

# Modality and gradation: Comparing the sequel of developments in ‘rather’ and ‘eher’

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on some effects and possible causes in the concatenation of two micro-developments undergone by words like *rather*. While the first one maps its semantics from an original temporal-based comparison to modal meanings, the second takes it from modal ordering to the modification of gradable predicates. A comparison is drawn with the parallel sequel of developments observed in the case of German *eher* (‘sooner, rather’) especially with respect to the apparently distinct flavors of modal ordering available in the two items.

## 1. Introduction and background

The goal of this paper is to analyze key aspects in the meaning, structure, and history of the representation of words like *rather*. I take them to remain in need of both diachronic and synchronic explanation despite the interest and work that has been conducted from several perspectives (e.g. Thompson 1972, Dieterich & Napoli 1982, König & Traugott 1988, Rissanen 2008, Gergel 2009, van der Auwera & De Wit 2011, Kratzer & von Stechow 2014). Given the comparative nature of such words and the modal flavors involved, the issues addressed will be tied directly to semantic change in the areas of intensionality and degrees (cf. e.g. Kratzer 2012 for theoretical discussion). In a nutshell, the paper investigates the hypothesis that two major spirals are involved, where I use the term to mean essentially “language change taking place in a systematic manner and direction” (van Gelderen, this volume). I will present telling contrasting data from German *eher* (‘sooner, earlier, rather’), a word which seems to be undergoing a partially similar change with regard to some of the major semantic building blocks, but which also presents an interesting counterfoil due to distinct morphosyntactic patterns and readings.

The essentials of the first change undergone by *rather* are – at least at first glance – quickly told: an earlier temporal-based comparative adverb (‘sooner, earlier, more quickly’) has developed modal as well as metalinguistic meanings. The new meanings of *rather* can be paraphrased roughly as “more preferably” in the modal cases and perhaps as “more appropriately” in the case of the metalinguistic ones. According to Giannakidou & Yoon (2011), the meaning of metalinguistic comparatives can ultimately be subsumed under preference as well.<sup>1</sup> Metalinguistic comparatives are not the specific concern of this paper, but I will point them out when there are potential confounds. I will show that a range of meanings is possible on trajectories like those of *rather* and that they have a common core in the original ordering relation. The contrast with German *eher* will be argued to be useful in illustrating the variety of meanings with a change that is still ‘in progress’ (in the sense of

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<sup>1</sup> But see Morzycki (2011) for a different view of metalinguistic comparatives, which is based on the semantic notion of imprecision.

being transparent synchronically). I will follow, but also sharpen in some respects, an earlier account of such developments (Gergel 2009) with respect to timing issues, possible triggering factors and the range of possible and available meanings.

In a second diachronic step to be investigated (let's call this spiral number two), a modificational use comes into existence (cf. (1)). In this connection, I will also compare English *rather* to German *eh*er in discussing the development. An interesting fact is that despite differences in the shifts towards modal meanings (i.e. inherited from the initial spiral with its origins in temporality), the end results of the two follow-up spirals are exactly parallel data as in (1), which I will refer to – for descriptive purposes – as modificational *eh*er/*rather*:

- (1)    a. *Leo ist eher groß.*  
          b. *Leo is rather tall.*

The overall development of German *eh*er, 'earlier' is quite close in terms of the basic trajectory undergone. Although there are quite drastic distributional restrictions, as I will point out, *eh*er can still be recognized as a temporal comparative in appropriate contexts, alongside modal and modificational uses. At the same time, I will show that rolling up the case of *eh*er does considerably more than serving decorative purposes. It helps uncover key points in each of the two spirals. Regarding the first spiral (temporal to modal), the contrast with *eh*er will show interesting differences. Modality can be involved in more ways than this is visible in English today (and it is not always straightforward to reconstruct modal flavors from earlier stages). This will raise the question why English *rather* is so narrowly connected to preferential (i.e. ultimately bouletic) modality in current usage. With respect to the second spiral (modal to modifier, as in *rather tall*), the comparison with German will reveal interesting similarities despite a different chronology and qualitative differences in the first spirals. The organization of the paper follows the developments and the cross-linguistic comparisons take place within the respective sections. Thus, section two concentrates on the first spiral. That is, after a consideration of the temporal input morphemes, it will consider the modal flavors obtained. In the third section, the focus will be on the development leading up to the modificational use. The fourth section will specifically discuss issues related to the domain of cycles or spirals with respect to the two developments under investigation.

## 2. Comparative temporality shifting to modality

### 2.1. Essentials of the trajectory: the temporal-based scale and facets of its erosion

#### 2.1.1. English *rather*

In this section, I present - and seek to sharpen the analysis of - some of the key facts related to *rather*'s early history. The Old English cognates of *rather* could function as adjectives (viz. *(h)ræþ* and variants) and adverbs (cf. *(h)ræþe*, also with many variants; overall, adverbs of the stem are more broadly attested than adjectives, e.g. in the YCOE; Taylor et al. 2003). The meanings of the adverb are temporal-based in the sense that they range along the lines of 'soon', 'early', 'quick(ly)', 'swift(ly)'. The adverb and the adjective are almost indistinguishable morphologically, as in most cases of adverbs and adjectives in Old English. A version *hræðlice* existed in Old English, i.e. with the cognate of the modern adverbial ending *-ly*, but it interestingly did not take off towards the regularized use of *-ly* in Middle English.<sup>2</sup> Illustrations for Old English temporal-based *rath(er)* are given in (2) (from the

<sup>2</sup> Later on, Lowth's notorious prescriptive grammar of 1762 complains explicitly about the lack of adverbial endings in adverbial contexts in the writings of several English authors (including Shakespeare), but it does not

Penn-Helsinki-York corpora of historical English, in this case the YCOE corpus, Taylor et al. 2003; cf. Gergel 2009).

- (2) a. *On Sunnandæge mon sceal **hraðor** arisan to uhtsange.*  
 ‘On Sunday one shall earlier rise to morning song.’ (cobenrul, BenR:11.35.4.476)
- b. *Quirinus þa eode to ðam cwarterne **hraðe**,*  
 ‘Quirinus then went to the prison quickly.’ (coaelhom, ÆHom 24:78.3806)
- c. *Forþon hi ne besceawiaþ no **hu late** hi on þysne middangeard acennede*  
 therefore they not consider not how late they on this world born  
*wurdon, & **hu raþe** hi him eft of gewitan sceolan, ...*  
 were and how soon they him afterwards of depart shall  
 ‘Therefore they didn’t consider how late they were born on this world and how soon they would depart from it.’ (coblick, HomS\_17\_[BIHom\_5]:59.88.735)

While the sentence in (a) illustrates a comparative form (*hraðor*), the adverb we are interested in (just as the adjective) could naturally also feature the positive, as shown in (3b). Example (3c) features an implicit question in which *raþe*, ‘early’, contrasts with the antonym *late*, ‘late’: *hu late/hu-raþe*, ‘how late/how early’.<sup>3</sup> *Hu* in (3c) is an interrogative degree word in conjunction with the positive form *raþe*. More degree words could co-occur with the positive forms of *rather*, for instance *swiðe*, ‘very’; i.e. we can assume a largely well-behaved distribution of a gradable adverb.

Positive and comparative forms of *rather* can still express temporal meanings in the Middle English period, as illustrated in (3) (originally from PPCME2, Kroch & Taylor 2000):

- (3) a. *and al **so raþe** he was iwarisd of his maladie.*  
 ‘and all so soon he was cured of his sickness.’ (CMKENTSE, 218.108)
- b. *for þat Sonday was of þe **raþer** 3ere, and nou3t of þe newe 3ere þat ...*  
 for that Sunday was of the earlier year and not of the new year that...  
 ‘because Sunday was of the earlier year and not of the new year that...’  
 (CMPOLYCH, VI, 101.709)

If *rathe* was a well-behaved adverb originally (i.e. with a positive in the first place) and *rather*, the original comparative, is the only form existing today, we need to raise at least the following question: what was the relationship between the positive, the comparative (and the superlative)? Let us consider the superlative briefly, an example of which is given in (4)–drawn from the YCOE corpus (Taylor et al. 2003).

- (4) *& for oft hit wyrð **raðost** forloren þonne hit wære leofost gehealden.*  
 and for often it is fastest/earliest lost when it is dearest held  
 (cowulf, WHom\_13:12.1225)

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go as far as to invoke a form for *rather* that is morphologically (overtly) marked as adverbial, i.e. no *\*rathly* is proposed, even though historically the ingredients for such a form would have been available. We will see below that an impediment towards such a development might have been a striking dispreference for the positive form altogether already in the Middle English period.

<sup>3</sup> Differences between senses of e.g. immediacy, rapidity and earliness will not be discussed here (cf. e.g. Stern 1931 and references cited there). What such senses have in common is the linearity of a temporal scale (or of closely related scales). My focus is on the transition towards scales which are distinct from temporality, such as modality. Stern (1931: 185ff) entertains the possibility that temporal-based changes pertaining to swiftness – more generally, not in the context of expressions like *rather* – could take place in either direction. A crucial feature of the meaning change on which the focus is placed here is that it is unidirectional and predicted to be so.

It turns out that we may set the superlative *per se* aside in terms of the key quantitative developments that may have influence the perception and the grammatical properties of the form. Such a form was attested (as illustrated above), but it never played a large quantitative role. For example, the 1.5 million-words YCOE corpus only has 25 examples of the superlative and the PPCME2 (Kroch & Taylor 2000) happens to contain no examples that are annotated as superlative.<sup>4</sup> This clearly does not mean that the superlative did not exist in Middle English, but simply that it was infrequent enough in a balanced corpus in which comparatives and positives were attested (s. below). A full productive paradigm of the original adverb and adjective could then ultimately not be upheld, given that the superlative seems to have been the first of its members to be prone to disuse on a broad basis.

But there is a development that I take to be more important towards singling *rather* out as a special item: a rise in the ratio of comparative forms (to the clear detriment of any other adverbial forms, i.e. not only the negligible superlative, but especially the positive) in the transition from Old to Middle English. While the temporal readings are still available in Middle English (and hence the development may go unnoticed), they are increasingly only expressed in the contexts of comparative morphemes. Moreover, the *-er* form and its variants are increasingly the only ones available at all in Middle English. For comparison: in the YCOE corpus there are (only) 51 comparative forms in a total of 535 adverbial *rath*- forms. This yields a proportion of 9.53% of comparatives in the total of forms used adverbially. But in Middle English (based on the PPCME2 corpus once more), the proportion is of 73/105, i.e. at a total 69.52 % of comparative forms in the overall number of adverbial forms. This indicates a ratio of the comparative that increased more than seven times between the averaged Old and Middle English periods. The overall incidence of the adverb decreases, but the comparative forms (i.e. *rather* and its spelling variants) become the clear absolute majority in this pool of data over time.

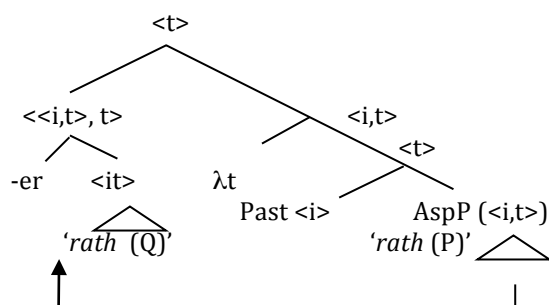
Establishing the exact disappearance date of *rath* forms can naturally only be given as a general tendency (archaic or other singular late uses cannot be excluded), but it appears that in the Early Modern English period it was hardly available in the general vocabulary of the then-emerging standard. There are three indications which lead me to this affirmation. One early piece of indication is that while Chaucer could still use *rath(er)* temporally, Caxton appears to be clearly more hesitant about it; the ambitious distributor of the new printing medium uses *rather*, but prefers to do so only with non-temporal meanings. Furthermore, dictionaries are known to take time to fully adapt to both new and disappearing forms. Taking such considerations into account, contemporary or later dictionaries can offer auxiliary evidence. The anonymous dictionary of 1598 entitled *The Works of our Ancient and Learned English Poet, Geoffrey Chaucer* (cf. Lancashire 2015) considers it necessary to translate *rath*. A later dictionary edited by John Ray (*A Collection of English Words not Generally Used*; 1674; see Lancashire 2015) considers *rath* to be a word that is explicitly not in general use and paraphrases it in the context of two expressions, listed one after the other as follows: “Rathe in the morning. i. e. early in the morning. Rath-ripe fruit, i. e. early fruit, fructus præcoces”. Last but not least, the PPCEME, Kroch et al. 2004, records no entries for positive *rath*. The PPCEME extends the original Helsinki basis for Early Modern English, i.e. it is a relatively large corpus within the family of syntactically annotated historical corpora. Even if the question of negative data remains (as always in historical linguistics), I take the findings presented to be indicative (by and large, i.e. at least in the grammars of most speakers) of the disappearance of the form *rath* and of temporal readings during Early Modern English. Having delimited the rough timeline of the temporal-based adverb, I turn to its analysis.

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<sup>4</sup> I searched the following forms in the corpus notation of the two corpora: *rath\**, *ra+t\**, *ra+d\**, *reth\**, *rad\**, *hrath\**, *hra+t\**, *hra+d\**, *hreth\**, *hrad\** coupled with the condition that they be superlatives. Notation: +t substitutes thorn, +d eth, and \* is a wild card (given that there are various endings attested).

Borrowing the technology from von Stechow's (2009) synchronic proposal for the semantics of comparisons of time, a simplified representation of *rather* on its basic temporal reading can be rendered as in (5) below with the corresponding semantic types indicated in brackets. I assume that the same representation applies to *eher*, 'earlier' on the temporal reading and to any similar comparative temporal adverb (e.g. *sooner*).

(5) Logical Form for temporal *rather* ('earlier')



As the arrow indicates, movement at the level of interpretation is crucially involved in this representation. (A more detailed background of the relatively standard semantic assumptions made is given in Gergel (2009)). The ontology involved includes saturated constituents such as  $\langle t \rangle$  (truth values), which can be 'opened up' via movement of the type known from Quantifier Raising. In fact, what we have in (5) is nothing but QR over times (entities of type  $\langle i \rangle$ ). The type  $\langle i, t \rangle$  stands for a set of times (or equivalently: the characteristic function of such a set). Following a common analysis in the semantics of comparison (cf. Heim 2001, Beck 2011 and references therein), the comparative morpheme is bracketed with the Q constituent above (i.e. the explicit 'than' clause/phrase, or the implicit term of comparison, as is frequently the case). More can be said about the representation, but suffice it for now to keep track of the fact that it involves movement as long as *rather* is interpreted as temporal.

To summarize, *rather* and *rath* had temporal meanings in Old and Middle English, but the positive gradually falls into disuse during the Early Modern period, after its frequency had already been considerably lowered in Middle English compared to Old English. The temporal comparative originally denoted by *rather* can be analyzed as a moved dependency at the level of Logical Form, i.e. a type of Quantifier Raising.

## 2.1.2. German *eher*

The ongoing development in the case of Modern German *eher*, 'early, soon' shows differences (it is not a cognate of *rather*), but a distributional similarity with the situation we have noticed for *rather* after the Middle English period is as follows: despite its availability as a temporal comparative adverb, *eher* does not show a well-attested and truly temporal positive adverbial form.<sup>5</sup> The stem with a temporal meaning is strikingly restricted in its distribution beyond the comparative. For example, the following sentences are marked at best:

<sup>5</sup> This does not mean that forms such as *eh(e)* cannot be found, but they show uses that have developed into different things; some instances are idiomatic as in the expression *wie eh und je*, 'as ever', or they have developed quite specialized meanings such as 'anyways, certainly' in Southern varieties of German; I give a version of the latter with ellipsis in a dialogue, specifically the fragment answer in (iB), a use observed, for instance, in Austrian varieties:

- (i) A: *Das bekomme ich auch hin.* B: *Ja, eh!*  
           this get I too PRT                   yes, EH

- (6) a. \**Wie eh(e) stehst du auf?* (ok: *früh*, ‘early’ instead of *eh(e)*)  
 how early get you up  
 ‘How early do you get up?’  
 b. \**Er war so eh(e) dran.* (ok: *früh*, ‘early’ instead of *eh(e)*)  
 he was so early on-it  
 ‘He was so early.’

This kind of behavior contrasts with both Old and Middle English, where the positive form not only existed freely with temporal meanings, but it could also be used with degree words, such as *so* or the interrogative *hu*, ‘how’, as we have seen. Neither an overt positive such as *sehr* ‘very’ nor e.g. an equative construction *so...wie*, ‘as... as’, appear to be quite right with *eh*, although they are just fine with the near-synonyms such as *früh* or *bald*, both meaning ‘early’.<sup>6</sup>

A superlative form *ehest-* is still available on temporal readings, cf. e.g. (7):

- (7) *Der eheste Termin ist in zwei Wochen.*  
 the earliest appointment is in two weeks  
 ‘The earliest possible appointment is in two weeks.’

But the impression of temporal normality is slightly perturbed in this corner of the paradigm as well. The example in (7) involved an adjective. First, a salient reading of (7) has a modal side message, as indicated in the translation. Second, the adverb *am ehesten* often induces a salient modal reading in current use.<sup>7</sup> I will not go through an entire list of degree constructions here, but in a few respects, the appearance of *eher* may seem to be more advanced in the relevant sense than e.g. Middle English *rather*, which for instance still allowed the degree word *so* with the positive (e.g. in Chaucer; cf. e.g. Gergel 2009).

A restriction with regard to the interface of meaning and intonation also becomes apparent in examples such as (8).

- (8) *Die kleinere Insel wird eher verschwinden.*

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‘I can get this done too.’

‘Yes, certainly!’

*Eh* had originally been a comparative itself in Old High German, translating Latin *prius*, ‘earlier’, (cf. Grimm & Grimm 1854-1961). (Modern) dictionaries such as *Duden* do not indicate temporal meanings of the positive adverb *eh(e)* at all (correctly, I believe). Finally, there is still a use of *ehe* in the sense of ‘before’ and in conjunction with full clauses. I assume that this is a preposition that takes full clauses due to the semantic equivalence of ‘earlier than’ and ‘before’. The reason I do not call this a complementizer is that it co-occurs with *dass*, ‘that’, itself in sentential contexts immediately preceding it: *ehe dass*, ‘before (that)’. Old English forms of *rath(er)* did not appear to select complementizers this way (thank you to a reviewer for raising the question). I take this to indicate that selecting for a complementizer cannot be a necessary condition for the development of modal meanings as those coupled with *rather*.

<sup>6</sup> I leave aside a discussion of measure phrases (e.g. *2m tall*) in the domain of temporality because their availability is even more restricted cross-linguistically, perhaps even to the point of being idiosyncratic. Even though German is often thought to be a language with a broad use of measure phrases (Schwarzschild 2009), the temporal domain is more restricted in this area. This also holds for *früh/spät*, ‘early/late’, unlike with their English counterparts, which are freely available (cf. *five minutes early/late*); the combination of *too* and a measure phrase is felicitous with *früh*, but not with *eh*. More generally, an acceptability study could offer a wider picture of the contrastive restrictions and their magnitudes.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. e.g. the following example brought up by a reviewer with a salient modal reading:

- (i) *Er wird am ehesten am Mittwoch kommen.*  
 he will on EH.SUP. on Wednesday come  
 ‘He will most likely come on Wednesday.’

the smaller island will sooner disappear  
'The smaller island will disappear sooner.'

For the sentence in (8) to receive a temporal reading, a pitch accent on the adverb is required (as indicated) and the predicate *verschwinden*, 'disappear' is deaccented. Its meaning can then be understood temporally as in the translation. More specifically, the comparison is with some contextually given entity via a phrasal comparative; e.g. by comparing the time interval when the smaller island will disappear with an interval given one way or another in the context (say the year 2050, due to expectations related to climate change). The comparison will then be based on asserting that the actual disappearance will be even earlier than at such an interval. A second possibility is that we compare, still on the time scale, but with another entity; e.g. the smaller island will disappear sooner than a contextually salient larger island. An additional pitch accent on the adjective appears to enhance this reading. In both cases, the comparison stays on the temporal scale. I will return to modal readings of the same type of configuration and the corresponding intonation in section 2.2.2.

Summarizing: at first sight, *ehler* seems to be a well-behaved modal comparison that wears its temporal-modal ambiguity on its sleeves synchronically, just like *rather* might have done at earlier stages. However, we have seen that restrictions are imposed on the form-interpretation mappings of temporal *ehler*. Among other restrictions, we noted that the form *eh* still exists, but while the comparative can be used with temporal meanings, the form *eh*, when used as an adverb (and not in the complementizer domain) only has non-temporal meanings in Present-day German. The additional restrictions observed enhance the point that we are not seeing semantic change in progress quite the way we might have expected to see it. On a currently popular view (e.g. Eckardt 2012 in a compositional framework), we might expect an overload of implicatures to cause a random and relatively regular item to change its core meaning. But there is an additional point. The item which has changed its core semantics is not a random synonym (e.g. *frü(er)*), but *eh(er)*, an item with a restricted distributional picture on its temporal meanings. Although the distributional restrictions are not identical, the same more general point appears to have held for *rather* in Late Middle and Early Modern English given that its appearance was increasingly restrictive.

## 2.2. Modal elements

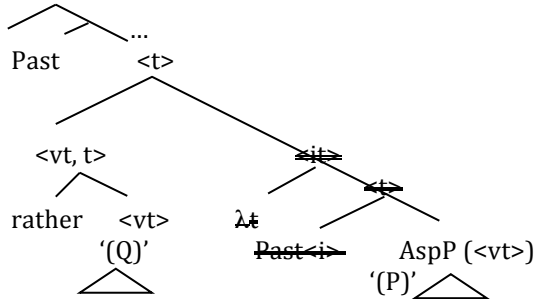
### 2.2.1. *Rather* as a modal relator marking preferences in Present-day English

While there is no trace of a temporal meaning left in Present-day English (PDE) *rather*, there is a quite prominent modal meaning, namely one of preference in it. This becomes apparent together with *would*, but also in isolation in appropriate contexts, as illustrated in (9) and (10), respectively. The *would*-less construction in PDE requires *rather* to be adjacent to the *than* clause. The constituent consisting of *rather* and the *than* clause can be fronted as a whole, or stay postposed, as long as the requirement for them to be adjacent (on the preference reading) is met. The usual prosodic preferences for longer constituents to go last may interact of course too (this is an orthogonal issue).

- (9) *Ben would rather eat the berries.*
- (10) *Ben ate the berries rather than take the meat from the fridge.*
- (11) *Rather than take the meat from the fridge, Ben ate the berries and stayed hungry.*

In such sentences there is no temporal meaning conveyed as an assertion and we encounter *rather* on its re-analyzed modal meaning. A first Logical Form representation that integrates the new meaning can be given as in (12) (cf. also Gergel 2009).

(12) Logical Form for the reanalyzed modal structure



In (12), the elements that were referring to times prior to the reanalysis (i.e. the ones containing <i> in their semantic types), cannot do so any longer and are eliminated from the interpretable structure. This corresponds to structural reduction in the relevant part at the level of interpretation. A higher Past node is added at the top of the tree. But this is attached to the LF that is already organized, i.e. to locate ranked preferences in time. What I assume, then, for preferential *rather* itself is that it ranks propositions P and Q with respect to desirability, requiring P to be more desirable than Q on such a scale. The pertinent propositions are viewed as sets of possible situations (or events) and P is considered more desirable than Q with respect to an individual's – say, a's – preferences. (This is usually the subject, i.e. Ben above.) The simple entry in (13) captures this fact:

$$(13) \quad [[\textit{rather}]] = [\lambda q: q \in D_{\langle v, t \rangle}. [\lambda p: p \in D_{\langle v, t \rangle}. q <_{\text{Des}, a} p]]$$

Assuming such an entry and a structure along the lines of (12) (see Gergel 2011 for further discussion regarding some of the effects involved in *rather* including actuality in the past) helps us make a case for structural reduction and for the elimination of a movement dependency. The latter has been widely discussed in diachronic syntax (Roberts & Roussou 2003, van Gelderen 2004). I suggest such mechanisms may also have an effect, and explanatory power, at the level of interpretation, as indicated in (12) above.

In what follows, I will argue that while preferences and bouletic modality are indeed a key component in the representation of *rather*, this is not part of a universal requirement for such spirals out of temporal readings. In general, it is one type of modality that can arise. I will proceed by beginning with an illustration of the modal flavors of German *ehler*. I will then return to *rather* to show that historically it had some other modal flavors as well. Although we will inspect different modal flavors, I will claim that the key semantic notion will still be an ordering as in (13).

### 2.2.2. The modal flavors of *ehler*

This section discusses *ehler*'s modal readings. The focus will be on the readings that can be conveyed by *ehler* alone, but I will also note a variety of modal readings that are available when *ehler* supports other (visible) modals.

A preliminary is in order: I will not discuss the potential temporal-precedence reading of *ehler* in all cases in which it is available. A related point is that even though sentences containing *ehler* can be ambiguous, in speech they are often disambiguated, not only via context, but also via intonation, albeit the relationship is not one-to-one. Consider (14), repeated from above, and its basic paraphrases in (15).



- (14) *Die kleinere Insel wird eher verschwinden.*  
 the smaller island will EHER disappear
- (15) a. ‘The small island will disappear sooner.’  
 b. ‘The small island is more likely to disappear.’<sup>8</sup>

We have seen that the temporal reading in (14) requires a deaccented predicate *verschwinden* and a pitch accent on the adverb. But this is a one-way implication. Consider things from the other perspective. When the focus is on the adverb in a sentence such as (14), the temporal reading becomes highly prominent, but – and this is where a good bi-conditional fails – it is not necessarily the only one. We turn to the modal reading next.

The distribution of the modal paraphrase given in b. is straightforward to get with a focus on the predicate, i.e. *verschwinden*, ‘disappear’ in (14). A speculation which comes to mind is that, since we are dealing with an epistemic reading, epistemic modality is less likely to bear focus. But this possible tendency (Drubig 2001) has exceptions even with epistemic modals and it turns out to be just a tendency in this case as well. Although the pertinent reading is less salient, focus on the adverb can be compatible with a modal reading as well. As is to be expected when focus interferes, the alternatives will vary. A focal accent on the predicate would typically be compatible with a context in which a straightforward possible alternative to ‘disappear’ is e.g. ‘not disappear’ (other alternatives can be invoked too, if they are made relevant). The focus on the adverb, on the other hand (on a modal reading), can bring out the higher likelihood of the small island to disappear (as opposed to, say, the likelihood of a contextually salient larger island to disappear, which may not disappear at all).<sup>9</sup>

Consider the modal readings possible for *eher* more closely. Recall that the primary reading of *rather* was related to preferences. But the modally flavored examples we have considered so far that featured *eher* had epistemic readings. Let us consider some more.

- (16) *Es wird eher regnen.*  
 it will rather rain  
 ‘It is more likely to rain.’
- (17) *Heute Abend legt eher Uwe auf.*  
 today evening sets rather Uwe up  
 ‘It’s quite likely that Uwe will be the DJ tonight.’

<sup>8</sup> An additional reading that a reviewer points out is that the smaller island is likely to disappear (notice: without ‘more’). I assume that one possibility is for this reading to be analyzed with an underspecified term of comparison. Another interesting possibility, I assume, is that *eher* decomposes on such readings at the level of interpretation into something like a (phonologically null) positive and ‘likely’.

<sup>9</sup> An interesting issue in the case of modal readings of *eher* arises also in interaction with the particle *noch*, ‘still’, which is itself also ambiguous between a temporal and other scalar meanings (in part similarly to English *still*). König (1991) and Hofstetter (2013) discuss some tendencies of *noch*, though not in connection with *eher*:

- (i) *Die kleinere Insel wird eher noch verschwinden.*  
 the smaller island will EHER still disappear

In a context such as (i) *noch* cannot receive a focus (though it can easily do so in other degree contexts, e.g. *nóch größer*, ‘even taller’). But the sentence is ambiguous at least between the two paraphrases in (ii):

- (ii) a. ‘The small island is more likely to still disappear’ (e.g. *still* within the next decade).  
 b. ‘The small island is more likely to disappear.’ (than say the large island, and there is a presupposition that none of them is very likely to disappear).

While these are two distinct readings, I attribute them to the interaction with *noch* and leave a larger discussion of the corresponding effects to further research.

Examples such as (16) and (17) show a similar pattern. A descriptive generalization we can draw so far is: uncertainty readings in connection with predictions are particularly prominent for instances of *eher* which are not accompanied by modals. Whether the relevant sentences contain an explicit future tense (*werden*) or not, is not a key factor. The present tense can convey future meanings in German. The sentences do not indicate the source of evidence directly (as bona-fide evidentials would do; contrast *sollen*, an established hear-say modal in German), but they have clear epistemic readings nonetheless, which are compatible with evidential backgrounds. Context setters such as ‘according to {the evidence/everything we know/the weather forecast/the latest rumors/etc.}’ are compatible with such sentences. Furthermore, there are also genuine present-tense and past-tense contexts that can be found in which epistemic readings of *eher* are prominent:

- (18) *Lisa kennt eher die Antwort.*  
 Lisa knows rather the answer  
 ‘Lisa is more likely to know the answer.’
- (19) *(Ich glaube,) gestern hat eher Uwe aufgelegt. Oder?*  
 I think yesterday has rather Uwe up-set or  
 ‘I think it’s more likely that Uwe DJ-ed yesterday. Didn’t he?’

On an epistemic reading, the context would naturally be such that the speaker does not possess the information regarding the individual who knows the answer in (18), or who was the relevant DJ the day before utterance time in (19), respectively. But they take the alternatives asserted in each case to be more likely than others. What I assume, then, is that we are dealing with a particular type of epistemic modal item in such cases. It induces an ordering of propositions and requires one to be more likely than the other. The likelihood ordering can be based on different types of evidence and inferences and it is usually the speaker’s assessment on the basis of the evidence and facts given. Thus, I assume that *eher* is a very similar building block as *rather* (recall (13))– in that on its prominent modal reading, it induces an ordering of propositions. A difference lies in the fact that while *rather* appears to have grammaticalized to order propositions primarily with respect to desires, *eher* orders them primarily with respect to likelihood based on knowledge and evidence. We will see momentarily more ways of ordering propositions via *eher* as well, but we need to get a potential confound out of the way first. Consider, therefore, (20).

- (20) *Sie haben eher Heuschrecken gegessen.*  
 they have rather locusts eaten  
 ‘Rather, they ate locusts.’

A prominent reading of (20) is metalinguistic. A preference reading for it seems to be hardly available with *eher*. What is more: substituting *eher* by a different comparative, *lieber*, ‘more preferably’ would give an impeccable preference reading and this fact might lead us to suspect that *eher* is just not available for marking desires.<sup>10</sup> Trying to replicate the exact morphosyntax of the English preference construction from (21) yields a structure which is standardly marked in (22) at best.

- (21) *They ate locusts rather than give up their pride.*  
 (22) <sup>2</sup>\**Sie haben Heuschrecken gegessen eher als ihren Stolz aufgeben.*

<sup>10</sup> Recall that we are considering *eher* without the addition of overt modals here. Together with a bouletic modal such as *wollen*, ‘want’, such doubts should not arise. Crucially for now, we contrast the preference effect which both *rather* and German *lieber* can induce on their own and which *eher* appears to be lacking.

they have locusts eaten rather than their pride give.up

But there are ways out of the apparent impasse. An interesting means to facilitate the construction is via full-fledged finite clauses including the complementizer *dass*, ‘that’:

- (23) *Sie haben eher Heuschrecken gegessen als dass sie ihren Stolz aufgegeben haben.*  
 they have rather locusts eaten than that they their pride given.up have  
 ‘They ate locusts rather than give up their pride.’<sup>11</sup>

The adjacency requirement between *rather* and that *than* clause in (21) does not hold for preference *eher*, but that does not change the basic semantics. If anything, the clause containing the complementizer makes it even clearer that we are dealing with propositions. The newly introduced clausal pattern does not require us to revise what we noticed previously about likelihood readings. Epistemic likelihood is just as available with *als dass* clauses as they were with the reduced (or implicit) comparatives introduced earlier:

- (24) *Man hat eher ein 6er im Lotto, als dass man einen Mitarbeiter des Supermarktes findet.*  
 one has rather a 6 in lotto than that one a worker  
 of.the supermarket finds  
 ‘It’s more likely to get all 6 numbers at lotto right than to find a supermarket worker.’<sup>12</sup>

To summarize what we have seen so far: *eher* alone can convey both preferences and epistemic modality. This may seem a larger domain of modality than the preferences conveyed by modern *rather*, but there are restrictions, too. Notably, *eher* does not seem to naturally convey deontic modality on its own. I will refrain from speculating why this is the case (it is well-known that certain modals develop uses that are predominantly found with certain modal bases only). I will next show, however, that *eher* can appear in an even wider range of contexts when it supports additional modals.

The following example is ambiguous in multiple ways (I consider a subset of the possible readings below):

- (25) *Das Restaurant muss eher schließen.*  
 the restaurant must sooner/rather close

Importantly, the readings of *eher* and of the modal can cross-classify. With a temporal reading of *eher*, there are a range of modal meanings involved: (i) on a deontic one, for example, the restaurant needs to close earlier these days because the law has changed and restaurants in the relevant part of the world must close at an earlier time than they used to; (ii) on an epistemic reading, the restaurant must be closing earlier these days based on the evidence – Jami comes home at 10 PM and she has noticed, when driving past the restaurant, that the lights at the place have recently always been off, unlike at earlier times, when it used to close at midnight; (iii) on a circumstantial/teleological reading (these could be distinguished easily further – but notice that it is not unusual for modal readings to be conflated either), the necessary closing of

<sup>11</sup> Adapted and simplified from [http://www.stryjak.de/land\\_ohne\\_grenzen.html](http://www.stryjak.de/land_ohne_grenzen.html). As a reviewer points out, another way to improve the acceptability of (22) is by placing *eher* in front of *Heuschrecken* (in this point as in (23)) and then participle morphology on the second main verb of (22) (*aufgegeben*, ‘given up’).

<sup>12</sup> Adapted and simplified from <http://www.spiegel.de/forum/wirtschaft/servicegedanke-deutschland-wir-haben-geoeffnet-bitte-bleiben-sie-fern-thread-131045-11.html>. (Guessing six numbers right in a German lotto game is the best possible result.)

the restaurant at an earlier time than previously is taking place in order to save costs (since there were no customers at late hours), etc. This covers some key modal readings in conjunction with temporal *eher*.

Let's now turn to modal readings of *eher* in the example in (25). The same modal readings just observed can still obtain (and more refined contexts can bring out more flavors as mentioned), but the meaning of *eher* will typically co-vary with the modal itself, as in a modal harmony context. There is a difference however from modal-harmony contexts. There is a clear ordering induced here by the non-temporal use of *eher*. What's at stake, then, is the restaurant's closing (not just closing earlier). For instance, on a deontic reading, the necessity for the salient restaurant to close is higher than the necessity for something else to happen (e.g. for some other entity to close – say, the same owner has another property and s/he'll be more forced to close the restaurant, because the other property is faring better). On an epistemic reading, e.g. when the interlocutors are wondering what's going to happen and assess probabilities on the basis of the available evidence in a context that includes the restaurant in question, one of them can assert that it's more likely that the restaurant will close (compared to the likelihood that something else will happen). We are then comparing the strengths of requirements, likelihood predictions etc..

With the additional contribution of an overt ability modal, *eher* can also have an epistemic reading which is independent of the modal. On such a reading *eher* takes scope over the ability modal. But it can also have a reading on which a gradation is undertaken on abilities to answer a question under discussion.

- (26) *Katarina kann das eher beantworten.*

Katarina can this rather answer

'Katarina is more likely to be able to answer this (e.g. than somebody else).'

'Katarina's ability to answer this is higher (e.g. than another salient person's ability).'

Finally, there are also contexts in which *eher* may appear neither to perform gradations on modality, nor (only) to harmonize in the usual way, but in which it (arguably) neutralizes the factor of modal force entirely. An interesting issue which von Fintel & Kratzer (20014: 178) point out is that in certain configurations, *eher* seems to neutralize the semantic contribution of modals. The following three sentences are thus claimed to be truth-conditionally equivalent:

- (27) *Das ist eher eine japanische als eine chinesische Maschine.*

this is more a Japanese than a Chinese machine

'This is more likely a Japanese than a Chinese machine.'

- (28) *Das kann eher eine japanische als eine chinesische Maschine sein.*

this might more a Japanese than a Chinese machine be

'This is more likely a Japanese than a Chinese machine.'

- (29) *Das muss eher eine japanische als eine chinesische Maschine sein.*

this must more a Japanese than a Chinese machine be

'This is more likely a Japanese than a Chinese machine.'

I am not sure whether scalar effects can be ruled out entirely (e.g. between the *kann* and *must* variety), but the sentences are very close to one another in their meanings. We may add a fourth variant including an epistemic use of the future and the optional addition of the particle *wohl* ('probably'):

- (30) *Das wird (wohl) eher eine japanische als eine chinesische Maschine sein.*

this will PRT more a Japanese than a Chinese machine be

‘This is more likely a Japanese than a Chinese machine.’

But let’s also note that to the extent that truth-conditional equivalence exists, it must be restricted. Consider, for instance, (31) (from Gergel 2009, modeled after an attested economic forecast). We do not get equivalent statements by inserting different modals in (32)-(35):

- (31) *Der Industriesektor wird **eher** nicht wachsen.*  
the industry sector will rather not grow
- (32) *Der Industriesektor **kann eher** nicht wachsen.*  
the industry sector can rather not grow
- (33) *Der Industriesektor **muss eher** nicht wachsen.*  
the industry sector must rather not grow
- (34) *Der Industriesektor **darf eher** nicht wachsen.*  
the industry sector may rather not grow
- (35) *Der Industriesektor **braucht eher** nicht zu wachsen.*  
the industry sector needs rather not to grow

The key difference lies in the modal base. The salient reading of (32) is clearly circumstantial. For instance, the economic set-up is such that the industrial sector cannot grow. However, (33)-(35) (with (35) featuring an NPI modal) have most readily deontic readings (other readings are possible as well), which - even if they may be related to one another - are clearly distinguishable. For instance (34) is a much stricter kind of prohibition on growth than the others. Unlike (35), (33) displays wide scope of the modal over negation; etc.

Evidential/hear-say *sollen* can also be inserted in such contexts, as can epistemic *dürfte* and a colloquial version of *wollen* (cf. Gergel & Hartmann 2009 on some such flavors):

- (36) *Der Industriesektor **soll eher** nicht wachsen.*  
the industry sector shall rather not grow  
‘The industry sector is supposed rather not to grow.’
- (37) *Der Industriesektor **dürfte eher** nicht wachsen.*  
the industry sector might rather not grow  
‘The industry sector might rather not to grow.’
- (38) *Der Industriesektor **will eher** nicht wachsen.*  
the industry sector wants rather not grow  
‘The industry sector rather doesn’t want to grow.’

The effects are similar, but the sentences are not quite equivalent; both differences of salient modal bases and scalar effects obtain.

This does not exhaust the modal readings of *eher*,<sup>13</sup> but it should offer an idea how the word can function in conjunction with modals in a multitude of ways and order the possibilities that are available further. I return to this point in section 3.

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<sup>13</sup> There are also metalinguistic readings, which I leave aside (they are not very different from English *rather* on metalinguistic readings). There are also further readings, on which *eher* orders possibilities, but on a different modal base than the overt modal. *Eher* can be epistemic (as we have seen) and, at the same time, interestingly order different types of necessities. E.g. consider a scenario for (25) in which we are talking about several (deontic or circumstantial) necessities and don’t know which one is more likely to hold in the actual situation. In such a context, *eher* can state that the necessity of the restaurant to close is more likely (according to the evidence available to one of the interlocutors) than for something else to (be forced to) happen. Also, I did not discuss weak deontic modality in an overt modal, but similar effects can obtain. For instance, (i) can mean that the addressee is allowed to go out tonight (more so than some other relevant possibility). *Rather* can harmonize quite similarly.

### 2.2.3 Further modal flavors in *rather*

The usual flavor from the domain of modality that is associated with Modern English *rather* is one of preference (Huddleston & Pullum 2002). While *eher* and *rather* do not convey an identical range of modal flavors, I investigate in this section whether more modal flavors can be associated with *rather* diachronically (where the usual diachronic provisos hold). I first point out that epistemic readings might have been available, then consider co-occurrence with other modals, and finally point out an additional co-occurrence pattern which I take to have been another crucial factor in *rather*'s ultimate anchoring to the domain of preferences.

Consider the following examples from the Middle English and Early Modern period, respectively (retrieved via the PPCME2, Kroch & Taylor 2000, and the Innsbruck Corpus of Middle English, Markus 2010):

- (39) *Trowist thou that Marye grucched of Martha?*  
 Believe you that Mary grouchd of Martha  
*Nay, but rather Martha of Marye.*  
 nay, but rather Marthy of Mary  
 'Do you think that Mary was angry at Martha? No, but rather Martha at Mary.'  
 (CMAELR4,16.471-2)
- (40) *Wherby I knowe certeynli, as I fere me / that she ys rather ded than a lyue*  
 whereby I know certainly as I fear myself that she is rather dead than alive  
 (W. Caxton's *Blanchardyn and Eglantine*)

The narrator of (39) raises a rhetorical question regarding the biblical context of the two sisters Mary and Martha and offers the answer that one possibility is more likely than the other. It is highly questionable whether there is a preference on the side of the narrative voice at all with regard to the two past possibilities (pace possible didactic purposes of such texts). And there is certainly no preference of the subject as in the PDE preference pattern displayed by *rather*, e.g. previously in (10). On the other hand, there is a source of evidence (e.g. the biblical passages in the New Testament cited) that make the outcome given as the more likely one, namely that Martha was angrier at (and in other versions: envious of) Mary. We cannot know whether the sentence was ultimately *intended* to have an epistemic reading. Some sort of metalinguistic reading may almost always be invoked and other readings may be possible too. However, if metalinguistic readings are understood as preferences, then there is no obvious preference-holder involved in the example (again, neither with respect to the narrator nor to the two individuals mentioned). Quite plausibly, then, a particular type of epistemic reading, which comes down to deciding between the likelihood of two possibilities, could be sanctioned by the context.<sup>14</sup> In the same vein, the sentence in (40) appears to rest on an ignorance/uncertainty background, even though no explicit question is formulated here. The

- 
- (i) *Du darfst heute Abend eher ausgehen.*  
 you may today evening rather go.out  
 'You may rather go out tonight.'

There are also additional syntactic possibilities; e.g. in (i) *eher* can immediately precede *heute Abend* (in which case a salient contrast would include 'tonight'), as - with some acceptability - *rather* could also immediately precede *tonight* in the English translation.

<sup>14</sup> The difficulties of establishing particular readings as epistemic notably holds for the modals themselves too (cf. e.g. Denison 1993, Gergel 2014 for some discussion). A possible marginal argument for the current sentence to be understood in a context in which alternatives that are not known are weighed against each other is also that an early Middle English version of the same text contained a matrix *whether* in the question, a marker typically used when one of two alternatives was expected to be true in earlier English.

king uttering the words in the narrative passage does not know whether the queen referred to is dead or alive (pace the perhaps misleading use of *certainly*). He fears the worst. This again makes an epistemic reading likely.

The width of potential modal readings can also be grasped via modals co-occurring with *rather*. This is presumably the case at any point in time, but particularly so at the transition from Middle to Modern English. Consider, for instance, the 15<sup>th</sup> century text *Le Morte Darthur* by Thomas Malory and printed by Caxton. A search for *rather* on the Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse within this text reveals 26 entries. Out of these tokens, only one lacks a modal altogether. While *will/would* appears frequently (in the corresponding forms, *wylle*, *wolde* etc.), this is not the only modal to co-occur with *rather*. *Shall* is one candidate that does not necessarily convey volition. *Ought* is another one, as shown below:

- (41) *Affermyng that I ouzt rather tenprynte his actes and noble feates /*  
 affirming that I ought rather to print his acts and noble feats  
 than of godefroye of boloyne  
 than of Godfrey of Boullion  
 ‘Affirming that I rather ought to print his acts and noble feats than those of Godfrey of Boullion.’  
 (*Le Morte Darthur*, Caxton’s Preface, p. 1)

(41) is from Caxton’s own preface; he reports having been under more pressure to print King Arthur’s story than other individuals’ (Godfrey being one of them). *Ought* is deontic and *rather* grades it further.

Besides co-occurrence with modals, which could be quite high at times, as we have seen, there are additional factors that may well have shaped the transmitted meaning of *rather* further. I mention one related construction here that I take to be particularly relevant, which was still available - if on the decline - during Caxton’s time of writing and *inter alia* in the text introduced above:

- (42) *and rather than my lady shold lese her heed / yet had I leuer* *lese my hede*  
 and rather than my lady should lose her head/ yet had I more preferably lose my head  
 (*Le Morte Darthur*, Book 8, Ch. XXV, p. 311)

(42) conveys that the reported speaker (viz. Tristan, upon complaining about an odd and as he calls it ‘foul’ custom at the castle at which he arrives) prefers to lose his own head over the possibility of his wife’s losing hers. Note that while the embedded clause contains *rather*, the main clause features *leuer*, ‘more preferably’. This pattern appears four times in the total of 26 examples of *rather* in *Le Morte Darthur*. Constructions such as *I had rather* (hardly transparent for many speakers in PDE) are also a follow-up of the same lexical fall into disuse of the original preferential marker *leuer*.

### 3. More ordering and scalar structures operated on by *eher* and *rather*

In this section, I will investigate how the ordering semantics has given rise to the modificational use of *rather/eher* in conjunction with adjectives.

#### 3.1 Ordering

I suggest that the crucial part that was transmitted in the meaning of *rather* and *eher* from the original temporal-based semantics is the ordering relationship. While we have already seen

specific illustrations of how the ordering could be implemented in the case of *rather* and *eher* (cf. section 2.2), I slightly extend the empirical scope of the observations in what follows. I begin by illustrating - inspired by claims to the contrary in recent literature - that the word is also able to operate between modalized finite clauses.

Von Fintel & Kratzer (2014) point out the apparent impossibility of modal comparisons with *eher*. What is claimed is that only a temporal meaning arises in (43). On an intended non-temporal reading, a puzzling ungrammatical status is claimed to arise:

- (43) \**Jockl wollte diesen Mord eher begehen als er konnte.*  
Jockl wanted this murder rather commit than he could

A qualification is, however, in order. There is no semantic puzzle involved in cases such as (43). With a change of syntactic configuration, the construction becomes fully acceptable:

- (44) *Jockl wollte diesen Mord begehen eher als dass er es konnte/gekonnt hätte.*  
Jockl wanted this murder commit rather than that he it could/ could has(KONJ.II)  
'The degree to which Jockl wanted to commit the murder is higher than the degree to which he was/would have been able to do it.'

The pattern is, moreover, extendable to other modals in the respective clauses joined by *eher*; cf. (45)-(46), the latter being modeled after a naturally occurring example.

- (45) *Jacky musste den Gast aufnehmen eher als dass sie es wollte/ gewollt hätte.*  
Jacky had.to the guest take.up rather than that she it wanted/ wanted has(KONJ.II)  
'The degree to which Jacky was obliged to take up the guest was higher than the degree to which she was/would have been willing to do it.'
- (46) *Gerade die Wanderung war wirklich anstrengend,*  
precisely the hike was really strenuous  
*laut Karte sollte die mittelschwer sein, aber zwischendurch musste man*  
according.to map should it middle-heavy be but in-between had.to one  
*eher klettern als dass man laufen konnte.*  
rather climb than that one walk could  
'It's precisely the hike that was really strenuous; according to the map, it should have been medium difficulty, but at times you had to climb, more than you could walk.'  
(adapted from usahochdrei.wordpress.com/)

The ordering between clauses seems to be the crucial common core that *eher/rather* constructions have. Notice that *rather* operating between two modalized clauses is quite common in late Middle and early Modern English too. The relevant common use is illustrated in (47) below:

- (47) ...*rather than I sholde be dishonoured, there wolde som good man take my quarell.*  
rather than I should be dishonored there would some good man take.up my fight  
(CMMALORY,36.1143)

*Rather/eher* operates between two modalized clauses in such configuration and the German examples shown, respectively. But there is a subtle difference. In German, such constructions stay with a relatively unspecified nature, i.e. without imposing an additional kind of modality which is superordinate to the two clauses. That means, we are really comparing degrees e.g. of wanting and being able to etc. - the very phenomenon von Fintel & Kratzer seem to allude to (even if they happened not to consider the right constructions in this case).



The latter point brings out the general type of ordering mechanism which the earlier temporal comparative can give rise to. I cannot rule out that some early English examples had (the potential of having) such meanings; on the contrary this is a possible scenario. The flavor I get from the contexts of examples like those in (47), which are common e.g. in Caxtonian prose, is a preference after all, but one that is added on top of the two internally modalized clauses. The lady reported to utter (47) has in fact a preference for the matrix proposition over the subordinate one.

### 3.2. Modifying adjectives

We have so far seen that a range of meanings available with *rather* and *eher* still contain a common element of ordering two entities (in the broadest sense, i.e. including propositions). There is, however, an interesting further use which both words have developed - cf. (48) (repeated from (1)) - and which is less obviously related to the temporal reading.

- (48) a. *Leo ist eher groß.*  
 b. *Leo is rather tall.*

Focus on features shared by *eher* and *rather*. While such sentences can also have metalinguistic readings, they have clear meanings that make use of the structure of scales, as I will illustrate. The metalinguistic use of *eher/rather* is most naturally accompanied by a *than* clause, while the scalar modificational use of interest here does typically not allow one. Adding *than* phrases/clauses makes the scalar meaning disappear in (49):

- (49) a. *Leo ist eher groß als schlank.*  
 b. *Leo is rather tall than thin.*

Whether the structure is phrasal or underlyingly fully expanded into a clause (*rather than he is thin* – and similarly in German with the optional use of a ‘Konjunktiv II’, i.e. the irrealis form of the copula as an alternative to the indicative) in general has little bearing on the unique reading which remains; see Lechner (2001) on comparative ellipsis. Only a metalinguistic meaning remains in (49), a straightforward rendering of which is that it is more appropriate to describe Leo as tall than as thin.<sup>15</sup>

If we factor out the metalinguistic reading, modificational *eher* and *rather* show further distributional restrictions with respect to degree constructions. *Than* phrases are odd also when possible comparisons would still be sensible. If the term of comparison remains implicit, then *rather* (and *eher*) can function as a non-metalinguistic marker (of showing a small difference interval) with a comparative of the adjective itself, but such a non-metalinguistic reading appears considerably harder to construe with other degree constructions including the superlative of the adjective:

- (50) a. *Leonie is rather taller.*  
 b. *<sup>#</sup>Leonie is rather the tallest.*

Let me return to the basic configurations such as (48), however, which have a clearly distinct and scalar reading induced by *rather/eher*. The basic insight that we need to use is that the interval which is denoted as the positive (i.e. *Leo is \_ tall*) is typically higher than the average (cf. e.g. Kennedy & McNally 2005 and von Stechow 2009 on the positive).

<sup>15</sup> Naturally, not only properties, but also e.g. individuals can be compared metalinguistically. Cf. von Fintel & Kratzer (2014) for observations on such comparisons.

- (51) -----xxxxxxxxx---  
                                   *pos tall*

Keeping context-sensitivity in mind, one thing that this time *rather tall* and *eher groß* can be thought to convey is that Leo's height is within a certain interval of the relevant dimension, but that this interval is just below the interval denoted by the positive. On my view, its core meaning does nothing more than that. There are several types of side-messages (for simplicity, I assume that they are implicatures here, without much hinging on it for the present course; cf. Eckardt 2006 for their relevance in change). For instance, ignorance could be one - e.g. the speaker doesn't know the exact height or, alternatively, the latter not particularly relevant to be told. Another possibility is some form of politeness, i.e. that the speaker does not wish to appear as e.g. too evaluative or offending; this will come out best in the use of *eher/rather* with adjectives such as e.g. *intelligent, old, cheap, expensive* or *dumb*.<sup>16</sup> But note that all such adjectives as well as the previously used dimensional class (*tall*; but cf. also *wide, broad, deep*) are open-scale adjectives (Kennedy & McNally 2005). Consider the use of *eher/rather* with some closed-scale adjectives:

- (52) a. *eher* {*fertig/voll/leer/unsichtbar*}  
       b. *rather* {*done/full/empty/invisible*}

In such cases, the meaning of *rather* (factoring out metalinguistic readings) is that the endpoint of the scale is not reached and that the degree reached is relatively close to it. Without denying the role of imprecision and approximation in natural language, notice that the meaning on this use of *rather* does not necessarily entail imprecision. A pragmatic halo of imprecision would be involved e.g. if we said a glass is full even if a few more drops could fit into it (Lasersohn 1999). We can invoke the contrast with *more or less*, which is close, but not identical in its effect. The use of *rather* under unmarked scalar circumstances means that the endpoint is not reached. An interesting further scalar effect obtains in comparison with *almost*. *Almost* would require the degree reached on the scale (e.g. in *almost full*) to be even closer to the endpoint. *Almost* and *rather* do not co-occur (except on metalinguistic readings with *rather* then preferably preceding *almost* as in a.):

- (53) a. \**rather almost full*  
       b. \**almost rather full*

Just like the use of *rather* in the modal domain was in fact quite broad on closer inspection, there is an interesting breadth of use in the scalar domain. The distinction discussed above, namely between open and closed scales, can in general be characterized by the use of different modifiers, one of the key observations in Kennedy & McNally (2005). Accordingly, there should be classes of modifiers that are more felicitously used with one respective class of predicates. For instance, the modifier *well* is fully felicitous and often attested with a predicate such as *acquainted* (being a closed scale) and not felicitous with *surprised* (which operates on an open scale). Conversely, *very* is felicitous with the latter predicate and odd with the former.

<sup>16</sup> This may be more prominent in certain types of speech/writings or perhaps even more predominantly at certain periods than at others (based on the data available). For instance, out of 62 modificational uses of *rather* in the currently expanding PPCMBE corpus (Kroch et al. 2010 has been used), 45 have a clear negative expressive evaluation (cf. (i)) in their respective contexts, 11 a positive one, and 6 are neutral or unclear. More such pragmatic questions of use can certainly be addressed (cf. Rissanen 2008 for some), but they go beyond present scope.

(i) *In Germany things look rather critical and threatening.* (VICTORIA-186X,1,271.697)

But Kennedy & McNally focus on deverbal predicates and their interesting paper does not discuss *rather*, which can felicitously be used in both types of scalar domains with adjectives as well as deverbal forms. In view of the descriptive suggestions made above, modificational *rather* has, however, slightly distinct meanings in each of the two scalar domains. To summarize so far, then: in the case of open scales, it denotes membership in an interval that is located, via context, typically just below the interval denoted by the positive (i.e. ‘very’ or a zero form) on the relevant scale. In the other case, it denotes non-adjacent closeness to the endpoint and it is situated - within the linear order of a scale - after the extension of *almost*, which comes in-between in the closed-scale environments.<sup>17</sup>

But how do we get from the relator ordering entities in the modal senses to the modifier use? I divide the answer into two parts. I illustrate some key data immediately below and return to the conceptual part that I suggest has been involved in section 4.2 in the context of the second spiral involved. First note that before modifying uses become visible in the data (recall their scarcity as late as in the Early Middle English period), there was a frequent use of *rather* that seemed to operate between scalar opposites of some sort, or antonyms. Borrowing Rissanen’s terminology for descriptive purposes, I call this a contrastive use:<sup>18</sup>

- (54) *Also Marie oweth **rather** to sytte with the **poor** þan with þe **rich**;*  
 also Mary owes rather to sit with the poor than with the rich  
***rather** to **obey** than to be **abeyde**; rather to kepe **silence** than to **speke**;*  
 rather to obey than to be waited rather to keep silence than to speak  
***rather** to be **alon** solytarie þen be conn\_ staunte **amonge** the grete*  
 rather to be alone solitary than be constantly among the great  
*of the world or amonge his wordily frindes.*  
 of the world or among his worldly friends  
 (*The Revelations of Saint Birgitta*, a1475, 33:3)

Interestingly, some of the earliest examples of modifiers that can be culled from the parsed corpora of English (PPCEME) have a contrastive reading, as do some of the earliest apparent examples from German (via the Cosmas II corpus):

- (55) *And dygnyties geuen vnto wycked folke, do not make them **worthy** ,*  
*but shewethe and declareth them rather **vnworthy** .* (BOETHCO-E1-P1,46.506-7)  
 (56) *Ueberhaupt muß ich bekennen, daß die Kunstrichter in Ansehung meiner*

<sup>17</sup> That is, I see *eher* as behaving distinctly in the two environments for the purposes of the current descriptive account. It remains unclear (to me) whether the two types of behavior are to be unified, e. g. if *almost* itself can be reduced to some version related to the positive (as suggested for example by Gergel & Stateva 2014 for quantificational contexts independent of *rather*). On an independent note that may bring *almost* closer to the current concerns, König & Traugott (1988: 119) briefly note a use of *bald*, ‘soon’, which comes down to meaning *almost*:

- (i) *Ich warte jetzt schon bald eine halbe Stunde.*  
 ‘I have been waiting for nearly half an hour.’

<sup>18</sup> Rissanen (2008) is one of the few contributions within the numerous ones on *rather* to also consider the modifier use (many others, including e.g. König & Traugott 1988 or Gergel 2009 do not treat it; but cf. Hall 1881 for interesting notes alluding to the modificational reading as well). I take such contributions to be of the highest merit philologically, even if e.g. Rissanen (2008: 357) seems to seriously doubt that there is much common ground between the temporality the first development started out with and the modificational end result of the development, even though he sees metonymy as plausible. The fact that the development takes place quite similarly with etymologically unrelated items like *rather* and *eher* (but also in other languages e.g. French *plutôt*, or Romanian with a non-related expression again; Gergel 2011) is an indication that there must be mechanisms which at least *can* produce such a sequence of two spirals in the change of natural language meaning.

Generally must I admit that the art\_judges in regard mine  
*eh*er *nachtsichtsvoll*, als *streng*e gewesen sind.  
 rather lenient than strict bin are  
 ‘I must admit, quite generally, that the jurors have been rather lenient than strict in  
 my case.’  
 (1767, Moses Mendelssohn, Cosmas II)

The pattern persists into the Late Modern periods. For instance, out of 40 examples of *rather* modifying adjectives in 31.721 tokens in the 1800s within the syntactically annotated corpora, 8 example can be interpreted as contrastive within the token, as illustrated in (57):

- (57) *some in the progress of formation, instead of being **soft and crumbling** like lumps of brown sugar, as some stalactites are, were flexible, something like a **rather tough** paste.* (RUSKIN-1835,1,21.558)

#### 4. More on how *rather* and *eh*er spiraled twice

##### 4.1. From temporal to modal: why does ‘rather’ spiral to preference readings?

The exploration of linguistic cycles or spirals has seen a broad range of research in recent years. Cases like *rather* and *eh*er are certainly distinct from the more prototypical cycles such as the famous negative one. Part of this may have to do with the much clearer distribution of labor in the case of negation. What comes in, every time a negation system gets such a boost, is an item that gains the ability to reverse the truth value of a sentence (or which yields the complement set if one thinks in terms of propositions as sets of possible worlds). Negation is intricate enough historically and synchronically, but we could still say: comparatively simple. In the case of modality, we have a many-to-many mapping. There are typically several modal markers for many modal flavors both before and after an earlier comparative may become a marker of modality. What happens with *rather* is thus certainly only one part of the fuller range of modal meanings. It is also not the case that anything comes back to its original position (e.g. of a temporal comparative). Hence – to the extent that such labels have theoretical significance – we may be dealing with a spiral in which new items seem to undergo trajectories also seen with earlier items (comparing e.g. modal contexts of *sooner*) and furthermore seen in other languages.

The only additional issue that I would like to raise in this subsection, is what kind of modality may constitute the more general pattern and – if such a pattern exists – why is the other pattern attested nonetheless? In a nutshell, we have seen that while several flavors are available, bouletic modality is the prevalent pattern for Modern English *rather* and a particular type of ordering epistemic modality the one prevalent for German *eh*er. Somewhat similar changes are attested in several languages (cf. e.g. König & Traugott 1988, Gergel 2011), and a statistical analysis which should extend to more languages than the Indo-European ones focused on so far should be able to tell which flavors are most frequent. (Notice, again, that more markers for the respective types of modality are available even at one stage of the same language.) From the simple comparison conducted within the limits of this paper, however, it appears that a development as in the case of German, towards epistemic modality and a more general type of comparison, may be a fundamental pattern. Examples with a similar potential have also been attested in English, as I have sought to illustrate with historical data. But why is, then, *rather* in Modern English ultimately tied so closely to preferences? I suggest that one major reason may lie in the disappearance of earlier preference constructions in English, and in particular one which is still preserved in German

and other Germanic languages, namely *lieber*, ‘more preferably’. *Leofer*, *lever* (and again, many alternative forms) were productive patterns in Old English and still available up until Middle English. That is, one particular type of meaning, which the more general type of scaffolding based on ordering in *rather* came to eventually replace, was the one pertaining to the relative preference of two propositions.<sup>19</sup>

#### 4.2. On the spiral to the modificational use; and most specially, why it is one

I propose (i) that the type of configuration-meaning pairing, which I call modificational, is a follow-up of the spiral development we have investigated in some detail from temporal to modal ordering elements<sup>20</sup> and (ii) that it is an independent sequel, insofar as it uses the input of the first development (as one means of introducing carriers of such modificational meanings), but it is not automatically triggered by it.

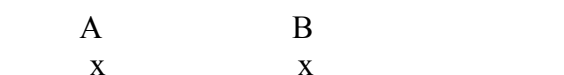
First notice that the modificational use seems to show up systematically in the late Modern English period in English and at around the same time, on first estimates, in German. This may appear as out of sync if we put into the picture that the change from temporal to modal has been fully completed in English for a long time, but it is still at least transparent in current German. That is, the first development seems not to condition (much less automatically trigger) the timing of the second one. Furthermore, there are words in several languages that undergo some part of the development from temporal to modal (e.g. English *sooner* in the context of *would*, or European Portuguese, also without the addition of additional modals), but which do not show the second development:

(58) \**sooner tall* (intended as: ‘rather tall’)

(59) \**mais depressa alto* (E. Portuguese, intended as ‘*rather tall*, Conceição Cunha, p.c.)

There is some indication why the modificational use and the modal uses seem to be quite distinct, as we have seen. But I claim that there is a diachronic semantic link that offers itself to consideration directly from the observations we have put together above. Recall that we had ordering involved, as schematically represented in (60):

(60) *rather/eher* as ordering: A before/more preferably than/ more than B



In some cases, as we have seen, the scale may not be so obvious at all and it only becomes detectable by virtue of the use of *eher/rather*. If A and B are properties and we have A holding of an individual more than B does, then we are close by at the meaning associated with the metalinguistic reading.

The contrastive readings we have seen may be relevant in two ways. One lies in the expressive power of contrasting properties that may have enhanced this in the process of change (as expressive use of language may well linger on etc.). But there is also a more

<sup>19</sup> Cf. also the following entry from Bosworth & Toller of a related verb: a-lífan *to permit*; *permittere* Alífe me *permitte mihi*, Deut. 3, 25. Aliéfp, Past. 50, 4. v. a-lyfan.

<sup>20</sup> I focus on how *eher* behaves with gradable adjectives (and by extension with properties that can be re-interpreted as gradable in some sense or another), but it should be clear that the configuration is not restricted categorically; cf. (i):

- (i) *Her mobile was rather [on the cheap side].*
- (i) *He was rather average.*

(61)    xxxxxxxxxxxx -----x-----xxxxxxxxxx  
         pos *unworthy*                      pos *worthy*

Notice that stating that *x* has the latter property (i.e. of being slightly below the pos interval) is then truth-conditionally equivalent to the earlier meaning that happened to have been set up by the opposing poles. This may be a case in which so-called constant entailments (Beck 2012) operate in language change (Beck & Gergel to appear, Gergel & Beck 2015). Truth-conditional equivalence in a subset of contexts may lead to the adoption of a different analysis. Crucially, this offers a window onto explaining the modificational use of *rather* and *either* from of the way ordering relationships and scales have been used.

This paper has suggested that two inter-related developments are involved in *rather* and *eh*, the first one leading to modality and a general type of ordering relation (prominently used for preferences in English and epistemic possibilities in German), and one leading to modificational uses in both languages. While many parts of the changes have been previously observed, the paper has sought to sharpen the reconstruction of the possible causal effects and the analysis of the semantic essentials towards a more predictable account of such changes. In terms of observations relating to the cycle, we have seen that *rather* - with its salient modern preference use - came to be used in such a way in part because a substitute turned out to be useful for the eventual demise of other such preference markers (while German still has the counterpart *lieber*). The question what exactly the specific epistemic markers and modifiers came in for is, however, less straightforward and desires further research.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> The question of the possibly late rise of epistemic markers is an old one in the domain of the modals (cf. e.g. Denison 1993). A somewhat similar possibility - under which new means enter a language without necessarily substituting for something specific, but rather by expanding it - has been interestingly raised by Johan van der Auwera at the second workshop on cycles with respect to the modificational use. It may thus be the case that the nominal and adjectival projections into which *rather* intruded simply expanded over time. We could phrase this in terms of syntactic articulation of the nominal domain and presumably richness in terms of semantic flavors expressed. Recent work such as Wood (this volume) or van de Velde (2011) may be interesting starting points for pursuing this more general question pertaining to the expansion of means further.

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