like features, basically by virtue of their auxiliary elements. These show reduced morphological paradigms as well as simplified syntax in that they function as operators in the sense of Huddleston (1988: 45), exhibiting the NICE-properties. That is, they never use the auxiliary *do* in negative sentences (N), cf. (18)–(19), in sentences with subject-verb inversion (I), cf. (20)–(21), as a substitute verb

in post-verbal ellipsis contexts ('Code'), cf. (22), or for the sake of emphasis (E) (cf. Palmer 1974: 18–25) (see Mitchell 2003: 132–134 on synchronic evidence for *had better*).[12]

(18) I *had sooner* not break the laws of my country (COHA, 1894)

(19) I guess he *better* not come sneaking or mussing round me (COHA, 1870)

(20) Do you wish for bail? Or *had* you *rather* remain confined until your trial? (COHA, 1845)

(21) Come on, le's start! Which half you *rather* take? (COHA, 1950)

(22) "Perhaps," — he paused earnestly, — "perhaps you don't feel like handball tonight?" "No," Francis mumbled. "I believe I'*d rather* not." (COHA, 1941)

In addition, the graphological evidence indicates that the auxiliary elements display phonetic weakening. This process of change will be looked at more closely in Section 4.1, which concentrates on the form type of auxiliary preceding the comparative forms. Sections 4.2 to 4.4 will give more details on how the process of erosion evolved — similarly for the three comparative modal groups — but will also point to aspects of semantic and constructional heterogeneity among the groups. Section 4.2 investigates the temporal reference of the comparative modal forms, and examines which contexts were most conducive to phonetic reduction. Section 4.3 looks at the subjects of the comparative modal constructions, and finds that the BETTER modals differ from the preference modals not only in terms of overt subject referents, but also in terms of covert subject constructions, which is linked up with their respective constructional history and leads to an alternative grammaticalization scenario for the

[12] It should be noted that two NICE-properties apply to the whole of auxiliary element (whatever form it takes, including zero) and comparative adverb, i.e. negation and code, while the other two apply to the auxiliary element only, i.e. inversion and emphasis. I thank one of the anonymous referees for indicating that the NICE-properties do not simply apply across the board.

preference modals. Section 4.4, finally, examines the degree of semantic bleaching versus retention of the original comparative meaning of the expressions studied.

4.1 Type of auxiliary

This section focuses on the type of auxiliary that precedes the comparative adverbs to form a modal construction, and on the degree of phonetic weakening — interpreted here as reflected in orthography[13] — that these forms exhibit across the time frame studied. If we take a look at Tables 2 to 4, it is clear that the BETTER modals formally differ from the preference modals in that they only appear with one full auxiliary, i.e. *had*. Both the SOONER and RATHER modals are found with *had* as well as *would*, as could be expected from their constructional history (see Section 2). Although the preference modals also originally patterned with *will*, no relevant examples have been found in the dataset studied.[14] In the tables, the *Ø* forms include constructions with covert subjects (cf. (23), (26) below) as well as overt subjects (cf. (12) above); in Section 4.3 these types will be teased apart (see Table 5).

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[13] As suggested by an anonymous referee, we cannot be sure whether the texts show true phonetic weakening or rather a change in transcription practices.

[14] Examples (i) and (ii) below do feature *will*, but in (i) it follows rather than precedes *sooner* and it merely temporally locates the event in the future rather than expresses comparative volition. In (ii), *will rather* might express preference, but again *will* follows *rather* and thus differs from the examples included in the analysis. In terms of Van der Gaaf's (1912: 384) typology, both (i) and (ii) instantiate type (b) rather than type (c) studied here (see note 9).

(i) *Sooner will* the moon cease to shed her placid beams upon the earth, *sooner will* this heart cease to beat, than your Amanda forget her vows (COHA, 1864)

(ii) Never any man prayed for direction in his duties to God and was repulsed; *rather will* God send an angel from heaven to instruct us, than our good desires shall be frustrated (COHA, 1817)

Table 2. The formal types of BETTER modals in the COHA

BETTER	*had better*			*would better*			*'d better*			*Ø better*			Totals		
	n	n/mil	%	n	n/mil	%	n	n/mil	%	n	n/mil	%	n	n/mil	%
1810–1849	4	0.11	57.14	0	-	-	0	-	-	3	0.08	42.86	7	0.18	100
1850–1889	11	0.15	25.00	0	-	-	2	0.03	4.55	31	0.42	70.45	44	0.60	100
1890–1929	8	0.09	7.27	0	-	-	5	0.05	4.55	97	1.05	88.18	110	1.20	100
1930–1969	10	0.10	6.85	0	-	-	1	0.01	0.68	135	1.39	92.47	146	1.51	100
1970–2009	4	0.04	5.19	0	-	-	0	-	-	73	0.69	94.81	77	0.72	100

Table 3. The formal types of SOONER modals in the COHA

RATHER	*had sooner*			*would sooner*			*'d sooner*			*Ø sooner*			Totals		
	n	n/mil	%	n	n/mil	%	n	n/mil	%	n	n/mil	%	n	n/mil	%
1810–1849	0	-	-	4	0.11	33.33	5	0.13	41.67	3	0.08	25.00	12	0.32	100
1850–1889	0	-	-	0	-	-	2	0.03	50.00	2	0.03	50.00	4	0.05	100
1890–1929	6	0.07	46.15	3	0.03	23.08	2	0.02	15.38	2	0.02	15.38	13	0.14	100
1930–1969	0	-	-	2	0.02	50.00	0	-	-	2	0.02	50.00	4	0.04	100
1970–2009	0	-	-	0	-	-	2	0.02	40.00	3	0.03	60.00	5	0.05	100

Table 4. The formal types of RATHER modals in the COHA

SOON-ER	*had rather*			*would rather*			*'d rather*			*Ø rather*			Totals		
	n	n/mil	%	n	n/mil	%	n	n/mil	%	n	n/mil	%	n	n/mil	%
1810–1849	114	3.01	82.01	11	0.29	7.91	6	0.16	4.32	8	0.21	5.76	139	3.66	100
1850–1889	152	2.08	64.96	28	0.38	11.97	45	0.62	19.23	9	0.12	3.85	234	3.20	100
1890–1929	86	0.93	54.78	32	0.35	20.38	28	0.30	17.83	11	0.12	7.01	157	1.71	100
1930–1969	10	0.10	15.63	10	0.10	15.63	21	0.22	32.81	23	0.24	35.94	64	0.66	100
1970–2009	13	0.12	16.88	13	0.12	16.88	35	0.33	45.45	16	0.15	20.78	77	0.72	100

Phonetic reduction is most obvious with the BETTER modals. They witness a gradual decline of the *had better* constructions, which in the most recent period only constitute a mere 5% (Table 2).[15] The data show that the forms are replaced by the phonetically most reduced *better* constructions, e.g. (23), which steadily rose in relative frequency from 43% to 95%.

(23) Not having been able to shake off the Bible notions about Christian burial, we adhere to the mode that was observed when devout men carried Stephen to his burial. *Better* not come around here with your chemical apparatus for the reduction of the human body. (COHA, 1847)

These figures support the grammaticalization scenario presented in Figure 2 (Section 2). They also suggest that the BETTER modals have strongly grammaticalized in American English. More generally, the normalized frequencies confirm earlier findings that the BETTER modals have decreased in frequency in the second half of the 20th century (see Leech 2003: 229–230; van der Auwera & De Wit 2010: 130).

The SOONER modals show less phonetic erosion than the BETTER modals, as the increase of the zero type halts at 60% in the most recent period, and the cliticized *'d sooner* type still takes up a relatively large share, up to 50% (Table 3). The full auxiliary types appear in only three out of five subperiods, with a peak of about 70% in 1890–1929. With *sooner*, it is *would* that is overall most frequent; the earliest example is in (24).

[15] Note that the normalized frequencies included in Table 2 do not reveal much about the development of the various formal types because of the low numbers. The relative frequencies, by contrast, are far more revealing. The same goes for Tables 3 and 4. As I am especially concerned with comparing the three comparative modals, no more normalized frequencies will be given in the rest of this article.

(24) "I know," added his Lordship, "that a man can only bo[sic] a certain time without sleep, and then he must go mad, without any one being able to save him; and I *would* len[sic] times *sooner* shoot myself than be mad, for I am not afraid of dying, — I am more fit to die than people think." (COHA, 1824)

Although the overall low frequency of the SOONER modals precludes hard and fast conclusions, we can interpret Table 3 as supporting a grammaticalization scenario in terms of *would/had sooner* > *'d sooner* > *sooner*.

Finally, the RATHER modals show the least phonetic weakening. Table 4 indicates that the *had rather* construction — which, rather than *would rather*, is the predominant full auxiliary construction in the earliest periods — gradually decreased in frequency from 82% to 17%, in favour of the *'d rather* and *rather* constructions. In the most recent period, the *'d rather* construction still accounts for 45%, while the *rather* construction only takes up about 20%; recent examples are in (25) and (26). Similar to Table 3, Table 4 also suggests a *had/would rather* > *'d rather* > *rather* grammaticalization path.

(25) "Im only in Rome for a few more months." "I thought you had returned to stay," Antigonus said, clearly surprised by his statement. "Ive changed my mind," Marcus replied shortly. "But why?" "For reasons I*d rather* not discuss." (COHA, 1998)

(26) Lots of folks out there with nothin' in their mouths. […] Still, those folks are outside, doin'. I'm stuck here, not doin'. *Rather* do laundry. Though I'm a man. (COHA, 2004)

To conclude, on the basis of the degree of phonetic reduction found with the three comparative modals, we can arrange them on a grammaticalization cline for American English, as in Figure 3.

BETTER > SOONER > RATHER

Figure 3. The grammaticalization cline of the comparative modals in American English

4.2 Temporal reference

In this section I investigate the temporal reference of the various formal types of the comparative modal groups to determine which temporal setting was most favourable to the process of phonetic reduction described in Section 4.1. In fact, all the comparative modal constructions are taken to derive from their full auxiliary forms (see Sections 2 and 4.1), which originally were past subjunctive forms (*OED* for *had better*; Van der Gaaf 1904: 47 for *would rather*). From the Middle English examples of RATHER given in Van der Gaaf (1912: 386–388), it is also clear that *would rather* was confined to past contexts, while present contexts featured *will*. However, Bybee (1995: 505) has indicated that by Middle English the modal *would* itself had made its way into present contexts, expressing present volition or willingness. We thus hypothesize here that in the data studied the comparative modals have lost their productive morphological past-nonpast pairing and have developed a "hypothetical present" with past form typical of modal auxiliaries (cf. Traugott & Dasher 2002: 132–137).

Figures 4 to 6 show that for all forms of the three comparative modal families present time reference is strongly predominant. As can be computed from Tables A.1 to A.3 included in the Appendix, on which Figures 4 to 6 are based, the overall share of present time reference is 94%, 95% and 86% across the 1810–2009 time frame for the BETTER, SOONER and RATHER modals respectively. This implies that by 1810 the forms *had* and *would* (and clitic *'d*) in combination with the comparative adverbs had indeed developed a hypothetical present use, as illustrated in (27). Expressions with past temporal reference like (28) still occur, but they are not very frequent.

(27) "But I guess," Delia added, "you *had better* just wait till Gaston comes." (COHA, 1888)

(28) The first Sunday in October 1925 a handful of sunbonneted women and mountain men with guns came to hear the parson's first sermon. This was a time when men stacked their guns outside the church and when a mountaineer *would sooner* leave his pants home than his gun. (COHA, 1951)

As a still less frequent option, the RATHER modals and *would sooner* constructions also include examples with perfect infinitive complements, which give rise to counterfactual meaning.[1616] In (29), for example, the I-person talks about a past situation in which he or she at a certain point preferred a different course of events than the actual one, but was not in a position to choose this preferred option and make it happen. Examples like (29) have a mere overall share of 4.5% of the RATHER modals (cf. Table A.3).

(29) he didn't call me pet names and hug me up in his arms, as he so often does when I haven't been naughty …; he wouldn't let me do the least thing for him. I just felt as if I wasn't one of the family at all, and *would* ten times *rather* have had the hardest of whippings; at least so far as the pain was concerned. (COHA, 1888)

[16] The British Late Modern English data used in van der Auwera *et al.* (2013) also include counterfactual instances of BETTER , but their relative share decreases across the Late Modern period from 13% (1710–1780) to 2% (1850–1920). According to Traugott & Dasher (2002: 137), the appearance of perfect infinitives after a modal (*must*, in their discussion) proves that the modal "was no longer understood as marked for past tense", but see Denison (1998: 140) and Denison & Cort (2010: 377) for convincing counterarguments to their claim.

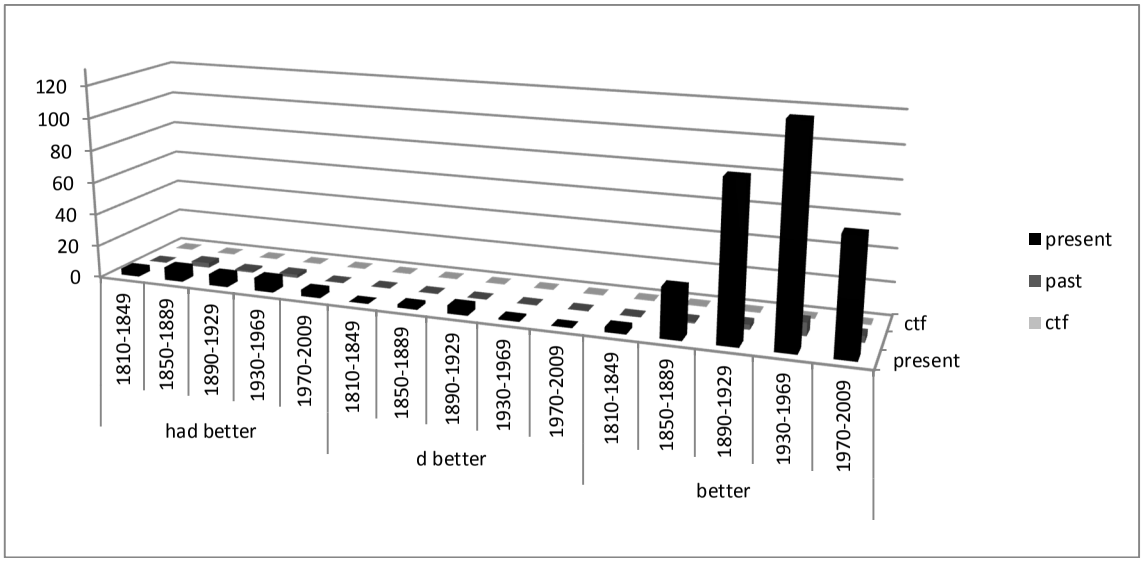

Figure 4. Temporal reference of BETTER modals in the COHA

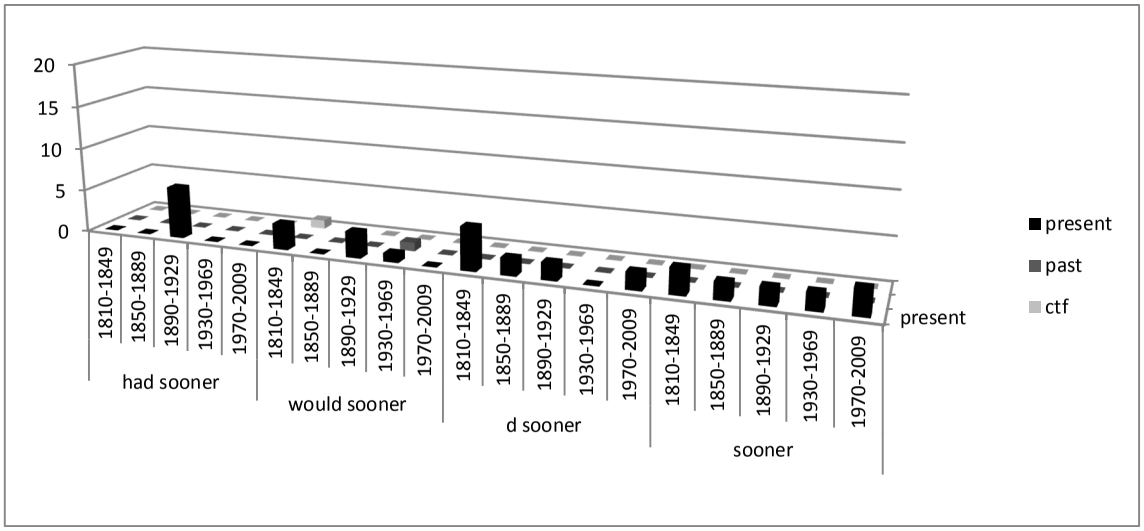

Figure 5. Temporal reference of SOONER modals in the COHA

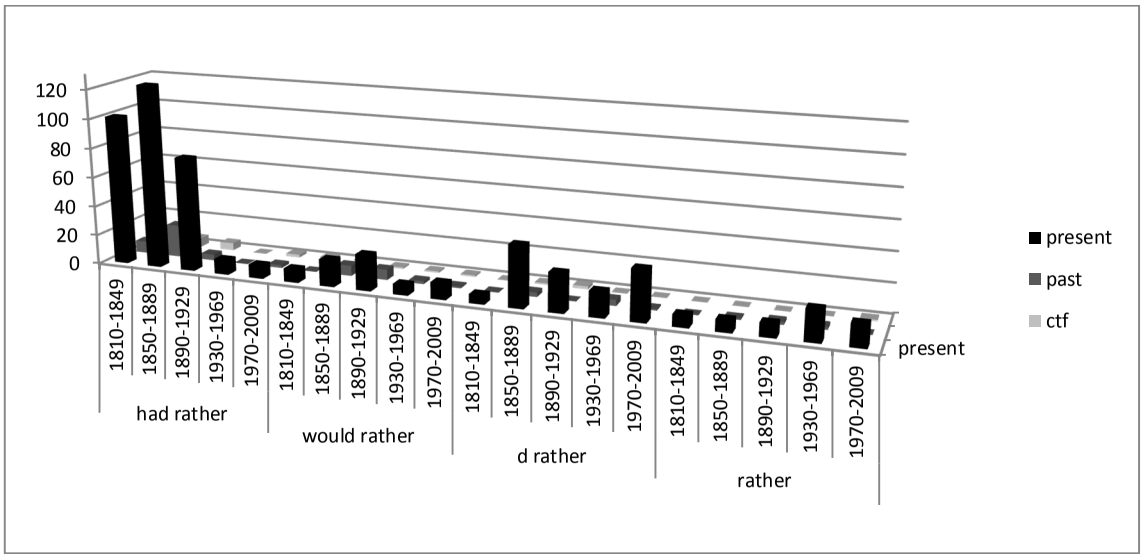

Figure 6. Temporal reference of RATHER modals in the COHA

The data show that the greatest variety in temporal reference is found with the RATHER modals. Within this family, it is the full auxiliary forms that account for the largest shares of past and counterfactual reference (cf. Figure 5; Table A.3). Likewise, among the SOONER modals only the *would* form occurs with non-present time reference (cf. Figure 5). Among the BETTER modals, past temporal reference is most frequently found with the *better* constructions in absolute terms (cf. Figure 4), but the relative figures show that the *had better* constructions have the largest shares (cf. Table A.1).

Clearly, the comparative modals have shed their productive past-nonpast pairing — like the modal *would* by Middle English — and are predominantly used with present temporal reference as of the earliest period studied. However, we also detected some degree of retention (Bybee & Pagliuca 1987: 112) or persistence across the three comparative modal families, as it is the full auxiliary forms — which originally had past temporal reference — that keep the largest shares of past temporal reference. At the same time, these retention phenomena indicate that the phonetic erosion outlined in Section 4.1 took place more readily in present than in past (or counterfactual) contexts.

4.3 Subject type

This section looks at the subjects found with the three comparative modal families, and distinguishes between overt subject constructions and covert ones, since the latter proved crucial in establishing the further grammaticalization stages of BETTER in previous studies (see Section 2). I will show that the preference modals developed along a different path, without analogical pressure from impersonal constructions.

4.3.1 Overt subject constructions

The study of constructions with overt subjects shows us — like the temporal reference data — which contexts promoted phonetic reduction of the comparative modals, but also brings to light

some differences among the three groups studied. As can be seen in Figures 7 to 9, the overtly expressed subject participants of the BETTER modals generally have different person/number values than those of the preference modals, and this throughout the time frame considered here. In particular, the BETTER modals predominantly pattern with second person subjects (63% overall), whereas the SOONER and RATHER modals are most frequently found with first person singular subjects (67% and 69% overall respectively) (see also Tables A.4 to A.6 in the Appendix).

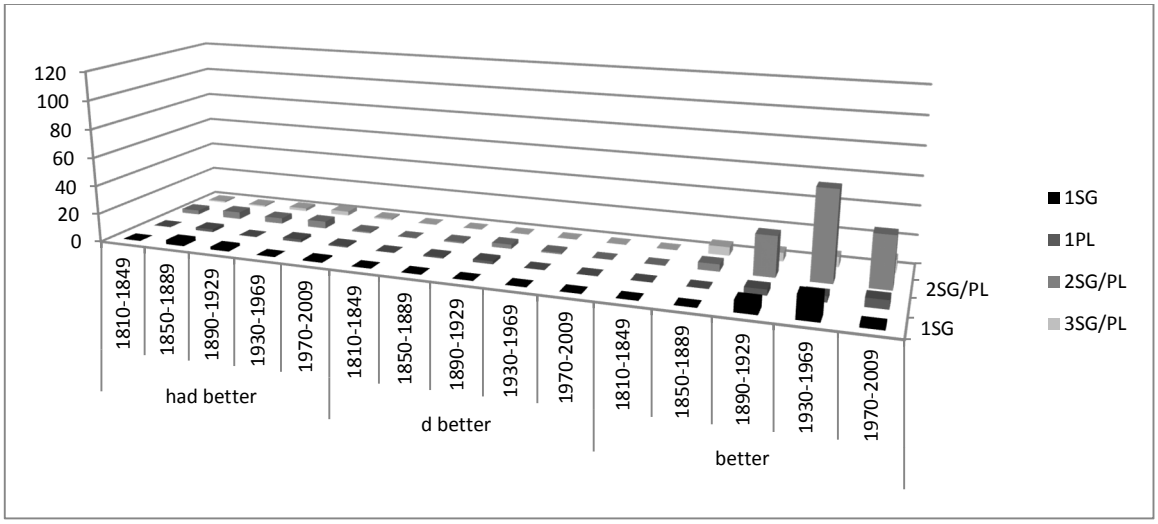

Figure 7. The subject referents of BETTER modals in the COHA

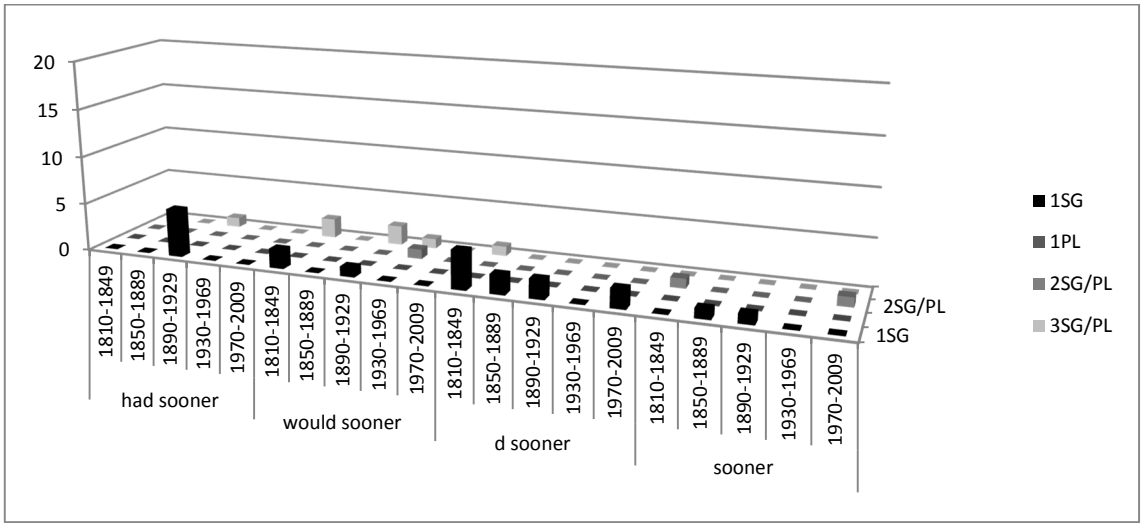

Figure 8. The subject referents of SOONER modals in the COHA

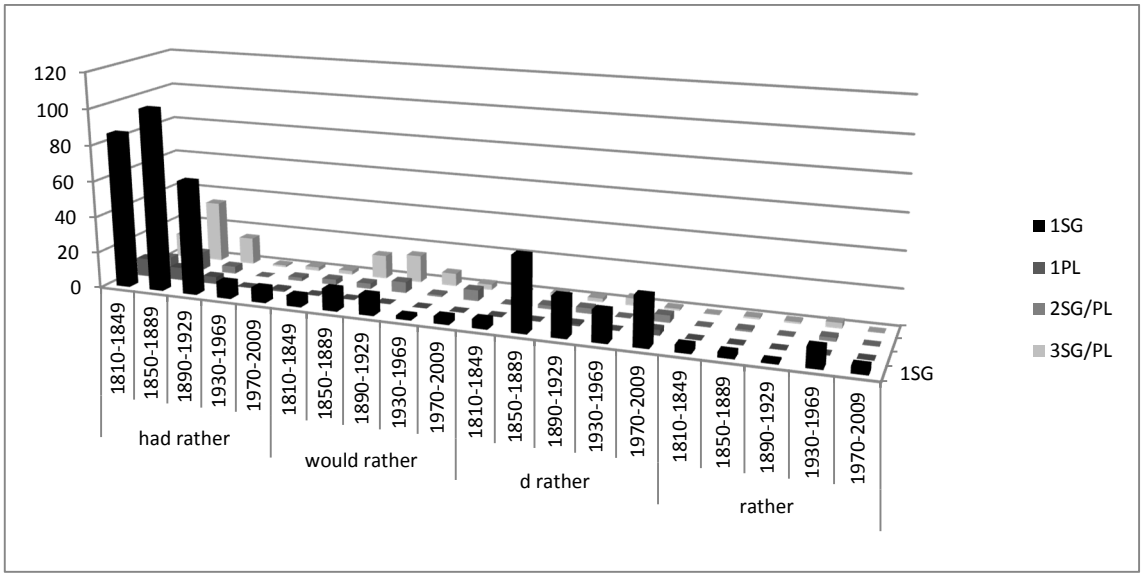

Figure 9. The subject referents of RATHER modals in the COHA

If we take a more detailed look at Figure 7, we see that the share of second person subjects increased in frequency most noticeably with the *better* constructions (from 45% to 68% in Table A.4) (This is consistent with what van der Auwera & De Wit (2010: 136–137) found in the BROWN and FROWN corpora — American English from the 60s and 90s.) The infrequent *'d better* forms only occur with second and first plural person subjects, whereas the *had better* forms are far less restrictive. In fact, we see that the shares of subject referents become more evenly distributed towards the most recent period. Although across time *had better* forms are most tolerant to third person subjects, they certainly do not show a clear preference for them, unlike what van der Auwera & De Wit (2010: 135–136) found in a similarly sized set of data from the FROWN corpus. They put this preference down to register, with the *had better* forms being "typical of registers other than conversational direct speech" (2010: 135).

Two examples with third person subjects are special in that they refer to inanimate entities; both feature a *better* form. One has been given in (4) above, and expresses optative

meaning rather than advice (see Section 1).[17] The other one is given in (30), and expresses deontic meaning: 'many believe that concerted action should come before the country is absolutely ruined' or 'that people should undertake concerted action'. What (30) illustrates is that deontic meaning of BETTER is possible "even if a human recipient of advice or direction is not actually expressed, so long as one can be inferred" (Denison & Cort 2010: 368). Like the core modal auxiliary *should*, for instance (cf. the paraphrase above), deontic BETTER can thus transfer its subject selection to the infinitive it combines with, and has thus moved further on the auxiliation path proposed by Heine (1993: 58–66).

(30) Many Mexicans are now calling for intervention preferably by concerted action. Of the Powers. This movement has grown to marked degree Since the dissolution of Congress. many believing that *this* is certain sooner or later and *better* come before the country is absolutely ruined. (COHA, 1913)

The SOONER and RATHER modals, by contrast, always have human subject referents[18] and show a clear tendency towards first person singular subjects, with the speaker expressing his or

[17] In the data studied, optative meaning is only found in one example (4), which has an inanimate subject. For examples of optative expressions with first person and second person subjects, I refer the reader to van der Auwera *et al.* (2013).

[18] As indicated by an anonymous referee, the finding that the subject referents of the preference modals are restricted to human referents probably is an artifact of the corpus consulted. (S)he provides the following example:

(i) I'm almost positive my plants *would rather* have some pee or deer repellent on them rather than be eaten by deer. (located at http://forum.grasscity.com/outdoor-medical-marijuana-growing/644268-piss-plants.html, 7/05/2014)

her own preference. In terms of the formal subtypes, in both the SOONER and RATHER family the distribution of subject types of the *'d* ADVERB forms is very similar to that of the *had* ADVERB forms. Third person subjects are most frequently found with the *would* ADVERB forms (and also with *rather* forms), but to a lesser extent than observed in the BROWN and FROWN corpora by van der Auwera & De Wit (2010: 142). If we change perspective and look at the distribution of the formal subtypes for each subject referent, we can see some diachronic tendencies more clearly. For first person singular subjects, we can discern a gradual increase of *'d rather* forms from 5% in 1810–1849 to 63% in 1970–2009. Similarly, third person subjects increasingly pattern with *would rather* forms (12.5% up to 50%). For the *had rather* forms, which were observed to decline in frequency (cf. Section 4.1), we can now conclude that they do so gradually and consistently across all the various subject referents.

The data on overt subjects have indicated that the difference in semantics of the comparative modals correlates with a diachronically stable difference in preferred subject referent: the BETTER modals expressing advice prefer second person subjects, whereas the SOONER and RATHER modals expressing preference pattern most frequently with first person singular subjects. Across the comparative modal families, it is the (oldest) full auxiliary form that most readily accommodates third person subjects, i.e. *had better*, *would sooner*, and *would rather*. Conversely, the data thus imply that phonetic weakening (see Section 4.1) happened especially in 1st and 2nd person contexts, with speakers expressing advice directed at the addressee, or expressing their own preference in direct speaker-hearer interaction.

4.3.2 Covert subject constructions

In (i), *would rather* has a non-human subject (*my plants*), and it expresses 'intrinsic disposition' rather than preference, as suggested by the anonymous referee. Nevertheless, it is still *would rather* that selects the subject, rather than the infinitival complement.

Van der Auwera *et al.* (2013) found that in British English, the *better* constructions first appeared without overt subject, and continued to do so across the Late Modern English period studied (1720–1910). This finding led us to posit the diachronic scenario presented in Figure 2, which involves analogical pressure first from clipped proverbial patterns and subsequently from the *had better* and *'d better* forms (see Section 2). This section investigates whether the scenario also holds for *better* forms in American English, as well as for *sooner* and *rather* constructions. In addition, it verifies van der Auwera and De Wit's (2010: 138) finding that the covert subject *better* constructions invariably have second person reference.

Table 5 indicates that in American English the *better* constructions also first occur with covert subjects, and that their ratio gradually declines in frequency in favour of overt subjects, from 100% to 27%. Although the first covert subjects date from 1840–1849 while the first overt subjects appear just one decade later (1850–1859), we should thus conclude that van der Auwera *et al.*'s (2013) scenario also holds for American English.

Table 5. Overt and covert subjects of the Ø ADVERB forms in the COHA

Subject types	*better*				*sooner*				*rather*			
	overt		covert		overt		covert		overt		covert	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
1810–1849	0	-	3	100.00	1	33.33	2	66.67	4	50.00	4	50.00
1850–1889	11	35.48	20	64.52	1	50.00	1	50.00	5	55.56	4	44.44
1890–1929	46	47.42	51	52.58	1	50.00	1	50.00	2	18.18	9	81.82
1930–1969	89	65.93	46	34.07	0	-	2	100.00	16	69.57	7	30.43
1970–2009	53	72.60	20	27.40	1	33.33	2	66.67	4	25.00	12	75.00
Total	199	58.70	140	41.30	4	33.33	8	66.67	31	46.27	36	53.73

However, Table 5 seems to tell a different story for the *sooner* and *rather* constructions. For the *sooner* forms, the covert subject constructions are more frequent throughout the time frame studied, but the numbers are low, and there is no such clear diachronic line as with the *better* forms. The *rather* constructions equally lack a clear diachronic tendency; their covert subjects are overall only slightly more frequent (54%) than the overt subjects (46%), and in the earliest two periods it is the overt ones that are a bit more frequent. The preference modals do

not seem to have developed the overt subject Ø ADVERB forms later than — or out of — the covert subject Ø ADVERB forms. This makes sense in view of their constructional history which — unlike that of BETTER — does not include impersonal predecessors. We might thus assume that in the early 19th century speakers felt that when using the preference modals they could as easily leave out both the subject and the auxiliary (clitic) as the auxiliary (clitic) only. I would therefore propose that the later development of the preference modals proceeded as represented in Figure 10.[19]

[19] This scenario is in keeping with the data discussed here and by Coorevits (2012), who did not find any Ø ADVERB form of the preference modals before 1850 in the 15 million word Extended version of the *Corpus of Late Modern English texts*, including British English only. However, Klippenstein (2012) reports attestations of (zero) *rather* constructions, all with overt subject, in the late 1500s and early 1600s, in literary works (mostly from England) and letters (mostly from Scotland). If we take her data into account, we can hypothesize a scenario even more radically different from that of the BETTER modals, assuming that the NP_{subj} *'d rather* construction first gave rise to the NP_{subj} Ø *rather* construction, in the late 1500s, from which the Ø Ø *rather* construction developed only later. At the same time, this NP_{subj} Ø *rather* construction was the first step in the lexicalization of *rather*, leading to forms showing verbal morphology in the late 1800s (see Klippenstein 2012). The SOONER modals should then be hypothesized to have developed analogously to the RATHER modals, but they did not undergo lexicalization. I leave substantiation of this hypothesis for further research.

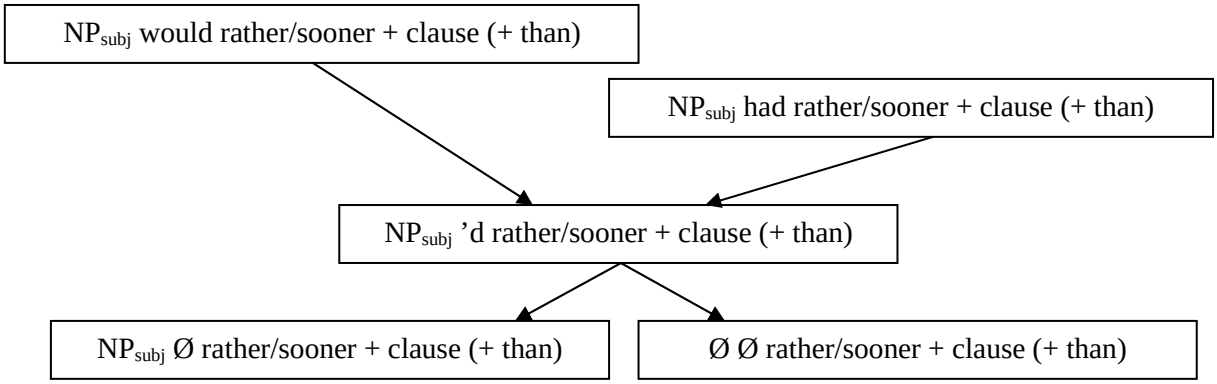

Figure 10. The (later) development of the RATHER and SOONER modals

With regard to the subject referents of the Ø ADVERB forms, it turns out that covert subject constructions do not differ so much from the overt ones. Figure 11 shows that for the *better* constructions the shares of subject referents are very similar across overt and covert subject constructions, especially after 1890. The covert ones are clearly not restricted to second person reference (see also van der Auwera *et al.* (2013: 136–137) for Present-Day British English), contrary to van der Auwera & De Wit's (2010: 138–139) finding in the LOB, FLOB and BROWN corpora. An example with first person plural subject reference is given in (31).

(31) We walked fast along the creek, cut through the Malstar place to the road and then followed the railroad tracks to town. "*Better* not let father see us," Joe said. "He'd sure be mad." (COHA, 1934)

The same goes for the *sooner* forms. As the constructions concerned are very infrequent, Figure 12 conflates all diachronic findings and thus presents a 'panchronic' picture. It shows that the covert subject constructions in fact occur with all person categories — an example with third person reference is given in (32) — whereas the overt ones are restricted to first person singular and second person reference.

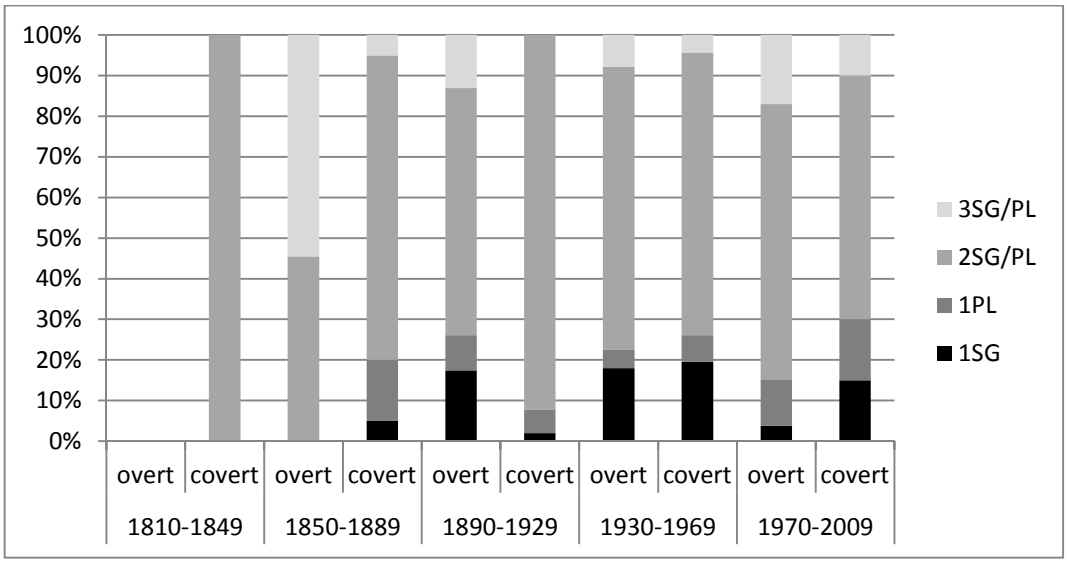

Figure 11. Subject referents of overt and covert subject *better* constructions in the COHA

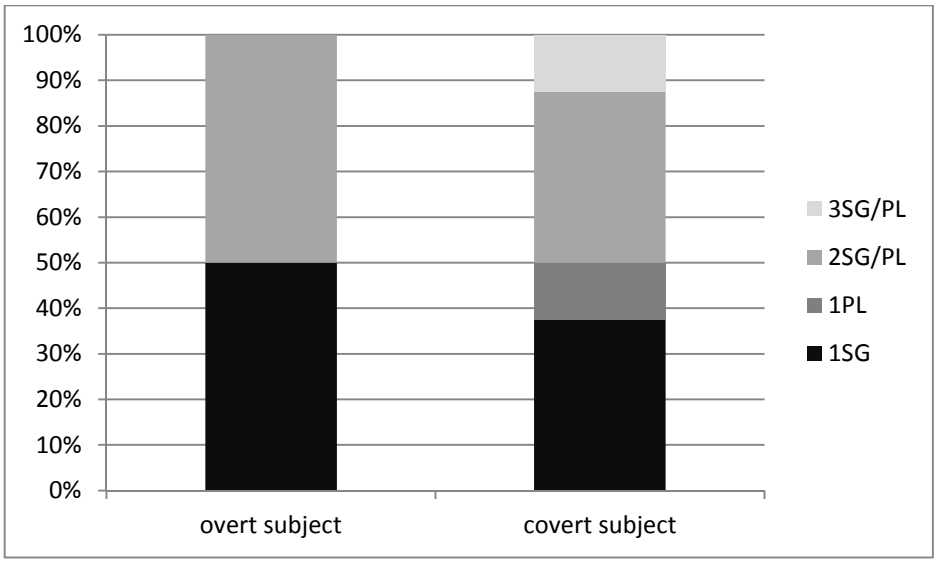

Figure 12. Subject referents of overt and covert subject *sooner* constructions in the COHA

(32) They won't even take it [i.e. whisky] when a rattlesnake bites 'em. *Sooner* die. (COHA, 1922)

Finally, the *rather* forms, for which van der Auwera & De Wit (2010: 142–143) do not mention covert subject constructions, show somewhat more variety across overt and covert subject constructions than the *better* forms (see Figure 13), but this is not significant. The overt ones generally have larger shares of first person singular, whereas the covert ones have larger second person shares. An example of the latter is in (33).

(33) Brother Jonathan with his cat-like step had drawn near, and she now caught a glimpse of his hated countenance, distorted with scorn and anger. "*Rather* die than be my wife?" he asked mockingly, as he approached nearer. (COHA, 1891)

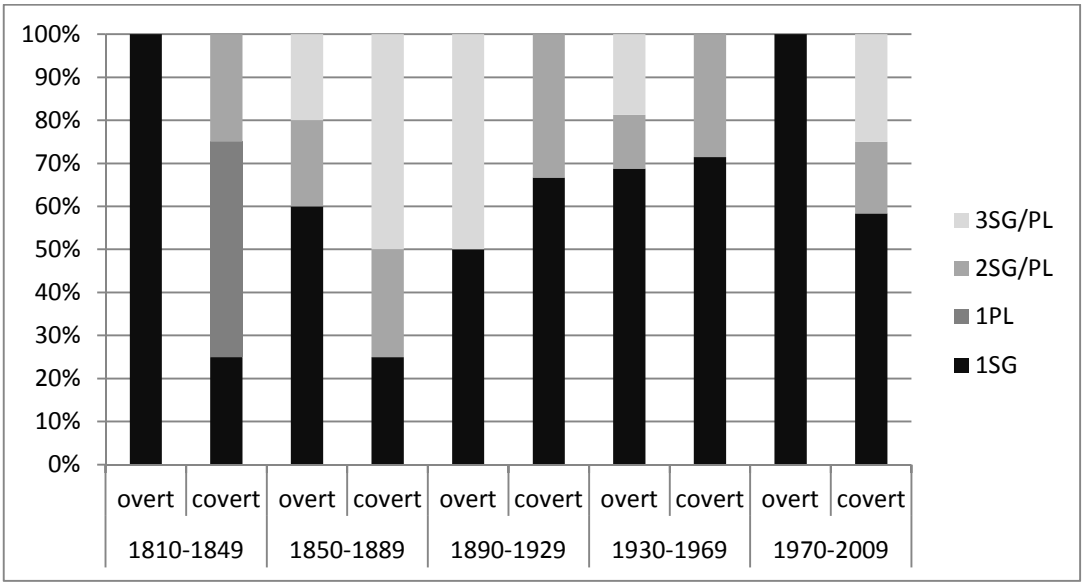

Figure 13. Subject referents of overt and covert subject *rather* constructions in the COHA

In conclusion, the study of the subject referents of the Ø ADVERB forms — which are found in all three comparative modal families — revealed no significant differences between overt and covert subject constructions. More importantly, this section has confirmed the grammaticalization scenario proposed for the BETTER modals on the basis of British English data (Figure 2 above), but it could not present clear evidence that the preference modals developed along similar lines. That is, the data did not irrefutably indicate that the Ø Ø ADVERB

forms emerged prior to the NP_{subj} Ø ADVERB forms. I therefore proposed a diachronic scenario different from that for BETTER, with no analogical pressure from impersonal constructions, which they never had direct diachronic links with (Figure 10). In this way, this section has highlighted the constructional heterogeneity of the comparative modal groups studied.

4.4 Comparative meaning

A final aspect in the development of the comparative modals in American English that we will look at here is the presence of comparative meaning. The data are not very informative on the circumstances in which the phonetic erosion detailed in Section 4.1 happened, but they again indicate that the structures studied are semantically fairly heterogeneous. It has been claimed that the BETTER modals have by now lost all comparative meaning, as they do not occur with an explicit standard of comparison anymore (e.g. Denison & Cort 2010: 355; Jacobsson 1980: 52; Mitchell 2003: 140). For the RATHER modals, by contrast, expression of a standard of comparison has been found quite regularly (Collins 2009: 18; van der Auwera & De Wit 2010: 143–144). This section sets out to verify these claims and looks at the expression of a standard of comparison with the three comparative modal families (Section 4.4.1). To get a fuller picture of bleaching versus retention of comparative meaning, it also investigates whether (and how frequently) the comparative modals use modifiers of the adverbial forms, like *ten times* in (29) above, which are taken to emphasize comparative meaning (Section 4.4.2).

4.4.1 Standard of comparison

As in the case of overt subject constructions (see Section 4.3.1), the results for the SOONER and RATHER modals are very similar to one another and very different from those of the BETTER modals as regards the expression of the standard of comparison (see Table 6).

Table 6. The standard of comparison with the comparative modals in the COHA

	BETTER				SOONER				RATHER			
	standard		no standard		standard		no standard		standard		no standard	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
had ADVERB												
1810–1849	0	-	4	100.00	0	-	0	-	71	62.28	43	37.72
1850–1889	0	-	11	100.00	0	-	0	-	82	53.95	70	46.05
1890–1929	0	-	8	100.00	4	66.67	2	33.33	49	56.98	37	43.02
1930–1969	0	-	10	100.00	0	-	0	-	7	70.00	3	30.00
1970–2009	0	-	4	100.00	0	-	0	-	4	30.77	9	69.23
would ADVERB												
1810–1849	0	-	0	-	2	50.00	2	50.00	8	72.73	3	27.27
1850–1889	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	-	16	57.14	12	42.86
1890–1929	0	-	0	-	0	-	3	100.00	14	43.75	18	56.25
1930–1969	0	-	0	-	1	50.00	1	50.00	5	50.00	5	50.00
1970–2009	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	-	4	30.77	9	69.23
'd ADVERB												
1810–1849	0	-	0	-	2	40.00	3	60.00	2	33.33	4	66.67
1850–1889	0	-	2	100.00	1	50.00	1	50.00	19	42.22	26	57.78
1890–1929	0	-	5	100.00	1	50.00	1	50.00	11	39.29	17	60.71
1930–1969	0	-	1	100.00	0	-	0	-	15	71.43	6	28.57
1970–2009	0	-	0	-	2	100.00	0	-	11	31.43	24	68.57
Ø ADVERB												
1810–1849	0	-	3	100.00	1	33.33	2	66.67	7	87.50	1	12.50
1850–1889	1	3.23	30	96.77	1	50.00	1	50.00	2	22.22	7	77.78
1890–1929	0	-	97	100.00	1	50.00	1	50.00	4	36.36	7	63.64
1930–1969	0	-	135	100.00	0	-	2	100.00	11	47.83	12	52.17
1970–2009	0	-	73	100.00	1	33.33	2	66.67	5	31.25	11	68.75
Totals												
1810–1849	0	-	7	100.00	5	41.67	7	58.33	88	63.31	51	36.69
1850–1889	1	2.27	43	97.73	2	50.00	2	50.00	119	50.85	115	49.15
1890–1929	0	-	110	100.00	6	46.15	7	53.85	78	49.68	79	50.32
1930–1969	0	-	146	100.00	1	25.00	3	75.00	38	59.38	26	40.63
1970–2009	0	-	77	100.00	3	60.00	2	40.00	24	31.17	53	68.83

The data for the BETTER modals support the strong claim about the complete loss of comparative meaning in Present-Day English. The only example with a standard of comparison (out of 384 relevant examples) dates from 1871 and is given in (34).

(34) "If you knew what I had brought for my lady-bird, you would be on your prettiest behavior and give me your best welcome," said Tom. "It's bon-bons!" cried Elsie with a shriek of delight. … "Come down and see," said Tom, mysteriously. Elsie danced

downstairs and entered the room where her sister sat. "Ugh, the ugly place!" said she. "It makes me shiver!" "*Better* come into the den *than* lose the sweets," said Tom, opening the papers and pretending to eat greedily. (COHA, 1871)

It is striking, though, that (34) features a *better* construction, as one would expect the full auxiliary forms to show retention of the comparative meaning (as they did for past temporal reference, see Section 4.2) rather than the more recent *better* construction.[20] It should also be noted that in this study corpus size might matter, as van der Auwera *et al.* (2013: 145–146) found sixteen examples with a standard of comparison with the BETTER modals in the large Present-Day American English COCA corpus, out of over ten thousand relevant expressions. This finding puts the strong claim about the complete loss mentioned above into perspective.

The SOONER and RATHER modals clearly have not lost the expression of a standard of comparison to the same extent as the BETTER modals. Since speakers using BETTER typically expect realization of the recommended action (Mitchell 2003: 141, 143; Westney 1995: 182), it is safer or more efficient not to mention an alternative action (standard of comparison), so as not to put a 'wrong' idea into the addressee's head. Speakers using the preference modals, by contrast, are not concerned with making another person perform a specific action, but merely express their own or another person's preference, in which there is no potential harm in naming also the dispreferred alternative. Nevertheless, Table 6 indicates that with the RATHER modals the expression of a standard is gradually losing ground, from 63% in 1810–18349 to 31% in 1970–2009 (with a peak reversing the trend in 1930–1969). In terms of formal subtypes, van der

[20] This expectation is also supported by the tentative conclusion by van der Auwera & De Wit (2010: 141) that "possibly *'d better* and *better* have indeed lost all comparative meaning, whereas *had better* has not gone quite that far." Similarly, Collins (2009: 78) found only one example with an overt standard of comparison in the corpora of English varieties he studied and this example featured a *had better* construction.

Auwera & De Wit (2010: 144) found a clear preference for *would/should rather* to express the standard of comparison in the BROWN and FROWN corpus (5/6 and 6/6 respectively), while *'d rather* is used more frequently without it (0/6 and 4/9 respectively). The data presented in Table 6, however, do not show such a pronounced difference between the four attested formal types. We can only tentatively conclude that the full auxiliary forms generally show slightly more retention of the standard of comparison than the *'d rather* and *rather* constructions. An example of the latter type with an expressed standard is given in (35).

(35) Monday nights, the Salvation Army dished out chili at the shelter in the old armory. The chili, lukewarm and gluey, without a bit of spice or meat in it, was something he'd look forward to about as much as withdrawal. *Rather* go hungry Monday evening *than* pass Tuesday morning in the bus station lavatory with the trots. (COHA, 1995)

For the SOONER modals, the diachronic tendency is less clear, but we certainly cannot speak of a general downward trend. Among the formal subtypes, it is the *'d sooner* construction rather than the full auxiliary forms that most often patterns with an expressed standard of comparison, for instance in (36).

(36) "By all the martyrs of Grub Street" he exclaims, "I'*d sooner* live in a garret, and starve into the bargain, *than* follow so sordid, dusty, and soul-killing a way of life, though certain it would make me as rich as old Croesus, or John Jacob Astor himself!" (COHA, 1866)

The data on the expression of a standard of comparison have again pointed to the different nature of the BETTER versus SOONER and RATHER modals. Whereas the first ones only exceptionally express the standard in the historical data, the preference modals are used quite often with a standard, both in the historical data and in the most recent data. The RATHER

modals were found to gradually lose the standard, but nevertheless have larger shares of its expression than the SOONER modals except in the most recent period. Evidence for retention of comparative meaning by the full auxiliary forms only came from the RATHER modals and with small quantitative differences. The data were thus not very instructive on the conditions of phonetic reduction.

4.4.2 Modification of comparative adverb

Whereas the previous section homed in on the expression of a standard of comparison to estimate the loss or retention of comparative meaning, the present section investigates the occurrence of modifiers of the adverbs, which are also understood to emphasize the comparative semantics of the expressions studied here (cf. van der Auwera & De Wit 2010: 143). Examples of the most elaborate modifiers attested are given in (37) and (38).

(37) This was, as has been stated, the capital of the New Purchase — the name of a tract of land very lately bought from the Indians, or the Abor'rejines, as the Ohio statesman had just then named them, in his celebrated speech in the legislature: "Yes, Mr. Speaker, yes sir," said he, "I'*d* a powerful sight *sooner* go into retiracy among the red, wild, Abor'rejines of our wooden country, nor consent to that bill." (COHA, 1843)

(38) Why, I'd be content to just go around and look at my part of the world and do nothing else for a thousand years. … And I'*d* a whole hell of a lot *rather* do that, for I know things here, than to go to the good place the preachers talk about. (COHA, 1930)

Table 7 shows that the results on modification largely concur with those on the expression of a standard of comparison (see Table 6 above). Again, the RATHER modals appear to have overall the largest shares of explicit coding of comparative meaning, while the BETTER modals have the smallest shares. However, the modification data for the BETTER modals suggest that the historical examples still had (slightly) more comparative semantics than the standard of

comparison data lead us to expect. The opposite is the case for the preference modals, for which the shares of modification are generally smaller than those of the standard of comparison in Table 6.

Table 7. Modification of the adverb of the comparative modals in the COHA

	BETTER				SOONER				RATHER			
	modifi-cation		no modification		modifi-cation		no modification		modifi-cation		no modification	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
had ADVERB												
1810–1849	0	-	4	100.00	0	-	0	-	13	11.40	101	88.60
1850–1889	1	9.09	10	90.91	0	-	0	-	15	9.87	137	90.13
1890–1929	0	-	8	100.00	0	-	6	100.00	8	9.30	78	90.70
1930–1969	1	10.00	9	90.00	0	-	0	-	1	10.00	9	90.00
1970–2009	0	-	4	100.00	0	-	0	-	1	7.69	12	92.31
would ADVERB												
1810–1849	0	-	0	-	4	100.00	0	-	0	-	11	100.00
1850–1889	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	-	14	50.00	14	50.00
1890–1929	0	-	0	-	3	100.00	0	-	11	34.38	21	65.63
1930–1969	0	-	0	-	0	-	2	100.00	2	20.00	8	80.00
1970–2009	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	-	4	30.77	9	69.23
'd ADVERB												
1810–1849	0	-	0	-	1	20.00	4	80.00	3	50.00	3	50.00
1850–1889	0	-	2	100.00	0	-	2	100.00	10	22.22	35	77.78
1890–1929	0	-	5	100.00	0	-	2	100.00	13	46.43	15	53.57
1930–1969	0	-	1	100.00	0	-	0	-	12	57.14	9	42.86
1970–2009	0	-	0	-	0	-	2	100.00	4	11.43	31	88.57
Ø ADVERB												
1810–1849	0	-	3	100.00	0	-	3	100.00	0	-	8	100.00
1850–1889	0	-	31	100.00	0	-	2	100.00	0	-	9	100.00
1890–1929	1	1.03	96	98.97	0	-	2	100.00	1	9.09	10	90.91
1930–1969	0	-	135	100.00	0	-	2	100.00	0	-	23	100.00
1970–2009	0	-	73	100.00	0	-	3	100.00	0		16	100.00
Totals												
1810–1849	0	-	7	100.00	5	41.67	7	58.33	16	11.51	123	88.49
1850–1889	1	2.27	43	97.73	0	-	4	100.00	39	16.67	195	83.33
1890–1929	1	0.91	109	99.09	3	23.08	10	76.92	33	21.02	124	78.98
1930–1969	1	0.68	145	99.32	0	-	4	100.00	15	23.44	49	76.56
1970–2009	0	-	77	100.00	0	-	5	100.00	9	11.69	68	88.31
TOTAL	1	0.26	383	99.74	17	44.74	21	55.26	347	51.71	324	48.29

Although the numbers are small, we can say that retention of comparative meaning is overall strongest with the full auxiliary forms of the BETTER and SOONER modals. For the

RATHER modals, *would rather* and *'d rather* diachronically take turns in showing the highest rate of modifiers. In fact, they show opposite diachronic trends. Whereas with *would rather* modification is decreasing in frequency from 1850 to 1969 and rising again in 1970–2009, the *'d rather* forms show an increase in frequency from 1850 to 1969 and a sharp fall in 1970–2009. In any case, within the three families, the zero constructions have the least expression of modification, which tells us that (complete) phonetic reduction happened more readily in contexts without modification of the adverb than in contexts with modification.

Since the figures on the standard of comparison (Table 6) and the ones on modification (Table 7) are based on the same set of examples, the question arises how these figures interconnect, and what they can teach us about the presence of comparative meaning. As the BETTER modals have extremely low numbers of indicators of comparative meaning, we will restrict our answer to the preference modals. From a panchronic perspective, the RATHER modals show no correlation between the expression of a standard of comparison and the use of modification of the adverb. The 347 examples with a standard (52%, cf. Table 6) show a 16.43/83.57 ratio of modification versus no modification, while the 324 examples without a standard (48%, cf. Table 6) show a 16.36/83.64 ratio. What it does mean is that another 7.90% (53 out of 671) can be added to the percentage of examples with a standard, amounting to 59% of instances which show signs of retention of comparative meaning in the RATHER modals across the periods studied.[21] Likewise, for the SOONER modals no significant correlation is found either (Fisher's exact $p=0.26$), as the 17 examples with a standard (45%, cf. Table 6) show a 12/88 ratio of modification versus no modification, while the 21 examples without a standard (55%, cf. Table 6) show a 29/71 ratio. In this case, the panchronic share of instances

[21] Across 1810–1969, the percentages of comparative meaning hover between 60% and 70%, but the most recent period witnesses a significant decline to 36.5% (Fisher's exact $p<0.005$). In the case of SOONER, the percentages stay between 50% and 70% across the whole time frame studied, except for 1930–1969, which sharply reverses the trend with its 25%.

which overtly feature comparative meaning totals 61%. The percentages of the preference modals are in sharp contrast with the overall percentage of overt comparative meaning with the BETTER modals, i.e. 1%. The data thus indicate that BETTER has moved farthest away from its original construction, whereas the preference modals have much more retained their comparative meaning, which is not very surprising in view of their — diachronically stable — semantics. Mitchell (2003: 142–143) interprets this semantic bleaching or "desemanticization" (Lehmann 1995: 306) of BETTER as a semantic shift from the pure giving of advice (presenting two options one of which is more advantageous) to the speaker's deciding on the desired behaviour of others or announcing decisions about one's own (see also Denison & Cort 2010: 368).

5. Conclusion

This article has investigated the development of modal expressions with the comparative adverbs *better, rather* and *sooner* in American English in the past two centuries. From the earliest data studied, the three comparative modal families show a number of auxiliary-like features. One of these, namely phonetic weakening, is seen to gain ground significantly in the 1810–2009 period studied. Investigation of several aspects of the comparative modal constructions, such as subject types, temporal reference and comparative meaning, has informed us on the more exact conditions under which this phonetic reduction took place. In addition, the data have also pointed to differences among the comparative modals, most clearly so between the BETTER modals on the one hand and the SOONER and RATHER modals on the other, which was linked to their basic semantics and constructional history. More generally, we have seen that the three comparative modal families are overall developing in the same direction, with the BETTER modals leading the way and the preference modals lagging somewhat behind.

The earliest data confirm that the three comparative modal families show a certain degree of auxiliarihood.[22] They feature phonetic weakening and reduced morphological paradigms, they function as operators exhibiting the NICE-properties (see Section 4), and do not enter into construction with other modal auxiliaries (cf. Mitchell 2003: 148). In addition, they have lost their morphological past-nonpast pairing (like the past tense core modals had by Middle English, cf. Bybee 1995), as they occur with their originally past tense forms in present contexts (see Section 4.3).

We also have indications that the BETTER modals have auxiliarized to a higher degree (and have thus become more similar to the core modal auxiliaries) than the preference modals. That is, the set of structures studied is less homogeneous than it appears at first glance. For one, the BETTER modals have become modally polysemous, while the preference modals have not (see Section 1). Another indication concerns complementation. Whereas the BETTER modals only combine with bare infinitives, like the core modals, the preference modals still pattern with finite complement clauses in addition to bare infinitives, as well as Exceptional Case Marking constructions (see Sections 2 and 3). A third clue involves the loss of subject selection (cf. Heine 1993: 60). Although the BETTER modals initially showed a strong link between animate (human) subjects and deontic meaning, and between inanimate subjects and optative meaning, examples are found now with inanimate subject and deontic meaning (cf. (30) in Section 4.3.1), just like instances with human subjects and optative meaning (see van der Auwera *et al.* 2013). This implies that subject selection has been transferred to the bare infinitive. The preference modals, by contrast, invariably take human subjects in the corpus data studied (see Section 4.3.1). Since their semantics is intrinsically subject-related, the criterion of subject selection is

[22] However, they also show behaviour that is less typical of auxiliaries, in that they tend to omit the subject to a much larger degree than the core modal auxiliaries, as observed by Denison & Cort (2010: 358–362).

less applicable.[23] All of this suggests that the BETTER modals have strongly auxiliarized, with the bare infinitive functioning as main verb rather than complement (cf. Heine 1993: 58–66), while the preference modals — mainly because of their basic semantics — remain true complement-taking predicates, but with auxiliary-like features.

In view of this difference in degree of auxiliation, it is small wonder that the BETTER modals show more phonetic weakening and semantic bleaching than the preference modals. It was found that the *had better* forms gradually declined from 57% in the earliest data to a mere 5% in the most recent data, while the reduced *better* forms gained in relative frequency from 43% to 95%. The preference modals also showed increasing erosion, but not to the same extent as the BETTER modals. In the most recent data, the SOONER modals show 60% of *sooner* forms, and 40% of *'d sooner* forms, while the RATHER modals show the least reduction, with 21% of *rather* forms and 45% of *'d rather* forms (see Section 4.1). We could thus observe the following grammaticalization cline: BETTER > SOONER > RATHER. In addition, this study has also shown that two forms should be added to van der Auwera & De Wit's (2010: 127) inventory of comparative modals, i.e. the zero forms *Ø sooner* and *Ø rather*.

Interestingly, from the analysis of the subject types, temporal reference, and modification of the comparative modals we learned that across the three families phonetic reduction occurred (i) more readily in present than in past (or counterfactual) contexts (see Section 4.2), as well as especially (ii) with 1st and 2nd person subjects (see Section 4.3.1) and (iii) in contexts without modification of the comparative adverb (see Section 4.4.2). The study of the overt expression of comparative meaning through a standard of comparison or modification of the comparative adverb indicated that the BETTER modals have almost completely shed their comparative

[23] Another indication that the BETTER modals have auxiliarized to a higher degree than the preference modals is voice-neutrality, which is strongly related to subject selection but not dealt with in the discussion above. Denison & Cort (2010: 367) have shown that it applies to the BETTER modals (see also Palmer 1990: 82), but like subject selection, however, it does not apply to the preference modals.

meaning, while the preference modals have (panchronic) shares of about 60% of comparative meaning (here in the most recent data the SOONER modals show a higher degree of retention than the RATHER modals). Again, this difference among the comparative modals can be explained by the semantics of the BETTER versus preference modals (see Section 4.4).

Importantly, this study is the first to propose a grammaticalization scenario for the preference modals. While the data confirmed the grammaticalization path posited for the BETTER modals on the basis of British English data by van der Auwera *et al.* (2013: 142), the preference modals showed no clear signs of following the same path, which involved analogical pressure from clipped proverbial patterns directly developed from the Old English impersonal source construction (see Section 2). Instead, the zero form constructions were assumed to have emerged simultaneously with and without expressed subject, which is more in line with their constructional history in having no direct links with impersonal verb syntax (see Sections 2 and 4.3.2, see also note 19). Although the stages in the two grammaticalization scenarios are very similar, the diachronic links are different, which stresses the constructional heterogeneity among the comparative modals once more.

If we compare the findings outlined above with what has been observed in the British varieties of English (cf. van der Auwera *et al.* (2013), and a pilot study by Coorevits (2012)), we can conclude that the American varieties have gone furthest down the two grammaticalization paths. For each comparative modal group, British English shows less phonetic reduction than American English. The grammaticalization cline found for the American data, however, also holds for the British data. Comparison with yet other varieties of English is left for further research. Another line of research that seems promising is a systematic investigation of the diachronic distribution of finite versus non-finite complementation of the preference modals. It will be interesting to examine which factors determine the distribution of the two complement types across time, and to see whether the preference modals show loss of (this) paradigmatic variability (cf. Lehmann 1995: 306; Fischer & Rosenbach 2000: 24), and thus move up the Verb-to-TAM or auxiliation chain (cf. Heine 1993: 58–66).

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Appendix

Table A.1. Temporal reference of BETTER modals in the COHA

BETTER	present		past		counterfactual		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
had better								
1810–1849	4	100.00	0	-	0	-	4	100
1850–1889	8	72.73	3	27.27	0	-	11	100
1890–1929	7	87.50	1	12.50	0	-	8	100
1930–1969	8	80.00	2	20.00	0	-	10	100
1970–2009	4	100.00	0	-	0	-	4	100
'd better								
1810–1849	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	100
1850–1889	2	100.00	0	-	0	-	2	100
1890–1929	5	100.00	0	-	0	-	5	100
1930–1969	1	100.00	0	-	0	-	1	100
1970–2009	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	100
Ø better								
1810–1849	3	100.00	0	-	0	-	3	100
1850–1889	30	96.77	1	3.23	0	-	31	100
1890–1929	94	96.91	3	3.09	0	-	97	100
1930–1969	127	94.07	8	5.93	0	-	135	100
1970–2009	69	94.52	4	5.48	0	-	73	100

Table A.2. Temporal reference of SOONER modals in the COHA

SOONER	present		past		counterfactual		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
had sooner								
1810–1849	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	100
1850–1889	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	100
1890–1929	6	100.00	0	-	0	-	6	100
1930–1969	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	100
1970–2009	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	100
would sooner								
1810–1849	3	75.00	0	-	1	25.00	4	100
1850–1889	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	100
1890–1929	3	100.00	0	-	0	-	3	100
1930–1969	1	50.00	1	50.00	0	-	2	100
1970–2009	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	100
'd sooner								
1810–1849	5	100.00	0	-	0	-	5	100
1850–1889	2	100.00	0	-	0	-	2	100
1890–1929	2	100.00	0	-	0	-	2	100
1930–1969	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	100
1970–2009	2	100.00	0	-	0	-	2	100
Ø sooner								
1810–1849	3	100.00	0	-	0	-	3	100
1850–1889	2	100.00	0	-	0	-	2	100
1890–1929	2	100.00	0	-	0	-	2	100
1930–1969	2	100.00	0	-	0	-	2	100
1970–2009	3	100.00	0	-	0	-	3	100

Table A.3. Temporal reference of RATHER modals in the COHA

RATHER	present		past		counterfactual		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
had rather								
1810–1849	101	88.60	8	7.02	5	4.39	114	100
1850–1889	124	81.58	22	14.47	6	3.95	152	100
1890–1929	77	89.53	4	4.65	5	5.81	86	100
1930–1969	10	100.00	0	-	0	-	10	100
1970–2009	9	69.23	2	15.38	2	15.38	13	100
would rather								
1810–1849	9	81.82	0	-	2	18.18	11	100
1850–1889	18	64.29	7	25.00	3	10.71	28	100
1890–1929	24	75.00	7	21.88	1	3.13	32	100
1930–1969	7	70.00	2	20.00	1	10.00	10	100
1970–2009	11	84.62	1	7.69	1	7.69	13	100
'd rather								
1810–1849	6	100.00	0	-	0	-	6	100
1850–1889	41	91.11	3	6.67	1	2.22	45	100
1890–1929	26	92.86	0	-	2	7.14	28	100
1930–1969	17	80.95	4	19.05	0	-	21	100
1970–2009	34	97.14	1	2.86	0	-	35	100
Ø rather								
1810–1849	8	100.00	0	-	0	-	8	100
1850–1889	8	88.89	1	11.11	0	-	9	100
1890–1929	9	81.82	2	18.18	0	-	11	100
1930–1969	21	91.30	2	8.70	0	-	23	100
1970–2009	15	93.75	0	-	1	6.25	16	100

Table A.4. The subject referents of BETTER modals in the COHA

BETTER	1SG		1PL		2SG/PL		3SG/PL		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
had better										
1810–1849	0	-	0	-	3	75.00	1	25.00	4	100
1850–1889	3	27.27	2	8.18	5	45.45	1	9.09	11	100
1890–1929	2	25.00	0	-	4	50.00	2	25.00	8	100
1930–1969	0	-	2	20.00	5	50.00	3	30.00	10	100
1970–2009	1	25.00	1	25.00	1	25.00	1	25.00	4	100
'd better										
1810–1849	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	-
1850–1889	0	-	1	50.00	1	50.00	0	-	2	100
1890–1929	0	-	2	40.00	3	60.00	0	-	5	100
1930–1969	0	-	0	-	1	100.00	0	-	1	100
1970–2009	0	-		-	0	-	0	-	0	-
Ø better										
1810–1849	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	-
1850–1889	0	-	0	-	5	45.45	6	54.55	11	100
1890–1929	8	17.39	4	8.70	28	60.87	6	13.04	46	100
1930–1969	16	17.98	4	4.49	62	69.66	7	7.87	89	100
1970–2009	2	3.77	6	11.32	36	67.92	9	16.98	53	100

Table A.5. The subject referents of SOONER modals in the COHA

SOONER	1SG		1PL		2SG/PL		3SG/PL		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
had sooner										
1810–1849	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	-
1850–1889	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	-
1890–1929	5	83.33	0	-	0	-	1	16.67	6	100
1930–1969	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	-
1970–2009	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	-
would sooner										
1810–1849	2	50.00	0	-	0	-	2	50.00	4	100
1850–1889	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	-
1890–1929	1	33.33	0	-	0	-	2	66.67	3	100
1930–1969	0	-	0	-	1	50.00	1	50.00	2	100
1970–2009	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	-
'd sooner										
1810–1849	4	80.00	0	-	0	-	1	20.00	5	-
1850–1889	2	100.00	0	-	0	-	0	-	2	100
1890–1929	2	100.00	0	-	0	-	0	-	2	100
1930–1969	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	-
1970–2009	2	100.00	0	-	0	-	0	-	2	100
Ø sooner										
1810–1849	0	-	0	-	1	100.00	0	-	1	100
1850–1889	1	100.00	0	-	0	-	0	-	1	100
1890–1929	1	100.00	0	-	0	-	0	-	1	100
1930–1969	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	100
1970–2009	0	-	0	-	1	100.00	0	-	1	100

Table A.6. The subject referents of RATHER modals in the COHA

RATHER	1SG		1PL		2SG/PL		3SG/PL		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
had rather										
1810–1849	86	75.44	10	8.77	5	4.39	13	11.40	114	100
1850–1889	101	66.45	7	4.61	10	6.58	34	22.37	152	100
1890–1929	63	73.26	4	4.65	4	4.65	15	17.44	86	100
1930–1969	9	90.00	0	-	0	-	1	10.00	10	100
1970–2009	8	61.54	1	7.69	2	15.38	2	15.38	13	100
would rather										
1810–1849	6	54.55	0	-	3	27.27	2	18.18	11	100
1850–1889	12	42.86	0	-	3	10.71	13	46.43	28	100
1890–1929	11	34.38	0	-	6	18.75	15	46.88	32	100
1930–1969	2	20.00	0	-	1	10.00	7	70.00	10	100
1970–2009	4	30.77	0	-	6	46.15	3	23.08	13	100
'd rather										
1810–1849	5	83.33	0	-	0	-	1	16.67	6	100
1850–1889	41	91.11	0	-	2	4.44	2	4.44	45	100
1890–1929	22	78.57	1	3.57	3	10.71	2	7.14	28	100
1930–1969	17	80.95	0	-	0	-	4	19.05	21	100
1970–2009	27	77.14	3	8.57	4	11.43	1	2.86	35	100
Ø rather										
1810–1849	4	100.00	0	-	0	-	0	-	4	100
1850–1889	3	60.00	0	-	1	20.00	1	20.00	5	100
1890–1929	1	50.00	0	-	0	-	1	50.00	2	100
1930–1969	11	68.75	0	-	2	12.50	3	18.75	16	100
1970–2009	4	100.00	0	-	0	-	0	-	4	100