

## English comparative modals and their complements<sup>1</sup>

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English comparative modals are combinations of the adverbs *rather*, *sooner* and *better* with an auxiliary. There is recent consensus that the comparative modals RATHER and SOONER have over time developed a different syntax and semantics than BETTER. However, potential differences in the syntax of RATHER and SOONER with respect to patterns of complementation haven't been explored. This article reports the results of a corpus study of these two modals and finds that RATHER patterns like object-raising verbs, allowing a range of complements that are unavailable for SOONER. Our analysis of these patterns draws on recent work in the Construction Grammar framework, with forays into its formal implementation, Sign-Based Construction Grammar, and we propose that RATHER differs from SOONER in that it constitutes a micro-construction whose features are licensed by both the Modal Construction and the Object-Raising Construction, the latter a subtype of the Transitive Construction.

**Keywords:** English, comparative modals, raising to object, constructionalization, constructional change

### 1 Introduction

This article addresses the question of whether English comparative modals can be analyzed as a coherent class, or as a single subschema in the terminology of Construction Grammar (CxG). The term comparative modals refers to combinations of the adverbs *rather*, *sooner* and *better* with an auxiliary. All three are depicted in the examples in (1)–(3), harvested from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA, Davies 2008–).

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- (1) I am concerned, but I would rather them have a full investigation, because an investigation plays out based on the evidence. (SPOK: *Connect the World*, 2013)
  - (2) Hebert would sooner lose \$49 million in new funding for roads, schools and police than provide an accounting of how the money is spent. (ACAD: *American Indian Quarterly*, 2017)
  - (3) Obama had better win this election and save an already conservative court from getting far worse. (BLOG: [www.queerty.com/what-would-bescarier-than-a-romney-presidency-a-romney-supreme-court-20121030/](http://www.queerty.com/what-would-bescarier-than-a-romney-presidency-a-romney-supreme-court-20121030/), 2012)

Recent research on the history of these modals shows that RATHER and SOONER have followed a different path than BETTER, not only with respect to their semantics, but also their syntax (Denison & Cort 2010; van der Auwera & De Wit 2010; van der Auwera *et al.* 2013; Van linden 2015; Traugott 2016, 2019).<sup>2</sup> It has been argued on the basis of these findings that RATHER and SOONER belong in a separate category from BETTER (Traugott 2016, 2019). We offer novel corpus evidence in general support of this argument, but we also demonstrate that the set consisting of RATHER and SOONER requires further differentiation due to the former's distinct ability to license raising to object (note the accusative-marked NP *them* followed by an infinitival complement in (1)), which is a feature of lexical verbs rather than modal auxiliaries. Our evidence is based on patterns of complementation that characterize RATHER and SOONER in present-day US English, an area still largely unexplored. We follow Traugott (2016, 2019) in adopting a CxG perspective on comparative modals, such that they are defined as constructions and (changes in) their semantics and syntax are considered in parallel.

The version of CxG we adopt here is Goldberg (1995, 2006). Its basic assumption is that linguistic knowledge can be represented as a network of constructions, which range from morphemes to clausal elements. Constructions of any size and complexity are understood as pairings of form and meaning. Generalizations over constructions are captured by means of inheritance hierarchies, where more schematic constructions license more specific ones and where features can be shared among several constructions in the network. In the remainder of this article, inheritance hierarchies will play a role in capturing the range of complementation patterns available for RATHER and SOONER, and in particular links that RATHER has to object-raising verbs. Our focus here is on (i) RATHER and SOONER, whose complementation possibilities have not remained stable over time unlike those of BETTER, and (ii) differences in the syntax of the comparative modals, given that their divergent semantics is uncontroversial. When describing the properties of the comparative modals we make occasional forays into Signed-Based Construction Grammar, a formal implementation of CxG (see Boas & Sag 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Here and throughout, small capitals subsume all forms of the comparative modals, i.e. combinations with a full auxiliary, contracted auxiliary, or no auxiliary at all. Thus RATHER, for instance, refers to all forms of the modal involving the adverb *rather*.

The rest of this article proceeds as follows. In section 2, we briefly sketch Traugott's (2019) constructionist analysis of the three comparative modals, which we then expand in section 5 in light of the corpus data to be presented here. Section 3 describes the data, which were harvested from COCA, while section 4 walks the reader through the results, i.e. complementation patterns observed in *RATHER* and *SOONER*, also drawing comparisons with equatives like *would (just) as soon*. In section 5, we address, in addition to a theoretical analysis of the comparative modals, a related question, namely whether the syntactic category of the adverb *rather* itself is shifting (or has shifted) from adverb to verb. Section 6 concludes.

## 2 Constructionist analysis of *RATHER*, *SOONER* and *BETTER*

Traugott's (2019) analysis of the comparative modals is based on changes to their semantics and syntax from the Old English period (650–1100) onwards. We begin by briefly summarizing these changes.

### 2.1 Historical development of *RATHER*, *SOONER* and *BETTER*

The predecessors of the adverbs *rather* and *sooner* in Old English were temporal adverbs meaning 'sooner in time, instead' that had the ability to co-occur with the verb *would*. The first indications of the modern preference meaning are found in them in Middle English (1100–1500), and there the preference is associated with the sentential subject, that is, it represents participant-internal rather than participant-external modality.<sup>3</sup> The adverbs co-occur with the verbs *would*, *will*, *should* and *had*, and there is an explicit or implied standard of comparison. By the sixteenth century, strings consisting of an auxiliary (predominantly *would*) and *rather/sooner* have clear preference meanings and can be considered modal verbs, as illustrated in (4) and (5).

- (4) I would rather be torn with wild Horses, than forsake my Religion. (1571, CED: DiTNORFO; Traugott 2016: 115)
- (5) Nay I meane to follow yee: I will sooner leese my life, then fight of you till this dinner be done. (1595, CED: DiCWARN; Traugott 2019: 116)

Subsequent developments include a strong association with the auxiliary *would* and an expansion in complementation patterns. While *RATHER* and *SOONER* take only bare infinitival complements until the sixteenth century (see (4) and (5)), the eighteenth century sees the addition of finite clauses as complements, with or without the complementizer *that*. The subject of the embedded clause may differ from the subject of the main clause, and a standard of comparison may be optionally expressed, as depicted in (6).

<sup>3</sup> The terms participant-internal and participant-external modality go back to van der Auwera & Plungian (1998), who define the former as following from forces an event participant controls, e.g. their internal abilities or needs (and hence van der Auwera & Plungian speak of participant-internal possibility and necessity). Participant-external modality, on the other hand, refers to forces beyond an event participant's control.

- (6) I would rather that the House should fall down, and knock his Brains out, than he should be hanged. (t17431012-37; Traugott 2019: 122)

While the availability of these complementation patterns has been acknowledged in previous research (Van linden 2015; Traugott 2016, 2019), it hasn't been explored in any detail what other complements are permitted by these modals. We demonstrate in section 4 that present-day RATHER and SOONER don't pattern exactly the same: RATHER behaves like an object-raising verb, licensing combinations of NP complements with predicative complements and of NP complements with infinitival complements in addition to infinitival and finite-clause complements. This suggests that *rather* could be analyzed as a lexical verb, rather than an adverb, co-occurring with an auxiliary. In fact, Juge (2002) and Klippenstein (2012) articulate the idea that *rather* has changed its lexical class from adverb to verb.

Klippenstein (2012) cites the earliest verbal uses of *rather* going back to the 1500s, initially without verbal morphology, as in (7). She concludes that *rather* must be a lexical verb here because there is no other finite verb in this clause.

- (7) I rather be borne Fortunate, then to be very wise. (Edwards 1576: 25)

As of the 1800s, *rather* is attested with morphological specifications, as in (8).

- (8) What care and what pains and hazard I have been in since coming here, I will remit to others to declare; but if the matter had not proceeded as it has done, I should have rathered I had been buried here. (Sinclair 1899: 119)

Klippenstein's (2012) data reveal that the historical record of *rather* includes both adverbial and verbal uses. She argues on this basis that *rather* has been reanalyzed from adverb to verb, following Juge (2002), who points to the morphological nontransparency of the comparative form *rather* compared to *sooner* as one of the potential reasons for the reanalysis.

It's interesting to note at this point that if *rather* indeed is a verb (we return to its potential lexical-verb status in sections 4.1, 4.3 and 5), its history tracks that of *better* in the sense that both exhibit verbal properties, although *rather* does so much earlier. As we will see shortly, however, verbal properties of *better* are aligned with auxiliary verbs, while *rather* clearly behaves like a lexical verb. We now briefly turn to the history of the comparative modal BETTER.

BETTER originates from a type of Middle English impersonal copula construction hosting the adjective *betere* (Denison & Cort 2010). This construction is illustrated in (9).

- (9) A mon were        betere for is    sunne be sori    and vnssriue    flanne issriue  
 a man would-be better for his son    be sorry and unshriven than    shriven  
 wifloute sorinesse.  
 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 & Cort 2010: 352])

The syntax of the construction that hosts *better* changes in several ways after the loss of impersonal constructions in Middle English. The changes are: the subject position in a new copula construction is first filled by expletive *it* (i.e. *It were better*), and then by referential NPs in place of expletive *it*, which is followed by *better* being associated with the auxiliary *had* and used as an adverb in this context (Denison & Cort 2010). These syntactic changes can be seen as the first steps toward the formation of a new modal. According to Traugott (2019), BETTER has preference semantics through the seventeenth century. This is plausible, given that, even if the meaning of BETTER comes closer to advisability, it can still be seen as intersecting with participant-external preference. That is, preference is dictated by circumstances external to both the sentential subject and the speaker, which stands in contrast to participant-internal preference conveyed by RATHER and SOONER, as we have seen above.

By the early eighteenth century there are reasons to see BETTER as a full-fledged modal (Traugott 2019). Its semantics has shifted away from preference and toward advice offered by the speaker to others or themselves (if a first-person pronoun serves as subject). Syntactically, BETTER licenses only infinitival complements and is rarely used with a standard of comparison. While BETTER is slower to develop into a modal than RATHER and SOONER are, there is a rapid increase in its frequency compared to that of RATHER and SOONER from the eighteenth century on. Furthermore, there are indications that bare *better* (i.e. used without the auxiliary *had*) has recently been moving in the direction of modalhood, as argued by Denison & Cort (2010) on the basis of semantic and syntactic evidence including contracted forms shown in (10).

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

In sum, although originally an adjective, *better* later patterns like the adverbs *rather* and *sooner* in terms of its lexical class and co-occurrence with an auxiliary, developments that are subsequently followed by a divergent semantics, complementation patterns and, partially, lexical class.

## 2.2 Traugott's (2019) analysis

Traugott (2019) asks whether there is enough evidence that we can group the three comparative modals into separate subschemas. She operates with distinctions that reflect the generality of particular constructions organized into an inheritance hierarchy. The most general nodes are macro-schemas, followed by schemas, within which several coherent sets can be identified. Schemas are further differentiated into subschemas grouping similar members, and the two lowest levels are micro-constructions (i.e. individual types like RATHER, SOONER and BETTER) and constructs (i.e. individual tokens). The macro-schema that licenses the network of English modals

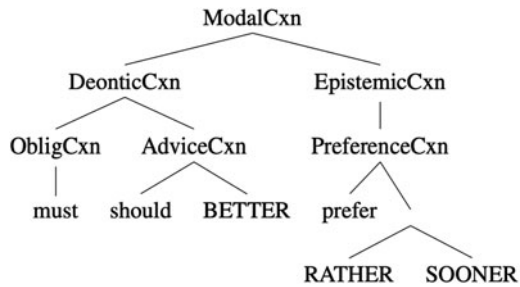


Figure 1. Partial constructional network of modals (based on Traugott 2019: 127)

is the Modal Construction (ModalCxn), and a number of daughter nodes can be differentiated within it, as depicted in figure 1.<sup>4, 5</sup>

The criterion for placing comparative modals within this network is the degree to which each of them shows evidence of being a conventionalized pairing of form and meaning. Given the historical changes detailed in the previous section, Traugott (2019) argues there is reason to believe that comparative modals have undergone constructionalization. Traugott (2022) defines constructionalization as in (11).<sup>6</sup>

(11) Constructionalization:

The establishment of a new symbolic link between form and meaning which has been replicated across a network of language users, and which involves an addition to the constructicon.<sup>7</sup> (Traugott 2022: 49)

On this definition of constructionalization, syntactic changes must be accompanied by semantic changes, and if this isn't the case, we can only speak of constructional changes that can appear before or after constructionalization itself. It is clear that all three comparative modals have developed a new syntax. They are adverbs forming a

<sup>4</sup> In addition to advice, BETTER can convey hope on the part of the speaker (Denison & Cort 2010; van der Auwera & De Wit 2010). Figure 1 doesn't include this use, which van der Auwera & De Wit (2010) term optative and which would justify classifying BETTER also as a subtype of the EpistemicCxn (see Denison & Cort 2010 and van der Auwera *et al.* 2013 for more discussion).

<sup>5</sup> Because preference implicates volition, Traugott's choice to make the PreferenceCxn a daughter of the EpistemicCxn is far from uncontroversial. Views on volition range from those connecting it to deontic modality (Palmer 1986), epistemic modality (Mitchell 2003), or no modality at all (van der Auwera & Plungian 1998). For more discussion, see Van Linden (2012).

<sup>6</sup> This definition is a revised version of the one originally proposed by Traugott & Trousdale (2013: 22), given in (i), some aspects of which have subsequently been debated (see e.g. Börjars *et al.* 2015; Flach 2020).

(i) The creation of form\_new-meaning\_new (combinations of) signs. It forms new type nodes, which have new syntax or morphology and new coded meanings, in the linguistic population of speakers. It is accompanied by changes in degree of schematicity, productivity, and compositionality.

<sup>7</sup> The constructicon refers to the inventory of constructions.

string together with a preceding auxiliary and minimally taking infinitival complements. It's equally clear that all three have developed a new semantics. *RATHER* and *SOONER* express preference after previously expressing temporal meanings, while *BETTER* expresses advice, and more recently hope, after previously expressing preference. We are thus justified in placing the comparative modals in the network shown in [figure 1](#). Given the semantics of the comparative modals, the subschemas in [figure 1](#) that are of interest to us are the AdviceCxn and PreferenceCxn. Traugott (2019) argues that *RATHER* and *SOONER* are micro-constructions falling under the PreferenceCxn, while *BETTER* instantiates the AdviceCxn, and thus they aren't subsumed under a single subschema, but constitute a family of constructions at the higher levels. This analysis aligns with Van Linden (2015), whose diachronic investigation of the comparative modals in US English reveals semantic and syntactic differences between *BETTER* and the two preference modals *RATHER* and *SOONER*. But there is also a grammaticalization path all three comparative modals have followed with respect to phonetic reduction of the auxiliary, although *BETTER* has progressed farther along this path than *RATHER* and *SOONER* and is closer to auxiliarihood.

### 3 Data

The research reported here is based on data harvested from COCA, the current size of which exceeds one billion words representing various registers of spoken and written US English. The time span is twenty-nine years from 1990 to 2019. Because we are interested here specifically in the range of material that can follow *RATHER* and *SOONER* (*BETTER* was excluded, given its inability to license complements other than infinitives), the search strings were designed to include all complements, contracted as well as full forms of the auxiliaries *would* and *had*, and null auxiliaries (this was the case only with *RATHER*, as there were no instances of *SOONER* with null auxiliaries and relevant preference semantics in our data).<sup>8</sup> As will become clear in the next section, *RATHER* has progressed farther than *SOONER* in developing a new syntax in US English. The novelty is especially its ability to appear in environments characteristic of object-raising verbs, i.e. with NP complements followed by infinitival complements and with NP complements followed by predicative complements. In this respect, *RATHER* also distributes differently than equatives (i.e. strings like *would (just) as soon*). Equatives are defined as members of a larger set of comparative modals discussed in van der Auwera & De Wit (2010: 127), a set which ranges from superlatives (e.g. *had best*) to equatives. We include data on equatives in [table 1](#) (and in [table 2](#) in section

<sup>8</sup> We conducted manual analyses of all hits when sorting complements out into the different categories. Extensive filtering out of irrelevant hits was necessary only in the case of bare *rather* on account of its regular adverbial uses, e.g. in *I rather doubt you can teach me anything*. Here we relied on the semantics of the verbs that followed *rather*, picking out those for which a preference reading was plausible. For instance, a search for bare *rather* followed by (any form of) a verb returned 3,000+ hits, but only 47 of them were judged relevant and were included in our data.



Table 1. *Complementation patterns for RATHER, SOONER and would (just) as soon (COCA)*

Modal	Inf	Fin. cl	NP	NP + Prep comp	NP + Inf comp	Total
RATHER	16,771	1,540	26	14	148	18,499
SOONER	349	1	0	0	0	350
<i>would (just) as soon</i>	509	13	0	0	0	522

4.3) in an attempt to locate the syntax of RATHER in a broader landscape, although equatives are not the focus of this article.

#### 4 Results

We begin by summarizing the range of complements available for RATHER and SOONER in table 1. These counts include both declarative and interrogative clauses hosting *rather* and *sooner* along with contracted and full forms of the auxiliaries *would* and *had*, as well as declarative and interrogative clauses hosting bare *rather* (i.e. without any auxiliary). The counts for finite-clause complements include those with an overt complementizer or without it, and all finite verb forms. Among the instances of finite-clause complements to RATHER and *would (just) as soon* are clauses with subjunctive verb forms (as in (15)), a pattern that is not attested with SOONER (we briefly return to subjunctives in section 4.1). Table 1 shows that the most frequent complements are infinitives, and these are followed by finite clauses across the board. Columns 4–6 show the lesser-known kinds of complement, which the following sections focus on. All five kinds of complements in table 1 are depicted in the examples below in the order in which they appear in table 1.

Infinitival complement:

- (12) All government is corrupt because it attracts people that want power and to steal others' property. I would rather dig ditches in Siberia than work with you in politics. (BLOG: <http://sayanythingblog.com/entry/are-republicanstrying-to-create-a-third-party-problem-for-themselves/>, 2012)
- (13) Many of those in Congress, mostly for historical political reasons they themselves didn't fully comprehend, would sooner have seen Snoopy turned into pie tins. (FIC: Analog Science Fiction \$26 Fact, 2018)
- (14) No matter – Clark had plenty of time and would just as soon be alone with his thoughts than engage in banal Cubs-related patter anyway. (FIC: *Southwest Review*, 2018)

Finite-clause complement:

- (15) So you don't mind that John is poor? No, but I would rather he have a house. (Mov: *Little Women*, 1994)



(16) Perhaps we should make you ambassador to the emperor. He doesn't deserve her. Would he sooner we didn't get the ships? (Mov: *Dangerous Beauty*, 1998)

(17) In fact, the TSA would just as soon nobody even stood up during the flight at all. (SPOK: *NPR Morning*, 2004)

NP complement:

(18) 'Would you come with me?', she asked. 'What about your mother?' 'I'd rather you,' she said. (FIC: *The Woman of the House*, 1997)

NP + predicative complement:

(19) Though I'd rather him with his shirt off, I agree with this handsome piece of work. (*Edge of Fear* (IMBD, Open subtitles), 2018)

(20) She's taken them to the house in Georgetown. I'd rather them at home. (Mov: *Jackie*, 2016)

NP + infinitival complement:

(21) To me, I feel like when we see Tribe on-stage we want to believe that there's love. And if it's really not and behind the scenes it's some BS going on I'd rather them not be up there. (NEWS: *Denver Post*, 2011)

(22) So on the one hand, he does cook and I'd rather him cook than not cook, so I try not to complain too much. (BLOG: <https://rewirenewsgroup.com/article/2009/06/02/lateterm-abortion-facts-stories-and-ways-help/>, 2012)

As can be seen from table 1, the characteristic that RATHER and SOONER share with each other and with equatives is the possibility of taking infinitival and finite-clause complements. There is no evidence in COCA that SOONER can take any of the remaining complements that RATHER can, that is, either an NP and an infinitival complement or an NP and a predicative complement in addition to NP complements, as in (18)–(22).<sup>9</sup> Because these are complements that normally are licensed by object-raising verbs (e.g. *consider*, *expect*, *make*, *want*, *have*), they demonstrate that RATHER has object-raising-verb properties and has thus syntactically moved further away from both SOONER and the core modals. We turn to raising verbs next.

#### 4.1 Subject- and object-raising verbs

Object-raising verbs are a type of *raising verbs*. The term *raising verbs* goes back to Postal (1974) and refers to verbs taking infinitival complements where the unexpressed subject of the embedded verb instead occupies the position of subject or object in the higher clause without being selected by the higher verb. Depending on the lower subject's grammatical function in the higher clause, two kinds of raising verbs can be distinguished: subject-raising verbs and object-raising verbs. The former are illustrated by *seem* in (23), and the latter by *consider* in (24) and the second instance of *make* in (25).

<sup>9</sup> But see Wood (2013: 85 and 2019: 16) for authentic object-raising examples of SOONER.

- (23) This book seems to be targeted to ordinary Joe Sixpacks who want to learn to make good home movies with their camcorders. (BLOG: <http://newsvideographer.com/2007/06/02/book-review-three-the-completedigital-video-guide/>, 2012)
- (24) I willfully continue to say hi to them anyway, and I just consider them to be rude and obnoxious human beings when they don't reply. (WEB: [www.apartmenttherapy.com/how-friendly-are-your-neighbors-andwhat-do-you-do-if-the-answer-is-not-at-all-174677](http://www.apartmenttherapy.com/how-friendly-are-your-neighbors-andwhat-do-you-do-if-the-answer-is-not-at-all-174677), 2012)
- (25) Republicans are just mad that he made a really good decision at a good time and made them look bad in the process. (BLOG: <http://politicalirony.com/2012/06/16/damned-if-you-do>, 2012)

The characteristic of all raising verbs is that they don't assign any semantic role to their subject or object arguments. That is, *this book* in (23) receives its semantic role not from the subject-raising verb *seem* but from the lower verb, and, similarly, the pronoun *them* in (24) and (25) receives its semantic role from the lower verbs and not from *consider* or *make*. These facts are supported by the ability of raising verbs to take expletive subjects or objects (e.g. *There seem to be lots of rules*, *We consider there to be a breach of the employment contract*) and to leave the meaning of idiom chunks unchanged when co-occurring with them (e.g. *The cat seems to be out of the bag*) (for recent overviews of theoretical analyses of raising verbs, see e.g. Polinsky 2013 and Abeillé 2021).

Although the term *raising* may suggest that movement operations are involved in theoretical analyses of raising verbs, this is not always so. This term is used in constraint-based frameworks like Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar and in constructionist frameworks like Sign-Based Construction Grammar, neither of which employ movement operations. Instead, raising is accounted for by allowing the unexpressed subject in the lower clause to share its syntactic and semantic features with the subject (under raising to subject) or object (under raising to object) in the higher clause at the same time that the subject or object is not included among the semantic arguments of the higher verb (see Abeillé 2021 for a recent overview). We are assuming here that an analysis along these lines is appropriate for raising verbs.

English auxiliaries, including the core modals (e.g. *should*, *may*, *must*), are considered to be subject-raising verbs. This view is shared by both transformational (Wurmbrand 1999, 2001) and non-transformational frameworks (Pollard & Sag 1994), including again Sign-Based Construction Grammar (Sag 2012; Sag *et al.* 2020).<sup>10</sup> As subject-raising verbs, auxiliaries license VP complements and do not assign any semantic role to their subject arguments. The three comparative modals fall into the subject-raising category as well when they appear in their default subcategorization

<sup>10</sup> The status of auxiliary verbs is, however, far from uncontroversial, with some scholars assigning them to a separate class from main verbs (see van Trijp 2017 for a Fluid Construction Grammar account and Heine 1993 for an overview of the various perspectives).

frames, i.e. with bare infinitives as complements.<sup>11</sup> However, our data demonstrate that *RATHER* is also an object-raising verb, much like *consider* and *make*. Examples (24)–(25) illustrate raising to object very clearly with *consider* and *make*: the NPs showing up in object position in the higher clauses have accusative case specifications, as they are headed by pronouns, and the embedded infinitival clause may host either a bare or a *to*-infinitive, depending on the higher verb.<sup>12</sup> In all the items in [table 1](#) that follow the NP + infinitival complement pattern, the relevant NPs also have accusative case specifications (as in examples (21)–(22)). We follow the essential insights of Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar and Sign-Based Construction Grammar in assuming that object-raising verbs take two complements: an NP and a VP, the first of which is not assigned any semantic role by the higher verb (see [Sag 2012](#) and [Abeillé 2021](#) for more detail).

Note that NPs that lack accusative case specifications and appear with bare infinitives would make the structure ambiguous between raising to object and finite-clause complements, specifically finite clauses hosting subjunctive verb forms, one example of which we saw in (15) (but example (15) is itself not ambiguous between raising to object and finite clause, because the NP is headed by a nominative-marked pronoun). Further examples of such ambiguity, which we have classified as subjunctives, appear in (26)–(27) below. These are grouped together with finite-clause complements in [table 1](#).

- (26) I mean if we're to have a cookout, I'd rather friends come over. (MOV: *The Neighbor*, 2019)  
 (27) Besides, I would rather Houston be known as a 'world-class city' on the basis of improvements to a variety of services that don't involve 'corporate welfare'. (NEWS: *Houston Chronicle*, 2000)

However, a *to*-infinitive makes the structure unambiguously raising to object, as depicted in (28).

- (28) I would love to sit down with Goldman. I would rather Goldman and Marcia Clark to be sitting right here interviewing me, but they're too busy making money, you know. (SPOK: *ABC World News*, 1996)

Example (28) is one of two with a *to*-infinitive among our object-raising examples. The ability to take either a *to*- or bare infinitive varies among the set of verbs that license raising to object in present-day English, which include: *allow*, *assume*, *believe*, *cause*, *consider*, *declare*, *deem*, *estimate*, *expect*, *find*, *get*, *hold*, *imagine*, *intend*, *judge*, *know*, *let*, *make*, *mean*, *need*, *perceive*, *prefer*, *project*, *repute*, *rumor*, *report*, *say*, *see*, *show*, *suppose*, *think*, *want* and *wish*.

<sup>11</sup> According to [Sag's \(2012: 112\)](#) type hierarchy of verb lexemes, auxiliaries are a subtype of subject-raising verbs, which are a subtype of intransitive verbs, while object-raising verbs are a subtype of transitive verbs. We draw on this type hierarchy when proposing a constructional network that licenses comparative modals in [section 5](#).

<sup>12</sup> Accusative case specifications seen on NPs in this position are a phenomenon known as Exceptional Case Marking. This term goes back to [Chomsky \(1981\)](#) and reflects an early transformational analysis of raising to object.

Another property *RATHER* shares with object-raising verbs is that it permits one more subcategorization frame with two complements. We saw examples of NP complements followed by predicative complements (here PPs) in (19) and (20), repeated here for convenience as (29) and (30); there is a total of fourteen of them in the current data.

(29) Though I'd rather him with his shirt off, I agree with this handsome piece of work. (*Edge of Fear* (IMBD, Open subtitles), 2018)

(30) She's taken them to the house in Georgetown. I'd rather them at home. (MOV: *Jackie*, 2016)

Verbs taking NP and predicative complements (which may be realized as NPs, APs or PPs) also belong to the class of raising verbs, typical examples of which are *elect* and *prove*, illustrated in (31)–(32).

(31) Her fellow froshies quickly elected her floor captain. (ACAD: *Humanist*, 2010)

(32) I guess I wanna prove her right. (*Gossip Girl*, 'Touch of Eva', 2010)

Notice the parallels between (29)–(32) and the object-raising verbs we have discussed thus far: the NP complements all appear in object position and with accusative case specifications at the same time that they are the unexpressed subjects of the respective predicative complements.<sup>13</sup> The raising analysis assumed for such verbs is that the first complement (i.e. the object of the higher verb) is shared with the unexpressed subject of the predicative complement and receives no semantic role from the higher verb (see Abeillé 2021 and references therein for more detail).

Several object-raising verbs (e.g. *expect*, *prefer*, *believe*, *want*) permit either infinitival complements or predicative complements as their second complements. This fact speaks in favor of *rather* being a verb when it appears together with an auxiliary. Wood (2013: 64, 82) argues that *would* by itself doesn't license raising to object in English, and nor does bare *rather*, based on examples similar to (33)–(36).

(33) \*I would Todd Akin in the United States Senate than Claire McCaskill.

(34) \*I would him cook than not cook.

(35) \*I rather Todd Akin in the United States Senate than Claire McCaskill.

(36) \*I rather him cook than not cook.

Although few, we did find counterexamples to Wood's claim regarding bare *rather*. It appears three times with an accusative-marked NP and an infinitival complement as the second complement, as in (37).

<sup>13</sup> Two of our examples in this category lack overt case specifications on the subjects of the predicative complements, both of them hosting nominal heads, as depicted in (i)–(ii).

(i) Sure would rather words like that on here, than some of what people post. (BLOG: <http://bangordailynews.com/2010/11/03/politics/bdn-projects-lepage-wins-governors-race>, 2012)

(ii) I would rather Todd Akin in the United States Senate than Claire McCaskill. (BLOG: [www.redstate.com/erick/2012/08/21/will-congressman-akin-put-his-world-view-ahead-of-his-pride](http://www.redstate.com/erick/2012/08/21/will-congressman-akin-put-his-world-view-ahead-of-his-pride), 2012)

(37) I rather him stand by them and be open about it ... than do like Mitt and try to pretend like he has no idea what they are doing. (WEB: [www.mediaite.com/online/president-obama-was-the-only-candidate-who-could-afford-to-denounce-super-pacs-yet-he-won%E2%80%99t/](http://www.mediaite.com/online/president-obama-was-the-only-candidate-who-could-afford-to-denounce-super-pacs-yet-he-won%E2%80%99t/), 2012)

Bare *rather* is otherwise only found with infinitival complements (47 instances) and finite clauses (7 instances) in our data (these counts are included in the data in [table 1](#)). In addition to these, we have harvested example (38), which shows a clearly verbal *rather* used with *do*-support.

(38) Do you rather they wear a condom or get HIV? (BLOG: <http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2008/07/24/the-great-deseccration/>, 2012)

Example (38) suggests that *rather* has been developing verbal characteristics regardless of the presence of an auxiliary, but we leave it for future research to explore why the presence of an auxiliary appears to impact the range of complements that are permitted. In any case, our three object-raising examples along with (38) strengthen the case for analyzing *rather* as a verb even when it's not accompanied by an auxiliary, which we return to in [section 5](#).

#### 4.2 NP complements

This section addresses the remaining pattern reported in [table 1](#), namely NP complements, that is found with *RATHER*. Twenty-six instances of *RATHER* are followed by an NP complement in our data. This count includes both nominal and pronominal heads within the complement, as shown in (39)–(40) (see also (18) for another example of a pronominal head).

(39) Though that was still bad, he'd rather Jack than Roger. (FIC: *We Remain*, 2019)

(40) Chief did make a few bad plays, but I would rather him than Ariza. (BLOG: [www.hornets247.com/2012/11/17/milwaukees-three-point-shooting-sinks-hornets](http://www.hornets247.com/2012/11/17/milwaukees-three-point-shooting-sinks-hornets), 2012)

This complementation pattern again sets *RATHER* apart from both *SOONER* and equatives, which resist NP complements, while further aligning it with the set of object-raising verbs (e.g. with verbs like *prefer* and *want*).

We now move beyond the data included in [table 1](#) by discussing the use of the auxiliary *have* with *RATHER* when it takes finite-clause complements.

#### 4.3 Auxiliary *have* and *RATHER*

In this section, we shift our focus to another difference that sets *RATHER* apart from *SOONER* and equatives. It's well known that both the two comparative modals and equatives may express counterfactual semantics, and do so by co-occurring with the auxiliary *have* at the same time that the lower verb bears perfect participle morphology. The auxiliary *have* typically follows *rather*, *sooner* and (*just*) *as soon*, as in (41)–(43).

(41) I think we played pretty well. I would rather have seen Ezeli more in the second half. (BLOG: <http://blogs.mercurynews.com/warriors/2012/11/17/promising-how-the-pieces-fit-warriors-106-minnesota-98>, 2012)

- (42) Christine, he was quite certain, would sooner have paraded in a potato sack than anything remotely resembling pants. (FIC: *Lady of Skye*, 2001)
- (43) For example, his recent writings about the Regional Air Quality Council's meetings exposed shenanigans I'm sure the 'growth elite' would as soon have kept quiet. (NEWS: *Denver Post*, 1995)

But *have* may also follow *would*, preceding *rather*, *sooner* or equatives, as in (44)–(46).

- (44) Frankly, I would have rather been backed over by a school bus than sat down to a meal. (MAG: *Cosmopolitan*, 2006)
- (45) Yabrith would have sooner believed the sun would voluntarily refuse to rise than those men be lost to the guild. (FIC: *The Hollow Queen*, 2016)
- (46) Though a very big part of him would have just as soon kissed her. (FIC: *The Bad Boy*, 2004)

The order illustrated in (44) is interesting due to the ability of *rather* to take verbal morphology in this environment in some US English dialects, as reported in Wood (2013, 2019). Example (47) illustrates this point: it hosts the participle *rathered* in place of *rather* and is one of two examples we have harvested from COCA.<sup>14</sup>

- (47) I would have rathered that this simple-minded President simply vote 'present' and leave the important decisions up to the adults in the room. (WEB: [www.politico.com/blogs/bensmith/0909/Polish\\_PM\\_wouldnt\\_take\\_US\\_calls.html](http://www.politico.com/blogs/bensmith/0909/Polish_PM_wouldnt_take_US_calls.html), 2012)

Data like these are suggestive of *rather* having changed its lexical class from adverb to verb and thus having the ability to license the auxiliary *have* in examples like (47) (recall Klippenstein's (2012) and Juge's (2002) proposals discussed in section 2.1). A parallel lexical-class change is not observed in *sooner*. But example (47) reveals that differences between RATHER VERSUS SOONER and *would (just) as soon* go even deeper.

A closer examination shows that RATHER, but not SOONER or *would (just) as soon*, has the option of taking finite-clause complements when the auxiliary *have* precedes *rather*. This option is illustrated in (48)–(49).

- (48) Honestly Shoshana, would you have rather the authorities not have inspected you and the other two men and found that you never made it home that day to see your children? (BLOG: <http://shebshi.wordpress.com/2011/09/12/some-real-shock-and-awe-racially-profiled-and-cuffed-in-detroit>, 2012)
- (49) I still feel that they would have rather I kept quiet. (WEB: <http://captainawkward.com/2012/08/07/322-323-my-friend-group-has-a-case-of-the-creepy-dude-how-do-we-clear-that-up>, 2012)

<sup>14</sup> The other example is given in (i). It's unusual in taking a *to*-infinitive, but it's not the only one doing so in COCA, as there are 12 other examples of RATHER followed by a *to*-infinitive.

(i) I would have rathered to see Obama handle the economy and jobs in the past 4 years, not Romney in a debate. (WEB: <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2012/10/fact-checking-the-presidential-debate-in-denver>, 2012)

Together, the instances of RATHER taking a *to*-infinitive track one of the complementation patterns available for the verb *prefer*, suggesting an analogy with it, as well as the verbal status of *rather* itself.

Table 2. *Complementation patterns for RATHER, SOONER and would (just) as soon when auxiliary have follows would (COCA)*

Modal	Participle	Finite clause	Total
RATHER	220	13	233
SOONER	7	0	7
<i>would (just) as soon</i>	7	0	7

To put this use into perspective, let us consider the data in table 2. While the frequency of finite-clause complements is low, they could be indications of the status of *rather* as a verb, though lack of overt participial specifications on it is problematic, as is the fact that participial specifications on *rather* are generally rare in COCA, as we have seen. Wood (2013) argues that RATHER allows raising to object in some dialects of US English when *have* precedes *rather* as well, which supports the potential status of *rather* as a verb. We have found no instances of raising to object in this environment in our data. However, even finite-clause complements combined with the lack of a perfect participle leave us with the question of whether there is a verb here at all to help license the auxiliary *have*.

A theoretical analysis articulated by Wood (2013) is that verbal features are borne by the silent verb *have*, while *rather* itself remains an adverb. He proposes this solution specifically to explain uses of RATHER with raising to object: the silent *have* is present in the structure to license accusative case specifications on the object in the higher clause and to receive participial morphology assigned by the auxiliary *have*. This reasoning is based on clear distributional parallels between the lexical verb *have* and RATHER, such that both can license raising to object with similar semantics, as shown in (50) from Wood (2013: 78).

(50) Would you have him kill them rather than arrest them?

We don't pursue Wood's analysis here for two reasons. First, silent categories are not permitted in the CxG framework; second, finite-clause complements illustrated in examples (48) and (49) would make illicit complements for the lexical verb *have*, introducing a complication to Wood's analysis. One would be forced to propose another silent verb on account of such examples, *prefer* being the best candidate, as in (51).

(51) I still feel that they would have preferred I kept quiet.

But because *prefer* doesn't license bare infinitives under raising to object, although RATHER does, this would require positing either *have* or *prefer* as a silent verb to account for the entire range of complements available for RATHER. We therefore turn to the theoretical possibilities for accounting for the complementation patterns of RATHER offered by CxG in section 5. However, before doing so, we explore another pattern associated with RATHER that offers more insight into the categorial status of *rather*.



#### 4.4 *Premodifiers of rather*

The data we present in this section center on two adverbs able to premodify *rather*, which can serve as a diagnostic for its verbal status. The first of them is *a lot*, which modifies adverbs and adjectives, but not verbs, and the second is *much*, which may modify all three categories. Thus, if *rather* is preceded by *a lot* this forces adverbial interpretation on it. We hypothesized that the string *would/had a lot rather* doesn't appear in environments associated with a verbal *rather*, such as raising to object. The string *would/had much rather*, on the other hand, could well be found with all the patterns we listed in table 1 for RATHER, since *much* doesn't block verbal use of *rather*. We add data on the corresponding strings with *sooner* for comparison. We have confirmed our hypotheses with data also harvested from COCA. First, the string *would/had a lot rather* appears three times in the corpus, each time with an infinitival complement (all three examples are depicted in (52)–(54) below). The string *would a lot sooner* appears a single time, also with an infinitival complement (55).

- (52) All I know in my state is that people would a lot rather have jobs than they would some empowerment zones or whatever you want to call it. (SPOK: PBS\_Newshour, 1993)
- (53) I'd a lot rather have talked to the puppies. (FIC: *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, 2007)
- (54) I'd a lot rather have somebody shooting hoops than shooting bullets. (SPOK: PBS\_Newshour, 1994)
- (55) She is more than competent and qualified, but there are others I would a lot sooner see on the Supreme bench. (BLOG: <http://emptywheel.firedoglake.com/2010/04/18/a-concurrence-in-the-case-against-elena-kagan>, 2012)

These examples demonstrate that if *rather* is interpreted as an adverb, the comparative modal RATHER lacks uses that would indicate the presence of a lexical verb. Not surprisingly, the same holds true of the comparative modal SOONER.

Moving on to the strings *would/had much rather* and *would much sooner*, the data are given in table 3. Exactly as expected, *would/had much rather* again permits finite clause complements (56), NP complements (57) and the NP + Infinitival complement pattern associated with raising to object (58), while *would much sooner* permits only infinitival complements. These data include strings with bare *rather*, which host only infinitival or finite-clause complements.

Table 3. *Complementation patterns for would/had much rather and would much sooner (COCA)*

Modal	Infinitive	Fin. cl	NP	NP+ Pred comp	NP + Inf comp	Total
RATHER	1,271	29	1	0	10	1,311
SOONER	5	0	0	0	0	5

- (56) We're in a new age of nutrition discovery, and as a dietitian, I'd much rather people focus on what they should be adding to their diets. (NEWS: *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, 2013)
- (57) I'd much rather Howard Zinn's paranoid style of American History than have progressives airbrush themselves into Mathew Brady's photographs. (BLOG: <http://pjmedia.com/richardfernandez/2009/09/19/to-the-manner-born>, 2012)
- (58) But I'd much rather him ask those questions and get it out there, prove to the American people that nothing has been violated in terms of the Constitution. (SPOK: CNNAM, 2006)

Furthermore, we have found an example much like those discussed in section 4.3, where the auxiliary *have* follows *would* and a finite clause serves as the complement, given in (59).

- (59) Just worked for six weeks in spring training to get here, plus the offseason. So would have much rather this popped up in spring training. (MAG: ESPN, 2019)

The picture that emerges from these data is that *rather*, unlike *sooner*, does exhibit distinct verbal characteristics when it appears as part of the comparative modal RATHER despite lacking overt verbal morphology.

## 5 Revised analysis of RATHER and SOONER

The current corpus results reveal that the idea that SOONER and RATHER have developed into parallel micro-constructions requires some amendments. We have seen specifically that RATHER permits a much wider range of complements and that *rather* itself has distinctly verbal characteristics. We therefore take the stance that RATHER, but not SOONER, represents a micro-construction whose properties are licensed by the Raising-to-objectCxn in addition to the ModalCxn. In other words, the set of properties of RATHER consists of those that are passed down to it by more than one schematic construction in the network, a licensing mechanism known in the CxG literature as multiple inheritance (for more discussion of multiple inheritance, see e.g. Goldberg 1995; Hoffmann & Trousdale 2013; Trousdale 2013; Sommerer 2020). We begin by spelling out how the complementation patterns of SOONER and RATHER are licensed and then proceed to address the categorial status of *rather*.

Recall from section 2.2 that the set of micro-constructions falling under the PreferenceCxn includes the comparative modals SOONER and RATHER and the lexical verb *prefer*. We leave the semantics of these micro-constructions aside in this section, revisiting only their syntax. The PreferenceCxn, being itself licensed by the macro-schema ModalCxn, licenses the modal-auxiliary properties of SOONER and RATHER, that is, their ability to take bare infinitives. Since both SOONER and RATHER also exhibit transitive-verb properties by permitting finite clause complements, we assume that these are licensed by the macro-schema TransitiveCxn. The TransitiveCxn additionally licenses the object-taking ability of RATHER. There is of course nothing unusual about allowing these comparative modals to be licensed by both the PreferenceCxn and the TransitiveCxn, since English already has verbs (e.g. the semi-modals *need* and *dare*) that straddle the boundary between modal auxiliaries and lexical verbs. The remaining subcategorization frames that are permitted only by

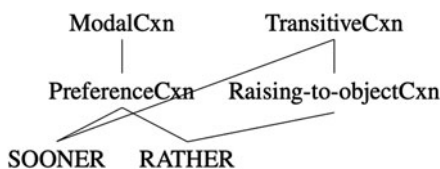


Figure 2. Simplified constructional networks that license *RATHER* and *SOONER*

*RATHER* – NP+ predicative complement and NP + infinitival complement – are licensed by the Raising-to-objectCxn, which we take to be a subschema falling under the TransitiveCxn. The Raising-to-objectCxn licenses constructions where NPs appear in object positions without being assigned any semantic roles in these positions. These links are represented schematically in figure 2. We are assuming here that all transitive-verb properties of *RATHER* are licensed by virtue of the fact that it must satisfy all constraints imposed on the Raising-to-objectCxn and those imposed on the TransitiveCxn, which licenses the Raising-to-objectCxn. Therefore, *RATHER* doesn't inherit directly from the TransitiveCxn.

Syntactic changes where a fully formed construction (or a form–meaning pairing being formed) gradually expands its range of syntactic contexts are known as syntactic expansion.<sup>15</sup> Because syntactic expansion triggers changes to the form, but not to the meaning, it doesn't affect a form–meaning pairing as a whole and, therefore, can only be seen as constructional change if one adopts either Traugott & Trousdale's (2013) or Traugott's (2022) definitions of constructionalization, as we do here.<sup>16</sup> We assume that the expanded range of complementation patterns that has become available to *RATHER* instantiates constructional change (specifically, syntactic expansion) surrounding the constructionalization of *RATHER*. According to Traugott & Trousdale (2013), syntactic expansion often follows constructionalization, but may be coextensive with it as well.

With respect to the categorial status of *rather*, we propose that it functions as a verb when in combination with an auxiliary. We are forced to conclude that this is so, given in particular the ability of *RATHER* to license raising to object and the availability of the auxiliary *have* to express counterfactual semantics with no other verbal form to be assigned participial features, as discussed in sections 4.3 and 4.4. Furthermore, it is due

<sup>15</sup> We apply this term to constructions here, but it's introduced in the context of grammaticalization by Himmelmann (2004), which he defines as context expansion. Syntactic expansion is one of the ways context expansion manifests itself.

<sup>16</sup> It is debatable whether changes to the form or the meaning of a construction, but not both, constitute constructional change rather than constructionalization. On the assumption that form and meaning are inseparable, altering either of them should always produce a new form–meaning pairing (see Sommerer & Smirnova 2020 and references therein). Following this reasoning, we could posit a new construction, one that is distinct from the *RATHER* that fails to license raising to object, as a subtype of the Raising-to-objectCxn whose features are also licensed by the PreferenceCxn. Doing so would, of course, not affect our analysis of *RATHER* as a subtype of the Raising-to-objectCxn.

to the presence of verbal *rather* that the combination of *would* and *rather* licenses the full range of complementation patterns we have seen in the current data. The auxiliary *would*, whether on its own or combined with a clearly adverbial *rather*, licenses only infinitival complements. The specific theoretical possibility we defend here is that the lexical-verb component of the combination of *rather* with an auxiliary comes from the construction as a whole rather than any of its individual members. That is, this micro-construction has a lexical-verb slot that is filled by *rather*, which allows the construction to pattern syntactically much like it would if the verbal slot was filled by the verb *prefer*. That *rather* is able to fill this slot, or, in other words, that it has a distinct potential to transition into a lexical verb, is not surprising, given that it does have a record of being used as a verb (however scarce the corpus evidence to support this claim). We can thus think of *rather* as a defective verb for the paucity of examples with overt verbal morphology,<sup>17</sup> or as underspecified with respect to its lexical class.

## 6 Conclusion

In this article we have presented novel evidence that the comparative modal RATHER has followed a different developmental path than SOONER. RATHER OWES its special character to a wider range of complements, which requires a theoretical analysis that goes beyond that offered by Traugott (2019). Toward this purpose, we have offered a CxG analysis where RATHER represents a micro-construction licensed by the ModalCxN and the Raising-to-objectCxN, the latter a subtype of the TransitiveCxN. We have also proposed that *rather* fills the verbal slot in this micro-construction.

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<sup>17</sup> But see the Yale Grammatical Diversity Project: English in North America, available at <https://ygdproject.yale.edu/phenomena/verbal-rather>, for information on where a fully verbal *rather* is attested in US English.

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