

***Better* as a verb**

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1. Introduction¹

The lexical item *had better* ~ *'d better* ~ *better* has been on the fringes of the modal verb system for a long time. For brevity we will refer to the verb in its various forms as BETTER.² Its history has not been widely discussed, nor has great attention been paid to its PDE behaviour (though note here Mitchell (2003), which we have found valuable). However, both its form history and its semantics are interesting and intricate, and the latter in particular call into question some familiar assumptions about modality and about semantic and pragmatic change. We will not give much space to the question of whether – or to what extent – BETTER belongs to the category Modal, although we will frequently look at its behaviour, distributionally and semantically, in terms that would be appropriate for a modal verb. Our main goal is to throw light on its semantic history in section 3, then to trace the growth of interpersonal usage in section 4. A necessary preliminary in section 2 is to trace the morphosyntactic history – in part to justify classing BETTER as a verb at all. A brief afterword forms section 5.

2. Form history

2.1. Present-day English grouping

In PDE BETTER seems to belong to a group of phrasal items of similar shape. Consider:

- (1) a. I'd better get a takeaway.
- b. I'd rather get a takeaway.
- c. I'd sooner get a takeaway.

These three items are lumped together by Quirk et al. among the 'modal idioms' (1985: 137, 141-3), and by *OED* s.v. *have* v. 22a. All three have as their (original) lexical core an item in the comparative which is adjectival

or adverbial or sometimes indeterminately either, used with a light or auxiliary verb and complemented, in the constructions which are of interest to us, by a clausal element. They look similar in form and show some – but only some – similarities of meaning as well. As for the typical modal semantics of obligation, volition and necessity, BETTER would appear to approach an **obligation** or **necessity** sense, though its actual meaning is closer to **advisability** (see section 3.4 below). With *had/would rather* and *had/would sooner* there is more of a sense of **preference**, which is related to **volition**. However, *OED* gives ‘preference or comparative desirability’ as the general sense of all these idioms and more.

2.2. Basic construction types

To what extent can a common history be attached to the set of lexemes and constructions exemplified in (1)a-c? Part of their interest lies in the trading relationship between A/Adv and the verbally conjugated item. With BETTER, the verb at the outset was BE, whereas in the earliest (and still surviving) pattern for the other two, it was the originally volitional *would*:

(2) NP_{subj} would A/Adv + clause

Subsequently with those two, *had* and occasionally *shall* or *should* became alternatives to *would* as the verbal element. For a detailed account, see Hall (1881).³ BETTER clearly has a different beginning.

The items which do resemble BETTER to begin with are patterns involving *lever*, the comparative of *lief* ‘agreeable’, no longer in use. In medieval times the *lever* constructions were far commoner than BETTER and can therefore be used with caution to fill out details of the early history of BETTER. The history of BETTER (and *lever*) in *OED* and elsewhere involves the following patterns:

(3) (h)it is A + clause

(4) NP_{obl} is A + clause

(5) NP_{subj} be A + clause

(6) NP_{subj} have A/Adv + clause

Pattern (4) is the oldest involving a referential NP as argument, while (6) is the ModE one, but what is the status of (5)? An example of (5) (with trivial word order difference) is:

- (7) a1450(?c1421) Lydg. ST (Arun 119) 2024: He better war to ha
ben in pees. (*MED* s.v. *betere* adj. 1b(b))

OED changes its mind as to the history of this phrase, stating s.v. *better* a. and adv. A.4b that the dative pronoun of (4) ‘was subsequently changed into the nominative’ of (5), then ‘[f]inally this was given up for the current’ (6). An alternative account appears s.v. *have* v. B.22c: that (5) only arose out of the confusion between (4) and (6), along with another and clearly blended form, (9). The dates of appearance of (5) and (6) are too close to decide the issue, as we will see below.

We have expressed the patterns (3)–(6) in formulaic terms. **NP** has human reference and is often pronominal,⁴ so that even after the loss of OE case, an oblique-case **NP_{obl}** can usually be discriminated from a subjective **NP_{subj.}** Pattern (3) as formulated lacks **NP** altogether; we have not come across examples with an oblique NP, though from ME onwards such an NP can occur in a *for*-phrase. **A/Adv** can be *lief*, *leofre/lever*, *levest*, *bet*, *better*, *best*, *selest*, *well*;⁵ comparative forms are the most common, superlative less so, while the positive forms are typically used with *as*. **Clause** can be a *that*-clause, contact clause, *to*-infinitive or plain infinitive, though with the advent of forms with HAVE in (6), only infinitival clauses are used.

One piece of evidence which supports the first of *OED*’s accounts – of a sequential development (4) > (5) > (6) – is a stage (4)’:

- (4)’ NP_{sg} is A + clause

The NP is singular and of indeterminate case, while the verb inflection is 3 sg, so that it is unclear whether the NP is subject or oblique. Pattern (4)’ can be regarded as intermediate between (4) and (5). We have noted some five probable examples for BETTER, including (8), and pattern (4)’ certainly occurs for *lever* too:

- (8) a1325 *SLeg.*(Corp-C 145) 131/91: A mon were betere for is sunne
be[o] sori and vnsriue Panne issriue wiþoute sorinesse. (*MED* s.v.
unshriven (ppl.))

There are several further complications. One is an apparently blended construction:

(9) NP_{obl} had A + clause

This appears briefly in late ME, completing the analogical proportion

(10) NP_{obl} be : NP_{subj} be :: ? : NP_{subj} have

See Visser (1963-73: i 33-4), who refers to van der Gaaf (1904). In fact, on the rather modest evidence that Visser gives,⁶ (9) appears at much the same date as (6), so it is unclear whether the development was (5) > (6), or (4) > (9) > (6). The dating of *lever* constructions tends to support the former, but *rather* brings in a blended (9) construction well before (6).

Another problem is the use of such patterns as *me/I had been better* + clause. Visser lists them (plus some irrelevant examples) separately from those with tensed BE (1963-73: i 34). Conceivably the HAVE form in such patterns could be regarded as the principal verbal item and hence parallel to HAVE in (9) or (6), respectively. The impression is reinforced by examples like (11): this looks very much like pattern (6) with a superfluous *been*.

(11) 1604 SHAKES. *Oth.* III. iii. 363 Thou had'st bin better haue bin borne a Dog Then answer my wak'd wrath. (OED, Visser)

Logically, however, *had'st* in (11) is a mere auxiliary of the perfect, with BE as the principal verb, as in (4) or (5), and we shall provisionally assume this latter, simpler analysis. The *had been better* forms with a clausal complement postdate the patterns with non-perfect BE.

A referee adds another ingredient: the sporadic use of *better* as a sentence adverb with other verbs, as in

(12) c1340 Cursor M. (Laud MS.) 9815 His hert ought bettyr breke in iije Then fro his byddynges to fle. (OED)

Whether such examples facilitated a switch from adjective use with BE to more adverb-like use with HAVE, or whether they merely show analogical influence from *rather*, (s)he leaves open. It can be seen that the range of forms in the early period is something of a tangle.

The later history of BETTER brings more subtle changes. From the start the verb HAVE is nearly always in the form *had* (or *hadst*), which OED calls a past subjunctive, and it is not clear how often other forms of HAVE

are used; *OED*'s and *MED*'s non-past examples all involve *lever* or *rather*, but cf. perhaps

- (13) 1561 T. HOBY tr. Castiglione's Courtyer IV. Uvijb, You haue better declared the vnluckinesse of yonge men, then the hap-pynesse of olde menn. (*OED*)

In time, anyway, the inflected verb becomes confined to past tense *had*. In turn the form *had* is increasingly often reduced to 'd and finally to zero. In the layering which is typical of a grammaticalisation process, all three forms continue to co-exist.

To judge from the evidence of *OED*, *MED* and Visser (1963-73), date ranges are approximately as shown in Table 1, though the dates quoted are no more than indicative. It is clear that in some of its early history BETTER patterns with *lever*, while later it partly resembles *rather*.

Table 1: Date ranges for patterns of *better*, *lever* and *rather*

pattern	<i>lever</i>	<i>better</i>	<i>rather</i>
(3)	never found	OE to PDE	never found
(4)	OE to 1614	OE to 1470-85	never found
(4')	a1340 to c1380	c1250 to c1333-52 [??]	never found
(5)	c1320 to c1450	1303 to 1647	never found
(2)	c1450	[irrelevant?]	1280-90 to PDE
(9)	c1390 to mid-15th c	a1425	a1325(c1280)
(6)	c1300 to 1750	c1410 to PDE	c1450 to PDE

2.3. Clausal complementation

Meanwhile, complementation is always non-finite with the *had better* patterns. The complementing clause is nearly always headed by a plain infinitive. Exceptions involve counterfactuals, which have been possible intermittently in ModE and which may permit *to*-infinitives beside the more common plain infinitives. The original adjectival *it BE better* construction of (3) has always permitted various types of complement clause.

- (14) 1542 *Brinklow's Complaint* 64, 14 Ye had bene better to have suf-fred death (van der Gaaf, Visser)

- (15) 1723 CHAMBERS tr. *Le Clerc's Treat. Archit.* I. 79 It had been better..to have fluted the upper part. (OED s.v. *flute* v. 3a)
- (16) 1866 *Evening Star* 19 Mar., He had better have been a dead man than have emitted from his mouth..such a rum-bred pestilence of breath. (OED)

Both adjectival *better* and counterfactuality are simultaneously exemplified in (14) and (15).

2.4. Comparison

Example (16) illustrates another salient development: that it has become ungrammatical with BETTER to include the standard of comparison in a *than-* or *as-*phrase (see also Mitchell (2003: 140-1)). This change applies to the BETTER construction generally, not just in counterfactual use. Thus the comparison is included in the seventeenth-century (17) and nineteenth-century (16) and (18) but has become impossible in the PDE (19):

- (17) 1613 SHAKES. *Hen. VIII*, V. *iii*. 132 He had better starue Then but once thinke his place becomes thee not. (OED)
- (18) [1961] I insisted on takeing the field and prevailed - thinking that I had better die by rebel bullets than [by] Union quackery. (Brown F18 1580)⁷
- (19) a. *We had better get a takeaway than start cooking now.
b. *We'd better get a takeaway than start cooking now.
c. *We better get a takeaway than start cooking now.

2.5. Subject

2.5.1. Animacy of subject

From the eighteenth century we start to get examples where the NP subject, previously always human in reference, is inanimate or a dummy NP:

- (20) 1712 ADDISON *Spect.* No. 287 (page)3 There had better be none at all. (OED s.v. *have* v. B.22a)

- (21) We've come a long way and spent a lot of money. It had better be good. Don't worry about the Acropolis. It is awe-inspiring. (1961 Brown G51:35)

It is of course typical of auxiliaries not to impose any subject selection.

2.5.2. Constraints on expressed subject

There is no absolute restriction on the *kinds* of NP found with BETTER either. A range is illustrated in (22)–(25):

- (22) However, during the summer Lord King warned that Boeing had “better get going” if it was to beat Airbus to the order. (BNC A9D 38)
- (23) What's so terrible about that? As a matter of fact, Grandpa better fork over some dough and pretty fast or I'm going to make his little Sarah into a shiksa. (ARCHER 1964gelb.d8a)
- (24) “When Margaret Thatcher gets in you and your bloody unions better watch out.” (BNC AOU325)
- (25) Oh, there had better be two of you. (BNC AT7 2570)

However, one kind of subject is very strongly favoured with BETTER: pronoun subjects. BETTER has a markedly higher level of subject pronouns than the semantically similar modals *should* and *ought to*, for instance. In Cort's dataset, while *should* has a pronominal subject just over 40% of the time and *ought to* roughly 50%, with BETTER nearly 82% of examples have pronouns as subject; see Table 2. Particularly prominent are first and second person pronouns, which between them account for more than 70% of all instances. The predominance of first and second person is actually even higher than that, since – as we shall shortly see in section 2.5.3 – a further 13% of BETTER examples lack an expressed subject, and such examples are nearly all implicitly first or second person. The subject NPs illustrated in (22)–(25), fully grammatical though they are, are actually rather exceptional statistically.

Table 2: Pronominal subjects with *better*, *should* and *ought to* in six corpora

BETTER							
	Archer	LOB	LLC	Brown	FLOB	Frown	total
I	19 (20%)	11 (22%)	21 (52.5%)	6 (15%)	6 (16.22%)	5 (13.89%)	68 (22.82%)
you	44 (46.32%)	14 (28%)	10 (25%)	15 (37.5%)	13 (35.14%)	14 (38.89%)	110 (36.91%)
he	4 (4.21%)	1 (2%)	1 (2.5%)	5 (12.5%)	1 (2.7%)	5 (13.89%)	17 (5.70%)
she	3 (3.16%)	1 (2%)	1 (2.5%)	2 (5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	7 (2.35%)
it	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.34%)
we	12 (12.63%)	10 (20%)	3 (7.5%)	2 (5%)	7 (18.92%)	2 (5.56%)	36 (12.08%)
they	3 (3.16%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.7%)	0 (0%)	5 (1.6%)
total PRO sub	85 (89.47%)	37 (74%)	36 (90%)	32 (80%)	28 (75.68%)	26 (72.22%)	244 (81.88%)
total ex	95	50	40	40	37	36	298

ought							
	Archer	LOB	LLC	Brown	FLOB	Frown	total
I	39 (10.74%)	13 (12.62%)	28 (17.18%)	11 (17.19%)	5 (8.62%)	2 (4%)	98 (12.17%)
you	25 (6.89%)	8 (7.77%)	20 (12.27%)	5 (7.35%)	2 (3.45%)	2 (4%)	62 (7.70%)
he	26 (7.16%)	3 (2.91%)	10 (6.13%)	7 (10.29%)	3 (5.17%)	3 (6%)	52 (6.46%)
she	8 (2.20%)	6 (5.83%)	2 (1.27%)	3 (4.41%)	3 (5.17%)	1 (2%)	23 (2.86%)
it	19 (5.23%)	4 (3.88%)	9 (5.52%)	2 (2.94%)	5 (8.62%)	3 (6%)	42 (5.22%)
we	25 (6.89%)	7 (6.80%)	28 (17.18%)	3 (4.41%)	5 (8.62%)	6 (12%)	74 (9.19%)
they	22 (6.06%)	9 (8.74%)	12 (7.36%)	3 (4.41%)	2 (3.45%)	1 (2%)	49 (6.09%)
total PRO sub	164 (45.18%)	50 (48.54%)	109 (66.87%)	34 (50%)	25 (43.10%)	18 (36%)	400 (49.69%)
total ex	363	103	163	68	58	50	805

should							
	Archer	LOB	LLC	Brown	FLOB	Frown	total
I	483 (21.32%)	107 (8.22%)	165 (27.00%)	34 (3.83%)	63 (5.65%)	36 (4.76%)	888 (12.80%)
you	111 (4.90%)	36 (2.77%)	42 (6.87%)	30 (3.38%)	37 (3.32%)	31 (4.1%)	287 (4.14%)
he	138 (6.93%)	70 (5.38%)	18 (2.95%)	44 (4.96%)	51 (4.57%)	28 (3.70%)	349 (5.03%)
she	47 (2.08%)	27 (2.08%)	7 (1.15%)	5 (0.56%)	15 (1.35%)	13 (1.72%)	114 (1.64%)
it	108 (4.77%)	92 (7.07%)	44 (7.20%)	71 (8.00%)	81 (7.26%)	41 (5.42%)	437 (6.30%)
we	136 (6.00%)	79 (6.07%)	64 (10.47%)	61 (6.88%)	58 (5.20%)	43 (5.68%)	441 (6.36%)
they	78 (3.44%)	49 (3.77%)	36 (5.89%)	30 (3.38%)	94 (8.43%)	28 (3.7%)	315 (4.54%)
total PRO sub	1101 (48.61%)	460 (35.36%)	376 (61.54%)	275 (31.00%)	399 (35.78%)	220 (29.06%)	2831 (40.82%)
total ex	2265	1301	611	887	1115	757	6936

2.5.3. *No expressed subject*

In a high proportion of instances BETTER occurs in clipped constructions without any expressed subject. (Unstressed *had* is never retained when the subject is omitted, and in the absence of a phonological host, contracted 'd is obviously impossible; all such examples therefore involve the zero-form *better*.)

- (26) Where should I go? To my room? Better stay in the hotel lobby, where the walls looked good and thick. (Brown F24 0090)

Considered as a kind of modal verb, BETTER is unusual in this respect. Although other modals do sometimes undergo subject clipping of this type, as in examples (27)-(30), it is highly infrequent in the corpus data collected by Cort (2006); see Table 3.

- (27) Leiter turned at the door. 'Take it easy, James. Be back in an hour and we'll go and get ourselves a good dinner. I'll find out where they've taken Tingaling and we'll mail the dough to him there. Might cheer him up a bit, the poor little bastard. (ARCHER 1956flem.f8b)
- (28) 7 P.M. Sits with its head down, engaged in picking at imaginary objects in front of it. Can find its way in and out of its cage when roused to action. (ARCHER 1873ferr.s6b)
- (29) Mary and I stood by here for the call on December 30th and 31st but it didn't come through. Must have been caught up in the New Years telephone overcrowding. (ARCHER 1961hmwy.x8a)
- (30) My period -- right on time. *Couldn't* be more regular. (ARCHER 1978ryan.j8a)

Table 3: Clipping with modal verbs

	ARCHER		Brown		FLOB		Frown		LOB	
	clips	total	clips	total	clips	total	clips	total	clips	total
<i>Can</i>	6 (0.19%)	3084	0	1762	0	1757	0	1725	0	2147
<i>Could</i>	7 (0.25%)	2765	0	1776	2 (0.13%)	1569	3 (0.2%)	1471	1 (0.06%)	1604
<i>May</i>	1 (0.04%)	2747	0	1301	0	1100	0	883	1 (0.07%)	1338
<i>Might</i>	4 (0.31%)	1301	0	663	4 (0.6%)	641	1 (0.16%)	638	6 (0.77%)	779
<i>Must</i>	5 (0.22%)	2242	2 (0.2%)	1013	0	803	1 (0.15%)	662	3 (0.27%)	1096
<i>Ought to</i>	1 (0.28%)	363	0	68	0	58	0	51	1 (0.97%)	103
<i>Shall</i>	3 (0.14%)	2109	0	267	0	200	0	149	0	351
<i>Should</i>	3 (0.13%)	2265	0	887	1 (0.09%)	1115	1 (0.13%)	756	2 (0.15%)	1301
<i>Will</i>	4	-	0	2344	0	2215	1 (0.06%)	1793	1 (0.04%)	2347
<i>Would</i>	3 (0.07%)	4222	0	2842	0	2293	0	2410	1 (0.04%)	2774
total	37	-	2	12406	7	11751	7	10389	16	13840

The relative rarity of clipped structures with these modals, never rising above a fraction of one per cent of occurrences, contrasts quite dramatically with BETTER, where clipped constructions account for a significant proportion of the data – between 10 and 20% in all but one of the corpora; see Table 4.

Table 4: Clipping with BETTER

	BETTER	
	clipped structures	total data
ARCHER	10 (10.5%)	95
Brown	9 (22.5%)	40
FLOB	7 (18.9%)	37
FROWN	1 (2.8%)	36
LLC	4 (10%)	40
LOB	9 (18%)	50
total	40 (13.4%)	298

2.5.4. Proverbs

The unusually high level of clipped structures with modal BETTER calls to mind some familiar proverbial patterns that begin with *better*:

- (31) Better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.
 (32) Better sit still than rise and fall.
 (33) Better the devil you know than the devil you don't.

This type of proverb, with or without initial clipping, derives from (3) in form, with explicit comparison retained. Although there are many possible variations on the surface form available, the underlying construction can be expressed as

- (34) (It is) better (to) XP_1 (than XP_2)

The more specific constructions which occur are as follows (most examples from Dykes 1713, Kelly 1721, Ludovici 1791, MacIntosh 1785, Pinker & Jackendoff 2004, Ray 1742, Speake 2003 = "ODP"):

- (It) is better (to) VP_1 than (to) VP_2 ± ellipsis of verb

- (35) c 1390 Gower *Confessio Amantis* v. 7725 Betre is to yive than to take. (ODP)
 (36) It's better to be stung by a nettle than prick'd by a rose (Ray, 1742: 20)
 (37) It's better to be happy than wise (Ray, 1742: 116)
 (38) It is better to knit than blossom (Ray, 1742: 127)
 (39) 1837 S. Lover *Rory O'More* II. xxi. 'Jist countin' them,—is there any harm in that?' said the tinker: 'it's bettther be sure than sorry'. (ODP)

-
- Better to VP_1 than (to) VP_2

- (40) a 1628 in M. L. Anderson *Proverbs in Scots* (1957) no. 320 Better to wow [woo] over middin, nor [than] over mure. (ODP)
 (41) 1911 G. B. Shaw *Getting Married* 116 St Paul's reluctant sanction of marriage;..his contemptuous 'better to marry than to burn' [...] (ODP)
 (42) Better to die a beggar than live a beggar (Ray, 1742: 2)

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- Better VP_1 than VP_2

- (43) Better have it than hear of it (Ray, 1742: 57)

(44) Better hold by a hair as draw by a Tedder (Kelly, 1721: 55)

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- With ellipsis of duplicate verbal material in VP_2 comparison

(45) 1546 J. Heywood *Dialogue of Proverbs* I. xi. D2V Sonne, better be envied then pitied, folke sey. (ODP)

(46) Better wait on the Cooks as the Leaches (Kelly, 1721: 57)

-
- *Better NP₁ than NP₂*

(47) 1857 Trollope Barchester Towers II. vii. ‘Better the d—you know than the d—you don’t know,’ is an old saying..but the bishop had not yet realised the truth of it.

-
- *Better BE NP₁ than NP₂*

(48) 1678 J. Ray *English Proverbs* 204 Better are small fish then an empty dish. (ODP)

2.5.5. Influence of proverbial patterns on BETTER

Crucial for our purposes is the pattern illustrated by (43)-(44), which could also be formulated as a variant of

(49) Better + *Vinf* + X

Notice that (49) can arise in two ways: by ellipsis of *it is* in proverbs, and by ellipsis of *NP had* before modal BETTER. Which came first? As we have seen, clipped proverbs are already attested in the seventeenth century, and in the specific form of (49) by the early eighteenth century; see (40) and (42)–(48) above. As for clipped modal BETTER, *OED* has one example from the late eighteenth century and several from the nineteenth century, while *ARCHER* has this type from the mid-/late nineteenth century only and Visser only from 1922 (1963-73: iii-2 1828):

(50) 1794 MATHIAS Purs. Lit. (1798) 73 Better preach With silky voice, and sacred flow’rs of speech. (*OED*)

(51) Better send for her sister. (*ARCHER* 1867robe.d6b)

- (52) Wheedle her a bit. Better wheedle her. Safer. (ARCHER 1944bagn.d7b)
- (53) ALICE: ... Mabel Cantwell and I face the press together. Can I get out of it?
RUSSELL: No. Better not. (ARCHER 1960vidl.d8a)

Initial clipping happened first in proverbs, therefore. It seems plausible that the pattern of sentence-initial *better* in proverbs may have helped to license the superficially identical structure for modal BETTER, contributing to the high frequency of ellipsis with BETTER as compared with other modals.

Blended structures which seem to combine elements of both can be found on the internet:

- (54) ... without believing, the only reason I could think of is if you say “I don’t really believe, but just in case it IS true, I had better be safe.” But isn’t this ...
www.authorsontheweb.com/ubb/Forum1/HTML/000258.html
- (55) ... Upon conferring with Oneonta fire and police departments, Piscitelli said, “we’d better be safe than sorry,” since a cause couldn’t be determined. ...
www.thedailystar.com/news/stories/2005/01/27/odor3.html - 37k - 4 Feb 2005
- (56) ... I did not intend to frighten the students that would like to participate in this program, but warn them since we all know that “You better be safe than sorry ...
www.spainexchange.com/student_info/erasmus_tips.php - 30k - 4 Feb 2005

This at least lends support to the idea of interaction between proverb structures and the general history of BETTER.

2.6. Counterfactuals

There is one other formal property to be discussed, one of the standard tests for modality. Can BETTER be used as first verb in the apodosis of a past unreal conditional? Huddleston (1980, table) and Mitchell (2003: 134) say not. To us – and apparently also to Huddleston & Pullum (2002: 113) – the judgement is a little less certain. Perhaps example (57)a is not completely out, though it is certainly marginal at best; (57)b is worse:

- (57) a. ?*If Blair hadn't won the 1997 election, he had better have left politics.
 b. *If Blair hadn't won the 1997 election, he('d) better have left politics.

To express such ideas in bullet-proof standard English, awkward circumlocutions must be used instead of BETTER, with BE⁸ rather than HAVE as the last verb before non-verbal *better*:

- (58) a. ... he would have been better (off) leaving politics
 b. ... he would have been better to leave politics.
 c. ... it would have been better for him to leave politics.

We will return in section 3.7 below to the PDE unsuitability of BETTER for counterfactuals.

2.7. Summary of form history

Putting together the history discussed so far, the main stages are as follows:

- (59) (h)it is better + clause (+ *than*)
 (60) NP_{obl} is better + clause (+ *than*)
 (61) NP_{subj} BE better + clause (+ *than*)
 (62) NP_{human} HAVE better + (to) + V_{inf} (+ *than*)
 (63) a. NP_{human} had better + (to) + have V_{pa.ptcp} (+ *than*)
 b. NP_{human} had better + V_{inf}
 (64) a. NP_{human} 'd better + (to) + have V_{pa.ptcp} (+ *than*)
 b. NP_{human} 'd better + V_{inf}
 (65) better + V_{inf}
 (66) NP_{human} better + V_{inf}
 (67) NP_{human/inanimate} better + V_{inf}

3. Semantics and pragmatics

3.1. Possible correlations between syntactic change and semantics

We can suggest some probable correlations between morphosyntax and semantics whereby transitions between the main stages in the form history correspond to differences of meaning:

Table 5: Changes of form and change of meaning

stages	earlier stage		later stage	
	form	meaning	form	meaning
(60) ~ (61), (62)	oblique human NP	beneficiary, evaluative modal	subject NP	argument of lower verb and sometimes of BETTER too
(62) ~ (63)b	<i>to</i> -infinitive	separate tense domain	plain infinitive	temporal concurrence of modal and lower verb; immediacy
(63)a ~ (63)b	better to have V	evaluative, implicit advice	better V	explicit advice
(62) ~ (63)b	better X than Y	comparison, evaluation, advice	better X	(stronger) deontic
(63), (64), (66) ~ (67)	animate NP subject	deontic	inanimate or dummy subject	not argument of BETTER; clause may be episodic

In OE and as long as oblique human NPs are allowed in ME, we can say that the human NP and *(h)it* are in complementary distribution. The oblique NP is an optional element, and when it does occur, it has a meaning standardly encoded as dative, namely beneficiary. The meaning of the predicate BE *better* is essentially evaluative. However, we have not found a convincing line of argument to associate a particular semantics with either the NP or the predicate in the NP_{subject} pattern, (61) – merely that the NP is likely to be an argument of the lower verb and optionally of BETTER as well. Once the BETTER construction comes on the scene, always with a

subject NP of human reference – (63) and later types – the meaning can become deontic. Finally, when non-human subjects become available, the meaning can become epistemic. As will be discussed below, the availability of first deontic and then epistemic meanings does not entail that such meanings are necessarily present.

3.2. Immediacy and specificity

Dictionary evidence suggests that infinitives with BETTER have always been predominantly plain rather than *to*-infinitives. However, there have certainly been examples with *to*. Recent scholars (Duffley 1992, Fischer 1993, 2000, among others) have argued that *to*-infinitives in general encode a tense domain separate from that of the higher verb, whereas plain infinitives do not. It is possible, therefore, that the now-categorical selection of plain infinitives is associated with a temporal coincidence of BETTER and the lower verb, which may help to explain the sense of immediacy of the advice that we detect in BETTER, as well as the specificity which has been observed, typically ‘a recommendation for a specific occasion’ (Westney 1995: 182); Mitchell too shows how BETTER is appropriate for advice on a particular occasion rather than in general or habitual situations (2003: 141).

3.3. Person

We must try to account for the extraordinary predominance with BETTER of first and second person subjects, explicit and implicit (section 2.5.2). First and second person pronouns are top of the animacy hierarchy (Silverstein 1976, Traugott & Dasher 2002: 69), but why should NPs lower down the scale appear so infrequently?

Keith Mitchell claims that BETTER is used not only to impart advice favoured by a speaker but to ‘imply that the speaker is also deciding that the advice should be acted upon’ (2003: 143). In connection with the association of BETTER with specific reference, Westney mentions a (consequent?) expectation of fulfilment (1995: 182). If we put these semantic-pragmatic traits together – speaker decision, specific occasion, expectation of fulfilment – then it does not seem surprising that BETTER should be associated overwhelmingly with the actual participants in the speech situation, namely first and second person: they represent the most likely effective scope of a speaker’s advice/decision on some immediate event. (It is interesting that

examples with third person subjects often do not refer to a specific occasion; see those cited in section 3.4.2 below.)

The properties discussed in this and the previous section range over semantics, pragmatics and morphosyntax. Some represent statistical tendencies, others have become categorical. Rather than trying to tease out a neat causal chain in which property X leads to Y leads to Z, it seems better to regard this as an instance of pattern-strengthening in which the whole constellation of mutually reinforcing properties gradually coheres around the constructional idiom involving BETTER.

3.4. Deontic meaning

3.4.1. *Advisability*

BETTER is often used to express the weakly deontic function of **advisability**, a concept discussed by Traugott & Dasher: ‘It includes the sense that action sought of the subject is not only normatively wished for but is also beneficial to the subject ...’ (2002: 106). Although their example involves modal OUGHT, it seems fully applicable to BETTER, except that historically the order should be reversed for BETTER: the action sought is beneficial to the subject and is also wished for by the speaker. The latter starts off as a generalised invited inference from the former, one that is particularly salient in the frequent early use of *better* constructions in conditional or even counterfactual contexts: why mention that you think it better for the subject that they should do/should have done something unless you **wish** them to do it/wish they had done it? Over time the element of speaker’s wish becomes semanticised.

3.4.2. *Third-person subjects*

The subjects of deontic advice expressed using BETTER are mostly first or second person, therefore personal by definition, but third person subjects are found too. A third person subject does not in itself rule out deontic meaning. To see this, consider a classic case of unequivocal deontic use, MUST with a second person subject, as in (68)a:

- (68) a. You must repay the debt within six months.
 b. The debt must be repaid within six months.

- c. The borrower must repay the debt within six months.

The meaning remains essentially the same, hence deontic, even if the sentence is passivised or given a human third person subject. Now BETTER, like MUST, is voice-neutral, so the same relationship holds between the a and b sentences in (69):

- (69) a. You had better repay the debt within six months.
 b. The debt had better be repaid within six months.
 c. The borrower had better repay the debt within six months.

And both (69)b and c remain deontic.

Let us consider a selection of inanimate third person subjects:

- (70) 1885 O. HEAVISIDE in *Electrician* 4 Sept. 311/2 We pass to electric displacement, the analogue of magnetic induction (noting by the way that it *had better* not be called the electric induction..but be called the displacement).
 (71) 1905 H. J. SPOONER *Motors & Motoring* 19 Grinding in valves is an operation that *had better* be left to the trained mechanic.
 (72) He slowly imagines the character, moulds her into shape, and then -- probably the last thing of all -- pops a pair of glass eyes into those empty sockets. Eyes? Oh yes, she'd *better* have eyes, he reflects, with a weary courtesy. (BNC G1A 574)

In examples (70) and (71), both somewhat archaic, the writer gives advice, enjoins someone unspecified (the reader, people in general) to act in a certain way. In (72) we have free indirect speech, and the recipient of the advice is the speaker/thinker himself: this is speaker decision. All three are deontic. We are arguing, therefore, that deontic meaning is possible even if a human recipient of advice or direction is not actually expressed, so long as one can be inferred.

3.4.3. Comparison

Up to late ModE, BETTER in the form *had better* could be used, albeit rarely, with a *than*-phrase of comparison:

- (73) = (17) 1613 SHAKES. *Hen. VIII*, V. iii. 132 He had better starue
Then but once thinke his place becomes thee not.

As we have seen, this possibility no longer exists. Mitchell regards this as confirmation that the meaning of BETTER now extends beyond the pure giving of advice to directing the behaviour of others or announcing decisions about one's own. 'In other words, here the deciding function overrides the comparative advantage element in the meaning ...' (2003: 143). Directing others is more strongly deontic than advising them.

3.4.4. *Semantics of proverbs*

The proverbial patterns of section 2.5.4 involve advice-giving, like BETTER. Unlike BETTER, the proverbs offer general (generic?) advice (i.e. what is commonly/historically held to be true) and need not reflect the opinion of the speaker. They do not convey any element of decision, any real expectation that the advice will be acted upon, any sense of immediacy. They are not, or barely, deontic. The interpersonal element is low.

3.5. Epistemic meaning

Scholars routinely distinguish deontic and epistemic modality, as in

- (74) You must hurry up.
(75) John must be stuck in traffic.

respectively. Here is Coates's definition of epistemic modality:

It is concerned with the speaker's assumptions or assessment of possibilities and, in most cases, it indicates the speaker's confidence (or lack of confidence) in the truth of the proposition expressed. (1983: 18)

Westney denies flatly that BETTER can be used epistemically (1995: 181 and 183 note 12), while Mitchell asserts that it can (2003: 145-6). The disagreement is instructive. The examples Mitchell chooses are decontextualised snippets from the BNC with third person subjects. Mitchell's alleged epistemic examples of BETTER (2003: 145, his (73-5)) are as follows. We have expanded the context from the full BNC, apparently unavailable to Mitchell.

- (76) [“Kurt here. I have urgent information. There have been serious developments. Can we meet? ...” “I’ll meet you in the lobby of the Frankfurter Hof half an hour from now.] It had better be important.[“ He slammed down the phone before Meyer could reply ...] (BNC ARK2617)
- (77) [I had hoped she would be able to get rid of Dennis quickly, but it was almost 4 o’clock before the red BMW finally appeared and roared away in the direction of the ring road. By that time I was chilled to the bone, exhausted from the relentless battering of the traffic, sullen and depressed.] This had better be good, I thought grimly as I crossed the road and walked up the cul-de-sac to the Parsonage. [This had better be bloody good.] (BNC BMR408)
- (78) [“It was here. I haven’t made it up.] I swear the bodies are somewhere near here.” “They had better be,” Goreng said. [“Or there will be new ones.”] (BNC H9N288)

All three come from fiction (imaginative prose). Mitchell correctly guesses the context of (76) and asserts that

the speaker expresses the **hope** that it is an important matter (and an alternative utterance in this context would be *I hope it’s important*).

He claims that of the three, (76) and (77) at least ‘are resistant to a deontic interpretation’ (2003: 145); (77) and (78) are not otherwise discussed. He goes on to cite Givón (1994: 280) and Palmer (2001: 134) in support of the claim that hope is an epistemic illocutionary act, an instance of epistemic volition. We have some difficulty in accepting all of these claims. Would *I hope it’s important* really have served as an alternative to *It had better be important*, and can the claimed absence of deontic meaning be sustained? Epistemic volition is a possible characterisation of that part of the meaning of BETTER concerned with the truth of the proposition (‘I wish it were true / I wish it to be true’),⁹ but it fails to capture that part of the meaning in which the speaker not so much comments on the truth of a proposition as actually tries to influence events (if only counterfactually) by impressing a course of action on a participant or imposing an obligation.

One interpretation is that all three of (76)–(78) incorporate **simultaneously** an epistemic and a deontic element. (We assume here that the kinds of modality available in English range over those discussed by Palmer (1979).) The epistemic component is certainly akin to hope, while the deontic element involves the imposition of an obligation by the speaker/thinker. The meaning of (76) is difficult to paraphrase precisely,

but it does seem to be rather more than merely ‘I hope it’s important’. We detect in addition two linked meanings: that someone (here the addressee) is in some way responsible for the situation, and that that person should endeavour – or should have endeavoured – to produce a favourable outcome (plus perhaps the suggestion that they will suffer adverse consequences otherwise). With *hope* there are no such additional meanings. Much the same analysis holds for (78). As for (77), the emphatic repetition (not given by Mitchell) makes the writer seem more vehement: **someone** is responsible, probably the housewife who had previously made sexual advances, or perhaps the writer himself, or both.

It is generally taken for granted in the literature that deontic and epistemic modalities are mutually exclusive, which may explain both Westney’s position (if he thinks deontic meaning is always present with BETTER) and Mitchell’s (who argues from an apparent absence of deontic meaning in certain examples). Some scholars do acknowledge the existence of modal verb examples which are either equivocal or ambiguous between these two kinds of modality – Coates (1983) is a notable case in point – but I am not aware of analyses that attribute both deontic and epistemic modality to the same sentence without either ambiguity or vagueness. I see no reason why they should not coexist. Some scholars operate with a much wider armoury of modalities: buletic, doxastic, and so on. Again, I see no particular advantage in this case in assigning modalities to a more fine-grained classification. Better insight may be gained by invoking the concept of intersubjectivity; see section 4.

Keith Mitchell has drawn my attention to a more recent discussion of modality of his, where the following tabulation occurs:

Table 6: Two kinds of modality, adapted from Mitchell (forthcoming)

DEONTIC MODALITY	EPISTEMIC MODALITY
speaker’s decisions about the occurrence of situations (potential ‘acts’)	speaker’s conclusions about the truth of propositions (potential ‘facts’)
function: directive/conative <i>You can take my car</i>	function: speculative/verdictive <i>They may be at the pub</i>

It seems to me that the BETTER clause of (76) is both directive and speculative. The speaker is doing two things at once: imposing a retrospective

obligation on a speech participant, and at the same time making a judgement about the truth of the proposition.

3.6. ‘Threat’ or other additional meanings

Does BETTER encode a threat of adverse consequences if the speaker’s recommendation is not followed by the second or third person addressee? The possibility has been canvassed in the literature, and the idea was apparently salient for one group of ordinary speakers whose invented examples of sentences with BETTER tended to include a threat element.¹⁰ Examples involving an explicit or implicit threat do indeed occur, as in the corpus examples (79)–(82):

- (79) I saved out that lunch money and they took it. And one of them push him down and tell him he better get some protection for himself.” (Frown L12:28)
- (80) “You’d better not show your face back here, unless you want me to work on it with a razor.” (LOB L10:112)
- (81) “You see, Mr. Tisdal, you had better behave peaceably,” said Garrett. “There is nothing to be gained by violence. We are protected, and you in every way in our power – [...] and I tell you fairly, that, except with my permission, you shall not leave this room alive. (ARCHER 1847lefa.f5b)
- (82) As a matter of fact, Grandpa better fork over some dough and pretty fast or I’m going to make his little Sarah into a shiksa. (ARCHER 1964gelb.d8a)

But they are not frequent, amounting to just a handful in the smaller corpora and the BNC sample. (There is an analogy here with the deontic **permission** sense of MAY, which is perceived as more prototypical than epistemic uses despite its comparatively low frequency of occurrence.) More important, any sense of threat with BETTER is either encoded elsewhere in the linguistic context or is merely a pragmatic implication in a situational context where menace is to be expected; see here Westney (1995: 183-4), Mitchell (2003: 146). Threat is not inherently part of the semantics of BETTER.

Examples like (82) are reminiscent of the so-called pseudo-conditional, in which an imperative clause X is coordinated with a declarative clause Y, roughly equivalent to protasis and apodosis of a conditional sentence, and with Y usually representing an adverse consequence for the addressee:

- (83) Hand over the money, or I'll shoot. = X or Y 'If you don't X, then Y'
 (84) Scream and you'll be sorry. = X and Y 'If you X, then Y'

To a certain extent the BETTER construction is equivalent to a hedged version of such an imperative clause, but it is far less grammaticalised in this role: with BETTER the consequence need not be stated, and there is no equivalent to (84) (where the imperative actually conveys 'don't scream', the converse of its literal meaning outside the pseudo-conditional construction).

If threat is not part of the semantics of BETTER, are there nevertheless additional shades of meaning in the pragmatics? If so, they must be tested against definitions of various kinds of implicature. Consider the clause *it had better be important* of (76). Suppose this conveys additional meanings something like the following (the first two are perhaps more convincing):

- (85) a. You should have made sure that the information is important.
 b. I hold you responsible.
 c. If the information turns out not to be important, you will suffer adverse consequences.

Are such meanings defeasible or detachable? (Huang 2007: 32-5, Levinson 1983: 114ff.) I believe that (85)c and probably b are defeasible, while (85)a is not and so cannot be an implicature:

- (86) a. !It had better be important, but you were under no obligation to make sure.
 b. It had better be important, but I guess you can't know whether it is.
 c. It had better be important, but you won't suffer if you made an honest mistake.

The continuation shown in (86)a does not seem felicitous. It is harder to test whether the meanings of (85) are detachable – not specifically linked to the linguistic form of (76) – because it is so hard to find a good synonym for BETTER. Consider these possible paraphrases:

- (87) a. It would be advantageous for it to be important.
 b. I hope that it is important.

If either of (87)a,b is close to synonymy with the BETTER clause of (76), then in my judgement it carries no additional implicatures or entailments, but the additional meanings (85) are lost, from which it apparently follows that (85)b,c cannot be conversational implicatures. But not only is the test of detachability problematic (Levinson 1983: 119-20), the supposed synonymy of (87) with (76) is far from clear. It is tempting to see (85)b,c instead as conventional implicatures of BETTER, which would sit better with meanings tied to the particular idiom, but defeasibility would argue against this (Levinson 1983: 128). In Traugott & Dasher's terms (2002), these might be invited inferences, not yet generalised.

In the absence from the context of a suitable 'fall-guy', someone to blame, the apparent implicatures or invited inferences and hence the deontic element disappear. Consider these invented pairs (cf. the genuine (21) above):

- (88) a. (You've talked me into an expensive holiday.) I hope the weather is good.
 b. (You've talked me into an expensive holiday.) The weather had better be good.
- (89) a. (The annual parade is in September.) I hope the weather is good.
 b. (The annual parade is in September.) The weather had better be good.

Examples (88)a,b are not synonymous: in (88)b but not a, 'you' will be (partly) to blame if my money is wasted. The context of (89), on the other hand, allows (89)a,b to be closer to synonymy, except perhaps that (89)b expresses a stronger hope, almost a jokey requirement (of whom? – the gods?) that the weather be good. Thus (88)a and (89)a,b are not deontic and are best seen as epistemic.¹¹ The following, historical example may belong here too; it repeats (20) with a little more context:

- (90) 1712 ADDISON *Spect.* No. 287 (page)3 if [liberty] only spread among particular branches, there had better be none at all, since such liberty only aggravated the misfortunes of those who are deprived of it, by setting before them a disagreeable subject of comparison.

The natural interpretation is of the writer's preference for what the state of affairs should be, a hope.

Epistemic uses of BETTER come later than deontic ones (indeed example (90) is unusually early). The late development of epistemic usage is of course a classic symptom of grammaticalisation among modals. A non-human subject is probably a necessary but certainly not a sufficient condition for epistemic meaning.

3.7. Counterfactual semantics

As we saw in section 2.6, BETTER has been used in counterfactual contexts to comment on what might have been. Here are two more examples:

- (91) 1814 "Poor dear Fanny," cried her cousin, "how ill you have been used by them! You had better have staid with us." (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 86, cited by Jespersen (1909-49: IV.146))
- (92) 1813 It had better have happened to you, Lizzy; you would have laughed yourself out of it sooner. (Austen, *P&P* xxv)

Evidently if there is an advice element in (91), it cannot be direct advice as to immediate future action: at best it is implicit advice on future behaviour in similar circumstances, but the main effect is of evaluation of a past action and perhaps of implicit speaker wish. There is no advice element at all in (92). Such irrealis functions are regarded by Mitchell as positively ungrammatical in contemporary usage (2003: 143). Nonetheless they do still occur, if infrequently; there are two examples in written texts in the corpus data, (93) and (94):

- (93) He declares that he has come to prevent Charity from getting into trouble, or to help her evoke a marriage proposal from Lucius, but he concludes the episode by saying in front of Lucius that Charity is a promiscuous "woman of the town" just like her mother. "I went to save her from the kind of life her mother was leading - but I'd better have left her in the kennel she came from" (203-4). (Frown G43:10)
- (94) "Well, I am now. Simon beat Pippa for these."
"No wonder."
"He'd better have beaten me." Sara swung round, and Thomas was half touched by the horror in her. (FRH 1761 BNC)

Perhaps the most natural-seeming paraphrase for this expression of unreal past in standard English is the rather lengthier ‘It would have been better if X had happened [rather than Y]’ (cf. section 2.6), although this loses something of the speaker investment.

What kind of modality is this? In meaning, (91) is not quite the same as (92)–(94). All four express a present-time speaker comment on the past, but only (91) contains a small element of direct (albeit belated) advice from speaker to hearer and can be analysed as – just about – deontic. In (92)–(94), instead of advising a second person subject of BETTER, the speaker expresses a preference towards the proposition. And this looks very much like epistemic use, defined as follows by Mitchell:

[t]he speaker expresses a volitional attitude (a desire, a preference) towards a proposition that is potentially true: “I would like/prefer it to be the case that p”. Hoping is a type of epistemic volition: a wish that a proposition whose truth is unknown turns out to be true. (2003: 145)

In these counterfactual cases, however, what is being expressed is a volitional attitude with a converse formulation: a wish that a proposition whose **un**truth is known might turn out to be true. Notice, though, that these particular epistemic uses have almost disappeared from current English.¹²

Note too that BETTER historically involves or derives from a past tense form, yet its gravitation away from counterfactuals and unreal conditionals towards present and future open conditionals suggests that it fits a generalisation about obligation modals (apart from HAVE *to*) losing their productive morphological past-nonpast pairing and developing a “hypothetical present” with past form (Traugott & Dasher 2002: 108, 132-7). Traugott & Dasher take the appearance of the *have*-perfect after a modal (*must*, in their discussion) as unambiguous demonstration that the modal ‘was no longer understood as marked for past tense’ (2002: 137). If the inference is safe, then the same should hold of BETTER from the fifteenth or sixteenth century iff it is a modal:

- (95) [c1435 Torr. Portugal 1186 Better he had to have be away.] (OED s.v. better, a., (n.), and adv. A.4b)
- (96) 1537 Thersytes, *Four O. Plays* (1848) 69 They had better haue set me an errande at Rome. (OED s.v. better, a., (n.), and adv. A.4b)
- (97) c1620 T. GOFFE *Careless Shepherdess III*. i, You had better have been hang’d at first, as I wo’d had you. (OED s.v. will v.1 A.8)

- (98) 1621 SANDERSON Serm. I. 214 Vzza had better have ventured the falling, than the fingering of the ark. (*OED* s.v. *falling* vbl.n. 1)
- (99) 1684 H. MORE Answ. 214 The Remarker had better have let things alone. [*OED*]

However, the superfluous use of infinitive *have* to express or reinforce unrealised action is well known (Denison 1998: 140), and many examples follow (non-modal) verbs which certainly retain a clear past-nonpast distinction:

- (100) 1595 V. SAVIOLO Practise I. i. sig. **2, The Padouan replied, that he meant to have cut of the Spaniards heade firste. (*OED* s.v. Paduan 2)

Given the uncertain status of BETTER as a modal, especially in the early ModE period, we are unwilling to use this test. Nevertheless, BETTER can express a hypothetical present with its past form.

3.8. Discourse markers

Since Traugott & Dasher raise the question of a further semantic change from epistemic into speech act modalities, we have looked briefly at the evidence of BETTER. They suggest that ‘evidence in the domain of modal auxiliaries has remained elusive’ (2002: 77-8), and cf. also their (2002: 115-6) on uncertainties about timing of development of speech act modalities.

In late ModE the combination of BETTER with a verb of speaking, thinking or motion can act as a discourse marker. Such discourse markers often serve to indicate (i) a (brief) divergence from the main topic of discussion, (ii) an outright change of topic, (iii) the introduction of a topic, (iv) the closure of a topic/discussion:

- (101)
- (102) 1897 O. WILDE *Let.* ?7 June (1962) 601, I had better say candidly that he is not ‘a beautiful boy’... He is simply a manly simple fellow, ... (*OED* s.v. *mulierast* n.)
- (103) “^I think we’d better go on to the next question fr=om# (name) (LLC 5:4 Heading)
- (104) 1992 The most important example and one easily overlooked is the symbiotic relationship of the stony corals which act as hosts to mi-

- croscopic algae living within their tissues. Perhaps I better explain that symbiosis is popularly defined as a relationship between two differing life forms for their mutual benefit. (BNC C95:2088)
- (105) Since I mention native speakers' feelings in this connection, and since I am elsewhere rather sceptical about appeals to native speakers' feelings, I *had better* explain that in this case my evidence comes from the native speakers of English I have taught in practical classes on transcription over many years. (BNC K93 175)
- (106) "Is there something wrong?" Grace asked. "I figure you'd *better* know someone's been following us, Grace. They may be here." (FLOB N14:31)
- (107) I'd better introduce myself ... (Westney 1995: 183, example 5.75)

But it is the **combination** of BETTER and predicate which carries the discourse function: the function of BETTER alone is almost purely one of deciding, with perhaps sufficient connotation of 'advice to self' to be regarded as deontic. It is very doubtful, therefore, that BETTER by itself can be considered a discourse marker.

4. Subjectivity and intersubjectivity

Evaluation is inherent in the meaning both of the adjective/adverb *better* and of the verbal BETTER, hence an element of subjectivity is necessarily involved in their use. Many early examples of the non-verbal *better* involve third person NPs and express the speaker/writer's evaluation of a situation and no more. (There is, however, no epistemic element, since the evaluation is part of the propositional content; cf. here also Westney (1995: 183 n.12).) Although pronominal NPs have always been predominant, it is not clear whether first and second person had such an overwhelming preponderance as they now do: we have not undertaken a corpus count of earlier material, and in any event, first and second person pronouns might well be under-represented in the text types available. Counterfactual uses, which were once common, are perhaps somewhat more strongly subjective, since they involve both the projection of an imaginary outcome by the speaker/writer and its evaluation, while proverbial uses are weaker.

In section 3.6 we discussed a group of examples which seemed to convey at one and the same time both deontic and epistemic semantics. An alternative account would bring in intersubjectivity. We repeat (88) and (89) below:

- (88) a. (You've talked me into an expensive holiday.) I hope the weather is good.
 b. (You've talked me into an expensive holiday.) The weather had better be good.
- (89) a. (The annual parade is next Monday.) I hope the weather is good.
 b. (The annual parade is next Monday.) The weather had better be good.

Where (88)a and (89)a,b are epistemic and subjective, (88)b is intersubjective and epistemic/deontic: the speaker/writer projects the hope onto the addressee as well ('you too should hope for a favourable outcome').

It looks as if a cluster of properties is lost at much the same time in late ModE: complementation by a *to*-infinitive, inclusion of a comparison, and the possibility of counterfactual meaning (see sections 2.3, 2.4 and 2.6 above). The meaning of advisability comes to the fore and with it an intersubjective element: the speaker/writer doesn't just express an opinion but attempts to co-opt the hearer/reader into accepting the advice. (Note that the 'hearer' and speaker may be the same individual, since first person use is semantically reflexive). The greater the degree of speaker decision, the stronger the interpersonal element. Likewise, any invited inferences involving a second person subject, whether of being held responsible or even of being at risk of adverse consequences for non-compliance, suggest a great degree of intersubjectivity.

The preceding paragraphs rather suggest a steady diachronic progression from subjectivity to intersubjectivity, thus in Traugott's terms (this volume), a process of intersubjectification. However, there is another line of development which need not involve interpersonal use and therefore need not contribute to intersubjectification. This is the diachronic development of modality from deontic to epistemic, especially in connection with inanimate and dummy NP subjects. After all, a natural interpretation of the syntax-semantics interface is to assume that deontic modality requires a two-place verb, where the person on whom the obligation falls is one argument (and a proposition the other). Intersubjectivity arises because of the involvement of the speaker not as a syntactic argument but pragmatically. An epistemic modal is a one-place verb, taking only a proposition as argument and involving the speaker's perspective pragmatically: the

perspective of the hearer does not have to be addressed by the speaker, hence intersubjectivity is low or absent altogether.

5. Afterword

In the course of a history that lasts at least 1200 years, the BETTER constructions have exhibited various attributes of grammaticalisation, and in particular a growth of interpersonal usage that is reflected in their semantics and in their selective preference for first and second person subjects. There is a typical chronological priority of deontic before epistemic use with inanimate or dummy subjects, just as if BETTER was (or was becoming) a full-blown modal.¹³ We have not detected, however, an inevitable and unidirectional change towards pure modality. For one thing, BETTER is probably older than the morphosyntactic category Modal. For another, the category is a moving target – but that is another story.

Secondary sources

I quote Cort (2006) on the sources used:

The corpora used were: the British National Corpus (BNC), A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers (ARCHER),¹⁴ the London Lund Corpus (LLC), the 1961 [...] Brown Corpus and the LOB Corpus [...], and their early 1990s Freiburg counterparts FROWN and F-LOB. This selection of corpora encompasses a range of Englishes: spoken and written, British and American, historical and contemporary.

Table 7: Corpora cited

corpus	AmE	BrE	spoken	written	timespan	words (millions)
ARCHER	✓	✓	✓	✓	1650–1991	1.7
BNC	✓	✓	✓	✓	1960–1993	100
BROWN	✓	–	–	✓	1961	1
F-LOB	–	✓	–	✓	1991	1
FROWN	✓	–	–	✓	1992	1
LLC	–	✓	✓	–	1959–1975	0.5
LOB	–	✓	–	✓	1961	1

A number of citations come from *OED*, and other sources for occasional citations are indicated after the quotation concerned.

Notes

- 1 The corpus data and much of the work for the oral paper in 2005 were contributed by AC. The present revision is mostly DD's work, hence the fluctuation between authorial *we* and *I*. I am grateful to Martina Faller and John Payne for helpful advice on modality and logic, though I don't expect to have satisfied either of them, and to two anonymous referees for their detailed comments, some of which at least I have been able to take account of.
- 2 We adopt the notational convention of small caps for verb lexemes.
- 3 Much of Hall's discussion is framed in the form of orotund footnotes which could almost have been the model for Flann O'Brien's preposterous de Selby commentaries.
- 4 Although there are examples in OE where **NP** is nominal (e.g. *þam menn, þam hæþenan cilde, ælcum men, Ðæm lytegan, þam men, Ðam yrmingan, ælcum cristenum men*), they are greatly outnumbered by pronominal NPs, a preponderance which we can assume continued into ME. As we shall see in section 2.5.2, the successor constructions in ModE also show a preference for pronominal subjects.
- 5 Examples of the latter, somewhat rare, lexemes:
 - (i) For þan us is selest ær ðam deaþe, þæt we onginnan þisse forgifenan tide brucan (*HomM* 11 (ScraggVerc 14) B3.5.11)
therefore us is best before the death that we begin this given time to-enjoy
 - (ii) 1844 MOZLEY Ess. (1878) II. 27 You must give way; and you had as well do so voluntarily. (*OED*)
- 6 Visser only gives two examples of (9) with *better*, marked "14th c." and "End 14th c.", respectively, but the first comes from a manuscript dated a1425.
- 7 Example (18) appears to be a quotation from a Civil War letter.
- 8 Or perhaps DO:
 - (i) ... he would have done better to have left politics.
- 9 However, it is not necessarily legitimate to conflate desire for an outcome with belief about a proposition; they are kept distinct in Ginzburg & Sag (2000), for instance. On the other hand, I do not accept an anonymous referee's claim that hope concerns the desirability of a situation and so (if modal at all) must be deontic: hope has no performative element and does not convey an obligation.

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- 10 These were native and non-native speakers, linguistically sophisticated, who were questioned by AC as to how verbal BETTER was used. One interpretation of this (suggested by Susan Fitzmaurice, p.c.) is that a threat context was the clearest way of signalling their intuitive sense of an intersubjective meaning (on which see section 4).
- 11 An anonymous referee tentatively appeals to van der Auwera & Plungian's classification of the modality of possibility and necessity (1998): a weakening of deontic meaning in BETTER could then be seen as a shift from participant-internal to participant-external modality.
- 12 Alternatively, as an anonymous referee argues, if what is expressed is advisability, then such examples are not epistemic at all but merely unfulfilled past time deontics.
- 13 On this question the formal property of being a 'NICE' verb might be thought relevant, as in internet data such as the following:
- (i) its guna b so fun we better b in tha same team betnt we!
- (ii) lol well you better start staying in then betternt you!!!! lol
- Example (i) comes from Google's cache of <<http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendID=110770125>> as retrieved on 10 June 2007 19:34:51 GMT, search dated 13 August 2007, while (ii) is from <<http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=81374563>>, sampled 13 August 2007. But *bettern't* forms have never been particularly frequent, and even an apparently central modal verb like MAY has lost the form *mayn't*.
- 14 The examples from ARCHER and the word counts were gathered from an early version of the corpus by AC; citations have been referred by DD to the file-names used in the current release of ARCHER, version 3.1.

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