

'What would you rather me say?'

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Abstract

In varieties of English, the combination of *would* and *rather* (also: *sooner/as soon/as well*) can be followed not just by a bare infinitive (as in *they would rather leave*) or by a finite clause (*they would rather (that) I (would) leave*), but also by an infinitive with an accusative subject (as in *they would rather me leave*), which can even be coreferent with the matrix subject (*I would rather me leave*). This short paper focuses on this Acl-infinitival construction. It shows that the infinitival clause is a fully clausal complement of *rather*, capable of harbouring sentential negation and constituting a local binding domain for its subject, whose accusative is not an assigned case. The paper closes on some remarks about the evolution of this construction, against the background of the form and distribution of the subjunctive.

Sentences of the type in (1) feature a degree-modified dispositional adjective or adverb (*rather, sooner, as soon, as well*) followed by a bare infinitival clause with an accusative subject.¹

- (1) a. they would rather me leave
b. they would sooner me leave
c. they would just as soon me leave
d. they would just as well me leave

¹Though this construction seems particularly common with *me* (representing the speaker) as the accusative subject of the infinitive, it is not restricted to *me*, as witness sentences such as *I would rather him/her/us/them be happy*. Though the initial exemplifications in (1) are made-up sentences to keep them simple and directly comparable, the bulk of the examples in this paper are attested sentences culled from the internet, and checked with native-speaker linguists. In what follows, exemplification will generally be confined to *rather*.

The infinitival clause is transparent for extraction of its object (as in (2a)), its subject (as in (2b)), and even a modifier (as in (2c)).²

- (2) a. what would you rather me say?
- b. who would you rather kiss you like that?
- c. how would you rather me do this?

The adjective cannot be *wh*-fronted, however, despite the fact that it can be intensified with *much*:

- (3) a. you would much rather me do this
- b. *how much rather would you me do this?

In precluding extraction of the adjective, the construction in (1) patterns like the one in (4), and unlike that in (5).

- (4) a. you would much rather that I do this
- b. *how much rather would you that I do this?
- (5) a. you would much rather do this
- b. how much rather would you do this?

In (5a), *much rather* is a modifier of the projection of *do*, which is the main verb of a single clause. In (4a), we are evidently dealing with a biclausal construction, with the *that*-clause serving as the complement of *rather*. This straightforwardly explains the contrast between (4b) and (5a) in the latter but not in the former, (*how*) *much rather* is a constituent. The fact that (3b) behaves the same way as (4b) suggests that in (3a) and (1), too, what follows *rather* is a clausal complement:

- (6) [AP A=*rather* [CLAUSE]]

The clausality of what follows *rather* is perfectly apparent for variants of (1) in which the infinitive is adorned with the infinitival marker *to*, as in (7a), which, like (1), allows extraction, as shown in (7b).

- (7) a. you would rather me to do this
- b. what would you rather me to do?

²Again, the pattern is not limited to *me*: sentences such as *what would you rather him say?* (directly parallel to (2a)) and *what would you rather him be to you?* (with extraction of the predicate of a copular infinitive) occur frequently as well.

But for the bare infinitive in (1) as well, there are clear indications that it is a clausal constituent. Thus, sentential negation is grammatical in the bare-infinitival clause, as shown by the fact that *not* in (8) licenses negative polarity items:

(8) you would rather/sooner/just as soon/just as well me not do anything

Since sentential negation is by consensus (see Zanuttini 1997, references there, and work in its wake) dependent on T, the bare infinitive in (8) must at a minimum be a TP – i.e., a full clause.

The hypothesis that the bare-infinitival constituent in (1) is a full clause helps us explain the otherwise quite intractable fact that the subject of the bare infinitive can be a pronoun coreferential with the matrix subject:³

(9) a. I would rather me leave
b. I would rather me die than you

For (9b), the acceptability of *me* could perhaps be ascribed to the fact that this pronoun is a contrastive focus (contrasted with *you*). But in (9a) the subject of the infinitive is not contrastive. The fact that it allows itself to be coreferential with the matrix subject indicates that the bare-infinitival constituent is a local domain for binding, just as in *I would rather that I leave*. The postulation of clausal structure for the bare infinitive contributes to making this understandable.

By itself, however, the clausal (i.e., TP) status of the complement of *rather* does not immediately facilitate a coreference relation between the matrix and embedded subjects: for bare Acl-infinitives embedded under causative or perception verbs, the grammaticality of clausal negation (as in (10a)) suggests full clausality; yet coreference of the pronominal subject of the infinitive with the matrix subject is impossible, as (10b) shows.

(10) a. I made/saw him not eat anything
b. *I made/saw me leave

The difference between (1) and causative and perception verb constructions lies in the category of the selector of the bare Acl-infinitive: an element of category A in the former and a verb in the latter. Thanks to the fact that in causative and perception verb constructions, the infinitive's selector is of the same category as the head of the infinitival complement, the two domains engage in what is

³Like (1) and (2), the pattern in (9) is attested with accusative pronouns other than *me*, as in *he would rather him be dead* or *they would rather them do work around the house*.

variably called 'reanalysis', 'restructuring' or 'clause union'. In (1), where the categories of the bare infinitive and its selector are different, such integration is impossible. The infinitival TP in (1) thus remains an independent binding domain, making (9b) grammatical.

Though opaque for binding, the fact that the infinitival clause in the complement of *rather* is a selected constituent renders it transparent to extraction: we saw this in (2) for disjoint reference cases; (11) shows that in coreference contexts, though much rarer, *wh*-extraction is also possible — even for a predicate nominal (*what* in (11) is a predicate), which strongly resists extraction from islands (**what don't you know whether to call these linguists?* vs. ?*which linguists don't you know whether to call 'generativists'?*).

(11) what would they rather them be named?

With respect to extraction, (1) and (9) are similar to *likely*+infinitive constructions, in which the infinitival complement to the adjective *likely* is likewise transparent to argument and non-argument *wh*-extraction (*what is he likely to say?*, *how is he likely to solve the problem?*).

What could be the source of the accusative case of the subject of the Acl-infinitive? For causative and perception verb constructions, the answer is straightforward: the matrix clause contributes an accusative case feature, assignable to the subject of the infinitival clause. But in the construction in (1), the selector of the infinitival clause is of category A, incapable of assigning structural case.⁴ The morphological accusative case of the subject of the infinitival clause in (1) can be dealt with in either of two ways. One would be to treat it as a manifestation of *default* case, which in English is indeed accusative. Alternatively, it may be possible to invoke Marantz's (1991) notion of *dependent* case: nominative case in the matrix domain is already used up by the matrix subject, so the subject of the infinitival clause gets the dependent accusative instead. The feasibility of a dependent-case approach to the accusative in (1) will depend crucially on whether *they* and *me* in these sentences belong to the same local domain. Above, we saw that the infinitival clause embedded under *rather* is an opaque domain for binding; yet at the same time it is a transparent domain for *wh*-extraction. If the infinitive's complement status is sufficient to include it in same local domain as the matrix subject for the purposes of dependent case assignment, it will be possible to get

⁴Though *I'd rather me than you* occurs as a complete utterance, it is arguably always elliptical: the syntax features a clause with a pronominal subject rather than just a pronoun in the complement of *rather*.

dependent accusative case assigned to the subject of the infinitive. In view of the fact that passivisation (with concomitant promotion of the structural accusative to subject) is independently impossible in the *rather*+infinitive construction (because *would rather* does not passivise), it is difficult to ascertain whether the case of the subject of the infinitive is structural (*i.c.*, dependent) or default.

In closing, I would like to make a few speculative remarks about the evolution and spread of the construction illustrated in (1). It seems to me likely that pairs of sentences such as the following play a major role in the development of the *rather*+ACC+INF construction:

- (12) a. you would rather (that) I were more serious
b. you would rather (that) I be more serious

In (12a), we are dealing with a subjunctive subordinate clause, whence the nominative subject, *I*. On the surface (and perhaps also in a deeper sense), the subjunctive form of the English verb is indistinct from the bare infinitive. So for the version of (12b) lacking the complementizer *that*, the complement clause is easily reanalysed as an infinitival clause. Such a reanalysis deprives the subject of that clause of its nominative case, and leads to a (default/dependent) accusative case form, as in *you would rather me be more serious* – an instantiation of the pattern in (1).

Though the negation and pronominal coreference facts reviewed above have led me to conclude that the bare infinitive embedded under *rather* is fully clausal, a logical next step in the development of the construction type would be for the infinitival constituent to be analysed as a small clause. Once this happens, we expect to be able to find bare non-verbal predication structures with an accusative subject in the complement of *would rather*. Indeed, this seems to have become a reality, judging from the occurrence of sentences such as the ones in (13a)–(13c) (with disjoint reference, *à la* (1)) and (13d) (with coreference of the matrix and embedded subjects, as in (9)):

- (13) a. AirTran would rather me stinky
b. he would rather them dead
c. I would rather him sick now than when he is in school
d. I would rather me sick than you

The previous paragraphs paint a preliminary picture of a construction type which, as far as I am aware, has not received detailed attention in the theoretical literature to date. It goes without saying that much more could and should be said

about *what would you rather me say?* and its ilk. I hope that the honouree of this webschrift will say that what these initial notes say is well-said. But perhaps she would rather me say just simply: Thank you very much, Liliane, for all the wonderful linguist(ic)s that you have given the world, for the innumerable ways in which you have contributed, empirically as well as theoretically, to the generative enterprise, and for all the great fun we've had.

References

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