

Variation in the grammaticalisation of polar operators in West Germanic

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1 Introduction

embedded interrogatives in (Standard) German: [wh] feature of a C head marked either by the *wh*-element moving to [Spec,CP] in constituent questions, or by the insertion of *ob* ‘if’ into C in polar questions (Zimmermann 2013: 86)

- (1) a. Ich frage mich, **mit wem** er kommt.
I ask.1SG myself.ACC with who.DAT he comes
‘I wonder who he is coming with.’
- b. Ich frage mich, **ob** er kommt.
I ask.1SG myself.ACC if he comes
‘I wonder if he is coming.’

Doubly Filled COMP in dialects (e.g. Alemannic, Bavarian): complementiser *dass* ‘that’ inserted in constituent questions following the *wh*-operator

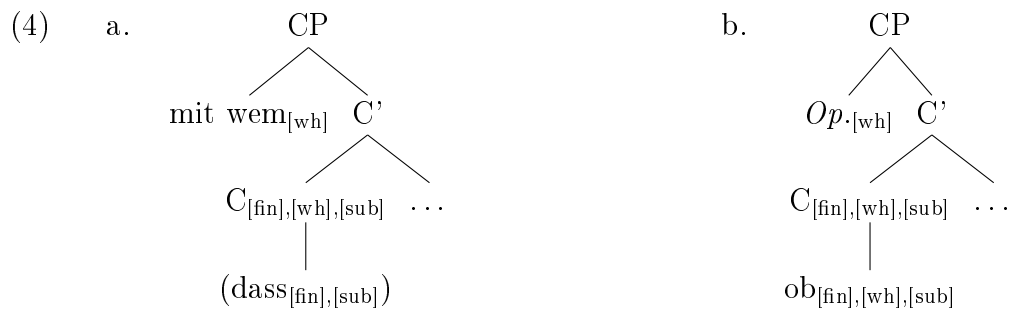
example from Alemannic:

- (2) I ha koa Ahnung, **mid wa für-e Farb dass**-er zfriede wär.
I have no idea with what for-a colour that-he content would.be
‘I have no idea what colour he would be content with.’
(Bayer & Brandner 2008: 88, ex. 4b)

no *dass* in polar questions (not even in Alemannic – Ellen Brandner p.c.):

- (3) *Ich frage mich, **ob dass** er mit einem Dackel kommt.
I ask.1SG myself.ACC if that he with a.M.DAT dachshund comes
‘I wonder whether he is coming with a dachshund.’

structures:



question: whether cognates of German *ob* in West Germanic behave differently

Standard Dutch *of* ‘if’: no doubling, similar to the case of English *if* (see Bayer 2004, following Hoekstra 1993)

combination of *dat* in substandard dialects possible:

- (5) Ik vraag me af **of dat** Ajax de volgende ronde haalt.
 I ask me PRT if that Ajax the next round reaches
 ‘I wonder whether Ajax will make it to the next round.’
 (Bayer 2004: 65, ex. 14, quoting Hoekstra 1993)

note: substandard dialects also allow Doubly Filled COMP with ordinary *wh*-elements in Dutch (see Bayer 2004, following Hoekstra 1993)

evidence for Dutch *of* being different from English *if*: *of* available in constituent questions as well

- (6) Ze weet **wie of dat** hij had willen opbellen.
 she knows who if that he had want call
 ‘She knows who he wanted to call.’
 (Bayer 2004: 66, ex. 17, citing Hoekstra 1993)

separation of [Q] and [wh] by Bayer (2004): languages with distinct elements carrying yes/no property and the *wh*-element itself

note: Q element appearing also in conditionals (historically German *ob* as well), where no [wh] proper is present

English: no Doubly Filled COMP with *if* in interrogatives: always in C

note: *if that* attested in Middle English but in conditionals (Van Gelderen 2005):

- (7) Blameth nat me **if that** ye chese amys.
 ‘And blame not me if you do choose amiss.’
 (Chaucer, The Canterbury Tales: Miller’s Prologue)

patterns with doubling similar to Doubly Filled COMP in constituent questions, see (2);
 pattern available with the operator *whether*: doubling attested in Old and Middle
 English and in modern substandard varieties (see Van Gelderen 2009):

- (8) I wot not **whether that** I may come with him or not.
 ‘I do not know whether I may come with him or not.’ (Paston Letters XXXI)

→ question: whether *ob* was always a complementiser in complementary distribution
 with *dass*, or whether grammaticalisation can be detected

if grammaticalisation is probable, how it is related to the difference between [wh] and [Q]

proposal: grammaticalisation of *ob* early but still detectable

- attested patterns suggest that any doubling is related to the need of filling the [wh]
 C by an overt element
- operators/complementisers may differ in their feature specification – *whether* is
 inherently [wh], whereas *if* has both a [wh]+[Q] and a [Q] version
- *ob* originally available in conditionals as well, but its disappearance from condition-
 als makes a mere [Q] version paradigmatically unavailable

2 Old Saxon

both the operator *(h)wedār* ‘whether’ and the complementiser *ef* ‘if’ attested

corpus analysis: DDD Referenzkorpus Altdeutsch (Old German Reference Corpus)

results (both texts from the 9th century):

	<i>ef</i>	<i>(h)wedār</i>	<i>(h)wedār</i> + V
Genesis	1	1	
Heliand	5	2	1

example for *ef*:

- (9) endi frâgodun, **ef** he uuâri that barn godes
 and asked.3PL if he was.3SG the son God’s
 ‘and they asked if he was the son of God’ (*Heliand* 11)

examples for *(h)wedār*:

- (10) a. ne rôkead, **huueðar** gi is ênigan thanc antifâhan
 not worry.IMP.2PL whether you it some thank receive.2PL
 ‘do not worry whether you get some reward’ (*Heliand* 18)
- b. endi he frâgoda sân, huilic sie ârundi ûta gibrâhti,
 and he asked.3SG instantly, which they.ACC business out brought.3SG
 ueros an thana uuracsið **huueðer lêdiad** gi uundan gold te
 man in this.ACC foreign.land whether bring.2PL you wrought gold to
 geþu huilicun gumuno?
 gift.DAT some men.GEN
 ‘and he instantly asked, what business had brought them out from their land
 into this foreign land and whether you are bringing wrought gold as a gift
 to someone?’ (*Heliand* 7)

→ Old Saxon pattern similar to the English one – separation of *whether* and *if* in their distribution (note: analysis here differs from Axel 2007, who categorises all of the Old German elements mentioned here as complementisers)

but: verb movement instead of a complementiser equivalent to *that*

analysis (Bacskai-Atkari 2016): potentially all patterns in (9)–(10) involve lexicalising the C head

structures:

- (11) a.
- b.
- c.

structure in (11b): alternatively, *(h)wedār* could be an operator and the C head null, but the availability of verb movement suggests that the [fin] C was required to be lexicalised (see Bayer & Brandner 2008, Bacskai-Atkari 2015; 2016 on *wh*-elements inserted/moved into C)

crucial difference between (11a) and (11b): no grammaticalisation in the case of *(h)wedār*, only head adjunction

availability of two distinct elements: facilitates functional split of a fully grammaticalised complementiser and a *wh*-operator

also: *(h)wedār* not available in Old Saxon conditionals, *ef* is

corpus results: *ef* in conditionals only in *Heliand*, all the 33 instances contain a single *ef* as a grammaticalised complementiser

→ parallelism between embedded interrogatives and conditionals suggests there may be some analogy between the two clause types

3 Old High German

cognates of *if* attested: *ibu* and *ob*

corpus analysis: DDD Referenzkorpus Altdeutsch (Old German Reference Corpus)

results:

	<i>ibu</i> + V	<i>ob</i>	<i>ob</i> + V
Benediktiner Regel (9th c.)	1		
Otfrid (9th c.)		11	
Tatian (9th c.)		8	1
Ludwigslied (9th c.)		2	
Psalm 138 (9–10th c.)		1	
St. Galler Schularbeit (11th c.)		1	
Benediktbeurer Glaube und Beichte III (12–13th c.)		1	

examples:

- (12) a. fona himile simblum sihit ubar parn manno, daz sehe,
 from heaven always sees onto children.PL men's, that see.SBJV.3SG
ibu ist farstantanti edo suahhanti cotan
 if is understood or sought.ACC God.ACC
 'from Heaven, he always sees onto men's children, to see if God is understood or sought' (*Benediktiner Regel* 7)
- b. láz nu, gisehemes **oba come** Helias losenti inan
 let.IMP.2SG now see.1PL if comes Elias save.INF he.ACC
 'let us see if Elias will come to save him' (*Tatian* 208)
- c. Pilatus uuntrota, **oba** her iu entoti
 Pilate wondered.3SG of he already died.3SG
 'Pilate wondered if he was already dead.' (*Tatian* 12)

verb movement to C with *ibu/ob*: in the earliest texts, rare; yet: *ibu/ob* is an operator in these instances, but *ob* grammaticalised as a complementiser quite early

both *Benediktiner Regel* and *Tatian* from the Upper German dialect area, as most texts in table above (only *Ludwigslied* Central German); *Benediktiner Regel* is Alemannic, *Tatian* is East Franconian, *Otfrid* is South Rhine Franconian

→ the unavailability of *ob* in Modern German as an operator truly stems from grammaticalisation

compare *ibu/ob* in conditionals:

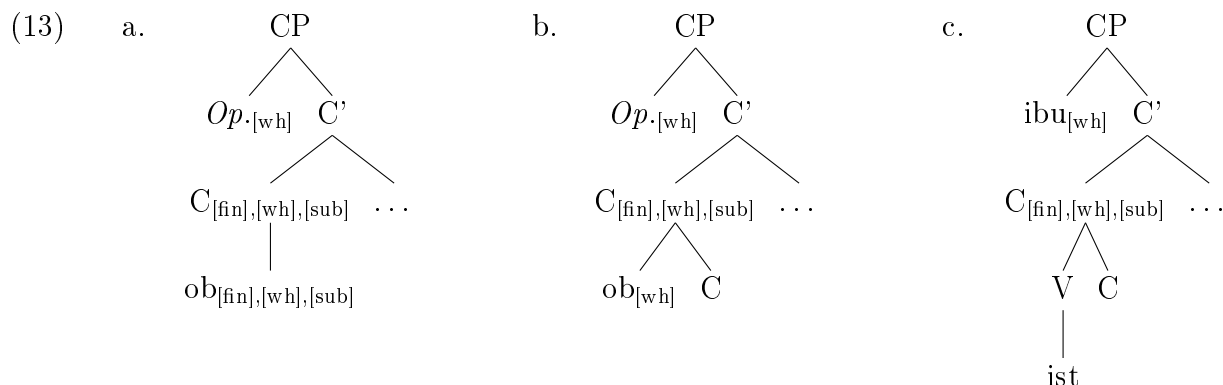
	<i>ibu</i> + V	<i>ibu</i>	<i>ob</i>
Isidor (8–9th c.)		7	
Benediktiner Regel (9th c.)	2*	2	
Otfrid (9th c.)			10
Monseer Fragmente (9th c.)		2	
Murbacher Hymnen (9th c.)			3
Wessobrunner Glauben und Beichte (11–12th c.)		1	

*note: one example elliptical (contains only *ibu* and the verb), the other contains an object following the verb as well (but OV/VO shows some variation in Old High German, see Hinterhölzl 2015), hence not necessarily instanced of V-movement to C

grammaticalisation in conditionals most probably even earlier

Old Saxon more similar to English than to Old High German (*if* already fully grammaticalised in polar questions, availability of *whether*) – Ingvaeonic dialects of West Germanic (Old English, Old Frisian, Old Saxon), while (Old) High German is Erminonic and (Old) Dutch is Istvaeonic

structures:



presence of fronted verb (V2): unambiguously associated with the structure in (13c)

absence of fronted verb (V2): either (13a) or (13b), though the low number of true operator cases suggests there was little optionality and grammaticalisation occurred early

grammaticalisation process: (13c) \rightarrow (13b) \rightarrow (13a)

4 Grammaticalisation

reanalysis of polar operator into complementiser:

element inserted into [Spec,CP] \rightarrow element inserted into C via head adjunction \rightarrow element base-generated in C (complementiser)

change is gradual

transparency: structures like (13b) and (11b) transparent for the language learner as long as there is input in the form of (13c) and (11c) showing the lack of grammaticalisation – stable input in the case of *whether/(h)wedat* but not in the case of *if/ob*; if no operator input, generation of (13a) or (11a) more transparent and more economical

feature changes

- [wh] has to be marked overtly (no distinctive intonation in embedded clauses) – either in [Spec,CP] or in C, feature checked off either way
- feature difference between [wh] operator and [wh] complementiser: complementiser is also [fin] and [sub]
- regular *wh*-operators occupy [Spec,CP] in the syntactic paradigm, and even if head-sized operators may merge to C, visibly phrase-sized ones cannot \rightarrow a regular *wh*-operator such as *whether* is not reanalysed as a C head, hence no feature change occurs
- operators of the form *if/ob* are not members of the regular *wh*-paradigm but instead come in two versions: a [wh]+[Q] one and a mere [Q] one (as in conditionals), and the latter is especially prone to grammaticalisation (transparency, economy) \rightarrow these operators do acquire the [fin] and [sub] features when merged to C, and are reanalysed as C

5 Conclusion

differences in the status of [wh]-marking elements in embedded polar interrogatives in West Germanic

- Modern German *ob* a grammaticalised complementiser – evidence from Old High German for its origin as an operator
- grammaticalisation of operators depends on availability of further overt operators
- grammaticalisation of operators depends on features associated with the operator in interrogatives and in conditionals
- variation in West Germanic follows from these factors

the grammaticalisation of German *ob* follows general mechanisms of reanalysis

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