Variation in the grammaticalisation of polar operators in West Germanic

Julia Bacskaï-Atkari
University of Potsdam

julia.bacskai-atkari@uni-potsdam.de

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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, \textit{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, \textit{ob} er kommt.  
I ask.1SG myself.ACC if he comes
‘I wonder if he is coming.’
I have no idea what colour he would be content with.

(2) I ha koa Ahnung, mid wa für-e Farb dass-er zfriede wär.
‘I have no idea what colour he would be content with.’

(Bayer & Brandner 2008: 88, ex. 4b)
Polar questions

no *dass* (not even in Alemannic — Ellen Brandner p.c.):

(3) *Ich frage mich, ob dass er mit einem Dackel kommt.*

I ask.1SG myself if that he with a.M.DAT dachshund comes

‘I wonder whether he is coming with a dachshund.’
Structures

(4) a. CP
   / \   /
mit wem\_wh] C'
   \   /  
    C\_fin],\_wh],[\_sub] (dass\_fin],\_wh])

   b. CP
     / \
Op\_wh] C'
    /   
   C\_fin],\_wh],[\_sub]  
  /   
ob\_fin],\_wh],[\_sub]
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)
Constituent questions

(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
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

• 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 conditionals makes a mere [Q] version paradigmatically unavailable
Old Saxon

both the operator \((h)wedar\) ‘whether’ and the complementiser \(ef\) ‘if’ attested

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ef</th>
<th>(h)wedar</th>
<th>(h)wedar + V</th>
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<tr>
<td>Heliand</td>
<td>5</td>
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</table>
(9) endi frâgodun, ef he uuâri that barn godes and asked if he was the son God’s ‘and they asked whether he was the son of God’ (Heliand 11)
Examples for *(h)wedar*

(10) a. ne rôkead, *huueðar* gi is ênigan thanc antfâhan not worry whether you it some thank receive ‘do not worry whether you get some reward’ *(Heliand 18)*

b. endi he frâgoda sân, huilic sie ârundi ûta gibrâhti, and he asked instantly which they business out brought

*uueros an thana uuracsîð*   *huueðer lêdiad* gi uundan man in this foreign.land whether bring you wrought

*gold te geȫu huilicun gumuno??gold to gift some men*

‘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. CP
    \[\text{Op.}_{[\text{wh}]}\]
    \[C'\]
    \[C_{[\text{fin},[\text{wh}],[\text{sub}]}\] ...
    \[\text{ef}_{[\text{fin},[\text{wh}],[\text{sub}]}\]
b. CP
    \[C'\]
    \[C_{[\text{fin},[\text{wh}],[\text{sub}]}\] ...
    \[(h)\text{wedar}_{[\text{wh}]}\] C
c. CP
    \[(h)\text{wedar}_{[\text{wh}]}\] C'
    \[C_{[\text{fin},[\text{wh}],[\text{sub}]}\] ...
    \[V\]
    \[\text{lêdiad}\]
    \[C\]
structure in (11b): alternatively, (h)wedar could be an operator in [Spec,CP] 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, Bacskaï-Atkari 2015; 2016 on wh-elements inserted/moved into C)
Conditionals

also: *(h)wedan* 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
Old High German

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

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ibu + V</th>
<th>ob</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benediktiner Regel</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Otfrid</td>
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<td>St. Galler Schularbeit</td>
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<td>Benediktiner Glaube und Beichte III</td>
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Examples

(29) a. fona himile simblum sihit ubar parn manno, daz sehe, from heaven always sees onto children men’s that see

ibu ist farstantanti edo suahhanti cotan
if is understood or sought God

‘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 now see if comes Elias save him
‘let us see if Elias will come to save him’ (Tatian 208)

c. Pilatus uuntrota, oba her iu entoti Pilate wondered if he already died
‘Pilate wondered if he was already dead.’ (Tatian 12)
Variation

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
## Conditionals

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<tr>
<td>Isidor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Benediktiner Regel</td>
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<td>Otfrid</td>
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Note

ibu + V: 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 instances of V-movement to C
So...

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
(13) a. CP
   \[Op_{[wh]}\]
   C’
   C[fin],[wh],[sub]
   \[\text{ob}_{[fin],[wh],[sub]}\]

b. CP
   C’
   C[fin],[wh],[sub]
   \[\text{ob}_{[wh]}\]
   C

 c. CP
   C’
   ibu_{[wh]}
   C[fin,][wh],[sub]
   \[\text{V}\]
   \[\text{ist}\]
   C
Grammaticalisation

reanalysis of polar operator into complementiser:

element inserted into [Spec,CP] → element inserted into C via head adjunction → 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)vedar 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] an [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 → 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) → these operators do acquire the [fin] and [sub] features when merged to C, and are reanalysed as C
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
Thank you!
Danke!
Acknowledgements

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References


References