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Structure-Sensitivity in Actuality: Notes from a Class of Preference Expressions

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Abstract

The paper deals with the development of certain preference expressions (in particular 'rather') against the background of language change. Following results from narrow syntax, a diachronic reanalysis at the level of Logical Form is proposed. Synchronically, certain actuality entailments (Bhatt 1999/2006) are observed and a structural analysis capitalizing on Hacquard (2009) is proposed.

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Remus Gergel[*]

1 Introduction

An important insight gained in recent years (see e.g., von Fintel 1995 and especially Eckardt 2006) is that, in many crucial cases, semantic change in a word goes together with a wholesale reorganization of meaning in its linguistic environment. This is, of course, part and parcel of the issue of compositional semantics, Frege's conjecture, applied to language change. Part of ongoing work, the present paper addresses this perspective by considering certain aspects of *rather* expressions together with the mapping between the interpretable structures involved in the change and the effects they produce. We focus on the preference reading of *rather* constructions. Following Gergel (2009a), we apply a Heim/Villalta semantics (cf. Villalta 2006) to such constructions and additionally deal with actuality effects (AEs) that obtain in them.

The article proceeds as follows. Following earlier work, Section 2 introduces the basic data for modern and earlier stages of *rather*. In Section 3, we present our proposal of modeling the change theoretically. The key idea is that of diachronic reanalysis at LF, a concept that we put forward by relying on the findings of semantic change conducted in the literature so far, but in conjunction with configurational properties of change. To this end we capitalize on (structure-focused) syntactic diachronic research (cf. Axel 2007, van Gelderen 2008, Kroch 2001, Roberts and Roussou 2003, among many others) alongside the pertinent semantic literature. In Section 4, we refine the analysis of the change undergone by *rather* in several respects. Our main focus will be on the AEs (Bhatt 1999/2006) that obtain with bare *rather* constructions in post-reanalysis grammars. In Section 5, we extend the proposal to European Portuguese and Romanian. Given that the most explicit configurational theory of AEs with other types of modality (Hacquard 2009 and related work) has been developed on the basis of the Romance tempo-aspectual system, we show that when expressions of preference with similar actuality effects as *rather* are grammaticalizing, they are sensitive to the same imperfective/perfective distinctions predicted from other areas of modality within the Romance system.

2 Essential Characteristics of *Rather*

2.1 *Rather* in (Standard) Modern English

According to the Cambridge Grammar of the English Language (CGEL; i.e., Huddleston and Pullum 2002), *rather* is a less central governor of scalar inequality with four main uses:

(1) She would rather live in danger than die of loneliness and boredom. (so-called idiom *would rather*)
(2) Joe went to jail rather than pay the fine. (with bare infinitive, preference reading)
(3) Care rather than skill is all you need. (contrastive link)
(4) These people are more likely to be referred to courts rather than to aid panels. (pleonastic)

From the four uses, we will focus here on the most clearly modal types of *rather*, i.e., the preference reading and the *would+rather* construction. This does not exhaust the ModE morphosyntax (cf. e.g., the non-standard verb *rather*; Juge 2002) or the range of meanings of *rather* expressions, but yields a first orientation. Two descriptive addenda: (i) the modality conveyed in the

bare-infinitive pattern is frequently bouletic, comparing preferences on a scale, but other backgrounds for the alternative propositions are attested as well (cf. e.g., Gergel 2009a); (ii) the *-ing* form is an alternative to the bare-infinitive type of *rather* in many cases.

Let us note a few additional characteristics of the patterns in (1-4) before considering earlier English. First, the pleonastic use is easiest to distinguish. The introducer of the comparative XP, *rather than*, can be substituted by *than* alone (e.g., (4)), though the opposite is not generally true; cf. the run-of-the-mill comparative *Lisa is taller than Bart*. (Some notion of distance between comparative and *rather than* is minimally necessary.) Second, from the perspective of grammaticalization the pleonastic use is interesting to the extent that claims about bleaching have substance. An alternative to the term pleonastic would be, however, to say that in examples like (4), *rather* is an optional marker of modal harmony (e.g., with *likely* there). Third, the so-called contrastive-link reading may belong to a potentially larger group of metalinguistic comparatives. It is conceivable that they involve some type of modality as well (cf. e.g., Giannakidou and Stavrou 2008 for Greek). Metalinguistic comparatives (called denial of assumption, DOA, in some of the literature; cf. Thompson 1972) can be distinguished morphosyntactically in English (when they are overtly clausal) from the modal-in-a-narrow-sense *rather than* structures (RTS) on which the focus lies here. RTSs involve the non-finite form of the main verb, while DOAs have the finite form:

(5) Harry walked to work rather than drive. (RTS with a preference reading)
(6) Harry walked to work rather than drove. (DOA)

According to Dieterich and Napoli (1982), there is a further correlation between expletives and the two types of *rather*. Notice that the preference RTS naturally rules out a non-referential expletive *it* subject (given that such a subject cannot be interpreted to have a preference):

(7) *It snowed rather than rain.
(8) It snowed rather than rained.

Finally, another well-observed characteristic of RTSs in ModE is that *rather* is obligatorily adjacent to the introducer of the standard of comparison and this constituent is frequently preposed (unlike in DOAs, where the adjacency is not generally given and preposing is ruled out):

(9) *Rather than rained it snowed.
(10) Rather than drive/driving Harry walked to work.

Summarizing, even though the four classes introduced above for *rather* are not exhaustive or always easily distinguishable, there is a certain basis of diagnostics through which they can be motivated empirically. What the current patterns may have in common is some type of comparison (cf. *than*) and of modality. Cognitively, we are dealing with comparative modality, a type of modality that can be realized in a number of ways in English and cross-linguistically (cf. van der Auwera and de Wit 2010, Gergel 2009a). From a compositional perspective, language change can also offer some insight into the issue given that there are no obvious degrees of *rathness* in ModE.

2.2 *Rather* in Early English

While the relic *-er* morphology is opaque in combination with *rath* today, the original comparative nature of *rather* becomes obvious by considering earlier stages of the language, i.e., Old and Middle English (OE/ME). Given that there is a fair amount of description available (e.g., Mitchell 1985, Rissanen 1999, Stern 1931, Gergel 2009a, and the references cited there), let us just make two observations, one because it is essential in the compositional account of change of *rather* and the other in connection with the chronology of the loss of the temporal meaning. First, while the positive *rath* and the comparative *rather*, i.e., with their variants, have had a range of meanings in OE and ME ('soon', 'early', 'swift', among others), they had in common some notion of ranking on a timeline, or a related scale that can be linearly mapped onto such a line. The following passage from Wycliffe's Middle English version of the New Testament (PPCME2, Kroch and Taylor

2000) illustrates this with a clearly temporal *rather*:

(11) for he was rather than Y.
    'for he was before me'   (CMNT., I, 20.64)

     Second, a death certificate of the temporal meaning must be sought in the early Modern period. This has, of course, long been sensed from the disappearance of temporal uses of *rather* (itself preceded by the progressively infrequent occurrence of the temporal positive *rath*). A more definite clue in this connection, however, may be the fact that William Caxton replaced the temporal instances of *rather* in earlier manuscripts which were available to him and which he reproduced in printing. (Archaic temporal uses afterwards are still possible of course.)

     We have sketched the modal meanings of *rather* in current English and its temporal meaning in earlier English. We next introduce the main tools for modeling the change theoretically.

## 3 Towards Diachronic Reanalysis at the Level of LF

3.1 Diachronic Reanalysis in Narrow Syntax

A classical case of diachronic reanalysis is that of the English modals. As so-called premodals, they were able to undergo some version of V-to-I(infl) in Pre-Elizabethan English but are directly merged I-elements today (Roberts 1993, Gergel 2009b, among many others). A simplistic but initially sufficient representation of this syntactic alternation is given in (12–13) below.

(12) English modals preceding their Diachronic Reanalysis (V-to-I Move; simplified structure):
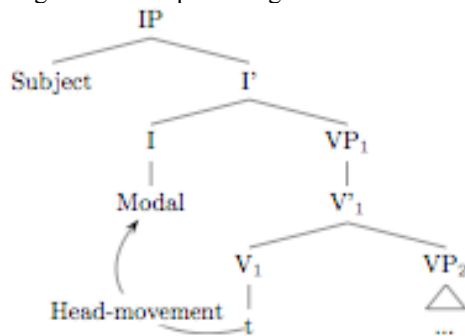
(13) ModE modals, after the Diachronic Reanalysis (Merge instead of Move):
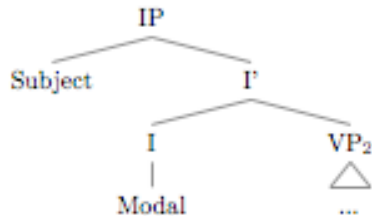
While the transition from (12) to (13) refers to the loss of a movement-dependency with regard to head movement, case studies that show the same principle at work for syntactic phrasal movement are also available (cf. van Gelderen 2008). In Section 3.3, we will show that the generalization can be extended and the loss of movement dependencies applies to reanalysis at the level of LF, too.

3.2 Semantic Reanalysis

Eckardt (2006), as much related work on semantic change, has suggested an account of semantic change with a trajectory from context-dependent pragmatic effects to linguistically encoded meaning. We illustrate this with Eckardt's account of the development of *going-to* in English:

- descriptive trajectory: from movement marker to marker of imminent future (cf. CGEL for certain issues with the term), "bleaching" of the progressive;
- theoretical trajectory: from context-based side-messages towards hard-wired lexical entries incorporating imminence.

The idea of the side-message can be applied to *rather*. While the original meaning of *rath* by itself was essentially temporal, there are comparative uses as early as in OE that allow other meanings. Readings of preference were obtainable, e.g., in conjunction with explicit bouletic markers such as *willan*, 'want', as the following translation from Latin by Ælfric (cf. Rissanen 2008) shows.

(14) magis hoc uolo quam illud: swyðor oððe hraðor ic wylle þis þonne ðæt
      magis hoc uolo quam illud: more   or   rather I want this than   that
      'I want this more than that.'   (Ælfric, Grammar 241.2, DOEC)

The generality of the pattern of change is easily observed. Similar potentials for change from temporal-based expressions of comparisons towards modalizing ones are frequent in different nuances cross-linguistically (cf. French *plus+tôt*, German *eher*, Catalan *més aviat*, among myriads of other cases; see also Section 5 below), and ModE is no exception:

(15) Anna would have cut off her hand sooner than have brought the girl to harm.
                              (M. Roberts Rinehart, *The Street of Seven Stars*, gutenberg.org)

3.3 Putting the Ingredients Together: Structure-Sensitive Semantic Change

The goal of this section is to combine the notion of semantic reanalysis (e.g., in Eckardt's sense sketched above) with a consideration of the relevant structural properties of change. That is, we propose a transfer of some of the insight stemming from diachronic syntax to the issues that are relevant for change at LF. In order to do so, we first introduce the pre-reanalysis interpretable structure of (temporal) *rather* clauses.

Following von Stechow (2009:230), temporal comparative adverbs such as *früher/später* ('earlier/later') induce quantifier raising over times. This lends itself directly to the pre-reanalysis LF of *rather* and leads to a structure such as (16).

(16) Temporal comparative *P rather (=sooner) than Q* preceding the reanalysis:
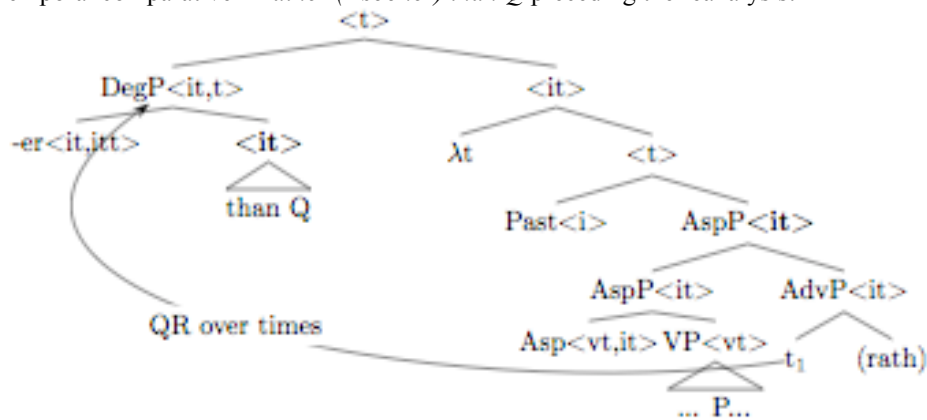
But when the meaning based on the temporal scale disappears altogether from the language and the former side-message becomes the only possible entry, such an LF is no longer available in any form. After the reanalysis, *rather* can then not relate (characteristic functions of) two sets of times. Instead, with temporal meaning gone, *rather* must relate two sets of situations. In Eckardt's terms, it comes to fully express its former side-message (recalling that temporal expressions are frequently used with implicatures in which propositions are ordered). But the repercussions go all the way through the LF. Without the set of times available, the *Tense* node cannot be interpreted either. A tense pronoun must be added higher up. This results in a wholesale reorganization of the original

LF. An initial possibility is the one given in (17) (Gergel 2009a).

(17) Reanalyzed structure (to be amended):
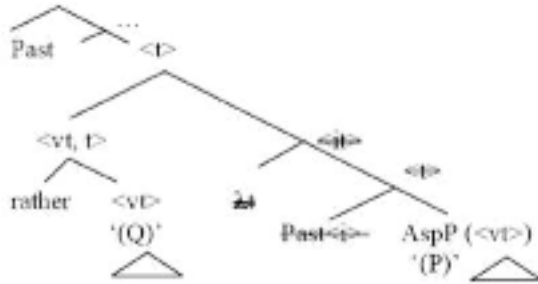
We next improve the outcome structure of the reanalysis. A first amendment relates to the transition from the <i,t>-denoting constituents to the <v,t>-denoting constituents, i.e., from the sets of times to the sets of events. In (17), this change is stipulated, in the sense that the same constituents that naturally had type <i,t> before the change (AspP) are *overwritten* to <v,t>. A simpler solution, guided by the idea that we are left with nothing more than what can be interpreted, presents itself as follows. In the pre-reanalysis structure (16), there are both <v,t>-denoting and, structurally higher, <i,t>-denoting constituents. The head Asp transforms the sets of events into sets of times, which in turn can compositionally be interpreted as sisters of *Tense*. But once the entire temporal component is out of business within the *rather*-clause, the Asp-head naturally loses its function, too. That is, the original low <v,t>-denoting constituents are all what is left (rather than the <i,t> constituents being overwritten to <v,t>). This results in a simple structure such as (18) for the low area of the tree.[1]

(18) Remains of the original structure (by itself devoid of T and Asp layers):
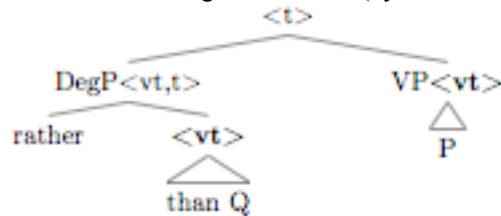
Besides the reasoning of the you-have-what-you-interpret strategy suggested above at the level of LF, there are two additional reasons for the plausibility of this amendment in the process of change. One is that tightening of structure and in particular of non-activated functional layers is a frequent type of loss in language change. It is visible, for instance, in restructuring configurations from biclausal to monoclausal structures. The reanalysis of the English modals is a prime case that illustrates this aspect of change. In this connection, the view of the reanalysis briefly discussed above can straightforwardly be refined so that it accommodates not only the transition from a movement to a first-merge dependency but also from a biclausal to a monoclausal structure (Roberts and Roussou 2003:40ff.).

An additional reason for the plausibility of structure reduction to the specific exclusion of T and Asp layers from the relic structure in the history of English is that Modern English RTSs are resistant to accommodating aspectual and temporal layers that are not independently licensed (cf. Zagona 1988), i.e., in configurations such as (19a–c). The embedded clause seems invisible to the T/Asp layer and it cannot independently introduce one into the computation.

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[1]*Rather* is on the current analysis the result of the interpretation of a former movement dependency. It is worth emphasizing nonetheless that *rather* itself is, comparatively speaking (within the reanalyzed structure), a low modal at LF, unlike, e.g., a possible accompanying *would*. This refines to some extent claims occasionally made with the result often viewed as a "high" modal (cf. Abraham 2010, Gergel 2009a, for discussions).

(19) a. *Rather than (Francis) fought the enemy, Francis resigned from the army.
　　 b. *Rather than to fight the enemy, Francis resigned from the army.
　　 c. *Rather than to have fought the enemy, Francis resigned from the army.

An example of a *rather*-clause from Chaucer such as (20) illustrates the situation preceding this stage of clause tightening that took place in the history of English RTSs.

(20) Rather than I leese / Custance, I wol be cristned.
　　　 'Rather than I loose/ Constance I will be christened.' (Chaucer, *CT, The Miller's Tale*, 225)

Now, if a structure such as (18) above is on the right track within the lower area of the reanalyzed tree (recalling that, on top of it, T/Asp still needs to be added within the full structure, an issue for Section 4 below), then, what is the contribution of *rather* itself? Using the simplest of assumptions, we treat *rather* here as a relator of two propositions. Propositions are understood as sets of events or, interchangeably here, situations (Kratzer 2009). Notationally, this yields type <v,t> for the two propositions and <<v,t>, <<v,t>,t>> for *rather*. The relator *ranks* the two propositions on a scale, e.g., of desires for the preference reading (cf. Villalta 2006 for interesting discussion of the relationship of scales to run-of-the-mill desire predicates). This yields in our case an entry as in (21) below.

(21) RTS preference reading: ⟦rather⟧ = λq: q ∈ $D_{<v,t>}$.[λp: p ∈ $D_{<v,t>}$. q $<_{Des,a}$ p]

What this particular entry does is to order two propositions, which are conceptualized as sets of events. Notice that the entry of *rather* itself does not say anything about the anchoring to worlds. This effect will be derived from independent structural factors in Section 4 below. To summarize this section, we have made a simple suggestion as to how to reconstruct the basic meaning components in the wake of the diachronic reanalysis of *rather* in the low area of the tree.

4 The Modal/Non-Modal Issue and Its Implications

What we still need to map in the reanalyzed structure is the higher area of the tree, i.e., the tempo-aspectual input to LF. In this section, we turn to this issue. The motivation of the final structure (proposed in Section 4.2) requires a brief discussion concerned with the representation of actuality effects in connection with modality, which is offered in Section 4.1.

4.1 Actuality Entailments (Bhatt 1999/2006, Hacquard 2009)

Sentences containing modal expressions are evaluated, on standard semantic assumptions (Lewis 1973, Kratzer 1981), in relevant *possible* worlds. A discovery of the past decade (Bhatt 1999/2006, Hacquard 2006, Piñon 2003, Portner 2009) has been, however, that assertions under the scope of certain modal markers can be actualized. That is, such assertions also hold true of the *actual* world. In this section, we introduce the basic idea, while the next section implements it with the specifics in the investigative context of RTSs.

　　 One of the most explicit accounts of AEs in conjunction with modals has been developed by Hacquard (2009) on the basis of the Romance tempo-aspectual system. Thus, while the English modal *can* does not produce AEs, e.g., French *pouvoir* does. Consider (22) and (23).

(22) Jane a   pu   soulever la table, #mais elle ne l'a   pas soulevée.
　　 Jane has could.PFV lift   the table, but she not it-has not lifted.
　　 'Jane was able to lift the table, #but she didn't lift it.'
(23) Jane pouvait   soulever la table, mais elle ne l'a   pas soulevée.
　　 Jane could.IMP   lift   the table, but she not it-has not lifted
　　 'Jane was able to lift the table, but she didn't lift it.'

According to Hacquard, what we observe in (22) is that a continuation which retracts the AE of

the main predicate is infelicitous. This is essentially the AE. Importantly within the Romance tempo-aspectual system, the finite morphology is perfective in this sentence. Placing the same sentence in the imperfective removes the AE, cf. (23). The reasoning (in brief) is that the imperfective morphology activates a higher modal operator; (23) is thus about possible worlds. But while the latter sentence may be less surprising,[2] (22) is. Its account relies on the presence of a default binder of the modal variable (Percus 2000). By adapting Hacquard's proposal to the case study at hand, we next illustrate where the effect arises in RTSs and how it can be accounted for.

4.2 Back to RTSs: Amending the Post-Reanalysis Structure Further

The relevance of AEs is obvious for the (bare) RTSs under inspection (even though it was overlooked in earlier research). Consider (24).

(24) Francis resigned from the army rather than fight an enemy that was willing to live on so little food.

While such examples have a preference reading in ModE (cf. the CGEL), they do not only mean that Francis preferred resigning to fighting. They also assert that Francis resigned in the actual world. This makes an extension of the structural proposal of Bhatt and Hacquard to RTSs plausible. We will next use this observation to return to our original goal and give a more appropriate account of the structurally higher portion of the post-reanalysis LF.

In order to implement the observation, let us assume, following Hacquard (2009), that the tempo-aspectual layer is structurally related to the world parameter. More specifically:
- the aspectual head carries a world-variable (associated with the VP for which it yields the aspectual information; here this can only be the main clause ('P') on the basis of the asymmetry observed between the two clauses);
- building on the line going back to Percus (2000), the world-variable itself can be bound either by an immediately dominating overt modal (if available) or by a default binder, as is the case with the non-finite RTSs.

The upshot of this for a run-of-the mill RTS is given in (25) below.

(25) Proposal for the structure of the reanalyzed *rather*:
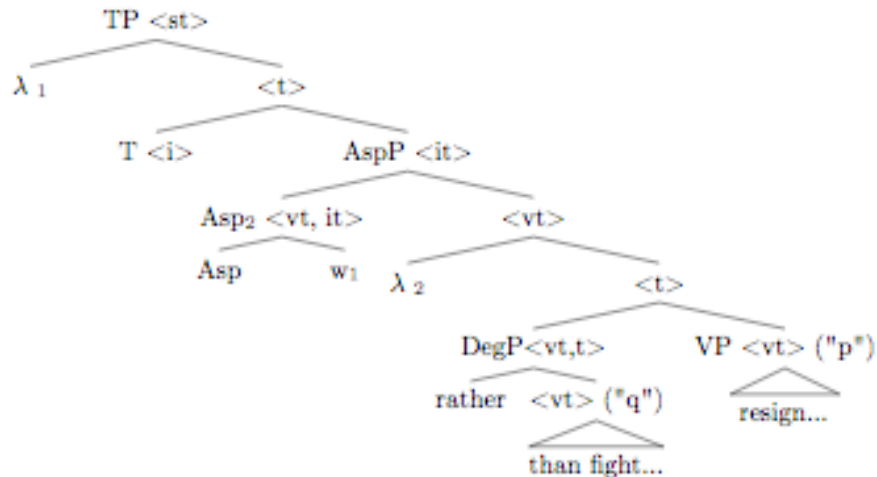
In (25) the AE is derived structurally. Following the technique introduced, the default binder λ_1 is the only binder of the world-variable w_1. This predicts that the part that is visible to the aspectual head, namely the proposition p, is also actualized. But what if an overt modal intervenes, as in the *would+rather* constructions? Such examples, after all, certainly do not entail anything about even-

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[2]Cf. also the independently known, notorious variety of functions of the imperfective (including modal ones) in the Romance languages.

tualities taking place in the actual world. The solution is evident. In such sentences, the default binder is not the closest to the variable any longer in structural terms. Hence, it is the overt intervening modal (*would*) that binds the variable, and hence no AE is predicted to hold.

5 Two Romance *Rather*'s

5.1 European Portuguese

European Portuguese (EP) has two key prerequisites for current purposes. It has the Romance (im)perfective distinctions in the past tense and it shows AEs paralleling, e.g., the ones discussed by Hacquard (2009) for French, that is, independently of the relevant expressions of preference, to which we will turn shortly.[3] Following Gergel and Cunha (2010), let us consider (26–27) first.

(26) O   João sabia   resolver o problema (mas por fim não o fez).
      the João could.IMP solve   the problem (but for end not it did)
      'João could solve the problem (but eventually he didn't do it).'
(27) O   João soube   resolver o problema (#mas por fim não o fez).
      the João could.PFV solve   the problem (but for end not it did)
      'João could solve the problem (#but eventually he didn't do it).'

What we can observe is that while the imperfective shows the expected genuinely modal behavior in (26), the perfective displays the AE, as evidenced by the infelicitous continuation in (27).

Crucially EP also has a grammaticalizing expression of preference with the relevant properties. A basic example is given in (28) below, which displays *mais depressa*, lit. 'more of hurry'.

(28) A   Carla canta mais depressa pop do que rock.
      the Carla sings more of-hurry pop than   rock
      'Carla sings pop faster/more preferably than rock.'

In EP, (28) can in particular have the reading of ranking propositions on a scale of preferences.[4] The question is whether distinctions in the tempo-aspectual properties of sentences containing such expressions have an effect on the actuality regarding the main predicate. We can show that that is the case, by considering (29) and (30) below.

(29) (Devido ao   mau-humor do pai...) a   criança comía   mais depressa
        due   to-the bad-humor of dad   the child   ate.IMP more of-hurry
        na   escola do que em casa (mas naquele dia não o fez.)
        in-the school than   at home but in-that day not it did
        '(Due to dad's bad humor) the child had meal at school rather than eat at home (but that day s/he didn't).'
(30) (Devido ao   mau-humor do pai...) a   criança comeu   mais depressa
        due   to-the bad-humor of dad   the child   ate.PFV more of-hurry
        na   escola do que em casa (#mas naquele dia não o fez.)
        in-the school than   at home but in-that day not it did
        '(Due to dad's bad humor) the child had meal at school rather than eat at home (#but that day s/he didn't).'

In (29) and (30), we find a familiar pattern: while the imperfective allows a continuation involving the retraction of the actuality of the main predicate, the perfective does not. This confirms the

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[3]As is well known, Portuguese has a rich and intricate tense system within Romance (cf. Coseriu 1976). Regarding modality, cf. e.g., Johnen (2003), Gergel and Cunha (to appear) and references for further discussion.

[4]A simple present sentence such as (28) has a habitual reading, an orthogonal issue of the present tense that we set aside here. We turn immediately below to past tenses in which the relevant perfective/imperfective distinction becomes operative in accordance with the expectations for Romance.

structural approach to *rather* expressions proposed here. Such facts furthermore make it plausible that it is the interpretable structure that plays a role. It is a wider class than the morphosyntactic carriers of modality (i.e., more than the modals proper, as originally proposed by Hacquard) that can induce such effects. It is thus hoped that the illustration from EP has been useful in convincing the reader of the approach. While the form discussed differs from English, it does so in respects which yield further support to the proposal by exploiting additional properties of the language.

5.2 Romanian

In this section, we briefly illustrate a similar expression of preference available in Romanian for which the surfacing representation displays some additional differences while preserving the key behavior with respect to AEs in the perfective vs. the imperfective forms.

Without expanding the details here for space reasons, note that Romanian in general shows similar correlations between modality/actuality and the (im)perfectivity distinction as they are known from other Romance languages. What it also has is expressions grammaticalizing towards a preference marker similar to the Portuguese case above, in this case *mai de grabă*, cf. below. Let us come directly to the main relevant distinction, by considering (31) and (32):

(31) Mai de grabă se ducea la cumpărături decât să-l însoțească la meci
more of hurry SE-has gone.PFV to shoppings than PRT-him join to match
dar nu s-a dus (miercurea aceea).
but not SE- has-gone (Wednesday that)
'S/he went shopping rather than join him to the game, but s/he didn't on that Wednesday.'

(32) Mai de grabă s-a dus la cumpărături decât să-l însoțească la meci
more of hurry SE-has gone.PFV to shoppings than PRT-him join to match
#dar nu s-a dus...
but not SE- has-gone
'S/he went shopping rather than join him to the game, #but s/he didn't.'

While in (32) the speaker cannot utter the continuation given without contradicting herself, in (31) she can. The main distinction thus lies in the structural-aspectual distinction once more.[5]

5.3 Conclusion

We have argued for a compositional account in the diachronic change of *rather-* and some related preference expressions. Focusing on the synchronic output at LF in this paper, we investigated the structural aspects including the actuality effect it displays in English. This was corroborated to an extent by certain characteristic distinctions from Romance.

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[5]Some of the surface differences are as follows. First, the Romanian clauses were not truncated comparatives. They had the particle *să*, an introducer of the subjunctive in general. Second, such *mai-de-grabă* comparatives have the property that their *decât* ('than')-constituent can be fronted, something that cannot generally be achieved in comparatives in general. This resembles only partially the possibility of fronting the *rather*-XP in English RTSs. From the present vantage point, it is unlikely that such diverging points have a deeper and generalizable significance. They are certainly well explainable within the morphosyntax of each individual language considered here and primarily show points of individual variation between them.

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