

**Phonetically and syntactically based reanalysis
in the development of verbal *better***

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Background

In some varieties of English, the comparative adverb *better* has been reanalyzed as a verb with some modal properties. The modal properties are fullest in varieties that have a negative form used in inverted tag questions (often spelled *betn't*, sometimes *bettern't*)¹, such as the Essex dialect reported in Gepp 1920:50, but more widespread constructions such as *He better not try* also show it in auxiliary position with a bare infinitival complement expressing modal-like semantics. This construction can be found in print as far back as the 1700s, as seen in example 1:

- (1) Consequently, *he better not answer the adversary's putting*, and put up his cards. ('Annals of Gaming', 1773:441)

Denison and Cort (2010) treat *better* in this construction as a verb but explicitly lay aside the question of whether it is a modal; Pinker (1984:72–73) treats it as a non-invertible modal or quasi-modal, and Sells (1985:93) similarly treats it as a non-invertible auxiliary verb.

The reanalysis by which *better* becomes an auxiliary verb cannot be explained as a simple case of syntactic reanalysis, but it can be explained via phonetic reanalysis with syntactic reanalysis as a side effect.

Reanalysis typically occurs in contexts that offer room for ambiguity between the old analysis and the new analysis (Timberlake 1977). This makes sense if reanalysis happens when a speaker produces an utterance intending the old analysis, while a hearer interprets the utterance with the new analysis; reanalysis can only easily take place if both analyses of the utterance are viable. However, different kinds of reanalysis take place on different levels.

In a typical case of syntactic reanalysis, the hearer interprets the same phonetic segments that the speaker intends, but interprets different syntactic properties and structure than the speaker intends; sometimes syntactic reanalysis is necessarily accompanied by semantic reanalysis, as the semantic content of the utterance must be redistributed among elements which relate to each other in different syntactic ways than previously. A straightforward example of syntactic reanalysis is the reanalysis of *fun* from noun to adjective (Algeo 1962): in contexts like *The party was fun*, the speaker intended *fun* as a noun, while a hearer interpreted it as an adjective.

In phonetic reanalysis, on the other hand, the hearer parses the speech signal into different segments than the speaker intends. For instance, a speaker saying the

¹ I argue in Klippenstein 2013 that *betn't* is essentially a spelling variant of a non-rhotic pronunciation of *bettern't* /betənt/.

word *tree* may intend the phonemes /tʃi/, but a listener may interpret the transition between the [t] and the [ʃ] as frication, and interpret the initial segment as an affricate, analyzing the whole word as /tʃi/.

Reanalysis of *better*

The source for the construction seen in *He better not try* appears to be sentences like *He'd better not try*, where 'd (or non-contracted *had*) fulfils the auxiliary role, and *better* remains an adverb.

- (2) Before reanalysis: He_{pronoun} 'd_{auxiliary} better_{adverb} not_{neg} try_{infinitive}
 (3) After reanalysis: He_{pronoun} better_{modal} not_{neg} try_{infinitive}

However, this context does not offer room for syntactic ambiguity between old and new interpretations that's needed to account for straightforward syntactic reanalysis. In the construction in 2, the auxiliary 'd cannot be followed by a modal, because the auxiliary must be followed by a non-finite verb², and English modals do not have non-finite forms. This is true if the 'd is equivalent to *had* (as originally in this construction), but would remain true if the 'd were reinterpreted as equivalent to *would*. Thus, from a purely syntactic angle, this construction offers no grounds for reanalyzing *better* as a modal.

This context does, however, offer room for phonetic reanalysis. The string 'd *better* contains a [db] sequence. Major place of articulation distinctions in stops have stronger phonetic cues in CV transitions than in VC transition; thus place of articulation in stops is relatively non-salient in coda position (Steriade 2001); when a stop is unreleased before another stop, as here, post-consonantal place cues in the first stop are completely eliminated. Côté (2004) argues that weak transitional cues to consonants (especially obstruents) in clusters are a major contributor to the deletion of consonants in Icelandic consonant clusters [check that summarizing accurately]. This makes it highly plausible that a speaker could intend to say e.g. /hidbetənattɹai/, but a listener could fail to perceive a [d] due to weak cues before another stop, and instead parse the speech signal as /hibetənattɹai/. The listener would then chunk the speech signal into words; since the /d/ is not phonetically recovered, the result is *He better not try*. If the listener first partially assigns categories and semantics where these are clear, the result could be:

- (4) He_{pronoun} better not_{neg} try_{infinitive}

From this partial analysis, the most plausible analysis for the listener is that *better* is a modal or at least an auxiliary verb, based on its syntactic context (between a subject pronoun and negation, followed up by a bare infinitive verb) and morphology (no 3rd person singular present -s after a 3rd person singular subject), as

² In various uses, *had* can be followed by a past participle (*I had been there*) or a *to*-infinitive (*You had to be there*); in the *had better* construction, it is followed by a bare infinitive (*You better not be there*).

well as modal semantics (for which see Denison and Cort 2010).³ Thus, the phonetic reanalysis of /hidbetənattɪaɪ/ as /hibetənattɪaɪ/ drives the syntactic reanalysis of *better* from adverb to modal verb.

Contrasting case: syntactic reanalysis of *rather*

There is a superficially similar case in English of *rather* being reanalyzed as a verb (Juge 2002, Klippenstein 2012, 2013) which also shows a comparative adverb being reanalyzed as a verb (though here a main verb, not a modal verb), after auxiliary 'd (though here that is equivalent to *would* rather than to *had*) in pre-reanalysis forms which is not present in post-reanalysis forms. For instance, pre-reanalysis *I'd rather be dead* is equivalent to post-reanalysis *I rather be dead*, as attested in a 1584 letter by Patrick, Master of Gray:

(5) *I rather be dead* than continually deing, if I ver in þe lyk caes.
(Thompson 1835:42)

That this is a main verb and not a modal verb is clear from examples such as 6, with a finite complement rather than an infinitival complement:

(6) If it come by commaundement of *Ceres*, not their owne motions, *I rather they should hate*; (Lyly 1601, Act 5, scene 4)

Despite the superficial similarity to the case of *better*, simple syntactic reanalysis can explain the case of *rather*. Since the result of this reanalysis is not a modal verb but a main verb, which can be infinitive after an auxiliary verb, sentences like 7–8 do in fact offer ambiguity between the old analysis and a new analysis:

(7) I_{pronoun} 'd_{auxiliary} rather_{adverb} be_{infinitive} dead_{adjective}
(8) I_{pronoun} 'd_{auxiliary} rather_{infinitive} be_{infinitive} dead_{adjective}

Thus, the immediate result of reanalysis is not 5 but 8; the construction in 5 comes about through a further extension from the ambiguous context into an unambiguous context.

Additionally, there is less phonetic grounding for a phonetic reanalysis, since [d] is more salient before [ɹ] in *I'd rather* than before [b] in *I'd better*. Supporting evidence against [d] being lost phonetically in this context comes from the delocutionary noun *druthers* from 'd *rather*.

Conclusions

The reanalysis of *better* as a modal verb cannot be explained by syntactic reanalysis alone; phonetic factors drive the reanalysis and must be considered in order to adequately account for it, even though syntactic reanalysis is evident in the final

³ I present the listener's stages of analysis as sequential for ease of exposition, but they need not be strictly linear.

result. This shows that cases of apparently syntactic change may not be fully explainable without reference to phonetics.

On the other hand, the reanalysis of *rather* as a main verb, while superficially similar, is better explained by syntactic reanalysis without phonetic influence, both because the grounds for straightforward syntactic reanalysis are present here, unlike with *better*, and because there is less phonetic grounding for a phonetic reanalysis.

The contrast between these two cases highlights the fact that superficially similar cases may have significantly different causes; thus, it is important to examine superficially similar cases individually, rather than rushing to categorize them together and make generalizations.

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