Syntactic features and clause typing in Middle English polar questions

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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])

→ 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 pat* 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 manum 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 oðdæt 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

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<th>prose</th>
<th>verse</th>
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<tr>
<td><em>whether</em></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>whether + V</em></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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</table>
Data from the Wycliffe Bible

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

<table>
<thead>
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<th></th>
<th>older version</th>
<th>newer version</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>whether</td>
<td>581 (86.72%)</td>
<td>835 (98.35%)</td>
<td>1416</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>whether + V</td>
<td>87 (12.99%)</td>
<td>10 (1.18%)</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>whether that</td>
<td>2 (0.30%)</td>
<td>4 (0.47%)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(5) 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?
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)  
\[ \text{a. I don’t know } \text{when/whether/if } \text{I should call Ralph.} \]
\[ \text{b. I don’t know } \text{when/whether/} *\text{if } \text{to call Ralph.} \]

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

(7)  
\[ \text{a. Whether such is the fasting that I chese, bi the dai a man to tormenten his soule? } \text{whether to binde togidere as a cercle his hed, and sac and asken to aražen?} \]
\[ \text{b. Whether sich is the fastyng which Y chees, a man to tur|mente his soule bi dai? } \text{whether to bynde his heed as a sercle, and to make redi a sak and aische?} \]
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 answeryden, *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
illustration:

(9) a. Ich weiß nicht, wer (% dass) im Garten sitzt.
   'I don’t know who is sitting in the garden.'

b. Ich weiß nicht, was für eine Farbe dass er mag.
   '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. 

\[
 CP \\
   \quad \text{whether}_{[wh]} \quad C' \\
   \quad \quad \quad C_{[fin],[Q]} \quad \ldots \\
   \quad \quad \quad V \quad C \\
   \quad \quad \quad \quad \text{han}
\]

b. 

\[
 CP \\
   \quad C' \\
   \quad \quad C_{[fin],[Q]} \quad \ldots \\
   \quad \quad \quad \text{whether}_{[wh]} \quad C
\]
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.

\[
\text{CP} \\
\text{whether}_{\text{wh}} \quad \text{C}' \\
\text{C}_{\text{fin}},[Q] \\
\text{(that)}_{\text{fin}}
\]

b.

\[
\text{CP} \\
\text{C}' \\
\text{C}_{\text{fin}},[Q] \\
\text{whether}_{[Q]} \quad \text{C}
\]
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 Bacskaï-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 grammaticalisation

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)
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!
Acknowledgements

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References I


References II


