



HAL
open science

The French comparative modal constructions "faire mieux de, valoir mieux" and "falloir mieux"

Johan van Der Auwera, Adeline Patard

► **To cite this version:**

Johan van Der Auwera, Adeline Patard. The French comparative modal constructions "faire mieux de, valoir mieux" and "falloir mieux". International Conference on Grammaticalization and (Inter)subjectification, Nov 2010, Bruxelles, Belgium. pp.81-112, 10.1515/9783110492347-004 . halshs-02157915

HAL Id: halshs-02157915

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02157915>

Submitted on 17 Jun 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

The French comparative modal constructions *faire mieux de*, *valoir mieux* and *falloir mieux*

Adeline Patard and Johan van der Auwera

Abstract

In the recent literature a number of articles have been dedicated to the study of comparative modal constructions (CMCs) in Germanic languages such as English, Dutch and German. However, CMCs are not restricted to the Germanic area. The present paper presents original data from a Romance language, namely French, in which (at least) three CMCs are attested: *faire mieux de* ‘do better of’, *valoir mieux* ‘be worth better’ and *falloir mieux* ‘must better’. The aim of this paper is twofold. It intends to offer the first linguistic description of CMCs in French. Making use of several corpora, it presents a synchronic structural characterization of CMCs in Modern French, it investigates their diachronic development and describes their semantics. In addition, the paper seeks to define the degree of grammaticalization of French CMCs. This will enable us to specify their status as semi-auxiliaries within the paradigm of French modals.

1. Introduction

In recent years, comparative modal constructions (henceforth CMCs), such as English *had better* (e.g. *You had better shut up*), have become a popular topic of research. According to a number of studies, CMCs are attested in various Germanic languages such as Dutch (Byloo, Nuyts, and van der Auwera 2010), English (Mitchell 2003; Denison and Cort 2010; van der Auwera and De Wit 2010; van der Auwera, Noël, and Van linden 2013), German (Vanderbiesen 2011; Vanderbiesen and Mortelmans 2011), Yiddish and West Frisian (Byloo, Nuyts, and van der Auwera 2010: 107). However, CMCs are not restricted to the Germanic area and are also found in a number of Romance languages such as Italian (e.g. *Faresti meglio a tacere*), Romanian (e.g. *Ai face (mai) bine să taci*), Spanish (e.g. *Harías mejor en callar*) and French (e.g. *Tu ferais mieux de te taire*).¹

The present study focuses on French, which exhibits three principal CMCs, each involving the comparative adverb *mieux* ‘better’: (i) *faire mieux de* ‘lit. do better of’, (ii) *valoir mieux* ‘lit. be worth better’, and (iii) *falloir mieux* ‘lit. must/have to better’. Its aim is twofold. First, the paper wants to contribute to remedying the lack of studies in the field, especially in the Romance domain, by providing the first linguistic description of CMCs in French, both from a synchronic and a diachronic perspective; second, it seeks to explore the grammaticalization of these constructions, i.e. “the proces[s] whereby items become more grammatical through time” (Hopper and Traugott 1993: 2), which encompasses both a shift from a lexical to a grammatical status and from a less to a more grammatical status. To capture the degree of grammaticalization of French CMCs, we make use of Lehmann’s (2002 [1995]) seminal work, which describes the characteristics of grammaticalizing items. However, we will not discuss all of the six parameters suggested by Lehmann, but only consider those that seem to us most relevant to grasp the modal-like status of French CMCs. One such parameter is the syntagmatic *variability* of French CMCs which concerns “the positional mutability” of the constituents making up the construction (Lehmann 2002: 140). In other words, we seek to determine whether the ordering of the different constituents within the construction is fixed (*syntagmatic fixation*) or whether the constituents may easily be shifted or separated from each other (*syntagmatic variability*). In the case of modal auxiliaries, syntagmatic fixation is expected to be high, with an intimate connection between the modal verb and the non-finite verb. On the semantic side (Section 4), we will consider the *semanticity* or *semantic integrity* of CMCs, i.e. their “possession of a certain [semantic] substance which allows [them] to maintain [their] identity” (Lehmann 2002: 112). The grammaticalization of an

1. The Romance sentences are translations of English *You had better shut up*.

item usually goes hand in hand with a decrease in semanticity (*desemanticization* or *semantic bleaching*), which is reflected in the loss of semantic features. In addition to these two parameters, we will also consider the parameter of *decategorialization* (e.g. Heine 1993, 2003; Heine and Kuteva 2007; Lamiroy and Drobnyakovic 2009), which corresponds to the tendency shown by grammaticalizing items “to lose morphological and syntactic properties characterizing [their] earlier use but being no longer relevant to [their] new use” (Heine and Kuteva 2007: 40). In the case of modal verbs, decategorialization is manifested in the loss of the verbal morphosyntactic features of the lexical source (most often a lexical verb) from which they developed. Finally, the degree of grammaticalization of French CMCs may also be captured by examining the evolution of their frequency. As underlined in a number of studies (e.g. Bybee and Hopper 2001; Bybee 2003, 2006), a significant rise in frequency may constitute both a trigger for, and a result of, grammaticalization. Looking at these different parameters, we will argue that French CMCs should be taken as semi-modals that have experienced a modest degree of grammaticalization.

To give a synchronic and diachronic description of French CMCs and examine their degree of grammaticalization, we resort to corpora extending from Old French up to Modern French. The synchronic analyses of Modern French CMCs are carried out using four corpora, covering the period from 1960 to the 2000s: the more recent texts (from 1960 to 2009) of the written corpus *Frantext*, which is mainly composed of literary texts and essays; and three corpora of spoken French (*Elicop*, *Corpus de Langue Parlée en Interaction (CLAPI)* and *Corpus de Français Parlé Parisien des années 2000 (CFPP2000)*). The diachronic analyses are conducted on a corpus covering the period from the 12th century to the 2000s. The diachronic corpus includes the texts of *Frantext* and *Frantext Moyen Français*, ranging between 1180 and 1999. Detailed information about these corpora is provided in a separate section at the end of the paper.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 first provides a synchronic description of French CMCs. The aim is to characterize the structural properties of these constructions in Modern French. Section 3 then investigates the history of French CMCs and their development from their source constructions. Finally, we explore the semantics of French CMCs, focusing on the extent to which their interpretations in Modern French reflect a semantic evolution or mirror some features of the source constructions.

2. Synchronic analysis

2.1. The three constructions and their variants

The three most frequent CMCs in French consist of the combination of a verb (*faire* ‘do’, *valoir* ‘be worth’ or *falloir* ‘must, have to’) and the comparative adverb *mieux* ‘better’. Two types of French CMCs can be distinguished. The first is the personal construction *faire mieux*, which patterns as follows: [*faire mieux de* + infinitive], as in (1). The second type comprises the impersonal constructions *valoir mieux* and *falloir mieux*, as in (2) and (3) respectively.

- (1) *Tu ferais mieux de dormir!*
 you do.COND.2SG better of sleep.INF
 ‘You’d better sleep.’
 (*Frantext*, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Rigodon*)
- (2) *Je crois qu’ il vaut mieux que je laisse la parole*
 I think that it be.worth.PRS.3SG better that I let the word
 à mon collègue.
 to my colleague
 ‘I think that I’d better let my colleague speak.’
 (*ELICOP*)
- (3) *Faut mieux continuer à pied.*
 have.to.PRS.3SG better continue.INF on foot

‘We’d better go on on foot.’

(*Frantext*, Frédéric Lasaygues, *Vache noire, hannetons et autres insectes*)

Unlike *faire mieux*, *valoir mieux* and *falloir mieux* have several variants: they may combine with an infinitive, as in (3), or with a complement clause in the subjunctive mood, as in (2); further, they do not require the presence of a dummy subject, as in (3). *Valoir mieux* also allows two different word orders, i.e. [*valoir mieux*] and [*mieux valoir*]. The second (impersonal) type thus comprises the following variants:

- [(il) *valoir mieux* + infinitive]
- [(il) *valoir mieux que* + subjunctive]
- [*mieux valoir* + infinitive]
- [*mieux valoir que* + subjunctive]
- [(il) *falloir mieux* + infinitive]
- [(il) *falloir mieux* + subjunctive]

According to Lehmann’s (2002) inventory of grammaticalization criteria, the syntagmatic variability of the [*valoir mieux*] and [*falloir mieux*] constructions would indicate a rather low degree of fixation and hence grammaticalization. The [*faire mieux de* (+INF)] construction, in contrast, is more firmly fixed and shows less positional mutability.

Syntagmatic variability may also be measured in terms of the separability of the inflected verb and *mieux*. In this regard, the two types of CMC exhibit a moderate degree of grammaticalization. They are only loosely tied as the sequence [verb + *mieux*] can be interrupted by negation, as in (4), or by an adverbial, as in (5) and (6).

- (4) *Est- ce qu' il ne faudrait pas mieux retrouver*
Is it that it NEG have.to.COND.3SG NEG better find.INF
des mathématiques plus utilisables ?
of.the mathematics more usable
‘Wouldn’t it be better to find more usable mathematics?’
(*CLAPI*)

- (5) *Il vaut beaucoup mieux pour toi que tu restes ici*
It be.worth.PRS.3SG much better for you that you stay here
seul et nu devant Dieu, à méditer sur tes péchés.
‘You’d much better stay here, alone and naked in front of God, meditating on your sins.’
(*Frantext*, Zoé Oldenbourg, *Les Cités charnelles*)

- (6) *Je ferais peut-être mieux de présenter*
I do.COND.1SG maybe better of present.INF
tout de suite Candie.
immediately Candie
‘I’d maybe better present Candie to you at once.’
(*Frantext*, Roger Vrigny, *La Nuit des Mougins*)

2.2. Frequencies

When we compare the frequencies of the CMCs in the Present-day French corpora (Table 1), *valoir mieux* is by far the most frequent construction, both in written and in spoken French. *Faire mieux* comes second and *falloir mieux* comes third.

Table 1. Absolute frequencies (n) and normalized frequencies (per million words) of *faire mieux*, *valoir mieux* and *falloir mieux* in the Present-day French corpora

	spoken		written(<i>Frantext</i>)		total	
	n	n/million	n	n/million	n	n/million
<i>faire mieux</i>	7	3.55	358	7.60	365	7.43
<i>valoir mieux</i>	65	33.02	1384	29.34	1449	29.49
<i>falloir mieux</i>	13	6.60	5	0.11	18	0.37
total CMC	85	43.19	1747	37.04	1832	37.29

Increase in frequency is known to play an important role in the process of grammaticalization, both as a trigger and as a result (see, for instance, Bybee and Hopper 2001; Bybee 2003, 2006). CMCs are much less frequent (approximately 37.29 tokens per million words) than modal verbs such as *devoir* ‘have to’ (1082.22 tokens per million words) or than highly grammaticalized constructions such as *venir de* ‘come from’ + infinitive expressing near/recent past (335.92 tokens per million words) and *aller* ‘go’ + infinitive expressing future (1065.50 tokens per million words).² Accordingly, one could expect that French CMCs have not reached an advanced stage of grammaticalization.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that *falloir mieux* is far more common in spoken French than in written French (approximately 66 times more frequent). A likely explanation is that the use of *falloir mieux* is still considered incorrect in normative grammars.³ As a consequence, *falloir mieux*, which is quite common in spoken language (even more so than *faire mieux*, according to the data), is rarely used in written texts.

What Table 1 does not reveal, but what immediately strikes the eye when looking at the written corpus is that the overwhelming majority of CMCs occur in represented speech, i.e. in direct or indirect speech. Table 2 presents the distribution of CMCs in represented speech. It shows that in the written corpus 75.31% of the CMCs occur in reported speech. Van der Auwera, Noël, and Van linden (2013) found similar results for English.

Table 2. Percentages of reported vs. unreported speech in the synchronic written corpus (*Frantext*) (based on samples of 200 if total n > 200 in Table 1)⁴

	unreported	reported		total
		direct	(free) indirect	
<i>faire mieux</i>	17	63.50	18.50	83
<i>valoir mieux</i>	32	37	31	68
<i>falloir mieux</i>	40	40	20	60
total CMC	24.29	50.12	25.19	75.31

2. Frequencies are calculated on the basis of the texts from the POS-tagged French database ‘Frantext catégorisé’, which includes texts from 1960 onwards.

3. The *Nouveau dictionnaire des difficultés du français moderne* (Hanse 1989: 973) stipulates for instance: “Se garder de dire ou écrire : ... [*il faut mieux*] au lieu de ***il vaut mieux***: *Il vaut mieux se taire.*” (Avoid saying or writing: ... [*il faut mieux*] instead of ***il vaut mieux*** : *Il vaut mieux se taire.*)

4. See Table 4 in the appendix for the n values corresponding to the percentages for indirect and free indirect speech.

2.3. Combination with tenses

As can be seen from Table 3, French CMCs exhibit defective conjugations. The more restricted choice of tense forms may be seen as signaling grammaticalization in at least two respects. First, it may be indicative of a lesser degree of syntagmatic variability of the constructions (Lehmann 2002: 140–143), as it imposes a higher degree of fixation at the constructional level. Second, by allowing fewer tense inflections, CMCs are in a way “losing” the morphosyntactic properties of lexical verbs and resemble fully-fledged modals, a process which could be subsumed under the notion of *decatégorialization* (e.g. Heine 1993, 2003; Heine and Kuteva 2007; Lamiroy and Drobnyakovic 2009), i.e. the loss of the morphosyntactic properties of the source construction.

Table 3. Choice of tense forms (percentages based on samples of 200 if total n > 200 in Table 1)

		<i>valoir mieux</i>		<i>faire mieux</i>		<i>falloir mieux</i>	
present tense (<i>présent</i>)	present perfect (<i>passé composé</i>)	62	0.5	0	0	72	0
present conditional (<i>conditionnel présent</i>)	past conditional (<i>conditionnel passé</i>)	18	2.5	71	27.5	5.5	5.5
imperfect (<i>imparfait</i>)	pluperfect (<i>plus-que-parfait</i>)	14	0	0	0	17	0
future tense (<i>futur simple</i>)	future perfect (<i>futur antérieur</i>)	0.5	0	0.5	0	0	0
imperfect subjunctive (<i>subjonctif imparfait</i>)	pluperfect subjunctive (<i>subjonctif plus-que-parfait</i>)	0	2.5	0	1	0	0
total simple form	total compound form	94.5	5.5	71.5	28.5	94.5	5.5

Interestingly, the two constructional types mentioned earlier – *faire mieux de* and *valoir/falloir mieux* – show two clearly distinct patterns. *Faire mieux de* occurs almost exclusively in the conditional tense (present or past), as in (7), while *valoir mieux* and *falloir mieux* mostly combine with the present tense (as in (8)), although they also occur with other tenses, such as the past imperfect tense (as in (9)). Note that, unlike *faire mieux de* (28.5%), *valoir mieux* and *falloir mieux* do not easily admit compound tenses (only 5.5%).

- (7) *Le jour... où j' ai croisé le regard de votre*
 The day when I have crossed the look of your
filles, j' aurais mieux fait de me
 daughter I have.COND.1SG better do.PPTCP of to.me
casser les deux jambes.
 break the two legs

‘The day when I crossed the eyes of your daughter, I had better have broken my two legs.’
 (Frantext, Frédéric Lasaygues, *Vache noire, hannetons et autres insectes*)

- (8) *On pense qu' il faut mieux garder*
 one thinks that it have.to.PRS.3SG better keep.INF
l' ascenseur client là.
 the lift client there
 'We think that we'd better keep the client lift there.'
 (CLAPI)
- (9) *Mieux valait ne pas y penser, certes,*
 better be.worth.IMP.3SG NEG NEG about.it think.INF sure
mais j' y pensais quand même.
 but I about.it think.IPFV.1SG anyway
 'I'd better not think about it, sure, but I was thinking about it anyway.'
 (Frantext, Léo Malet, *Sueur aux tripes*)

One possible explanation for these facts is the diachrony of the two types of construction. As we will see in Section 3, *faire mieux de* probably originated from an irrealis conditional of the type [*faire.COND mieux si X.IMP*] 'would do better if X'. This would explain why *faire mieux de* is almost always in the conditional tense. By contrast, *valoir mieux* (and consequently *falloir mieux*, see Section 3.2) do not have this kind of origin and thus allow a freer choice, and may combine with the present tense as well as with other tenses (mainly the conditional tense and the imperfect).

These patterns could also be related to the *Aktionsart* or actionality of the lexical verb. *Faire* is typically an activity verb describing a bounded situation which may easily be viewed as accomplished. That is why it can be used with the perfect form of the conditional (*conditionnel passé*). In contrast, *valoir* refers to a stative unbounded situation which cannot normally be viewed as terminated. *Valoir mieux* is therefore less compatible with perfect tenses than its counterpart based on *faire*.

A third determining factor could be the distinct functional domains that the two types *faire mieux de* and *valoir/falloir mieux* bear on (Sections 4.1 and 4.2). *Faire mieux de* tends to be used more to express directive meaning (advice, threat, command) than *valoir/falloir mieux*, which rather express a subjective (deontic and evaluative) meaning. On the one hand, *faire mieux* involves a potentially greater threat for the hearer's face (an intersubjective dimension, in Traugott's (2003) view). As a consequence, the speaker uses the conditional tense to soften a possibly "threatening act" and preserve the hearer's face (Brown and Levinson 1987). On the other hand, the subjectivity of *valoir/falloir mieux* represents a smaller threat to the hearer's face and does not require the use of a mitigating form such as the conditional – although the speaker may still decide to use it (20.5% and 11% of the uses of *valoir mieux* and *falloir mieux* have the conditional tense).

2.4. Syntactic properties

As far as their syntactic behavior is concerned, French CMCs resemble more grammaticalized modals like *pouvoir* 'can' or *devoir* 'must' in certain respects, but in other respects, they still resemble plain verbs.

According to Chu (2008: 25–28, 31–32), when the verb phrase includes an inflected modal like *pouvoir* and *devoir*, it is not the modal but the infinitival verb which is the head of the verb phrase, i.e. the element that carries the central information about the denoted situation. As a consequence, it is the infinitive which determines the argument structure of the verb phrase, i.e. the number and the characteristics of the complements. In the case of CMCs, the argument structure is (at least partly) determined by the infinitival verb. On the one hand, *faire mieux de* imposes no constraints on the number of arguments; rather, it adopts the argument structure of the infinitival verb. This indicates that the infinitival verb is the head in the verb phrase, as is the infinitival verb in the case of *pouvoir* and *devoir*. On the other hand, *valoir mieux* and *falloir mieux* seem to retain some elements of their argument structure. They are characterized by the deletion of the subject (which is replaced by a dummy *il*) due to their impersonal nature, and, in formal genres, they may license an additional argument (typically a dative clitic) in addition to the arguments of the non-finite verb. In (10a) and (10b), for instance, *valoir mieux* and *falloir mieux* possess what superficially look like indirect objects

(*me* and *te*), while the infinitival verbs have their own indirect objects (*aux dieux* ‘to the gods’, *à la fibre* ‘to fibre optics’). It follows, then, that *valoir mieux* and *falloir mieux* behave more like lexical verbs with regard to argument structure.

- (10) a. *Il me **vaut** **mieux** obéir aux dieux qu’*
 It DAT.1SG be.worth.PRS.3SG better obey to the gods than
aux hommes.
 to.the men
 ‘I’d better obey to gods than to men.’
 (*Le semeur*, newspaper, 1835, Google books, accessed on 26 January 2012)
- b. *Il te **faut** **mieux** passer à la fibre.*
 it DAT.2SG have.to.PRS.3SG better switch to the fibre
 ‘You’d better switch to fibre optics.’
 (Google, accessed on 26 January 2012)

Furthermore, CMCs impose constraints on the status of the participants. In contrast to *pouvoir* and *devoir*, they require that the subject be animate; compare in this respect (11a) with (11b) and (11c). This suggests that, even in the case of *faire mieux de*, CMCs still have a certain influence on the argument structure. In conclusion, unlike with *pouvoir* and *devoir*, the infinitival verb cannot be fully regarded as the head of the verb phrase, especially when it is combined with *valoir mieux* and *falloir mieux*.

- (11) a. *La table **pourrait/devrait** être là.*
 the table could/should be there
 ‘The table could/should be here.’
- b. *??La table **ferait** **mieux** d’être là.*
 the table do.COND.3SG better of be there
 ‘The table had better be here.’
- c. **Il **vaut/faut** **mieux** être là (pour la table).*
 It be.worth/have.to.PRS.3SG better be there (for the table)
 ‘The table had better be here’.⁵

Then again, there is another fact which suggests that the infinitival verb is not a complement of the CMC, which makes CMCs more similar to modals like *pouvoir* and *devoir*. According to Chu (2008: 35–36), the impossibility to pronominalize the infinitival verb shows that the latter is not governed by the finite verb. In the case of CMCs, the picture is rather clear-cut: the infinitival verb cannot normally be replaced by an anaphoric pronoun (such as *le* ‘it’). Like *devoir* and *pouvoir* (12a), it rather prefers a null anaphoric complement (see 12b, 12c).⁶

5. When no source is given in the rest of article, the example is constructed, as is the case for examples (11) to (14).

6. No such occurrences are found in FRANTEXT, but an exploratory Google search revealed that the combination is possible with *valoir mieux*. These cases are, however, considered to be very formal.
 e.g. *La jeune femme est honnête et ne mentira jamais, même s’il LE **vaudrait mieux**, parfois.* ‘The young woman is honest and will never lie, even though she’d better IT, sometimes’ (Google, accessed on 26-01-2012)

- (12) a. *Doit- il/peut- il acheter le journal ?*
 must he/can he buy.INF the newspaper?
[?]*Oui, il le doit/peut.*
 yes, he it must/can
- vs. *Oui, il doit/peut.*⁷
 yes, he must/can
 ‘Does he have to/can he buy the newspaper?’
 lit. ‘Yes, he has to/can it.’ vs. ‘Yes, he has to/can.’
- b. *Ferait -il mieux d’ acheter le journal ?*
 do.COND.3SG he better of buy.INF the newspaper
[?]*Oui, il le ferait mieux.*
 yes he it do.COND.3SG better
- vs. *Oui, il ferait mieux.*
 yes he do.COND.3SG better
 ‘Had he better buy the newspaper?’
 lit: Yes, he’d better it. vs. Yes, he’d better.’
- c. *Vaut/faut -il mieux acheter le journal ?*
 be.worth/have.to.PRS.3SG it better buy the newspaper
[?]*Oui, il le vaut/faut mieux.*
 yes it it be.worth/have.to.PRS.3SG better
- vs. *Oui il vaut/faut mieux*
 yes it be.worth/have.to.PRS.3SG better
 ‘Had he better buy the newspaper?’
 lit: Yes, he’d better it. vs. Yes, he’d better.’

A final property of CMCs is the *syntagmatic fixation* of the sequence [CMC + infinitive]. For Chu (2008: 27), the modal verb and the infinitival verb form a cohesive syntactic entity. This is why *devoir* and *pouvoir* require the use of the verbal proform *faire* in (pseudo-)cleft constructions and questions, so as not to be separated from the infinitival verb. And so does *faire mieux* (see 13b, 14b), which thus behaves like a modal verb. By contrast, with *valoir/falloir mieux*, the verbal proform is optional, as in (13c) and (13d); these verbs thus occupy an intermediate position on the cline between ordinary verbs and modal verbs, as in (13c) and (14c).

- (13) a. **Ce qu’ il doit/peut, c’ est partir.*
 what he must/can it is leave.INF
- vs. *Ce qu’ il doit/peut faire, c’ est partir.*
 what he must/can do.INF it is leave.INF
 ‘lit. What he must/can is to leave. vs. What he must/can do is to leave.’
- b. **Ce qu’ il ferait mieux, c’ est partir.*
 What he do.COND.3SG better it is leave.INF
- vs. *Ce qu’ il ferait mieux de faire, c’ est partir.*
 What he do.COND.3SG better of do.INF it is leave.INF
 ‘lit: What he had better is to leave. vs. What he had better do is to leave.’
- c. *Ce qu’ il vaut/faut mieux (pour lui)*
 what it be.worth/have.to.PRS.3SG better for him
c’ est (de) partir.
 it is of leave.INF

7. The combination of *pouvoir* and *devoir* with an anaphoric pronoun also sounds very formal, not to say archaic.

vs. *Ce qu' il vaut/faut mieux faire*
 what it be.worth/have.to.PRS.3SG better do
 (*pour lui*), *c' est (de) partir*.⁸
 for him it is of leave.INF
 'lit: What he had better is to leave. vs. What he had better do is to leave.'

- (14) a. **Que doit/peut -il ?*
 What must/can he
 vs. *Que doit/peut -il faire?*
 What must/can he do
 'lit: What must/can he? vs. What must/can he do?'
 b. **Que ferait -il mieux ?*
 what do.COND.3SG he better
 vs. *Que ferait -il mieux de faire?*
 what do.COND.3SG he better of do.INF
 'What had he better? vs. What had he better *do*?'
 c. *Que vaut/faut -il mieux ?*
 what be.worth/have.to.PRS.3SG it better
 vs. *Que vaut/faut -il mieux faire ?*
 what be.worth/have.to.PRS.3SG it better do.INF
 'lit: What had he better? vs What had he better do?'

In sum, *faire mieux de* is more firmly connected to the infinitive (just like the modals *devoir* and *pouvoir*) than *valoir mieux* and *falloir mieux*, which allow for more syntagmatic variability.

Concluding this section on syntactic properties, we want to note that with French CMCs, as with modal verbs, the non-finite verb is not a complement governed by the CMC (it cannot be pronominalized). At the same time, CMCs, and more specifically *valoir mieux* and *falloir mieux*, also resemble lexical verbs in that they still exert some influence on the argument structure. In the following section, we will investigate whether these properties may be interpreted as a sign of decategorialization (e.g. Heine 1993, 2003; Heine and Kuteva 2007; Lamiroy and Drobnyakovic 2009).

One may further distinguish between *faire mieux* on the one hand, which resembles modals in forming a close unit with the infinitive, and *valoir mieux* and *faire mieux*, on the other hand, which may still be separated from it. This confirms what we noted in Section 2.1, namely the higher degree of syntagmatic variability of *valoir mieux* and *falloir mieux* compared to *faire mieux de*, which exhibits greater fixation to the main verb. It follows that *faire mieux de* is best seen as a structurally more grammaticalized construction than *valoir mieux* and *falloir mieux*.

The next section will explore the diachrony of CMCs and seek to establish to what extent the source constructions determine the structural properties observed in Present-day French.

8. Another possibility based on *ce qu'* (instead of *ce qu'il*) is also attested in less formal registers:

(i) *Ce qui vaut mieux (faire), c' est partir.*
 what be.worth.PRS.3SG do.INF it is leave.INF
 'What is better (to do) is to leave.'

3. The development of French CMCs

3.1. Some diachronic data

Valoir mieux is the oldest of the three constructions, with attestations from the second half of the 13th century onwards (15). *Faire mieux de* (16) and *falloir mieux* (17) are first attested in the 15th century.

- (15) *Mieux li vauroit* *chi demourer*
 better it be.worth.COND.3SG here stay.INF
Que prendre la crois d'outremer,
S'il ne se paie netement.
 'He had better stay here than go on a crusade overseas (...).'
 (*Frantext*, Ruteboeuf, *Œuvres complètes*, ca 1249–1277)
- (16) *Et eusses mieulx fait de non parler dudit*
 and have.SBJV.2PL better do.PPTCP of not talk about.said
traictié que tu appelles traictié de paix.
 treaty that you call treaty of peace
 'And you had better not talk about the aforementioned treaty that you call peace treaty.'
 (*Frantext moyen français*, Jean Juvenal des Ursins, *Audite celi*, 1435)
- (17) *Neantmoins faut-il [mieulx] premièrement avoir*
 nevertheless have.to.PRS.3SG it better first have
du malheur que de l'heur,
 of.the bad.luck than of the luck
et doit-on prendre en pascience les choses ameres et les diversitez de fortune, qui vult parvenir
à hault estat.
 'Nevertheless it is better to be first unfortunate than fortunate (...).'
 (*Frantext moyen français*, Jean de Bueil, *Le Jouvencel*, 1461–1466)

The existence of *falloir mieux* in Middle French is quite surprising given the fact that today it is still considered incorrect in normative grammars.

The diachronic data suggest that the crucial period for the grammaticalization of *valoir mieux* is the 14th century, during which the construction shows an important increase in frequency (Figure 4). From this period onwards, the overall frequency remains relatively high, with between 22 and 53 occurrences per million words.

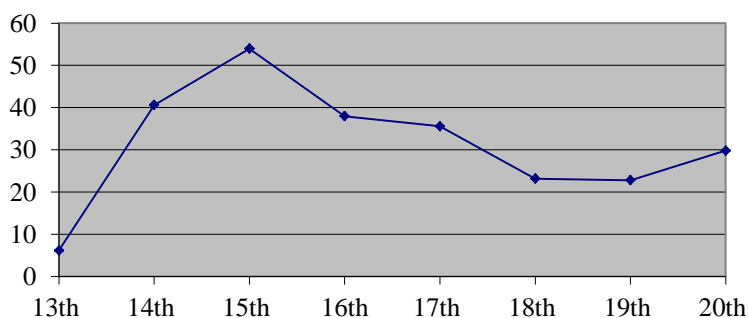


Figure 4. *Valoir mieux*: frequency (number of occurrences per million words)

No such striking rise in frequency has been observed for *faire mieux de* or for *falloir mieux*, but both constructions seem to have gradually increased in frequency from the 15th century onwards.⁹ Their more modest increase points toward a less advanced grammaticalization of *faire mieux de* and

9. *Falloir mieux*'s higher frequency in the 15th century is only due to two occurrences that were found in the corpus, which was quite small (approximately 3,295,023 words).

falloir mieux, as compared to *valoir mieux*, which rapidly gained in frequency after its emergence in Middle French.

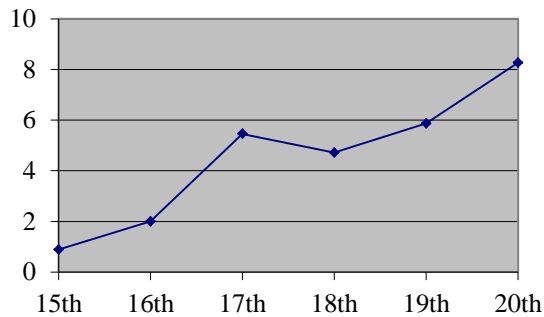


Figure 5. *Faire mieux de*: frequency (number of occurrences per million words)

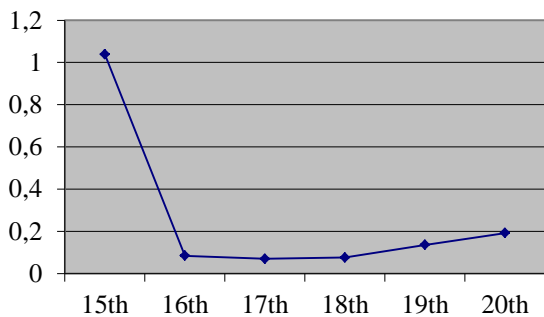


Figure 6. *Falloir mieux*: frequency (number of occurrences per million words)

The next section investigates the constructional origins of French CMCs and tries to emphasize how the source constructions from which they derive account for some of the synchronic properties that we have discussed in Section 2.

3.2. Hypotheses on the origin of French CMCs

3.2.1. *Valoir mieux*: Two constructional origins

Valoir mieux developed from the lexical verb *x valoir y* ‘x be worth y’, where x was in most cases a noun phrase. *Mieux* was then used to compare the value of x with an element z, which did not need to be made explicit: *x vaut mieux (que z)* ‘lit. x is worth better (than z)’. As in other languages, the slot of the grammatical subject can be occupied by an infinitive verb (or a subordinate clause), as in (18). We argue that sentences such as these were the source construction of the *valoir mieux* construction.

- (18) *Prévenir* *vaut* *mieux* (*que guérir*).
 prevent .INF be.worth.PRS.3SG better than cure.INF
 ‘To prevent is better (than to cure).’

The first constructional subtype – [(*il valoir mieux* + INF (or *que* + SUBJ)] (Section 2.1) – is the result of a rather productive syntactic transformation in French, which allows turning an intransitive predicate into an impersonal construction (e.g. Gaatone 1970; Legendre 1990). As a consequence, the subject x, whether infinitival or clausal, is extraposed to the right of the verb and a dummy *il* ‘it’ takes the position of the subject.

- (19) *(Il) vaut mieux prévenir (que guérir).*
 It be.worth.PRS.3SG better prevent.INF than cure.INF
 ‘To prevent is better (than to cure).’

When this transformation was first observed in the 13th century, French still allowed a null subject, i.e. the non-expression of the grammatical subject (e.g. Vance 1988). However, the presence of the subject became mandatory by Classical French (from the 16th century on). As mentioned in Section 2.1, dummy *il* seems to have become optional again in Modern French. However, the optional non-expression of *il* should not be seen as the retention of an archaic property due to high frequency (Bybee 2003, 2006); rather, it should rather be considered a consequence of the tendency in colloquial French to delete, with certain verbs, the impersonal *il* which is uninformative (see Blanche-Benveniste 2010).

The second constructional subtype – [*mieux valoir* + INF (or *que* + SUBJ)] – originates in the syntax of Old French, which was characterized by a verb second (V2) word order (Marchello-Nizia 1995: 61–67; Buridant 2000: 741–756), that is, the verb mostly occurred in second position and could be preceded by any kind of constituent. This feature progressively disappeared during Middle French and gave way to the stricter subject–verb order (XXX)SV(XXX), which is characteristic of Modern French.¹⁰ In line with the V2 feature, still present in Middle French, *mieux* could occur in preverbal position while the infinitival or clausal subject could take postverbal position, as in (20).

- (20) *Mieux vaut prévenir (que guérir).*
 better be.worth.PRS.3SG prevent.INF than cure.INF
 ‘To prevent is better (than to cure).’

This means that the construction [*mieux valoir x*] was not originally impersonal. It is therefore to be distinguished from the first subtype [(*il*) *valoir mieux x*], which is the result of an impersonal transformation.

The fact that this second construction was maintained up to Modern French (Section 2.1) clearly is indicative of the retention of archaic properties of the syntax of Medieval French, in particular, that this subtype was entrenched enough (and sufficiently grammaticalized) to maintain conservative features into the modern language (Bybee 2003, 2006).

3.2.2. Faire mieux de: A conditional origin?

At the time of its emergence in the 15th century, *faire mieux de* coexisted with another (less frequent) variant which seems to have disappeared after the Classical period.¹¹ This variant combined with a *si*-clause instead of the prepositional phrase introduced by *de*: [*faire mieux si* + FINITE CLAUSE], as in (21).

- (21) *Et ainsi je diray, qu' il eust mieux fait,*
 and so I say.FUT that he have. SBJV.3SG better do.PPTCP
*s'il eust employé sa plume à rimer comme Du-Bartas.*¹²
 ‘And so I will say that he had done better to use his quill to rhyme like Du-Bartas (lit. would have better done, if he had used his quill to rhyme like Du-Bartas).’
 (*Frantext*, Pierre de Deimier, *L'académie de l'art poétique*, 1610)

In this construction, *faire* was a dummy verb with a proform function: its role was to refer (anaphorically or cataphorically) to the situation denoted in the conditional clause. So in (21), dummy

10. X refers to a constituent that is neither subject nor verb.

11. Seven occurrences were observed in the 15th and 16th centuries (against 15 occurrences of *faire mieux de* for the same period).

12. *S'* is the contracted form of *si*.

faire refers to the situation *il eust employé sa plume à rimer comme Du-Bartas*, which was deemed to be a better alternative for the agent *il* ‘he’.

It is noteworthy that in most cases, the conditional sentence is an irrealis conditional. As a consequence, the conditional tense and the imperfect are the tenses that are most commonly used [*faire.COND mieux si X.IMP*], along with the pluperfect subjunctive [*faire.PLU.SBJV mieux si X.PLU.SBJV*], as in (21), which was functionally equivalent to the past conditional.¹³ We saw in Section 2.3 that the conditional tense was used as a politeness device to mitigate the speech act of the speaker and preserve the face of the addressee: by presenting a piece of advice as unreal, the speaker allows the addressee to see it as a mere supposition and disregard it. By using an imperfect subjunctive or the past conditional, the speaker rather refers to what should have been done and thus expresses regret.

We hypothesize that *faire mieux de* is a simplified version of this conditional construction. For (21), this simplification would give rise to example (21’).

- (21’) *Et ainsi je diray, qu’ il eust mieux fait d’*
 and so I say.FUT that he have. SBJV.3SG better do.PPTCP of
employer sa plume à rimer comme Du-Bartas.
 ‘And so I will say that he’d better have used his quill to rhyme like Du-Bartas.’

We may now wonder why *faire mieux de* combines with the preposition *de* (*faire mieux de* + INF) instead of a bare infinitive (*faire mieux* + INF), as do the two other CMCs *valoir mieux* and *falloir mieux*. One possible reason is the frequent use of *de* in French to introduce an alternative situation in expressions such as (*plutôt que de* (22), or *au lieu de* ‘instead of’).

- (22) *Si par dextérité tu n’en peux rien tirer,*
Accorde tout plutôt que de plus différer.
 accept.IMP everything rather than more postpone
 ‘If you did not manage, using your skills, accept everything instead of postponing more.’
 (*Frantext*, Pierre Corneille, *La Veuve ou le Traître trahi*, 1634)

As a consequence, the use of *de* may have developed to allow for a morphological parallel to the expression of the standard of comparison [*faire mieux DE X (plutôt que/au lieu DE Y)*].

- (23) “*Il me semble, monsieur, que vous en avez assez fait pour ceste heure, et que vous*
ferez mieux DE penser à sauve
 and that you do.COND.2PL better of think.INF of save
vostre vie, que de la vouloir oster à aultres.”
 your life than it want.to taketo others
 ‘It seems to me, sire, that you have done enough so far, and that you’d better think about saving your life than willing to take it from others.’
 (*Frantext*, Marguerite de Navarre, *L’Heptaméron*, 1550)

The hypothesis that *faire mieux de* developed out of irrealis conditionals may explain why the conditional tense is predominant with *faire mieux de* (Section 2.3). This, then, would be a feature inherited from the source construction [*faire.COND mieux si X.IMP*].

Finally, we may note that *faire mieux de* could also be used in the future tense, and that this use was fairly frequent up to Classical French (23).¹⁴ This indirectly confirms the conditional origin of the CMC. Even though we found no attestations, it is plausible that the future tense variant developed out of *potentialis* conditionals (and not irrealis conditionals), which are formed with the future tense and the present tense. Accordingly, the source construction would be [*faire.FUT mieux si X.PRS*]. From Classical French onwards, the future tense is used less, in favor of the conditional tense, which is now

13. That is why the pluperfect subjunctive is sometimes called *conditionnel passé deuxième forme* ‘second form past conditional’. The pluperfect subjunctive may still be used in Modern French but sounds very archaic.

14. We observed 9 occurrences in the future tense between 1500 and 1639 (against 32 occurrences in the conditional tense or in the pluperfect subjunctive).

almost obligatory. As we noted in Section 2.3, this can be viewed as a sign of grammaticalization in at least two respects: an increasingly defective conjugation implies a rigidification (or increased fixation) of the construction and it indicates the loss of the morphosyntactic properties of plain verbs (or decategorialization) and the adoption of more modal-like characteristics.

3.2.3. *Falloir mieux*: confusion with *valoir mieux*

The emergence of *falloir mieux* in the 15th century plausibly stems from the confusion with the already grammaticalized *valoir mieux* construction, the only difference between the constructions being the initial labio-dental consonant of the verb (voiced in the case of *valoir mieux* and unvoiced in the case of *falloir mieux*). This confusion may have led to the reanalysis of the existing sequence [[*falloir*][*mieux* X]], in which *mieux* modifies the non-finite verb X (24), as the sequence [[*falloir mieux*][X]], in which *falloir mieux* forms a linguistic entity associated with the non-finite verb (25). In principle, both readings are possible, and it is the context which determines the correct interpretation.

- (24) *Attendez Abonde, ne veuillez courrir si furieusement:*
il nous en faut mieux informer.
 it us about.it have.to.PRS.3SG better inform.INF
 ‘Wait Abonde, don’t run so furiously: we have to get better informed about it.’
 (*Frantext*, Jean de La Taille, *Le Négromant*, 1573)

- (25) *Mais que finalement lesdits comtes et luy arresterent que pour le bien du royaume ...,*
il falloit mieux couronner Charles.
 it have.to.IPFV.3SG better crown.INF Charles
 ‘... it was better to crown Charles.’
 (*Frantext*, Claude Fauchet, *Declin de la maison de Charlemagne*, 1602)

However, when *falloir mieux* is followed by a subjunctive clause, its interpretation as a CMC is the only one possible as *mieux* cannot modify an object clause. This implies that the construction with the subjunctive clause [*falloir mieux que* + SUBJ] necessarily appeared in a second step, after the construction with the infinitive [*falloir mieux* + INF] was reanalyzed as a CMC. Unfortunately, the diachronic data on *falloir mieux* are too scarce to confirm this hypothesis.

The proposed hypothesis on the origin of *falloir mieux* explains many of its observed synchronic characteristics. First, the confusion with *valoir mieux* accounts for the morphosyntactic similarities between the two constructions. They can both be construed either with a bare infinitive or with a subjunctive clause, they exhibit the same tense distribution (e.g. the predominance of the present tense), and they are very similar in terms of syntactic behavior (Section 2.4). As well, the development of *falloir mieux* in the 15th century, when French had turned to the stricter subject–verb order, explains why *falloir mieux*, unlike *valoir mieux* ([*mieux valoir* X]), cannot normally occur with *mieux* in the preverbal position ([? *mieux falloir* X]). The verb second feature, which had previously favored the emergence of the *mieux*-initial construction, had almost disappeared by the time *falloir mieux* came into being.¹⁵

3.3. On the grammaticalization of French CMCs

To conclude this diachronic section, we want to stress that historical data are essential to properly assess the grammaticalization of linguistic items. In the case of the French CMCs, it has been shown

15. We found no such examples in our corpus. However, an exploratory Google search revealed that this word order is possible, albeit characteristic of very informal register.

e.g. *Quand ça va, mieux faut aussi le dire.*

‘When everything is ok, one **had better** also say it.’ (Google, accessed on 26 January 2012)

that some of the synchronic morphosyntactic properties do not reflect a particular stage of grammaticalization, but rather mirror features of the source constructions.

Crucially, the modal-like syntactic properties of French CMCs (Section 2.3) do not in all cases result from decategorialization. Actually, this is only the case for *valoir mieux*, which developed out of the lexical verb *valoir*. By contrast, *faire mieux de* probably derives from the conditional construction [*faire.COND mieux si X.IMP*], in which *faire* functions as a verbal proform. If this is the case, the source construction already exhibited a defective conjugation (only the tenses allowed in conditional sentences were possible) and there was no constraint on the argument structure (since the proform *faire* could refer to any kind of predicate). Consequently, there was probably no decategorialization in the case of *faire mieux de*. *Falloir mieux* exhibits the same argument structure as modal *falloir*, from which it is derived.¹⁶ It follows that there was presumably no decategorialization in the case of *falloir mieux* either.

However, the diachronic data also allow us to confirm some aspects of grammaticalization suggested by the synchronic data. First, the historical data support the claim that *faire mieux de* gained in syntagmatic fixation when grammaticalizing (through reduction and through obligatorification of the conditional tense). The data also partly explain why *valoir mieux* shows synchronic syntagmatic variability. One reason could be that *valoir mieux* is actually based on two distinct constructions, which were maintained up to Modern French.

As a final remark, we would like to underline that French CMCs seem to instantiate two types of moderate grammaticalization. On the one hand, *valoir mieux* showed a drastic increase in frequency when it emerged in Middle French and, at that time, it became sufficiently entrenched for features from the medieval language to be maintained. However, in Modern French, the construction still has a high degree of syntagmatic variability and is only loosely fixed to the main verb. On the other hand, *faire mieux de* has grammaticalized to a higher degree of syntagmatic fixation, but the construction still remains moderately infrequent (although it seems to be gaining in frequency). This illustrates that entrenchment on the one hand and syntagmatic fixation on the other hand do not necessarily go hand in hand in cases of moderate grammaticalization.

4. The semantics of CMCs

This final section returns to the synchronic use of French CMCs, with a focus on their semantics. The section aims to determine more precisely to what extent CMCs in Modern French are influenced by their source constructions and to what extent they are the result of grammaticalization and semantic change.

4.1. From evaluation to deonticity and directivity

French CMCs can be said to convey “modal” meanings in the broad sense, pertaining to the expression of subjective attitude or judgment of the speaker toward the expressed state of affairs.

As the three CMCs all involve the comparative adverb of superiority *mieux* ‘better’, their source meaning can be viewed to be *evaluative*, i.e. it expresses value judgments. The situation denoted is evaluated as preferable and more suitable, possibly in comparison to another situation given in the context. This “evaluative” meaning is still quite common in Modern French, as in (26).

- (26) *Pour qui exerce un métier sans doute*
 for who practices a craft without doubt
vaut- *il mieux être “en forme”.*
 be.worth.PRS.3SG it better be in shape
 ‘For someone who practices a craft, it is no doubt **better** to be “in shape”.’
 (*Frantext*, Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *Fenêtres*)

16. Modal *falloir* also requires an animate agent (e.g. **Il faut pleuvoir* ‘It must rain’), which may be expressed by a dative clitic (e.g. *Il te* [DAT.2SG]) *faut rentrer*. ‘You must go back home.’)

The analysis of the synchronic corpora shows that, besides evaluation, CMCs may carry additional modal interpretations.¹⁷ They may convey *deonticity* and express a participant-external necessity (van der Auwera and Plungian 1998: 81). In such examples, the CMC refers to an obligation related to certain ethical or social norms, as in (27).

- (27) *Il faut mieux parler comme tout le monde.*
 It have.to.PRS.3SG better talk.INF like whole the world
 ‘It is better to talk like everybody else.’
 (ELICOP)

CMCs may also convey *directivity*. In contrast with deontic modality, directivity involves some “action” plan (see Nuyts, Byloo, and Diepeveen 2005: 9) and resembles senses conveyed by mood markers such as the imperative as the addressee is incited to engage in the state of affairs. In directive uses, the CMCs typically express an advice, a threat, a command, etc., as in (28).

- (28) *Tu ferais mieux de préparer le souper*
 you do.COND.2SG better of prepare.INF the dinner
que de discuter sur l’histoire contemporaine.
 than of discuss on the history contemporary
 ‘You’d better prepare dinner than discuss contemporary history.’
 (Frantext, Raymond Queneau, *Les fleurs bleues*)

CMCs may also occasionally occur in *optative* contexts, as in (29), in which they serve to formulate a wish, a hope or (most often) a regret.

- (29) *Ah! Les blancs. Ils feraient bien mieux*
 ah! the whites they do.COND.3PL much better
de rentrer chez eux, tous.
 of return.INF with them all
 ‘Ah! The whites! They’d better go back home, all of them.’
 (Frantext, René Maran, *Batouala, véritable roman nègre*)

Figure 7 represents the distribution (in percentages) of the different interpretations of CMCs in the synchronic corpora.

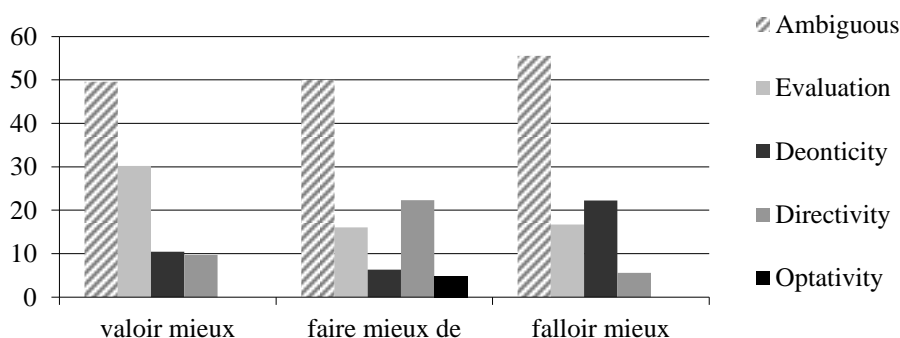


Figure 7. Interpretations of French CMCs (in percentages)

The data show several things. First, in most cases, the interpretation of the CMCs is ambiguous and cannot be said to be clearly evaluative, deontic or directive (or optative). This indicates that the context is crucial to determine the precise interpretation of the CMCs. Second, all the CMCs may

17. The proposed classification is solely based on semantic criteria, i.e. the interpretation associated with the observed CMCs.

receive one of the three modal interpretations evaluation, deonticity, or directivity, whereas the optative interpretation seems to be available only for *faire mieux de*. Interestingly, each CMC also tends to be specialized to some extent in expressing one of the different modal meanings. *Valoir mieux* is more inclined to convey evaluation (30%). *Faire mieux de* is more directive (22%), although it also often serves to give an evaluative judgment (16%). Finally, *falloir mieux* is more inclined toward deonticity (22%), but it also quite often conveys evaluation (almost 17%).

These results clearly reflect the compositionality of the source constructions. In the case of *valoir mieux*, the two components of the construction – *valoir* ‘be worth’ and *mieux* ‘better’ – have an intrinsic evaluative meaning. This semantic synergy explains why evaluative interpretations are by far the most frequent, even though *valoir mieux* may also receive non-evaluative (deontic and directive) readings. With the other two CMCs, the association of the verbs *faire* and *falloir* with the comparative *mieux* more easily gives rise to other modal interpretations, due to the semantics of those verbs. The evaluative sense conveyed by *mieux* still surfaces in 16 to 17% of the cases, but in 22% it is the meaning of the verb that seems to take precedence. As *faire* refers to a dynamic situation (which is typically performed by an agent), directive interpretations are favored: the addressee is expected to act in an adequate manner. With *falloir*, which is a deontic auxiliary, the dominant reading is, unsurprisingly, deontic: the construction serves to express a moral obligation.

These non-evaluative interpretations of the CMCs may be viewed as modal readings derived from the compositional meaning of each construction via *pragmatic inferencing* (Heine 2002; Traugott and Dasher 2002). More precisely, the modal inferences may be triggered by the evaluative meaning of *mieux*, with the deontic or directive (or optative) interpretations being preferred depending on the verb with which *mieux* is combined (*valoir*, *faire* or *falloir*). With *valoir*, the deontic and the directive readings occur in similar proportions (approximately 10%). By using *valoir mieux*, the speaker describes the situation as being more suitable (than another situation) and may imply that an agent has the moral obligation to engage in the situation (deontic meaning). When this agent is the addressee, the speaker may further suggest to the latter that he/she act a certain way (directive meaning). As we have just seen, *faire mieux de* prefers the directive interpretation due to the dynamic dimension of *faire*. This may also stem from the fact that *faire mieux* is used more in the second person than in the other persons, which often triggers the inference of a directive speech act. Finally, in the case of *falloir mieux*, the deontic meaning is not the result of an inferential process, but rather reflects the semantics of the construction and the intrinsic deonticity of *falloir*. The evaluative meaning of *mieux* then reinforces this dimension (instead of causing it) as the moral obligation is explicitly said to rest upon the social norm of “what is better”. Note that, in some contexts (17%), *falloir mieux* is interpreted evaluatively, as the evaluative sense of *mieux* is emphasized at the expense of the semantics of *falloir*.

The fact that the different interpretations of the CMCs still reflect the semantics of their components points toward the *persistance* (Hopper 1991) of the original meaning of the constructions (most notably in the case of *valoir mieux* and *falloir mieux*). However, CMCs have developed additional deontic and directive interpretations via the triggering of pragmatic inferences. Note that this semantic evolution does not manifest any desemanticization. First, the acquisition of a new meaning – whether deontic, directive or optative – is clearly not completed. The evaluative component of the source constructions is still available, although it may yield further modal inferences. Second, the semantic shift toward a deontic, directive or even optative meaning does not reflect the loss of semantic substance but rather corresponds to a semantic enrichment on top of the positive evaluation carried by *mieux*. Some contexts allow for additional deontic or directive (or optative) meanings which provide further information about the subjective attitude or judgment of the speaker toward the state of affairs. One must conclude that the grammaticalization of French CMCs has operated at the structural level but not at the semantic level.

4.2. The expression of a standard of comparison

The CMCs contain the comparative adverb *mieux* ‘better’, which entails that the denoted situation is compared with a standard of comparison (henceforth SoC), namely another situation. To further assess the weight of the comparative meaning in the semantics of each CMC, we have examined the expression of SoCs in the synchronic corpora. The results are given in Figure 8.

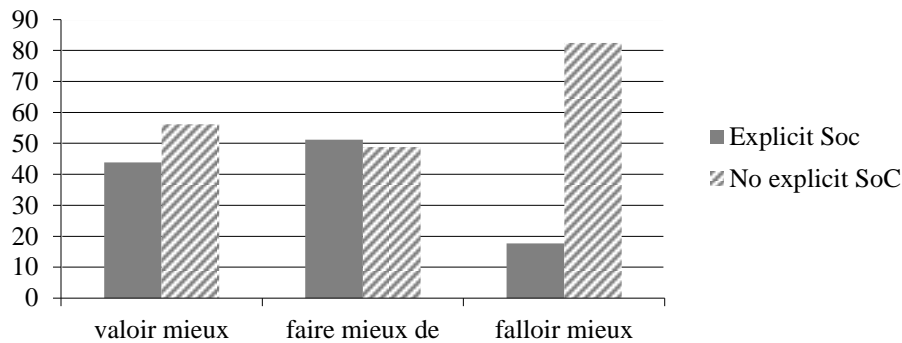


Figure 8. French CMCs and the expression of a standard of comparison (SoC) (in percentages)

We can observe that *valoir mieux* and *faire mieux de* are still frequently used with an explicit SoC (respectively 44% and 51% of the occurrences). Sometimes the SoC is introduced by means of a connector, e.g. *au lieu de* in (30), but most often it is simply given in the textual context without any grammatical marker connecting it to the verb phrase containing the CMC, as in (31). By contrast, in the majority of cases (82%), *falloir mieux* does not require the expression of an SoC, as in (32).

- (30) *Vous feriez mieux de m' aider,*
 you.PL do.COND.2PL better of me help.INF

au lieu de vous prélasser.

instead.of REFL take.a.rest

‘You’d better help me, instead_of taking a rest.’

(Frantext, Irène Monési, *Nature morte devant la fenêtre*)

- (31) *Mais si le service civil n'est ... que l'occasion de profiter à bon compte d'une masse de main d'œuvre,*

mieux vaut alors qu' il ne voie jamais le jour.

better be.worth.PRS.3SG then that it not sees ever the day

‘But if the service civil is only the occasion to easily use a huge workforce, it is better that it never comes into being.’

(Frantext, *Service militaire et réforme de l'armée, par le Groupe d'étude des problèmes du contingent*)

- (32) *Faut mieux continuer à pieds*

have.to.PRS.3SG better continue.INF on foot

à cause qu'on sait jamais c'qu'y nous attend.

‘Better go on by foot because you never know what’s going to happen.’

(Frantext, Frédéric Lasaygues, *Vache noire, hannetons et autres insectes*)

These findings permit us to clarify the picture sketched in the previous section. They first confirm the predominantly evaluative dimension of *valoir mieux*. Due to the meaning of *valoir* ‘be worth’, *valoir mieux* still quite often serves to denote a situation which is deemed to be preferable to another one. Figure 8 also suggests that, with *faire mieux de*, the comparative meaning of *mieux* still surfaces in many contexts with the presence of an explicit SoC (51%). This was obscured in Figure 7 by the high proportion of ambiguous interpretations. Finally, we learn that *falloir mieux* is the CMC that is least often accompanied by the expression of an SoC. This result is not surprising given that the

construction, which is based on the modal *falloir*, is inherently deontic. Deontic interpretations of *falloir mieux* are consequently not the result of desemanticization, but rather of the persistence of features of the source construction.

To complete the picture, we may now compare the situation of Present-day French to that of Renaissance French (from 1500 to 1599). Given the very limited number of hits for *falloir mieux* in Renaissance French, we only present the results for *valoir mieux* (Figure 9) and *faire mieux* (Figure 10).

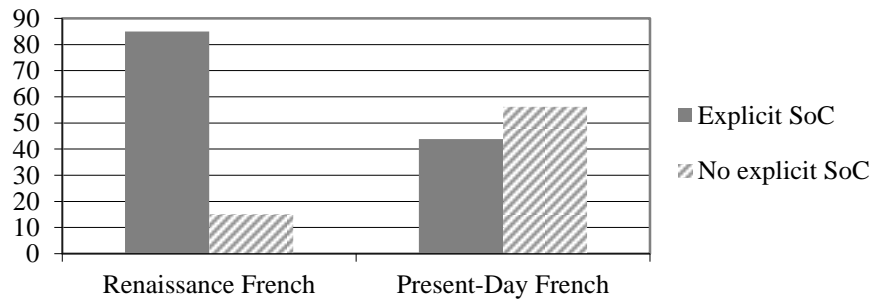


Figure 9. *Valoir mieux* and the expression of standard of comparison (SoC) in Renaissance and Present-day French (in percentages)

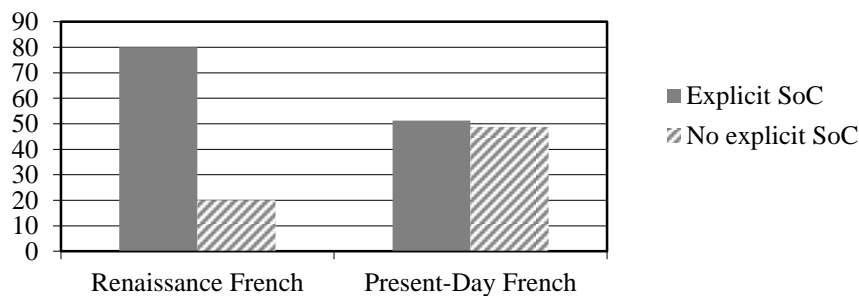


Figure 10. *Faire mieux de* and the expression of a standard of comparison (SoC) in Renaissance and Present-day French (in percentages)

Figures 9 and 10 show that *valoir mieux* and *faire mieux de* require the expression of an SoC less in Present-day French than in Renaissance French. This demonstrates that, although *valoir mieux* and *faire mieux de* retain a clear comparative dimension in Present-day French, they have also moved away from this evaluative meaning to develop other, modal (deontic and directive) senses. In the case of *valoir mieux*, these modal readings are nevertheless peripheral and evaluation remains central due to the evaluative lexical meaning of *valoir* (Section 4.1).

In conclusion, French CMCs have semantically evolved since they emerged in the 14th and 15th century, but this evolution has been rather modest. Whereas the semantics of the source constructions was evaluative due to the adverb *mieux*, the CMCs have developed new modal (mainly deontic and directive) interpretations. However, as pointed out in Section 4.1, this development is not the result of semantic bleaching. Indeed, the evaluative interpretations are still prominent in the case of *valoir mieux* and *faire mieux de* (with a relative presence of SoC ranging between 43% and 51%). The interpretation of *falloir mieux* is more independent of the comparative meaning of *mieux* but, in this construction, evaluation is not the source meaning, *mieux* merely reinforces the deontic sense conveyed by *falloir*.

5. Concluding remarks

French CMCs are an example of moderate grammaticalization. The constructions emerged in Middle French between the 13th and the 15th century from three different source forms – a lexical verb, a verbal proform, and an auxiliary – and have accordingly followed different paths of grammaticalization to end up, in Modern French, as semi-modals. *Valoir mieux* is the most entrenched of the three constructions and it retains, for this reason, some features of Medieval French (notably the constructional subtype [*mieux vaut X*]). *Faire mieux de* shows the highest degree of syntagmatic fixation and structurally resembles more grammaticalized modals such as *pouvoir* and *devoir*. As a result of its development from the modal verb *falloir*, *falloir mieux* is the construction whose semantics comes closest to that of modals.

The result of these linguistic changes (and probably also their motivation) is the creation of a new layer within the paradigm of modal verbs in French (see Hopper 1991 on layering). CMCs take up a slot within the paradigm also hosting the deontic *devoir* and *falloir* and the epistemic *pouvoir*. More precisely, they introduce a new category of deontic modals which subordinate the deontic assessment to an evaluative judgment (because of the adverb *mieux*).¹⁸

French CMCs can also be said to form a paradigm of their own within that of deontic modals. Within this CMC paradigm, each construction differs as to the degree of speaker involvement: *valoir mieux* instantiates weak involvement, which takes the form of a comparison between two states of affairs (evaluative meaning); *falloir mieux* implies a stronger involvement, with the speaker asserting a moral obligation (deontic meaning); and *faire mieux de*, finally, carries an even stronger involvement with the speaker pressing the addressee to act adequately (directive meaning). However, the integration into the new paradigm, or paradigmaticization, (Lehmann 2002) is only incipient. CMCs still exhibit a large degree of paradigmatic variability, both on the semantic side – the functional specialization of each construction is far from being complete – and on the structural side – CMCs do not show any uniform morphosyntactic properties.

Abbreviations

1/2/3 = first/second/third person; COND = conditional; DAT = dative; FUT = future; IMP = imperative; IPFV = imperfective; NEG = negation; PL = plural; PLU.SBJV = pluperfect.subjunctive; PPTCP = past participle; PRS = present; REFL = reflexive; SG = singular

Corpora

	DATES	NUMBER OF WORDS
SYNCHRONIC CORPORA		
<i>Frantext</i> (written texts) http://www.frantext.fr/ (last accessed on 08-12-2011)	1960-2009	46 026 672
<i>Elicop</i> (oral texts) http://bach.arts.kuleuven.be/elicop/ (last accessed on 22-09-2010)	1961-1976	1 164 000
<i>CLAPI</i> (oral texts) http://clapi.univ-lyon2.fr/ (last accessed on 22-09-2010)	1984-2007	442 513
<i>CFPP2000</i> (oral texts) http://clapi.univ-lyon2.fr/ (last accessed on 22-09-2010)	2007-2008	361 724
DIACHRONIC CORPORA		

18. Lehmann (2002) also talks about paradigmaticization.

<i>Frantext</i> (written texts) http://www.frantext.fr/ (last accessed on 31-01-2012)	1180-2009	240 038 096
<i>Frantext moyen français</i> (written texts) http://www.frantext.fr/ (last accessed on 22-10-2010)	1330-1579	6 851 879

Appendix

Table 4. Reported vs. unreported speech in the synchronic written corpus (*Frantext*) (based on samples of 200 if total n > 200 in Table 1)

	unreported		reported						total		total n
	n	%	direct n	%	indirect n	%	free indirect n	%	n	%	
<i>faire mieux</i>	34	17	127	63.50	27	13.50	12	6	166	83	200
<i>valoir mieux</i>	64	32	74	37	26	13	36	18	136	68	200
<i>falloir mieux</i>	2	40	2	40	0	0	1	20	3	60	5
total CMC	100	24.29	203	50.12	53	13.09	49	12.10	305	75.31	405

References

- Blanche-Benveniste, Claire. 2010. Où est le *il* de *il y a* ? *Travaux de linguistique* 61(2). 137–153.
- Brown, Penelope & Stephen C. Levinson. 1987. *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Buridant, Claude. 2000. *Grammaire nouvelle de l'ancien français*. Paris: Sedes.
- Bybee, Joan & Paul Hopper. 2001. *Frequency and the emergence of linguistic structure*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Bybee, Joan. 2003. Mechanisms of change in grammaticization: The role of frequency. In Brian D. Joseph & Richard D. Janda (eds.), *The handbook of historical linguistics*, 602–623. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Bybee, Joan. 2006. From usage to grammar: The mind's response to repetition. *Language* 82(4). 711–733.
- Byloo, Pieter, Jan Nuyts & Johan van der Auwera. 2010. *Beter en best*. In Johan de Caluwe & Jacques Van Keymeulen (eds.), *Voor Magda: Artikelen voor Magda Devos bij haar afscheid van de Universiteit Gent*, 93–109. Gent: Academia Press.
- Chu, Xiaoquan. 2008. *Les verbes modaux du français*. Paris: Ophrys.
- Denison, David & Alison Cort. 2010. *Better as a verb*. In Kristin Davidse, Lieven Vandelanotte & Hubert Cuyckens (eds.), *Subjectification, intersubjectification and grammaticalization*, 349–383. Berlin & New York: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Gaetone, David. 1970. La transformation impersonnelle en français. *Le Français Moderne* 38(4). 389–411.
- Hanse, Joseph. 1989. *Nouveau dictionnaire des difficultés du français moderne*. Paris & Louvain-la-Neuve: Duculot.
- Heine, Bernd. 1993. *Auxiliaries: Cognitive forces and grammaticalization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Heine, Bernd. 2003. Grammaticalization. In Brian D. Joseph & Richard D. Janda (eds.), *The handbook of historical linguistics*, 575–601. Blackwell: Oxford.
- Heine, Bernd. 2002. On the role of contexts in grammaticalization. In Ilse Wischer & Gabriele Diewald (eds.), *New reflections on grammaticalization*, 83–101. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Heine, Bernd & Tania Kuteva. 2007. *The genesis of grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hopper, Paul J. 1991. On some principles of grammaticalization. In Elizabeth Closs Traugott & Bernd Heine (eds.), *Approaches to grammaticalization*, Vol. I, 17–35. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Hopper, Paul J. & Elizabeth Closs Traugott. 1993. *Grammaticalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lamiroy, Béatrice & Ana Drobnjakovic. 2009. Auxiliaries and Grammaticalization. A case study of Germanic and Slavonic Languages. In Corinne Rossari, Claudia Ricci & Adriana Spiridon (eds.), *Grammaticalization and pragmatics: Facts, approaches, theoretical Issues*, 19–35. Bingley: Emerald Group.

- Legendre, Géraldine. 1990. French impersonal construction. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 8(1). 81–128.
- Lehmann, Christian. 2002 [1995]. *Thoughts on Grammaticalization*, 2nd revised edn. Erfurt: Seminar für Sprachwissenschaft der Universität.
- Marchello-Nizia, Christiane. 1995. *L'évolution du français: Ordre des mots, démonstratifs, accent tonique*. Paris: Armand Colin.
- Mitchell, Keith. 2003. *Had better and might as well: On the margins of modality?*. In Roberta Facchinetti, Frank Palmer & Manfred Krug (eds.), *Modality in contemporary English*, 131–149. Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Norde, Muriel. 2009. *Degrammaticalization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nuyts, Jan, Pieter Byloo & Janneke Diepeveen. 2005. On deontic modality, directivity, and mood: A case study of Dutch *mogen* and *moeten*. *Antwerp Papers in Linguistics* 110. 1–56.
- Vance, Barbara. 1988. L'évolution de Pro-drop en français médiéval. *Revue québécoise de linguistique théorique et appliquée* 7(3). 85–109.
- van der Auwera, Johan & Vladimir Plungian. Modality's semantic map. *Linguistic Typology* 2. 79–124.
- van der Auwera, Johan & Astrid De Wit. 2010. The English comparative modals – a pilot study. In Bert Cappelle & Naoaki Wada (eds.), *Distinctions in English grammar offered to Renaat Declerck*, 127–147. Tokyo: Kaitakusha.
- van der Auwera, Johan, Dirk Noël & An Van linden. 2013. *Had better, 'd better and better: Diachronic and transatlantic variation*. In Juana I. Marín-Arrese, Marta Carretero, Johan van der Auwera & Jorge Arús Hita & (eds.), *English modality: Core, periphery and evidentiality*, 119–153. Berlin & New York: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Vanderbiesen, Jeroen. 2011. 'Welches Outfit sollte man am besten anziehen?' A corpus study of comparative modal constructions in German. Leuven: University of Leuven MA thesis.
- Vanderbiesen Jeroen. & Tanja Mortelmans. 2011. 'Welches Outfit sollte man am besten anziehen?' Eine Korpusstudie komparativer Modalkonstruktionen im Deutschen. *Germanistische Mitteilungen* 37(2). 65–85.
- Traugott, Elizabeth Closs. 2003. From subjectification to intersubjectification. In Raymond Hickey (ed.), *Motives for language change*, 124–139. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Traugott, Elizabeth Closs & Richard B. Dasher. 2002. *Regularity in semantic change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Trousdale, Graeme. 2010. Issues in constructional approaches to grammaticalization in English. In Katerina Stathi, Elke Gehweiler & Ekkehard König (eds.), *Grammaticalization: Current views and issues*, 51–72. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.