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Syntactic features and clause typing in Middle English polar and alternative questions:

A case study on the Wycliffe Bible[1]

Abstract: Adopting a generative framework, this paper examines the syntax of polar and alternative questions involving *whether* in Middle English, concentrating on the exact status of this element on the left periphery of the clause. While the analysis of *if* as a complementiser is essentially uncontroversial in the literature, the status of *whether* has been subject to considerable debate. This paper argues that it is an operator throughout its history, refuting the idea that it was reanalysed as a complementiser in Middle English. Based on a corpus study mainly involving the two versions of the Wycliffe Bible, empirical evidence will be presented to show that the status of *whether* does not vary according to the alternative/polar distinction either, and hence a flexible, unified analysis is preferable.

Keywords: alternative questions, clause typing, complementiser, head adjunction, polar questions

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1. Introduction

Adopting a minimalist approach of generative grammar, the present paper examines the syntactic status of *whether* in Middle English polar and alternative questions. The two types are illustrated in (1) for Modern English:

(1) (a) Did you go to the library?

(b) Did you go to the library or to the museum?

(c) I wonder if/whether she went to the library.

(d) I wonder if/whether she went to the library or to the museum.

The examples in (1a) and (1c) are polar interrogatives, also called yes-no questions: these questions spell out one alternative and ask about the truth of the proposition. The examples in (1b) and (1d) are alternative questions: these questions spell out more than one alternative and offer an unbiased choice between them (see, for instance, Biezma – Rawlins 2012: 362–363, Lohnstein 2013: 51–54 for further discussion of both types). Since the two types are surface-similar with respect to their left peripheries (e.g. they both trigger *do*-insertion and/or subject-auxiliary inversion in main clause questions and can be introduced by either *if* or *whether* in embedded questions in Modern English), it seems reasonable to consider both types in the present investigation.

Middle English polar and alternative questions could be morphosyntactically marked either by *if* (in embedded clauses) or by *whether* (in main and embedded clauses). This pattern is attested from Old English onwards, and it continues into Early Modern English (see Van Gelderen 2009, Fischer et al. 2001).

The status of *if* is essentially unproblematic: there is a general consensus that it is a complementiser, which occupies the C position (the head of the CP or complementiser phrase) in the syntax. An example of its Middle English use in polar questions is given in (2a):[2]

(2) (a) She frayneth and she preyeth pitously / To euery Iew þat dwelte in thilke place / To telle hire **if** hir child wente oght forby.
'She asks and she implores piteously / every Jew that dwelled in that same place, / To tell her if her child had passed by there.'
(The Ellesmere ms of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, The Prioress's Tale, lines 600–602)

(b) And **if** I may ride for þe crikke, I shall kome to ʒow, praing with all myn hert þat ʒe 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])

Since *if* occupies C, it is not surprising that there is no verb movement to C in main clause interrogatives and that no *that* occurs in C in embedded clauses, as either of these would also appear in the same C position. Note that, just like in Modern English, *if* was possible as a conditional complementiser as well, see (2b). This is important inasmuch as *if* is clearly associated with disjunctive clauses beyond polar interrogatives already in Middle English; as will be shown later, this is relevant with respect to its feature properties.

The question arises what the status of *whether* is, as various patterns can be observed with this element. Consider the following examples from the *Cursor Mundi*:

(3) (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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[2] Unless otherwise marked, the data are from the Michigan *Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse* (https://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/cme/).

As can be seen, the element *whether* appears on its own in (3a), while it is combined with *that* in (3b); there is, however, no interpretive difference regarding the function of *that*. Van Gelderen (2009: 155) notes that (3a) constitutes the majority pattern in Middle English in comparison to patterns like (3b).

A similar variation is attested (from Old English onwards) in main clauses with verb fronting, which is possible but not obligatory (see Fischer 1992, Van Gelderen 2009). Consider the following examples from Old English:

(4) (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)

As can be seen, *whether* may co-occur with a fronted verb, as in (4a), or on its own, as in (4b).

Regarding *whether*, there are two possible analyses. Under one view, *whether* should be treated as a grammaticalised complementiser when it appears on its own, see Van Gelderen (2009). This would mean that in (3a) and (4b), *whether* is a complementiser, while in (3b) and (4a) it is an operator. However, one major problem with such a view is that the non-complementiser patterns survive into Middle English and beyond, which is not what one would expect if the element in question had undergone grammaticalisation in Old English (see the discussion in section 3). Another possibility is to say that *whether* is always located in the specifier in the above historical patterns, see Walkden (2014: 149–150) for Old English. While this is empirically more tenable, the question remains why no verb movement is triggered to C in cases like (4b) and why *that* is less likely to be inserted than with ordinary *wh*-operators (see Van Gelderen 2009).

In the present paper, I am going to propose the following. First, I adopt the view that *whether* is an operator throughout the history of English, including Middle English. Second, I

claim that doubling patterns (the co-occurrence of *whether* with a fronted verb or with *that*) emerge due to a lexicalisation requirement on [fin] in C, which is a general property of West Germanic (see Bacskai-Atkari forthcoming). Third, the lack of doubling patterns can arise if *whether* is inserted into C via head adjunction: in this case, the lexicalisation requirement on [fin] is again satisfied. Since the issue of semantically equivalent options with slightly different syntax is highly relevant regarding the status of *whether*, the present paper discusses the first results of a corpus study carried out on the two versions of the Wycliffe Bible, whereby the comparison of both versions allows us to identify optionality in comparable contexts.

As this paper is primarily devoted to the syntactic status of *whether* in Middle English (*whether* being more typical than *if* in Middle English, see Fischer 1992: 279), both polar and alternative questions will be discussed, since *whether* occurs in both types and differences between the two are highly relevant in terms of the analysis.

2. The data

There is variation in Middle English regarding the patterns with *whether*: it can appear on its own or in combination with a fronted verb or *that*. These configurations are possible both in verse and in prose texts, and variation can be observed also within the same text, as demonstrated by (3) in section 1. Consider also the following data:

(5)   (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 has 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 to Norfolk in haste, and I don't know whether I may come with him or not (…)'
(*The Paston letters and papers* XXXI: John Paston to his mother and brother, 1469 or 1474; modernised spelling from Jones 1922)

(c) Loke well aboute & take consyderasion, / As I haue declaryd, **whether** hit so be.
'Look about and take 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)

The examples in (5a) and (5b) are taken from prose texts (letters), while the examples in (5c) and (5d) are both taken from a verse text written by Lydgate. The fact that doubling patterns and single *whether* can occur in prose texts indicates that the variation attested in verse texts is not primarily due to requirements following from rules of versification (most importantly, rhythm) but that it is rather present in the language anyway.

In order to gain a better understanding of the variation in Middle English, I carried out a corpus study using the Michigan *Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse*. The focus of the study is the Wycliffe Bible; some other texts were taken into consideration as a control set. So far, I have examined the hits for the form *whether* (other spelling variants are to be included in further research). I found instances of *whether* in 9 shorter texts or collections of texts (4 prose and 5 verse) and in the Wycliffe Bible (earlier and later version).

Let us first consider the data from the shorter texts, given in Table 1; relevant examples are given in (5) above.

	prose	**verse**	**TOTAL**
whether	14	7	21
whether + V	0	1	1

Table 1: Corpus results: the shorter texts

As can be seen, the total number of occurrences is quite low. Nevertheless, it is evident that the pattern with single *whether* is predominant but verb fronting is also possible. This contradicts the assumption made by Fischer (1992: 279) that verb fronting patterns with *whether* are far more frequent than non-fronting patterns in Middle English.[3] However, the only example for verb fronting is not conclusive as it occurs in a verse text, and its insertion might in principle be influenced by versification rules.

Let us now turn to the data from the Wycliffe Bible. As mentioned before, there are two versions: the Later Version (LV) is the revision of the Earlier Version (EV).[4] The results of the corpus search are given in Table 2.

	EV	LV	TOTAL
whether	**581** (86,72%)	**835** (98,35%)	1416
whether + V	**87** (12,99%)	**10** (1,18%)	97
whether that	**2** (0,30%)	**4** (0,47%)	6

Table 2: Corpus results: the Wycliffe Bible

The number of all occurrences is 670 in EV and 849 in LV; the difference is most probably due to there being more of the other spelling variants in the earlier version (but also to more variation, see Table 3 below). What matters for us is rather the distribution of the individual patterns, indicated by the percentages. The proportion of single *whether* is considerably higher in LV than in EV, whereas the proportion of *whether* occurring with verb fronting is much higher in EV than in LV. The proportion of the combination *whether that* is about the same in both versions and very low.

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[3] This does not imply that the data presented here are indicative of Middle English in its entirety; the point is rather that there are apparently various texts that clearly deviate from what Fischer (1992) would predict.

[4] While the earlier version is traditionally associated with John Wycliffe, there is no consensus regarding its authorship; the later version is generally attributed to John Purvey (see Bruce 1984).

Naturally, there are other ways of forming polar and alternative questions in Middle English as well: *if* in embedded clauses and verb fronting in main clauses. A simple corpus search for *whether*, as presented in Table 2, does not cover all the differences between the two versions of the Wycliffite Bible. To gain more insight into the differences between the two versions, it is necessary to investigate parallel loci, so that constructions not containing *whether* in one of the versions (or containing a different spelling variant not recognised by corpus search) can also be found. Table 3 shows the results for the Five Books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy), indicating also the differences between polar and alternative questions (the "other" option refers to cases where one of the translations uses a construction other than an interrogative):

Question type	Element(s) in CP	EV	LV	Total
polar (71 items)	*whether*	**50** (70,42%)	**64** (90,14%)	114
	whether + V	**12** (16,90%)	**2** (2,82%)	14
	whether that	**1** (1,41%)	**1** (1,41%)	2
	if	2 (2,82%)	1 (1,41%)	3
	V	5 (7,04%)	2 (2,82%)	7
	other	1 (1,41%)	–	1
alternative (35 items)	*whether*	**22** (62,86%)	**32** (91,43%)	54
	whether + V	–	**2** (5,71%)	2
	other	13 (37,14%)	1 (2,86%)	14

Table 3: Polar and alternative questions in the Five Books of Moses

As can be seen, polar questions are considerably more frequent than alternative questions. Importantly, single *whether* is possible and indeed the most common construction in both types, refuting the idea that this pattern is restricted to polar questions (see the discussion in the next section).

The differences often arise when the same sentence is translated with different constructions in the two versions; the availability of both options in the very same context indicates that the uses of *whether* with or without verb fronting are essentially equivalent options. Consider the translations of the same locus in (6a) and (6b), with the Latin original given in (6c):

(6) (a) And the Lord seide to Caym, Where is Abel thi brother? The which answeryde, I wote neuere; **whether am** I the keper of my brother? (Wycliffe Bible EV, Genesis 4.9)

      (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? (Wycliffe Bible LV, Genesis 4.9)

      (c) Et ait   Dominus ad Cain: Ubi   est Abel frater   tuus?
and said.3SG God   to   Cain   where is Abel   brother your
Qui respondit: Nescio: num   custos fratris
who answered.3SG not.know.1SG   whether keeper brother.GEN
mei   sum ego?
my.GEN am   I
'And the Lord said to Cain, where is Abel your brother? Who said, I don't know: Am I my brother's keeper?'

As with many examples, the earlier version demonstrates verb fronting while the later one does not. The earlier version is generally claimed to be closer to the Latin original, but it must be stressed that here verb movement cannot be attributed to Latin influence: as shown in (6c), the Latin verb (*sum*) is not fronted and is not adjacent to the interrogative particle (*num*). While the later version has many examples where there is no additional element in C, it also has independent examples of *whether that*, that is, in cases where this was not taken over from the earlier version.

Summarising the corpus data from the Wycliffe Bible, the following points may be established. Single *whether* is predominant, but verb fronting and *whether that* are not merely occasional: in this respect, the differences in the choices are most probably due to inter-speaker differences. The variants of *whether* with or without verb fronting are essentially equivalent

versions. Note also that *whether* occurring in main clause questions (either with or without verb fronting) is associated with ordinary polar and alternative interrogatives, that is, with questions where the speaker presupposes that the addressee may know the answer.[5]

3. The analysis

Regarding the analysis of the observed data, there are three major options I would like to evaluate. The first one is the analysis of Van Gelderen (2009), developed for Old English: according to this, *whether* is a grammaticalised complementiser if there is no verb movement, and otherwise it is an operator in [Spec,CP]. The second option is the analysis of Walkden (2014: 149–150), developed for Old English: according to this, there is no grammaticalisation of *whether* into a complementiser, but *whether* is instead always an operator in [Spec,CP]. However, there are two possibilities here: *whether* is either a base-generated yes-no operator (triggering no verb movement) inserted directly into the [Spec,CP] position (cf. also Bianchi – Cruschina 2016), or it is an operator with a 'which of two' meaning moving to [Spec,CP] like ordinary *wh*-operators (and triggering verb movement). This analysis presupposes a difference between polar and alternative questions. A third way is the analysis I am going to propose here: according to this, *whether* is an operator and it is inserted either to [Spec,CP] or into C (via head-adjunction to an empty complementiser). The former case triggers verb movement or *that*-insertion to lexicalise C, the latter ones does not.

Let us review the first option (Van Gelderen 2009) and see the arguments against *whether* taken to be a grammaticalised complementiser. Grammaticalisation follows essentially

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[5] This crucially differs from deliberative questions which presuppose no such knowledge and often express the speaker's wondering about whether a given state of affairs is true (as is the case of German *ob* used in main clause questions, see, for instance, Gutzmann 2011, Zimmermann 2013).

from economy principles (feature economy), also in the framework of Van Gelderen (2009). If an element grammaticalises into a complementiser, it is unlikely to be preserved as an operator with exactly the same functions throughout the history of English (as doubling patterns are attested later as well, either with *that* or with verb movement). This is true even when taking into account that language change and variation are gradient in nature (Traugott – Trousdale 2010): similar reanalysis processes in the CP-domain took place in a much shorter time span during Old and Middle English (see, for instance, Van Gelderen 2009 for *that* in relative clauses). In addition, the problem is that Van Gelderen (2009: 156) explicitly states that *whether* is an operator in Modern English and cannot be analysed as a complementiser. Below I will present some further theoretical and empirical arguments against treating *whether* as a grammaticalised complementiser (in the sense that it is actually stored in the lexicon as a complementiser) and will finally present an analysis that enables *whether* to occupy the C position (and thus compete with the verb or with *that*) without being fully grammaticalised.

Theoretically, one may assume a double CP for cases with verb fronting or with *that* (similarly to the Force and Fin distinction of Rizzi 1997; see Baltin 2010 on Doubly Filled COMP structures), and this would mean that *whether* is always a higher complementiser. This would give a unified analysis for doubling and non-doubling patterns alike (*whether* can be a complementiser in either case), though it is not clear when the lower CP is generated and/or filled overtly. In addition, such an assumption would immediately generate another problem: namely, one would have to assume that *whether* is always a finite complementiser (just like *if*), but this is not the case (see (8) below). A traditional argument for *whether* being an operator (and not a complementiser) comes from the observation that it is not specified for finiteness:

(7)   (a) I don't know **when/whether/if** I should call Ralph.

        (b) I don't know **when/whether/*if** to call Ralph.

The embedded clause is finite in (7a), and the finite complementiser is permitted, as well as the *wh*-operators *when* and *whether*. By contrast, in (7b) the embedded clause is non-finite and the

finite complementiser *if* is ungrammatical, while the *wh*-operators *when* and *whether* are permitted. Since *whether* patterns with the ordinary *wh*-operator and not with *if*, it is evident that it should be treated as an operator and not as a complementiser, since it is not specified for finiteness.

Importantly, *whether* was also available in non-finite clauses in Middle English, as demonstrated by the following examples:

> (8) (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 araȝen?
> 'Is it a fasting that I have chosen to be a day for a man to afflict his soul? To bow down his head as a circle, and to make ready a sackcloth and ashes?'
> (Wycliffe Bible EV, 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?
> 'Is it a fasting that I have chosen to be a day for a man to afflict his soul? To bow down his head as a circle, and to make ready a sackcloth and ashes?'
> (Wycliffe Bible LV, Isaiah 58.5)

As can be seen, *whether* appears in a non-finite clause in both translations. In sum, it seems plausible that the operator *whether* was active in Middle English, and there is no reason to assume grammaticalisation to have taken place, either in Old English or later, especially because the operator pattern continues well beyond Middle English.

Let us turn to the second option (Walkden 2014) and see the arguments against there being two syntactically distinct operators showing differences in the lexicalisation of C (verb movement). As Walkden (2014: 145) argues, the operator status of *whether* in Modern English is not fully parallel with that of ordinary *wh*-operators, contrary to Van Gelderen (2009: 156) and Berizzi (2010: 122),[6] and this observation indeed allows syntactic configurations in which

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[6] The arguments against the complementiser status of *whether* are that, unlike *if,* it "blocks *wh*-movement from a lower clause", it "can be coordinated with *not*", and it "can occur with prepositions" (Walkden 2014: 145). As Walkden (2014: 145) points out, judgements regarding extraction patterns vary enormously, so that the first argument is empirically not very strong; coordination of elements from different categories is possible even with

whether does not behave like an ordinary *wh*-operator moving from within the clause to the left periphery. Nevertheless, it is not clear why an operator that is directly inserted into [Spec,CP], instead of undergoing movement from within the clause, does not induce verb movement to C.

Apart from this problem, the analysis faces a further difficulty since the difference between polar and alternative questions is empirically not tenable in Middle English. It must be stressed that Walkden (2014) discusses Old English data and parallel cases in other West-Germanic languages of the same period; one might expect the analysis to carry over to Middle English (which likewise shows variation regarding verb movement), but this is not the case. In Middle English, verb movement is attested with alternative questions, see (5d) above, and also with ordinary polar questions, see (6) above, showing that verb fronting is an option. Further examples are given below (from the Wycliffe Bible):

(9) a. And Rachel and Lya answeryden, **Whe|ther han** we eny thing of residewe in faculteis and erytage of the hows of oure fader?
'Then Rachel and Leah answered and said to him, "Is there still any portion or inheritance for us in our father's house?"'
(Wycliffe Bible EV, Genesis 31.14)

b. And Rachel and Lya answeriden, **Wher** we han ony thing residue in the catels, and eritage of oure fadir?
'Then Rachel and Leah answered and said to him, "Is there still any portion or inheritance for us in our father's house?"'
(Wycliffe Bible LV, Genesis 31.14)

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if (*if and when*); and the possibility of prepositions taking clauses depends largely on whether the clause can be embedded under a null nominal. The aim of the present paper is not to discuss these issues in detail; the point here is that *whether* seems to be quite special among *wh*-elements.

c. sendith of ʒou oon, and bringe he him, ʒe forsothe shulen ben in boondis, to the tyme that the thingis that ʒe han seide ben proued, **whether** fals or soth thei ben; ellis bi the helth of Pha|rao aspies ʒe ben.
'Send one of you, and let him bring your brother; and you shall be kept in prison, that your words may be tested to see whether they are false or true; or else, by the life of Pharaoh, surely you are spies!'"
(Wycliffe Bible EV, Genesis 42.16)

d. sende ʒe oon of ʒou, that he brynge hym, forsothe ʒe schulen be in boondis, til tho thingis that ʒe seiden. ben preued, **whe|ther**. tho. ben false ether. trewe; ellis, bi the helthe of Farao, ʒe ben aspieris.
'Send one of you, and let him bring your brother; and you shall be kept in prison, that your words may be tested to see whether you are false or true; or else, by the life of Pharaoh, surely you are spies!'"
(Wycliffe Bible LV, Genesis 42.16)

The examples in (9a) and (9b) show ordinary polar questions (yes-no questions), where verb fronting is permitted (but not obligatory). On the other hand, the examples in (9c) and (9d) show alternative questions without verb fronting. The data (see also Table 3 in the previous section) indicate that *whether* in Middle English does not have two clearly separable patterns, and hence a flexible approach is needed that accounts for the attested variation.

I propose that *whether* is an operator, but that it may be inserted directly into C via head adjunction as a head-sized operator. The idea goes back to Bayer – Brandner (2008), according to whom head-sized phrases can occur in C as well. This idea accounts for the asymmetry observed in Doubly Filled COMP patterns in Alemannic and Bavarian: head-sized *wh*-elements (e.g. *wer* 'who.NOM') can occur without the finite complementiser *dass* 'that' (there is some variation here, see also Weiß 2013). By contrast, phrase-sized *wh*-elements (e.g. *was für eine Farbe* 'what colour') regularly appear with *dass* in these dialects. The phenomenon is illustrated in (10) below (using Standard German orthography):

(10) (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.'

In (10a), the *wh*-operator *wer* is head-sized and while *dass* is acceptable for certain speakers in the relevant dialects, for others it is not. By contrast, the complex phrase *was für eine Farbe* is acceptable only together with *dass*. Since *dass* is located in C, its absence in (10a) suggests that *wer* competes for the same position and is hence located in C. This does not make *wer* a complementiser, however: just like verb movement to C is permitted in Germanic, involving head adjunction to an empty complementiser (see the arguments of Fanselow 2004: 10–32), *wer* can adjoin to the C head. This does not constitute a violation of chain uniformity: as argued by Bayer – Brandner (2008), following the notion of chain uniformity given by Chomsky (1995),[7] *wer* is both minimal and maximal in both of its positions (in the analysis of Bayer – Brandner 2008, this follows from a morphological condition on chain uniformity). Note that if one assumes that *wer* adjoins to C (rather than being C itself, as originally proposed by Bayer – Brandner 2008),[8] it follows naturally that it is both minimal (since it is not projected by any other element) and maximal (since it does not project further, the empty C being the head of the CP).

As observed by Van Gelderen (2009), Doubly Filled COMP patterns are possible with *whether* in modern (substandard) dialects as well, but the occurrence of the combination
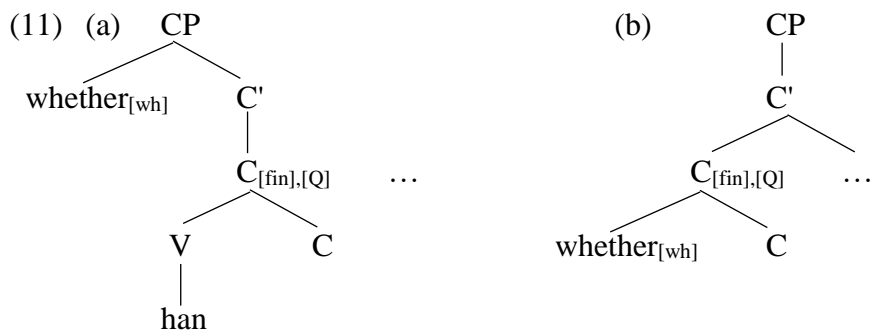
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[7] The Chain Uniformity Condition is formulated by Chomsky (1995: 253) in the following way: "a chain is uniform with regard to phrase structure status". This means that all copies of a movement chain should be either heads or phrases; the rule essentially prevents phrases from moving to head positions (and vice versa).

[8] Bayer – Brandner (2008) in fact propose that *wh*-elements can be equipped with a latent C-feature in dialects that show asymmetrical patterns (with head-sized *wh*-phrases prohibiting, other *wh*-phrases requiring the insertion of the finite complementiser). However, this assumption is problematic inasmuch as the C-feature is ad hoc and restricted to the dialects showing this particular pattern, which ultimately renders a somewhat circular argumentation. Instead, I propose that *wer* adjoins to C via head adjunction (rather than assuming a substitution mechanism or that it acts like a complementiser).

whether that is considerably less frequent than the combination of an ordinary *wh*-operator and *that*. That is, there is variation regarding *whether* intra-dialectally, similarly to the Middle English patterns: not all speakers favouring Doubly Filled COMP patterns use *whether that*. These assumptions are in line with the general observation that not only language change but also synchronic variation is gradient, see Traugott – Trousdale (2010). In this way, *whether* has an intermediate status regarding grammaticalisation, in the sense that it could potentially develop into a complementiser at some point, while its categorial status is still an operator (and it still does not encode finiteness). Further, polar/alternative questions do not have to behave in exactly the same way as constituent questions (given also the difference between [Q] and [wh] features); similar variation (according to sentence types) can also be observed in V2 (Westergaard 2007, 2008, 2009).

Based on the discussion presented above, I will now discuss the proposed structures for Middle English interrogatives containing *whether*. For the sake of simplicity, I am going to present main clause questions and embedded questions separately. The analysis is essentially the same, but the attested patterns are slightly different: while single *whether* is possible in both, verb movement is a main clause phenomenon and the insertion of *that* is restricted to embedded clauses.

The proposed structures for Middle English main clause questions with *whether* are given in (11), the fronted verb in (11a) taken from (9a):

(11) (a)   CP
        whether[wh]   C'
                    C[fin],[Q]   …
                  V   C
                  han

      (b)   CP
                       C'
                 C[fin],[Q]   …
            whether[wh]   C

As indicated, the C head is specified for [Q] and [fin]. The feature [Q] must be lexicalised either by verb movement or by the insertion of *whether*: if *whether* is not inserted, verb movement applies, in line with the regular West-Germanic pattern, where verb movement to C takes place in main clauses. The operator *whether* is able to check off the [Q] feature on the head: [wh] is an interrogative feature and it implies [Q], a disjunction feature, cf. Bayer (2004) on the separation of [Q] and [wh]. By contrast, the lexicalisation requirement on C itself does not presuppose feature checking, as the verb is clearly not specified as [Q]. Note that the operator may remain covert, as is the case in Modern English (and in examples involving only verb movement in Middle English, see Table 3): this is because main clause interrogatives have a distinctive intonation and hence the interrogative property does not have to be marked morphosyntactically.

The proposed structures for embedded questions containing *whether* in Middle English (and in non-standard varieties generally favouring Doubly Filled COMP) are given in (12):

(12) (a) CP — whether[wh], C'; C[fin],[Q] that, … (b) CP — C'; C[fin],[Q] whether[wh] C, …
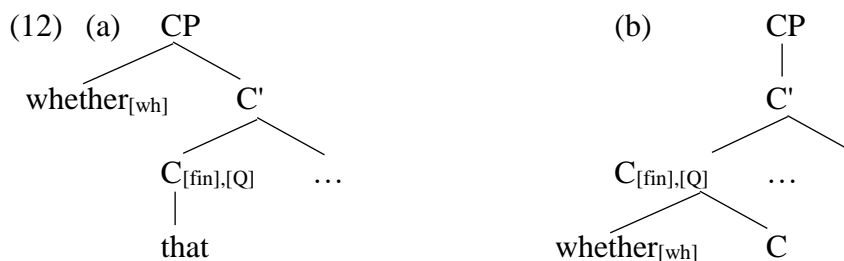
As can be seen, (12b) is exactly the same as (11b); the difference arises between (12a) and (11a). The C head is again specified for [Q] and [fin]; however, unlike in main clause questions, there is no distinctive interrogative intonation in English embedded questions, and the [Q] property must be marked morphophonologically. This can be done overtly either by an operator or by the complementiser *if*. Regarding [fin], this property is regularly lexicalised on C in West Germanic (V2 in German and Dutch and T-to-C movement in Modern English, see Bacskai-

Atkari forthcoming); the standard dialects are exceptional in (12a), while dialects preferring Doubly Filled COMP patterns either insert a finite subordinator or insert *whether* into C (via head adjunction): inserting *whether* is essentially more economical.

Two important questions arise at this point. The first one concerns the relatively low number of doubling patterns with *whether* in Middle English: this must be accounted for in the proposed framework. Note that if *whether* were taken to be available as a grammaticalised complementiser in Middle English, the number of doubling patterns (especially in the earlier version of the Wycliffe Bible) is still too high, while if *whether* were consistently associated with alternative questions (but not with polar questions), the frequency of doubling patterns is expected to be higher and similar in the two Bible translations, the proportion of alternative questions being fixed. The syntactic flexibility proposed here is thus in principle favourable.

One reason behind the relatively low frequency of doubling patterns may be due to dialectal/idiolectal variation: considering the difference between EV and LV regarding verb fronting, it is evident that even speakers of the same period have different preferences regarding the same constructions. On the one hand, it is possible that not all speakers require the overt lexicalisation of a C head with a [fin] feature, similarly to speakers of present-day standard West-Germanic dialects: this reduces the number of *whether that* patterns. On the other hand, it is true even for Doubly Filled COMP speakers that the insertion of the operator into C via head adjunction, once available, is more economical since there is no additional element or an additional verb movement step: this reduces the number of *whether that* and of *whether* + V patterns.

The second question is why *whether* did not grammaticalise into a complementiser in any period of English, in contrast to *if*, which appears as a grammaticalised complementiser very early on. On the one hand, *if* is specified as [Q] and [fin], which fully matches the feature properties of the relevant C, as selected by the matrix predicate (note that it is also restricted to subordinate structures). Seen in this light, the grammaticalisation of *if* is straightforward. By

contrast, *whether* is specified as [wh], which does not match the feature properties of the relevant C in the sense that it is overspecified for [Q] and underspecified for [fin]. Consequently, its grammaticalisation is hindered. In addition, since *if* is already available as a grammaticalised complementiser, the difference in the functional distribution of these two elements is maintained (rather than arriving at a stage where the two elements areoptional variants).

4. Conclusion

This paper examined the status of *if* and *whether* in Middle English, concentrating on the syntactic status of various patterns involving *whether*. The element *if* appears as a grammaticalised complementiser early on. The element *whether* is an operator appearing both in main and embedded clauses, showing various possible patterns: apart from standing on its own, it may co-occur with verb fronting or with the insertion of *that*. I argued that *whether* is inserted either into [Spec,CP] or into C (via head adjunction), and there is no difference between the two in their interpretation. Importantly, the data from the Wycliffe Bible clearly indicate that there was no clear distinction between single *whether* and its co-occurrence either with a fronted verb or with *that*: both types of patterns are possible in the same contexts (as shown by the differences between EV and LV), and both are attested in polar and alternative questions. The differences between the two versions of the Wycliffe Bible rather suggest that idiolectal and dialectal differences may play an important role in terms of preferences in the given patterns. Importantly, the empirical data suggest a certain amount of flexibility in the syntax, which is granted by the proposed feature-based approach.

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