

Parasitic participles in the syntax of verbal *rather*

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Abstract

In this paper, I discuss the syntax of parasitic participles in (varieties of) colloquial English, which can be found when *rather* is used as a verb. The syntax of verbal *rather* has not, to my knowledge, been studied before, and turns out to be of substantial interest, for two reasons. First, it presents a syntactic configuration that is not found elsewhere in the language, with the result that one perfect auxiliary can license two perfect participles. While rare in English, this phenomenon has been studied in a number of other Germanic languages, and has been argued to be diagnostic of restructuring. Second, its syntactic and argument structural properties in ECM contexts suggest that it may license a null variant of ECM HAVE, providing a perhaps unique angle for studying the syntax of verbal elements dependent on the availability of various uses of 'have'.

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1. Introduction

The sentences in (1) exhibit a phenomenon common in the colloquial speech of some, but not all, speakers of (American) English.¹ There, the word *rather* takes verbal participial morphology (-ed), and co-occurs with another verb which also takes participial morphology.

- (1) a. I wouldn't tell him, but I would **have rathered slept** in a bed because,
in all honesty, his lap was not very comfortable.²
b. But all in all, a strip club is where I would **have rathered him gone!**³

(1b) shows that *rather* in this use is (or may be) a verb, since it licenses the embedded subject *him*; without *rathered*, (1b) is ungrammatical for all speakers of English (as far as I know), as illustrated in (2).⁴

- (2) *But all in all, a strip club is where I would've him gone!

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¹ I have not investigated this phenomenon in varieties of English spoken outside of North America.

² <http://www.mibba.com/Stories/Read/19252/Rolling-Off-Your-Tongue/2/>

³ <http://www.weddingwire.com/wedding-forums/kwr-oops-update/f897699a59b8fd6e.html?page=2>

⁴ In this paper, I generally use 've instead of *have* for constructed examples in order to avoid ambiguity with lexical *have*, which may not, for most speakers of American English, be expressed as 've; in some cases, a parse with lexical *have* would lead to a grammatical sentence with an irrelevant meaning. Most examples of perfect *have* in this paper are more naturally pronounced [əv] or [ə]; see Kayne (1997) for the possible syntactic relevance of this, which introduces issues that go beyond the scope of the present study (see also Kayne, 1993).

The verbal use of *rather* means something very close to ‘prefer’.

The occurrence of two perfect participles with only one perfect auxiliary (*have*) is wide-spread across Germanic languages (see Wurmbrand, 2010, 2011 for a detailed overview; see also Bošković, 1995, 1999 on double participles in Serbo-Croatian). Den Dikken and Hoekstra (1997) discuss instances of what they call “parasitic participles” in Frisian.

- (3) hy soe it **dien** **wollen** ha
 he would it done.PRFX wanted.PRFX have.INFX
 ‘He would have liked to do it.’ (Frisian)

In (3), one auxiliary *ha* ‘have’ seems to be licensing two perfect participles; the infinitive *dwaan* ‘do’, normally selected by *wolle* ‘want’, is also possible. The participial form on *dien* ‘done’ is parasitic on the participial form of *wollen* ‘want’; that is, *dien* is only possible with ‘want’ if ‘want’ is itself in the participial form.

Parasitic participles are found in the Scandinavian languages as well, including at least Norwegian, Swedish and Faroese (and possibly some varieties of Danish) (Wiklund, 2001:211; Wiklund, 2007:190). The following is a Swedish example from Wiklund (2001:211).

- (4) Han har **velat** **åkt** till Spanien.
 he has wanted.PRFX gone.PRFX to Spain
 ‘He has wanted to go to Spain.’ (Swedish)

(4) looks quite similar to *I would have rathered gone to Spain*, a sentence which is parallel to (1a) and grammatical for me. Certain “Exceptional Case Marking” (ECM) verbs can also license parasitic participles, as illustrated again for Swedish in (5) (example from Wiklund, 2007:69).

- (5) Vi hade **låt** henne **skrivit** ett brev.
 we had let.PRFX her written.PRFX a letter
 ‘We had let her write a letter.’ (Swedish)

(5) looks quite similar to *We would have rathered her written a letter*, a sentence which is parallel to (1b) and grammatical for me. (See section 2 below for discussion of ECM verbs.)

Faroese, to judge by the discussion in Thráinsson et al. (2004), has parasitic participles very robustly. The examples in (6) show parasitic participles with a bare infinitive (6a), an *at* ‘to’-marked infinitive (6b), an adjective (6c) and an object control or ECM verb (6d).⁵

- (6) a. Han hevði **viljað** **lisið** bókina.
 he had wanted.PRFX read.PRFX book.the
 ‘He would have wanted to read the book.’ (Faroese)
- b. Teir hava **roynt** at **dripið** grind.
 they have tried.PRFX to killed.PRFX pilot.whale
 ‘They have tried to kill pilot whales.’ (Faroese)
- c. Tað hevði **verið** stuttligt at **sloppið** at **hildið** røðu.
 it had been.PRFX interesting to gotten.PRFX to held.PRFX speech
 ‘It would have been interesting to get to give a speech.’ (Faroese)
- d. Teir kundu **noktað** mær at **komið** í bátin.
 they could denied.PRFX me to come.PRFX to boat.the
 ‘They could have prevented me from getting on the boat.’ (Faroese)

⁵ I do not know whether (6d) is an instance of ECM or object control. (6a) comes from Wiklund (2007:191), and (6b–d) come from Thráinsson et al. (2004:235–236). The choice of perfect participial morphology with modals, such as in (6d), may have semantic effects, in addition to licensing a lower participle in place of an infinitive.

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