

Syntactic features and clause typing in Middle English polar questions

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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 3ow, praing
with all myn hert þat 3e 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])

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

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)
- 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)

Old English

- (3) a. **Hwæðer wæs** iohannes fulluht þe of heofonum þe
whether was John's baptism that of heavens or
of mannum
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

The data

- (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.
(*The Stonor letters and papers* 87)
 - 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 (...)
(*The Paston letters* XXXI)
 - c. Loke well aboute & take consyderasion, / As I haue declaryd, **whether** hit so be.
(John Lydgate, *The assembly of gods*)
 - d. **Whether art** thow double, or elles the same man / That thow were furst?
(John Lydgate, *The assembly of gods*)

Corpus study

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

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

Data from the Wycliffe Bible

earlier version by John Wycliffe ca. 1382, later version revised by John Purvey ca. 1388

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

Variation

- (5)
- a. And the Lord seide to Caym, Where is Abel thi brother? The which answeyde, I wote neuere; **whether am** I the keper of my brother?
 - b. And the Lord seide to Cayn, Where is Abel thi brother? Which an|swerde, Y woot not; **whether Y** am the kepere of my brothir?
 - c. Et ait Dominus ad Cain: Ubi est Abel frater and said God to Cain where is Abel brother tuus? Qui respondit: Nescio: num custos your who answered not.know whether keeper fratris mei sum ego? brother my am I

So...

- 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*)

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), analysis for Old English: no grammaticalisation of *whether*, 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 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
- 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)

Finiteness

whether 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?
- 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?

Arguments against two distinct operators

- 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

- (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)

Proposal

whether an operator 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

German

illustration:

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

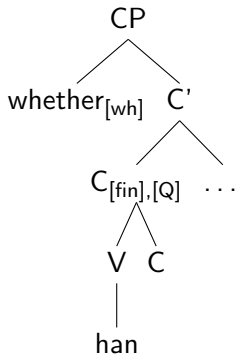
Variation with *whether*

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

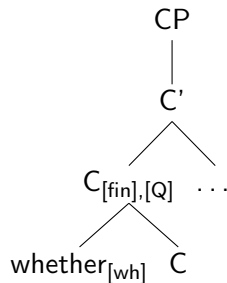
→ variation regarding *whether* intra-dialectally, similarly to Middle English patterns

Structures (main clauses)

(10) a.



b.



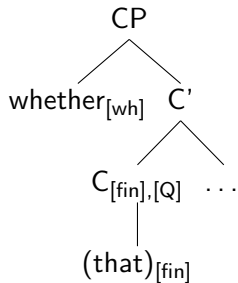
Features

C specified for [Q] and [fin]:

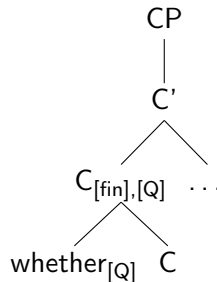
- [Q] must be lexicalised either by verb movement or by the insertion of *whether*, if *whether* not inserted, verb movement applies (regular West-Germanic pattern) – lexicalisation requirement does not presuppose feature checking (verb not [Q])
- [wh] implies [wh] but not vice versa – *whether* can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

Structures (embedded clauses)

(11) a.



b.



Features

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

- [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: frequency

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: no gramamticalisation

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)

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

Thank you!

Danke!

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