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THE RISE OF *HAD BETTER* STRUCTURE

This paper analyses the diachronic development of English HAD BETTER (and HAD RATHER) structure(s). It is argued that the original construction out of which HAD BETTER/RATHER developed and which contained the verb BEON 'be' could be substituted by a new construction employing HAD by virtue of the fact that these two verbs in a great number of contexts are devoid of any cognitive content leading to their mutual interchangeability (§1). Section 2 is devoted to the examination of the development of the construction in question. In section 3 it is shown how the mechanisms and principles of grammaticalisation set out by Lehmann (1982) [2002], Hopper (1991) and Heine (2003) [2005] apply in this particular case of grammaticalisation. The bulk of language illustrations comes from the *Dictionary of Old English*, the *Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse* and the *Helsinki Corpus of English Texts*. The references to the actual works follow the pattern of the first two electronic corpora.

1. BE vs. HAVE rivalry

At first sight, the verbs 'have' and 'be' are quite distinct from each other. However, being the verbs of very low semantic content, they could often be used almost interchangeably, for instance, a locative interpretation of HABBAN is possible already in Old English: example (1a) is a case in point.

(1) a. ***her beoð*** *swyþe genihtsume weolocas, of þam bið geweorht se weolocreada tælgh,*
here are very plentiful whelks of them is made the whelk-red dye
... ***hit hafað*** *eac þis land sealtseaþas; &* ***hit hafaþ*** *hat wæter, & hat baðo ælcere*
it has also this land salt-springs and it has hot water and hot springs all
yldo
men
'There are whelks in abundance, the red dye is made from them. This land also has salt-springs and hot water and hot springs for all men.'

(850–950) Bede 1 0.26.9

b. & *we ne durron na mare awritan on englisc þonne ðæt leden **hæfð**,*
   and we not dared no more write   in English   than   that Latin has
   'And we dared not translate into English more than there is in Latin.'

   (c. 11th) ÆGenPref 94

c. *se [Autumnus] gæð on VII idus Augusti to tune; and he **byð** þry monðas,*
   the autumn   goes on 7   ides August to town and he is three   months
   *and he hæfð emniht, and he **hæfð** <twa and> hundnigontig daga, and he byð*
   and he has equinox and he has   two and   ninety   days and he is
   drigge and ceald.
   dry   and cold
   'Autumn goes to the town on the seventh of August, and it is three months long,
   and it has an equinox, and it has ninety–two days and it is dry and cold.'

   (c. 1011) ByrM 1 2.1.405

Apparently, in (1a) the meaning of *hafað* is identical with the preceding *beoð* where the normally possessive verb functions practically as a copula establishing a locative relation between the subject and the object. An analogical situation to the one in (1a) is observable in (1b). It is worthwhile to note that 'have' and 'be' in (1c) and (1d) are virtually interchangeable – both verbs are preceded by the same subject and followed by an expression denoting a period of time. In short, these examples above palpably demonstrate that the semantic distance between *have* and *be* is minimal.

Additionally, the rivalry between 'have' and 'be' is clearly noticeable when the two verbs function more like auxiliaries rather than full verbs. Visser (1963–1973 [2002]: 1471ff.) examines in detail the advent of *is to do with* construction in the twentieth century in lieu of *has to do with* – present in language since Mediaeval English. Another example concerns an innovative use of BE in the perfect tense with transitive verbs. Professor Stephen Nagle (p.c.) illustrates this phenomenon with genuine examples from Southern American English in (2):

(2) a. *He must be finished it by already.*
    b. *I'll be broken another tennis rocket.*
    c. *He must be got a new one.*

Such exchangeability of HAVE and BE must be due to a very high frequency of appearance of these lexemes, which in turn has resulted in their desemanticisation to the point where they are nothing more than meaningless phonetic substance (compare also *be gotta* as in *What I'm gotta do first ...*, or *I'm gotta get*)[1].

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[1] More examples of HAVE and BE competition are discussed in, e.g., Łęcki (2008: Ch. 2).

2. The development of HAD BETTER

In Present-Day English HAD BETTER functions as a modal (see Palmer 1979: 69f.) in that it does not take the third person singular present tense inflection, it is followed by a bare infinitive and the negation is formed by attaching *not* directly to the verb rather than by employing the operator DO. Mention should be made that *hadn't better* negates the predicate, thus, in this respect, it is closer to the core modals than, e.g., HAVE TO. The meaning of this construction is similar but not identical to *ought to* and *should* and is paraphrasable by *it would be better for someone to V*[2]. Although, semantically, HAD BETTER is comparable to *ought to* and *should*, historically, it has little to do with these modal verbs.

The original construction out of which HAD BETTER derives is composed of the verb BEON 'be' accompanied by BET 'better' or, alternatively, by a comparative form of LEOF (OE *leof, liof*; pre-Teut *leubho-* (cf. OE *lufu* 'love') 'beloved', 'dear', 'precious', 'desirable') and a Noun Phrase (usually a pronoun) in the dative case followed by a *that*-clause. Compare the examples in (3):

(3) a. **betere him is þæt** *he þæs dæges hit forga*
    better he-DAT is that he the day's it forgo
    'It is better for him to refrain from it this day.'

    Conf 3.1.1 (Raith O) 3.14

  b. **nis us, la, betere þæt** *we bugon ongean to Egypta lande?*
    not-is we-DAT lo better that we go against to Egipt's land
    KJV: 'were it not better for us to return into Egypt?'

    Num 14.3

  c. **mænegum men is leofre þæt** *he ær self swelte ær he gesio his*
    many-DAT:PL man-DAT:PL is rather that he sooner self die sooner he see his
    wif & his bearn <sweltende>.
    wife and his child dying
    'Many a man would rather die himself than see his wife and children die.'

    (c. 880) Bo 10.22.31

Prima facie, the original construction does not have much in common with HAD BETTER where the NP is in the Nominative case and, instead of a *that*-clause, a bare infinitive is used. Nonetheless, the first signs of the change in progress can be seen already in Old English: the NP could occasionally be expressed in the Nominative case especially when it was *hit* 'it' but, as Kilpiö (p.c.) notes, *hit* occurs in an anticipatory use referring to the following clause, thus this point does not have to be analysed as a marker of the ongoing change. Consider example (4):

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[2] A detailed description of various uses of *had better* can be found in, e.g., Westney (1995: 181ff.).

(4) a. *ða cwæð he to his geferan   þæt **hit**   betere wære þæt hig þa*
then said he to his companions that it-NOM better were that they the
mæssan hæfdon.
mass had
'Then he said to his companions that it would be better to celebrate a mass.'
(1050–1150) Leof 66

   b. *& cwæð þæt **hyt**   wære betere þæt an man swulte for folc*
and said that it-NOM were better that one man die   for folk
King James Version: 'that it was expedient that one man should die for the
people.'
(c. 990) Jn (WSCp) 18.14

However, a verb in the infinitive following this structure could sporadically appear in
Old English and it could be used either with *to* (5a) or without the verbal particle (5b):

(5) a. *is him   leofre **to licganne** on his lichaman lustum.*
is he-DAT rather to lie   in his bodily   pleasures
'He had better lie in his material pleasures.'
(c. 1000) ÆHom 6 202

   b. *betere is **gehihtan** on drihten þonne gehihtan on ealdrum*
better is trust   in Lord   than   trust   in chiefs
'It is better to believe in God than in rulers.'
PsGlG 117.9

In early Middle English, the infinitive appears with a much greater frequency while
the *that*-clause is in retreat. Other nouns except IT are still marked for the Dative case
and HABBEN and RATHER are not attested in the construction yet. Consider the ex-
amples in (6):

(6) a. ***Heom**   wære **bætere þæt** heo wrohton alle dæʒ on þam halʒan restandæʒ.*
they-DAT were better that they work   all day on the holy Sabbath.
c1175 (?OE) Bod.Hom.(Bod 343) 70/27

   b. *Forr miccle **bettre iss to þe mann. To don** all hiss unnþannkess god þan ifell*
for much   better is to the man   to do all his against-will's good than evil
hise þannkess.
his will's
'For it is much better for man to do good unwillingly than evil willingly.'
?c1200 Orm. (Jun 1) 7192

   c. *Hier we habbeð ilierned ðat **it is betere to læten** all ðat te mann awh.*
here we have   learned that it is better to give up all that the man owns
a1225 (c1200) Vices & V.(1) (Stw 34) 69/4

   d. *Swa he stonc to þe swin þet ham **was leoure to adrenchen** ham seoluen*
so he stank of the swine that them was rather to suffocate   themselves
þen forte beoren him.
than to   bear   him
c1230 (?a1200) Ancr.(Corp-C 402) 118/23

The first examples of this structure containing HAVE appear at the beginning of
the late Middle English period (7). Note that HAVE is almost invariably realised by
a past subjunctive form *had* ("modal preterite" in Visser's 1963–1973 [2002]: 761 ff.
nomenclature). The subject is used in the Nominative case and both LEVERE and
BETTRE are followed by an infinitive rather than a *that*-clause[3]. It needs to be ob-
served that throughout late Middle English the *to*-infinitive ((7a), (7c)) occurs inter-
changeably with a bare infinitive ((7b), (7d)).

(7) a. ***Leouere heo hadde to beon*** *Nonne þane beon i-widdet to wiue.*
　　　 rather　 she　had　 to be　　nun　than　be　 married as wife
　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　c1300 *SLeg.* (LdMisc 108) 197/2

　　 b. ***Thei had*** *welle* ***lever haue*** *bene stille.*
　　　 they had　 well rather have been still

　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　c1340 Hampole, Prose Tr. (1866) 25

　　 c. ***He hadde lever*** *hymself* ***to morder,*** *and dye, Than …*
　　　 he had　 rather himself to kill　　and die than …
　　　　　　　　　　　c1430 (c1386) Chaucer LGW (Benson-Robinson) 1536

　　 d. & 　so ***had better haf*** *ben þen* britned to noȝt.
　　　 and so had　better have been then cut　　to nothing
　　　 'and so (he) had better have been killed then.'

　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　c1400 (?c1390) Gawain (Nero A.10) 680

Apart from the past subjunctive form of HAVE before LEVERE, BETTRE or RATHER,
the indicative is also sometimes attested in Middle English, for example, (8)

(8) a. *but* ***leuer we hauen to be slayn*** *in oure treuþ, þan ȝelde vs to ȝow.*
　　　 but rather we have　 to be slain　 in our　faith than yield us to you
　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　c1400 Brut-1333 (Rwl B.171) 219/23

　　 b. *But* ***ȝe haue leuer schortly for to dye,*** *Rather þan lyue and to haue a schame.*
　　　 but you have rather shortly for to die　rather than live and to have a shame
　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　c1425 (a1420) Lydg. TB (Aug A.4) 1.2502

This situation lasts until about the end of the sixteenth century – the latest example
cited by *OED* (*s.v. have* def. 22b) of HAVE in the indicative form preceding LEVERE,
BETTRE or RATHER comes just from that time:

(9)　 *Poesie … like Venus …* ***hath rather*** *be troubled in the net with Mars, then
　　　 enjoy the homilie quiet of Vulcan.*

　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(1596) Sidney, Apol. Poetrie (Arb.) 61

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[3] A clause complementing HAD LEVERE/BETTRE/RATHER was used only marginally in Mid-
dle English, e.g.:
I had rather that ye　never maryd　in yowyr lyffe.
I had rather that you never married in your　life

　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(1478) Paston 5.325

Towards the close of the Middle English period the lexeme RATHER starts to occur in the sense of 'better', 'preferable' (cf. *MED*: *s.v. rāther(e* (adj.comp.) def. (e)):

(10)   *His subgitz had lever and **wolden rather** repaire yider, yan to any Toune in*
        his servants had rather and would rather   return thither, than to any town in
        Flaundres, Holand, Zeeland, Brabant, or any oyer straunge parties,
        Flanders, Holland, Zeeland, Brabant, or any other foreign countries
                                                                          (1429) RParl. 4.360a

Although RATHER was originally preceded by WOULD, without a considerable time lag this auxiliary began to interchange with HAVE as examples in (11) illustrate:

(11) a. *I [the Devil]...**wold rather** hate God and passe [exceed] him in wyrship than*
        love him.
                                                          (a1475) Rev.St.Bridget (Gar 145) 77/20
    b. *I **had rathir** be hewyn in   pyesemealys.*
        I had rather be hewn into pieces
                                                              (a1470) Malory Wks. (Win-C) 383/4

At the beginning of the early Modern English period LEVERE was dropped in favour of RATHER, compare (12):

(12) a. *Whether **had you leiffer haue**: payne or blisse?*
        which   had you rather have pain   or bliss
                                                       1607(?a1425) Chester Pl.(Hrl 2124) 416/458
    b. *Whether **had you rather have**: paine or blesse?*
                                                          1592 Chester Pl. (Add 10305) 2.166

In early Modern English HAD almost completely supplants WOULD before RATHER. In all Shakespeare's works, for instance, HAD RATHER appears as many as eighty times whereas WOULD RATHER is attested merely three times.
     For clarity's sake, it should be mentioned that in the Middle English period there developed a similar construction to WOULD/HAD RATHER, i.e. WOULD SOONER. Consider the examples in (13):

(13) a. *Ich þe **wold soner** ȝiue Þis to foules, so mot y liue.*
        I you would sooner give this to birds   so might I live
                                                      c1330 (?a1300) Arth.& M.(Auch) 4153
    b. *For god **wole sonere** here many pore riȝtfully criynge vengaunce þan*
        For God would sooner hear many poor rightfully crying   vengeance than
        a lord &   many ypocritis.
        a lord and many hypocrites
                                                   ?c1430 (c1400) Wycl.Serv.& L.(Corp-C 296) 240

But since this structure has practically never been used with HAD, and it is such constructions that are the subject of the investigation here, it is not given any more attention in this work.

The late Middle English period enjoyed also the rise of an impersonal use of HAVE in the concerning structure. For instance,

(14) a. **Hym hadde lever** *asondre* **shake**
   him had   rather apart   fall
                a1425(?a1400) RRose (Htrn 409) 5392

  b. *Aftur þem radly   he ran;* **hym had bettur haue** *bene styll.*
   after them quickly he ran him had better have been still
         c1450(a1425) MOTest.(SeldSup 52) 12574

The reasons behind such an expansion may have been twofold. Firstly, HAVE, being a modal verb, could acquire impersonal properties by an analogical extension with other (semi-)modal verbs at that time such as *ouen* 'ought', *moten* 'must', *neden* 'need', *thurven* 'be necessary', cf. Denison (1993: 314f.). Secondly, the direct continuation of the original construction with the verb *ben* 'be' freely employed the Noun Phrase in the Dative case throughout the Middle English period (the later, the less frequently though); consequently, given the similitude of the meaning, the similarity of the form should come as no surprise. A few examples are given in (15):

(15) a. **Him hadde be** *beter, he hadde hem slein!*
   him had   been better he had   them slain
          c1330(?c1300) Bevis (Auch) 57/1204

  b. **Me were leuere** *deed [Hrl: betere me were ded] Þen þus aliue to bee.*
   me were rather dead   better me were dead than thus alive to be
             ?a1300 Maximian (Dgb 86) 260

  c. **Hym had been better** *to have goon more a-sware.*
   him   had been better to have gone more aside
          c1460(?c1400) Beryn (Nthld 55) 586

The earliest examples of *had*-contraction after a personal pronoun in HAD BETTER/RATHER structure that I have managed to identify come from Robert Laneham's letter (1575):

(16) a. *the Churl'd better let it go, and then it'll come and sing to him every day,*
            (1575) Robert Laneham's letter, Page LVI

  b. *But instead of it they'd better say 'the gow[ld]en Paternoster of deuocion,'*
          (1575) Robert Laneham's letter, Page CXVI

Yet it is worth observing that the cliticisied spelling of *had* before BETTER or RATHER was virtually not in existence until the eighteen century when *'d better* and *'d rather* are attested more regularly, for example:

(17) a. *and for that reason, I should think, you'd **better** let him come down.*
                              1740 Samuel Richardson, *Pamela* or *Virtue Rewarded*
   b. *The poor beasts have smoked for it: rabbit me, but I'd **rather** ride forty miles*
       after a fox than ten with such varment.
                              1773 Oliver Goldsmith, *She Stoops to Conquer*. Act the Fifth.

Relatively a recent development in this construction is a loss of *had* and the acquisition of the modal properties by BETTER. The first examples cited by *OED* (*s.v. better* def. 4(b)) with *had* left out come from the first half of the nineteenth century, e.g.:

(18)   *... I thought I **better** hire out a few days and get slicked up a little.*
                              1831 S. Smith, *Major Downing* (1834) 65

Visser (1963–1973 [2002]: 1827) claims that BETTER functioning as an auxiliary is of American English provenance but now it is equally frequent in British English colloquial speech as well. He cites a genuine example *I better ... go now, bettn't I?* which is supposed to be based on the sentences of the type: *I ought to ... go, now, oughtn't I?*

3. HAD BETTER in the grammaticalisation perspective

In section 2 it has been claimed that the rise of HAD BETTER is an instance of a competition between two semantically almost empty verbs: HAVE and BE. While that is the case, this development is much more intricate and, in actual fact, it might constitute a classic example of a grammaticalisation path of HAVE. In the following paragraphs it will be shown that the changes that have affected HAD BETTER can be nicely accommodated by the theory of grammaticalisation and how the mechanisms and principles of grammaticalisation set out by Heine (2003 [2005]: 579), Hopper (1991: 22) and Lehmann (1982 [2002]: 108ff.) apply in this particular case.
   Heine (2003) [2005] maintains that the earliest process a lexical item undergoes on its way towards a more grammatical status is desemanticisation involving a loss or generalisation in meaning content. In the case of English HAVE **desematicisation** must have happened in proto-Germanic and one can only reconstruct the way the meaning of HAVE was bleached from 'grasp' to 'possess' and generalised to accommodate the whole range of more abstract possessive (and other) notions. According to Heine, the next step on a grammaticalisation pathway is **extension**. In our case, extension involves the introduction of HAVE to a new context, i.e. before BETTER, which brings about the rise of a new grammatical meaning (see example (7)). Extension is followed almost without exception by the process of **decategorialisation**, i.e. 'loss in morphosyntactic properties characteristic of the lexical or other less grammaticalised forms' (Heine 2003 [2005]: 579). In the case of the development of HAD BETTER, a loss of morphosyntactic properties is manifested by the recession of the indicative forms of HAVE ((8) and (9)) leaving only the past subjunctive *had* (some other features have been enumerated at the beginning of section 2, such as NOT negation). Decate-

gorialisation can be related to Lehmann's (1982) [2002] process of obligatorification, whereby paradigmatic variability of a linguistic sign is reduced, i.e. the speakers' freedom of choice of various items in a paradigm decreases, which is the case here. According to Heine, cliticisation can be treated as an indication of decategorialisation and this phenomenon is also attested in our case (see (16) and (17)). When *had* is cliticised (usually to a personal pronoun), it loses its phonetic substance, which is a characteristic feature of the final stage of grammaticalisation. An obvious instance of **erosion** is a complete loss of HAVE before BETTER (as exemplified in (18)), which in fact is consonant with what the grammaticalisation theory predicts.

The principles of grammaticalisation put forward by Hopper (1991) apply to the development of HAD BETTER as well. The very presence of the original structure (*him were better* + that-*clause* type) at the time when HAD BETTER was used is in concurrence with the principle of **layering** where an older layer coexists with a newer one. Compare examples (7) and (19) which come from the 14th century.

(19) a.   *Zuych can zigge his pater noster;* **him were betere þet** *he were stille,*
      such can recite his Pater Noster him were better that he were still

                                      (1340) Ayenb.(Arun 57) 115/9

   b.   *ʒit* **war me leuere þat** *þai so ware Þan þi son þat greues*   *me*
      it were me rather that they so were than your son that does harm me
      sare.
      intensively

                        a1425(?a1350) 7 Sages(2) (Glb E.9) 3169

The principle of **specialisation**, i.e. the reduction of formal alternatives of a grammaticalising construction, which may be related to Lehmann's (1982) [2002] lowering of the structural scope of a grammaticalising expression, can be exemplified by the displacement of *that*-clause by an infinitive and later by supplanting a *to*-infinitive by a bare one. The disappearance of the Dative in favour of the Nominative case also constitutes an instance of specialisation. The ultimate substitution of the indicative forms of HAVE accompanied by LEVERE, BETTRE or RATHER by its past subjunctive realisation falls under the rubric of **decategorialisation** – another parameter cited by Hopper (1991), cf. also Heine above.

In the development of HAD BETTER structure two processes defined by Lehmann (1982) [2002] deserve to be mentioned. One is **fixation** – a process responsible for a decrease in the syntagmatic variability of an item undergoing grammaticalisation. With reference to HAD BETTER, the decline of a positional mutability manifests itself in the establishing of the following word order: 'NP + had + better + infinitive + object' while in Middle English various different syntagms were possible, e.g. (7a), (7c) and (8a). The other observable grammaticalisation process pertaining to the rise of HAD BETTER that has been set out by Lehmann (1982) [2002] is **coalescence**. It involves an increase in syntagmatic cohesion from an independent syntactic item to an affix or just a sheer phonetic element. The growing intimacy between the particular components of the grammaticalising structure is reflected in the virtual loss of adverb

interpolation in Present-Day English while it was possible in the Middle English period, compare (7b) and (8b). The cliticisation of *had* to *'d* is another sign of increasing bondedness of HAD BETTER; note that *'d* can safely be treated as meaningless phonetic substance since it can be substituted by another grammatical morpheme – *would*, and this phenomenon is also predicted by grammaticalisation theory.

4. Conclusion

In this article, I have analysed the development of the HAD BETTER/RATHER structure – one which has not received much attention on the part of historical linguists. It turned out that it was in late Middle English that the language enjoyed the rise of the HAD BETTER along with HAD RATHER (originally HAD LEVERE) constructions. I have shown that the development of the HAD BETTER/RATHER structure can be easily accommodated by grammaticalisation principles. Well-established mechanisms of grammaticalisation such as desemanticisation, extension, decategorialisation, erosion, layering, specialisation, fixation and coalescence are all observable in the rise of HAD BETTER/RATHER in English. This process of grammaticalisation provides more concrete evidence in support of the thesis that the particular components of grammaticalisation are interconnected and do not occur in an accidental order: it is practically always desemanticisation and extension that happen first feeding the subsequent mechanisms of decategorialisation and erosion.

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