

# Syntactic features and clause typing in Middle English polar questions\*

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## 1 Introduction

Middle English polar questions: elements *if* (embedded clauses) and *whether* (main and embedded clauses) – pattern attested from Old English onwards, continues into Early Modern English (see Van Gelderen 2009, Fischer et al. 2001)

status of *if*: a complementiser in C (general consensus)

- (1) And **if** I may ride for þe crikke, I shall kome to ȝow, praing with all myn hert þat ȝe wold be þer &c.  
'And if I may ride in spite of the crick, I shall come to you, praying with all my heart that you should be there.'  
(*The Stonor letters and papers* 44: J. Hurlegh to Thomas Stonor, 28 September [1424 or earlier])<sup>1</sup>

→ no verb movement to C in main clause interrogatives, no *that* in C in embedded clauses

question: status of *whether* – various patterns:

- (2) a. O þis watur he gert ilkan Drinc, **quer** he wald or nan  
'Of this water he gives each to drink whether he wanted it or not.'  
(*Cursor Mundi* 5517–6618, Van Gelderen 2009: 155, ex. 62)
- b. If þai ani child miht haue, **Queþer þat** it ware scho or he  
'If they might have any child, whether it were a she or he.'  
(*Cursor Mundi* 10205, Van Gelderen 2009: 155, ex. 61)

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<sup>1</sup>Unless otherwise marked, the data are from the Michigan Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse.

*whether* may co-occur with *that* in embedded clauses, verb movement in main clauses also possible but not obligatory – pattern attested from Old English onwards:

- (3) a. **Hwæðer wæs** iohannes fulluht þe of heofonum þe of mannum  
whether was John's baptism that of heavens or of man  
'Was the baptism of John done by heaven or by man?' (*West Saxon Gospel*)  
(Van Gelderen 2009: 141, ex. 15)
- b. **Hwæðer** ic mote lybban oððæt ic hine geseo  
whether I might live until I him see  
'Might I live until I see him?' (Aelfric *Homilies*)  
(Van Gelderen 2009: 141, ex. 16, quoting Allen 1980)

possible analyses:

- *whether* a grammaticalised complementiser when appearing on its own, see Van Gelderen (2009) – but: non-complementiser patterns survive into Middle English and beyond
- *whether* in the specifier, see Walkden (2014: 149–150) – but: question remains why no verb movement triggered to C and why *that* is less likely to be inserted than with ordinary *wh*-operators (see Van Gelderen 2009)

proposal:

- *whether* an operator throughout the history of English, including Middle English
- doubling patterns (co-occurrence with a verb or with *that*) emerge due to a lexicalisation requirement on [fin] in C (general property of West Germanic, see Bacskai-Atkari 2016)
- lack of doubling patterns can arise if *whether* is inserted into C via head adjunction – lexicalisation requirement on [fin] satisfied

## 2 The data

variation in Middle English: single *whether* versus *whether* with fronted verb or *whether that* – both in verse and prose texts, also within the same text – (2)

- (4) a. I have wryten to Fowler in semblable wyse in this matter: **whether** my lettre be come to hym or no, I wete ner.  
 ‘I have written to Fowler in similar ways in this matter: I don’t know whether he received my letter or not.’  
 (*The Stonor letters and papers* 87: Humphrey Forster to Thomas Stonor, 21 October [1466])
- b. Brother, it is so that the King shall come into Norfolk in haste, and I wot not **whether that** I may come with him or not (...)  
 ‘Brother, it is so that the King will come into Norfolk in haste, and I don’t know whether I may come with him or not’  
 (*The Stonor letters and papers* XXXI: John Paston to his mother and brother, 1469 or 1474; modernised spelling, taken from *The Paston letters: a selection illustrating English social life in the fifteenth century*, ed. M. D. Jones, 1922)
- c. Loke well aboute & take consyderasion, / As I haue declaryd, **whether** hit so be.  
 ‘Look about and taken consideration, as I have declared whether it is so.’  
 (John Lydgate, *The assembly of gods*, stanza 267)
- d. **Whether art** thow double, or elles the same man / That thow were furst?  
 ‘Are you doubled or the same man that you were first?’  
 (John Lydgate, *The assembly of gods*, stanza 200)

corpus study (ongoing): *Michigan Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse*

- hits for the form *whether* (other spelling variants to be included)
- 9 smaller texts or collections of texts (4 prose and 5 verse)
- Wycliffe Bible (older and newer version)

data from the smaller texts (see the examples in (4) above):

	prose	verse	TOTAL
<i>whether</i>	14	7	21
<i>whether</i> + V	0	1	1

→ single *whether* predominant but verb fronting also possible

example for verb fronting not conclusive (verse)

data from the Wycliffe Bible (earlier version by John Wycliffe ca. 1382, later version revised by John Purvey ca. 1388):

	<b>older version</b>	<b>newer version</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
<i>whether</i>	<b>581</b> (86,72%)	<b>835</b> (98,35%)	1416
<i>whether + V</i>	<b>87</b> (12,99%)	<b>10</b> (1,18%)	97
<i>whether that</i>	<b>2</b> (0,30%)	<b>4</b> (0,47%)	6

proportion of verb fronting in the older version considerably higher

same sentence translated with different construction – *whether* with or without verb fronting essentially equivalent options:

- (5) a. And the Lord seide to Caym, Where is Abel thi brother? The which answerde, I wote neuere; **whether am** I the keper of my brother?  
(Wycliffe Bible older version, Genesis 4.9)
- b. And the Lord seide to Cayn, Where is Abel thi brother? Which answerde, Y woot not; **whether** Y am the kepere of my brothir?  
(Wycliffe Bible newer version, Genesis 4.9)
- c. Et ait Dominus ad Cain: Ubi est Abel frater tuus? Qui and said.3SG God to Cain where is Abel brother your who respondit: Nescio: num custos fratris mei sum ego? answered.3SG not.know.1SG whether keeper brother.GEN my.GEN am I  
'And the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper?'

older version generally claimed to be closer to the Latin original – but: here verb movement cannot be attributed to Latin influence

newer version without verb movement in several examples but newer version also has *whether that* in independent examples

→ single *whether* again predominant, but verb fronting (and *whether that*) not merely occasional – probably inter-speaker differences in the choices

→ *whether* with or without verb fronting: essentially equivalent versions

→ *whether* in main clause questions either with or without verb fronting: ordinary polar interrogatives, not “wondering” (↔ German *ob*)

### 3 The analysis

possibilities:

- Van Gelderen (2009), analysis for Old English: *whether* a grammaticalised complementiser if there is no verb movement, otherwise an operator in [Spec,CP]
- Walkden (2014: 149–150), analysis for Old English: no grammaticalisation of *whether* into a complementiser, but always an operator in [Spec,CP]: either a base-generated yes-no operator (triggering no verb movement) or an operator with a ‘which of two’ meaning moving to [Spec,CP] like ordinary *wh*-operators (and triggering verb movement) – presupposes a differences between polar and alternative questions
- proposal: *whether* an operator: inserted either to [Spec,CP] or adjoined to C. the former case triggers verb movement or *that*-insertion to lexicalise [fin] on C

arguments against *whether* as a grammaticalised complementiser:

- grammaticalisation follows essentially from economy principles (feature economy), also in Van Gelderen (2009) – if an element grammaticalises into a complementiser, it is unlikely to be preserved as an operator with exactly the same functions, but Middle English data suggest that the operator use was very much alive (also: doubling patterns attested later, either with *that* or with verb movement)
- theoretically, one may assume a double CP for cases with verb fronting or *that* (similarly to the Force and Fin distinction of Rizzi 1997, see Baltin 2010 on Doubly Filled COMP structures), meaning that *whether* is always a higher complementiser (unified analysis, though not clear when the lower CP is generated and/or filled overtly) – problem: this would assume that *whether* is always a finite complementiser (just like *if*), but this is not the case, see (7)

traditional argument for *whether* being an operator: not specified for finiteness:

- (6) a. I don’t know **when/whether/if** I should call Ralph.  
b. I don’t know **when/whether/\*if** to call Ralph.

*whether* available in nonfinite clauses also in Middle English:

- (7) a. Whether such is the fasting that I chese, bi the dai a man to tormenten his soule? **whether** to binde togidere as a cercle his hed, and sac and asken to arazen?  
(Wycliffe Bible older version, Isaiah 58.5)
- b. Whether sich is the fastyng which Y chees, a man to tur|mente his soule bi dai? **whether** to bynde his heed as a sercle, and to make redi a sak and aische?  
(Wycliffe Bible newer version, Isaiah 58.5)  
‘Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?’

→ it seems plausible that the operator *whether* was active in Middle English – no reason to assume grammaticalisation (either already in Old English or later), especially because operator pattern continues

arguments against two syntactically distinct operators showing differences in the lexicalisation of C (verb movement):

- not clear why an operator directly inserted into [Spec,CP], instead of movement from within the clause, does not induce verb movement to C; further, as Walkden (2014: 145) argues, the operator status of *whether* is not fully parallel with ordinary *wh*-operators, contrary to Van Gelderen (2009: 156) and Berizzi (2010: 122)
- difference between polar and alternative questions empirically not tenable in Middle English (note: Walkden 2014 discusses Old English data and parallel cases in other contemporary West-Germanic languages)

verb movement attested with alternative questions, see (4d) above, but also with ordinary polar questions, see (5) above (verb fronting essentially an option), similar example:

- (8) a. And Rachel and Lya answeyden, **Whe|ther han** we eny thing of residewe in faculteis and erytage of the hows of oure fader?  
(Wycliffe Bible older version, Genesis 31.14)
- b. And Rachel and Lya answeriden, **Wher** we han ony thing residue in the catels, and eritage of oure fadir?  
(Wycliffe Bible newer version, Genesis 31.14)

→ *whether* in Middle English does not have two clearly separable patterns, flexible approach needed that accounts for the attested variation

proposal: *whether* an operators but head-sized operators can be adjoined to C as well

idea of Bayer & Brandner (2008): head-sized phrases can occur in C as well – asymmetry observed in Doubly Filled COMP patterns in Alemannic and Bavarian: head-sized *wh*-elements (e.g. *wer* ‘who.NOM’) occur without *dass* ‘that’ (but: variation here, see also Weiß 2013), while phrase-sized *wh*-elements (e.g. *was für eine Farbe* ‘what colour’) do

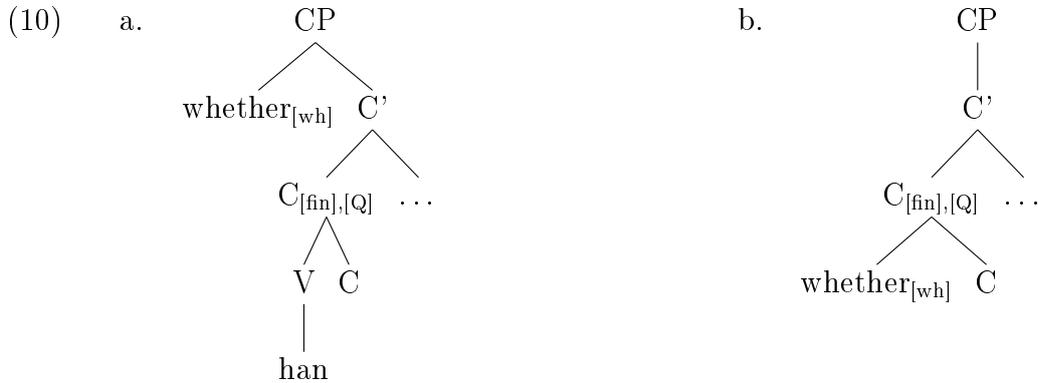
illustration:

- (9) a. Ich weiß nicht, **wer** (% **dass**) im Garten sitzt.  
I know.1SG not who that in.the.M.DAT garden sits  
‘I don’t know who is sitting in the garden.’
- b. Ich weiß nicht, **was für eine Farbe** **dass** er mag.  
I know.1SG not what for a.F colour that he likes  
‘I don’t know what colour he likes.’

observation of Van Gelderen (2009): Doubly Filled COMP patterns possible with *whether* in modern dialects (substandard) but less frequent than with ordinary *wh*-operators

→: variation regarding *whether* intra-dialectally, similarly to Middle English patterns

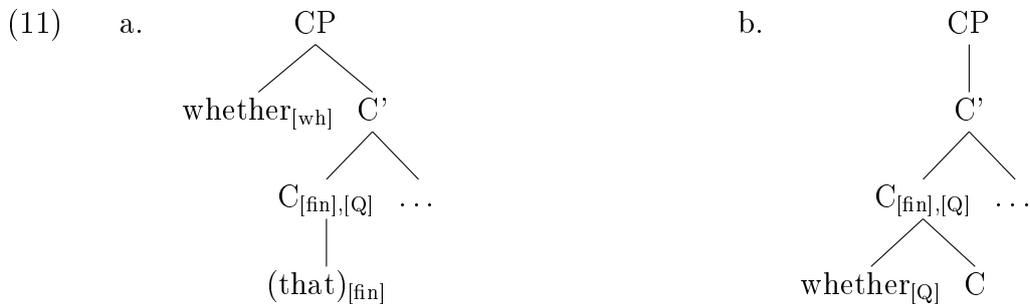
proposed structures for Middle English (main clauses):



C specified for [Q] and [fin]:

- [Q] must be lexicalised either by verb movement or by the insertion of *whether*, if *whether* not inserted, verb movement applies (regular West-Germanic pattern) – lexicalisation requirement does not presuppose feature checking (verb not [Q])
- [wh] implies [wh] but not vice versa – *whether* can be inserted even though it is more specified than mere [Q]; cf. Bayer (2004) on the separation of [Q] and [wh]

proposed structure for embedded questions (Middle English and beyond):



C again specified for [Q] and [fin] but no distinctive intonation, [Q] marked morphophonologically:

- [Q] overtly marked either by an operator or by *if*
- [fin] regularly lexicalised on C in West Germanic (V2 and T-to-C movement, see Bacskai-Atkari 2016) – standard dialects exceptional in (11a), Doubly Filled COMP dialects either insert a finite subordinator or insert *whether* into C (head adjunction) – inserting *whether* more economical

question: relatively low number of doubling patterns with *whether* in Middle English

- dialectal/ idiolectal variation (cf. Wycliffe vs. Purvey regarding verb fronting)
- not all speakers require lexicalising [fin], similarly to present-day standard West-Germanic dialects – reduces the number of *whether that* patterns
- even for Doubly Filled COMP speakers the insertion of the operator into C via head adjunction is more economical (no additional verb movement step) – reduces the number of *whether that* and of *whether + V* patterns

question: why no grammaticalisation of *whether* (throughout), compared to early grammaticalisation of *if*

- *if* specified as [Q] an [fin], fully matching the feature properties of the relevant C (also: restricted to subordinate structures) → grammaticalisation facilitated
- *whether* specified as [wh], not matching the feature properties of the relevant C (overspecified for [Q], underspecified for [fin]) → grammaticalisation hindered (also: *if* already grammaticalised, difference in their distribution maintained)

## 4 Conclusion

status of *if* and *whether* in Middle English

- *if* a grammaticalised complementiser early on
- *whether* an operator appearing both in main and in embedded clauses, showing various possible patterns (verb fronting insertion of *that*)
- *whether* inserted either into [Spec,CP] or into C (head adjunction), no difference in the interpretation – variation can be attributed to idiolectal and dialectal variation

→ feature-based approach can account for the diversity of the Middle English patterns

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