Unidirectionality in Grammaticalization and Lexical Shift: The Case of English *Rather*

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1.   Traditional models of grammaticalization

Traditional models of grammaticalization posit a process (or a set of processes) whereby words belonging to one lexical class shift to another lexical class considered to be more grammatical, as illustrated schematically in Figure 1, adapted from Hopper & Traugott 1993:108).

Figure 1—Typical one-dimensional model of verb grammaticalization
full verb > auxiliary > clitic > affix

In this paper I argue that the seemingly unrelated shift of English *rather* from comparative adverb to verb shows that such a model for grammaticalization is untenable.

2.   Subprocesses of grammaticalization

Newmeyer argues (1998:252-259) that many of the processes that comprise grammaticalization are not unique to grammaticalization. In addition to the examples he provides, consider the following examples:

- phonological reduction   English *says* [sɛz] (cf. *pays* [pejz])
- inferential change   English *want* 'lack' > 'desire'
- metaphor   Gothic *wait* 'I have seen/I saw' > 'I know'
- harmony   English *picker-upper, rathering interesting*

With the integrity of grammaticalization as a coherent process in jeopardy, it now becomes even more important than ever to clearly identify what the components of grammaticalization are and how they relate to other kinds of linguistic changes. First, I will explore some earlier treatments of unidirectionality.

3.   Previous arguments against unidirectionality

Other authors have argued that grammaticalization is not a unidirectional process, among them Newmeyer (1998), Beths (1999), and Janda (2001), while Ramat (1992) provides a number of counterexamples to the unidirectionality hypothesis.

Newmeyer argues quite strongly against the unidirectionality hypothesis. Part of his claim depends on the assertion—supported with extensive argumentation and examples (1998:232-59)—that grammaticalization is not a distinct process of its own. He further argues that, if it were a process in any meaningful sense of the term, it would, like aging, erosion, or evolution be uninterestingly unidirectional.

A key consideration that Newmeyer raises concerns the distinction between those grammaticalization researchers who treat unidirectionality essentially as part of the definition of grammaticalization and those who treat it as an empirical hypothesis or claim, in which case, he writes, '[T]he claim is false' (1998:261). Newmeyer suggests that for those who treat unidirectionality as a part of the definition of grammaticalization, there is no arguing, since definitions cannot be right or wrong.

Beths (1999) develops an argument against unidirectionality in the context of an in-depth analysis of a specific verb, claiming,

> The historical development of *dare*, from a semilexical verb in O[ld]E[nglish], to a modal auxiliary, a lexical verb, and a semimodal verb in Mod[ern]E[nglish] shows that grammaticalization can no longer be considered to be a unidirectional diachronic process of language change. (1999:1105)

Finally, Janda focuses on the discontinuous nature of language transmission and the fact that scholars have generally ignored this fact, paying attention instead to linguistic forms themselves.

In short, it now seems   clear that, if there is not yet consensus, there is certainly a growing body of literature expressing the idea that the claim of unidirectionality is simply false.

But I wish to argue that all these researchers are missing an important point. In discussing unidirectionality and reversability, these scholars reveal that they are working with a one-dimensional model of lexical categories. The evidence shows that a multi-dimensional model is required to accommodate the various types of changes we see in the data, some of which are illustrated by the history of English *rather*, to which I now turn.

4.   Lexical shift

In this section I would like to put aside questions of unidirectionality momentarily and address one of the similarities between grammaticalization and another kind of language change, namely **lexical shift**, called **transcategorization** by Ramat (2001). This is the shift of a linguistic unit, usually a word, from one lexical class to another. For example, in English, the participle *during* has shifted to the class of prepositions.

I want to explore these two (putative) phenomena together because grammaticalization frequently involves lexical shift. Thus, if we are to understand grammaticalization—and any unidirectionality it may show—then we must first understand lexical shift. In order to do this, I will perform a case study of the English word *rather*.

5. *Rather*
In modern English, the word *rather* has as one of its uses a verbal usage whereby it marks preference, as in (1).

(1)   She   hates   listening   about   castles,/She   rathers   the   battles. (http://homepage.tinet.ie/~portlawns/Pages/poems.htm)

This non-standard usage is further exemplified in the Appendix.

5.1   English
Historically *rather* is a comparative adverb meaning 'sooner, more quickly', as shown in the following example from around 1475 (Simpson & Weiner 1989):

(2) This worle..goth vnto decline, Rather or later to an endly fine.

Such a meaning is suitable in the right circumstances for expressing preference, as we see in (3):

(3) I would **sooner** cut off my right arm than be converted to right-handedness.... (from http://www.emf.net/~estephen/facts/lefthand.html)

In this situation, the expression of preference depends on two main components: (a) the real-world knowledge that cutting off one's right arm is a dispreferred action (even for a southpaw!) and (b) the tendency to, when possible, do what we like doing before doing things we do not like doing. We have here a case of pragmatic implicature (sometimes called **inferential change** in the grammaticalization literature) that allows the addressee to realize that the writer is so fond of left-handedness that, given the choice of losing it or their right arm, they would give up their right arm.

With *rather* the common pragmatic implicature of preference ultimately came to outshine the temporal meaning. This process was aided by the loss of the positive and superlative forms *rathe* and *rathest*, respectively, around the sixteenth century (contrast *sooner*, which the speaker can easily relate to the positive and superlative *soon* and *soonest*).

It is important at this point to note that because English lexical classes do not have characteristic morphological structures, *rather* does not advertise its status as an adverb, having essentially the same structure as the noun *lather* and the verb *gather*. This morphological ambiguity makes *rather* well-suited for

reinterpretation as a word of virtually any lexical class, but I will focus exclusively on the verbal use and ignore other uses, including the adverbial degree usage (*It's rather cold in here*) and the compound prepositional usage (*I had a salad rather than a burger*).

Let us now consider the placement of *rather* relative to the verbal elements with which it frequently appears, namely *would* and *have*. Examples (4-10) show that English is flexible not just with *rather* but with the placement of adverbials in general.

(4)   I **gladly** would've paid the extra $20....
(http://www.mexconnect.com/mex_/jrrimmig.html)

(5)   I would **gladly** have paid twice the amount....
(http://www.pcesoft.com/)

(6)   I would have **gladly** ransomed him....
(http://www.audiencemag.com/archives.html)

(7)   We would have **rather** had a trial by ourselves.
(http://www.cnn.com/2001/LAW/01/29/combs.trial.02/index.html)

(8)   ...I would have **rathered** a contractor do this.
(http://www.easton.ma.us/Directory/selectmen/minutes/min9-5-00.htm)

(9)   I would **rather** a person (including entered contenstants) didn't win mr.net.art (http://bak.spc.org/iod/MisterNet.Art.html)

(10)   I would **rather** a year of suffering than a week of living the mundane (http://www.pagans.org/~fyrecat/fyrecat/lyght.html)

This flexibility is not without pattern, however. Table 1, the results of a search of three patterns on the World Wide Web, shows that in cases in which *rather* appears with *would* and *have*, there is an overwhelming tendency for it to come between them.

Table 1—*Frequency of patterns of* rather *and the verbal complex*

I rather would have	80
I would rather have	19097
I would have rather	2990

This positioning of *rather* gives it the appearance of a second auxiliary marking preference.

The next piece of the conspiracy to make *rather* look like a verb concerns the behavior of *would*. Historically it is the past tense of *will*, which as a main verb used to mean 'to want'. It also was the past subjunctive of *will*, with the meaning 'would like', but this usage has faded into disuse:

(11)   *I would one of those chocolate chip cookies.

The loss of this main verb use of *would* leaves the phrase *would rather* (11) looking like a phrase consisting of an auxiliary (*would*) and a main verb (*rather*).

(12)   "...or would you rather coffee?"
(http://www.lisacerasoli.com/fanfic/authors/rebecca/memories/memories8.html)

Once *rather* was (re)interpreted as a verb, the door was opened to the analogical formation of additional verb forms, including past tense *rathered*, participial *rathered*, and third singular non-past *rathers*.

The exact chronology of some of these changes is difficult if not impossible to ascertain since some of the uses are non-standard and thus unlikely to be recorded, except on the internet (see §7 for further discussion of this point).

So, difficulties in dating certain changes notwithstanding, we may summarize the development of *rather* from adverb to main verb as follows:

chronology of *rather*
1. positive *rathe* and superlative *rathest* lost in modern English
2. loss of earlier temporal meaning of *rather*
3. un(der)specified morphological structure: cf. noun *lather,* verb *gather*
4. *rather* between *would* and a main verb—appearance of a second auxiliary
5. loss of *would* as subjunctive equivalent to *would like*
6. reinterpretation of *rather* as a verb
7. analogical past tense, past participle *rathered*, third singular non-past *rathers*

5.2   Brief comparison with Italian *piuttosto*
It may be useful at this point to explore why cases of the kind of shift shown by *rather* are not more common. To do this, I examine the potentially equivalent term in Italian, *piuttosto*, exemplified in (13).

(13)   piuttosto andrei a chiedere l'elemosina '...I would rather go ask for alms.'
(http://www.theo.it/R&L/inmorte.html)

Like *rather*, *piuttosto* has the appearance of a comparative form (>*più* 'more' + *tosto* 'soon'), although since *tosto* is now literary, there is a certain opacity to

the form. Again like *rather*, there is a separate root that now means 'soon', *presto*. Quite unlike rather, however, *piuttosto* does not resemble a verb (except that it ends in *-o* like first person singular indicative forms).

In Italian, the chance that an adverb will essentially accidentally resemble a verb, inflected or otherwise, is slim because verbs have a characteristic set of shapes, while in English this is not the case. In the end, a number of factors have to come together for the kind of shift shown by *rather* to take place. Thus we do not see such changes often. Since this type of change is one of the major kinds that contradict the appearance of unidirectionality and it is relatively infrequent, researchers have been led to believe that (apparent) unidirectionality is a significant phenomenon.

6.   A unified model of lexical category change
The case of *rather*, then, suggests a model of language change that does not rely on a simple, one-dimensional view of language, but rather a conceptualization of lexical space with at least two dimensions, if not more (see Figure 2).

Figure 2—A two-dimensional model for category changes


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                  adverb
                    ↓
verb    ↔      auxiliary → clitic → affix

              preposition
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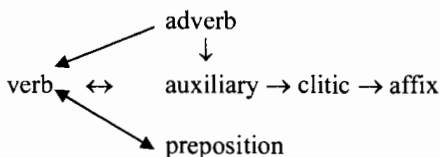
On such a view of the relationships among lexical categories, the debate over unidirectionality takes on a less compelling character. At the same time, we are more likely to recognize patterns previously overlooked because researchers were only looking in a restricted set of places for their data.

7.   Coda: Lowered standards and improved research
In the course of conducting the research for this paper, I was reminded of certain difficulties associated with researching non-standard language forms. Beyond the well-known obersver's paradox is the fact that in certain kinds of contexts, the very fact that these forms are non-standard excludes them from appearing. In this section I argue that the relatively untamed nature of the World Wide Web is a boon to the linguistic researcher working on some kinds of non-standard patterns.

While some might think of the internet as a place where important standards are being violated daily, in my research I found that not only is there a great degree of systematicity and order—how could it be otherwise if the medium is to be used for communication?—but that there is also the added benefit of increased likelihood of appearance of certain linguistic forms. The case of *rather* shows this well, for when we compare a corpus of materials that adhere fairly well to these standards, namely the SARA corpus (http://sara.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/lookup.html),

we find no examples of verbal *rather*, while on the Internet, we find many examples.

7.1 Complications associated with 'lowered' standards

Along with the increased research possibilities of the unregulated nature of the internet come certain complications. Foremost among these is that when using the internet as a corpus, one must keep in mind that some tasks will require extra effort. One example is performing word frequency counts or distribution analyses; a search for *receive*, for instance, would be more successful if one also searched for *recieve* (and possibly other variants). Of course there is a good chance that additional variants may occur that the researcher will not be able to anticipate, but the same is true of research with an unfamiliar spoken language.

7.2 Directions for future research on the Internet

My experience in researching the distribution of verbal *rather* strongly suggests that use of the internet as a new kind of corpus holds a great deal of promise so long as researchers keep in mind, as they should in all research situations, the importance of context to data they obtain.

Appendix: Examples of verbal *rather*

Zionism was born in the late 1800s, the Jews did not want to leave their countires, no need to mention on how the Zionists were fought & attack, both politically & physically, by the Jewish peoples across europe, but thanks to the Holocaust that left the Jews to no choice but to immigrate to Russia, US, and England, you know like every one esle know that the bulk of the Jews **rathered** to go to russia than going to the "Promised land".
www.salam-shalom.net/ salam-shalom/arcjan27.htm

LBJ much **rathered** to fight a war against poverty and make his vision of a Great Society a reality, but performing in the shadow of an assassinated president did not afford him that luxury.
www.coe.uh.edu/ hypergroups/courses/ hist3322/0043.html

Webster noted for 2.2m I would have **rathered** a contractor do this.
www.easton.ma.us/Directory/ selectmen/minutes/min9-5-00.h

But I would have **rathered** a slightly better pc for slightly more...
www.linuxsa.org.au/mailing-lis 2001-01/429.html

"I think the players would have **rathered** to play on when the break came, but we have the chance when we go back to show what we can do again."
www.celticfc.co.uk/newsdesk/ latest_news/01- 01/am_21_2009.htm

Erris themselves would have **rathered** to take the full Complement of points on offer but at least a point keeps them within touching distance of the leaders.
www.mayo-ireland.ie/WPeopl WP9809/WP980909/Sport.htm

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