

## Syntactic change and pragmatic maintenance: discourse particle *then* over the history of English

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This talk traces the history of *then* as a discourse particle in English (as distinct from *then* as a temporal adverb), based on xml versions of the Penn and York parsed corpora of historical English, queried by means of *CorpusStudio* (Komen 2011). It will be shown that the pragmatic use of *then* and its status as a discourse particle was more or less stable throughout the history of English, even though its syntax changed profoundly. An example of *then* used as a discourse particle in questions in present-day English (PDE) is given in (1):

- (1)a Initial: **Then** why did you do that?  
b Final: Why did you do that **then**?  
d “middle field”: ??Why did you **then** do that?

The paraphrase to distinguish the particle reading of *then* from the reading as a temporal adverb is ‘in that case’. *Then* in (1) is presuppositional in the sense that it reflects a speaker’s response to the context, such as surprise or disapproval in questions, reinforcement or downtoning of the directive in imperatives.

Particle behaviour in OE is very similar to that in PD German and Dutch (van Kemenade & Links 2020 and refs. cited there): Particles form a closed class of functional elements that contribute to common ground management. Their pragmatic effect matches specific types of illocutionary force. They have an invariant form, are typically unstressed, and they occur in fixed positions in V to C clauses (which in German means all root clauses). They are generally considered a middle field phenomenon. The precursor of discourse particle *then* in Old English is *þonne* (I leave aside *þa*, which occurs in different clause types). It occurs on a large scale in a fixed position in questions and imperatives (the “middle field” position in (1c)), which are V to C clauses and represent special illocutionary types.<sup>1</sup> An example of a question in OE:

- (2) Hwi ne sceal he **þonne** rihtlice wrecan þæt yfel ðæt he onscunað.  
Why not-shall he PRT justly avenge that evil that he abominates.  
‘Why then should he not justly avenge that evil which he abominates?’  
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The structure for OE V to C contexts assumed here follows Bayer (2012), based on the assumption that V to C movement activates the illocutionary force matching the discourse particle:

- (3) [CP wh [C0 Vf] [FP pro subject [PrtP [Prt0 *then*] [... Vf ]]]

(3) accounts for the “middle field” position in (23), and extends to imperatives as V to C contexts in OE and ME. The discourse particle reading is absent in other contexts such as declarative SVO clauses (presumably implying that these are not V to C contexts in OE).

From early Middle English onward, the pragmatic use of *then* in questions and imperatives makes use of available alternative positions: initial (cf. (1a), in yes/no questions

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<sup>1</sup> One subclause context in which *þonne* features prominently are preposed conditional correlative clauses, which I leave aside here.

and imperatives) and in a newly introduced final position (cf. (1b) in questions and imperatives). The older particle position in (3) at first became restricted to questions, and finally was lost there as well. The new final position as in (1b) was extended to declarative SVO clauses (i.e. its use was broadened beyond special illocutionary types and V to C contexts).

The division of labour between particle use and temporal adverb use will be shown to interact, over the late Middle English and early Modern periods, with the major syntactic changes that affected each of the clause types in different ways: the loss of V2, the auxiliation of the modals and rise of *do*-support, and the loss of V to T movement. Specifically: **Questions** maintained initial, final and middle field positions; they are the only context that preserves V (later Aux) to C movement. The loss of the middle field position, which is degraded in PDE, cannot be traced in the corpora.

**Imperatives:** the loss of V2 over the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries entailed the loss of V to C movement in imperatives, and particle use from then on occurred in initial or final position. **Declarative SVO clauses:** from early ME onward, the particle reading occurs exclusively in clause-final position. The temporal adverb use of *then* features in a position between T and V whose development reflects the auxiliation of the modals and rise of *do*-support, and the loss of V to T movement: from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onward, auxiliaries increasingly precede *then*, while lexical verbs increasingly follow it. I take this to show that the rise of verbal periphrastic constructions (modals, *do*, etc.), precluded the particle reading.

We see then, that the middle field position, which was originally licensed by V to C movement that activated the illocutionary force of the clause, was lost, first in imperatives, and we cannot tell when it was lost in questions. It was never licensed in declarative SVO clauses.

The initial position was largely one where the particle reading of *then* in OE and ME piggybacked on available structure, e.g. in imperatives and yes/no questions. The fact that the initial position was extended to *wh*-questions may also indicate the creation of an extra position.

The final position was newly created from early ME onward, according to Haselow (2011) in the spoken language, as an afterthought, similar to PD spoken Dutch.

Thus, the pragmatic use of *then* has expanded over time to different positions, and generalized beyond specific illocutionary force types, rather than being lost as a small unstressed grammatical word. This suggests that its robust pragmatic function was a powerful drive for maintenance and positional shift under pervasive syntactic change.

## References

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