

Syntax and semantics of *whether*-questions in Old English

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Introduction

Old English *whether*-questions

- (1) **hwæþer** nu gimma wlite eowre eagan to him getio
whether now jewels.GEN looks your eyes to them attract
heora to wundriganne
their to wonder
'Do jewels attract your eyes, to marvel at their shine?'
(Old English Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, p40)

- ▶ unembedded question
- ▶ introduced by question particle *hwæþer*

Context (before). Wisdom: *Are the riches of this middle earth worthy of a man when no one can fully have them? Nor can they enrich any man, unless they bring another to poverty.*

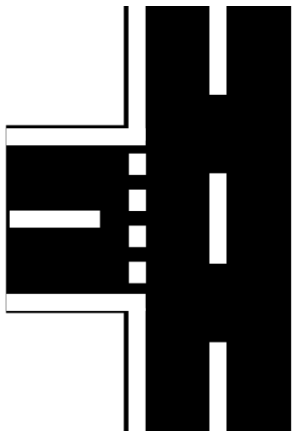
Context (after). Wisdom: *I know that they do so.*

Research questions

- ▶ Under what semantic-pragmatic conditions were *hwæper*-questions licit?
- ▶ How does this relate to their syntactic properties?
- ▶ What is the diachrony of *hwæper*-questions?

Structure

Introduction
Background and evidence
Generalizations and syntax
Diachrony
Summary and conclusion
References
Extra slides



Background and evidence

Previous research

Work in last 50 years on *hwæþer*-questions in Old English (OE), e.g. Traugott (1972); Allen (1980); van Gelderen (2009); Parra-Guinaldo (2013); Walkden (2014), has focused on aspects of their syntax.

- ▶ Alternative possibility for forming polar questions (vs. inversion, i.e. V1 order)
- ▶ *hwæþer*-questions have the verb late (like subordinate clauses)
- ▶ Inference: *hwæþer* is in C⁰, blocks verb movement

hwæþer-questions are rarer than V1 questions. Why? How are they used?

Other uses of *whether* in Old English

Can be used in embedded questions (just as in present-day English:

- (2) ðry weras ... axodon ... **hwæðer** se halga Petrus þær
three men asked whether the holy Peter there
wununge hæfde
dwelling had
'Three men asked whether Saint Peter lived there'
(coelive,+ALS[Peter's_Chair]:109.2346)





Can be used as a nominal *wh*-item meaning 'which of two':

- (3) **hwæðerne** woldes þu deman wites wyrðran?
whether.ACC would you deem punishment.GEN worthier
'Which (of the two) would you deem worthier of punishment?'
(coboeth,Bo:38.122.28.2444)

The evidence base










More than half of the unembedded *hwæper*-questions in the YCOE prose corpus (Taylor et al., 2003) come from a single text: the Old English version of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*.

Fact file: *De consolazione philosophiae*

Date written	 523 CE	
Language	 Latin	
Author	 Anicius Manlius Severinus Boëthius	
Country	 Ostrogothic Kingdom of Italy	
Place of writing	 Jail (charges of conspiracy; later executed)	
Later influence	 Huge from late Antiquity to the Renaissance, especially for Christianity	
Structure	 5 books, each of 11–24 sections	
Style	 Dialogue: Boethius (also “Mind”; sometimes first person) and Philosophy (female)	
Themes	   happiness; the existence of evil; human nature	

Fact file: Old English translation

(Godden & Irvine (eds.) 2009; Bately 2014; Guenther Discenza 2014)

Date translated	 Probably 890–930 CE	
Language	 West Saxon Old English	
Translator	 King Alfred, with help (Bately 2009, 2014) OR someone else (Godden & Irvine 2009)	
Place of translation	 Probably southern England	
Structure	 42 sections	
Translation style	 Very free	
Manuscripts	 Mid-10 th century (MS C, prose/verse); end of 11 th /early 12 th century (MS B, prose)	
Edition in YCOE	 Sedgefield (1899), mostly based on MS C	

Generalizations and syntax

Dialogue between Wisdom (W) and Boethius (B). Only W asks questions with *hwæþer*. (43 examples)

- (4) **hwæþer** nu gimma wite eowre eagan to him getio
whether now jewels.GEN looks your eyes to them attract
heora to wundriganne
their to wonder
'Do jewels attract your eyes, to marvel at their shine?' (Old
English Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, p40 = ((1) above)

This example is typical:

- ▶ W always knows the answer
 - ▶ sometimes answers herself
 - ▶ sometimes simply does not allow B to answer
 - ▶ B almost always answers as suggested by W

Polarity varies (answer can be yes or no).

Unembedded *hwæþer*-questions are **always in the subjunctive**.
(The counterexample suggested by Mitchell (1985, 682) can easily be analysed away.)

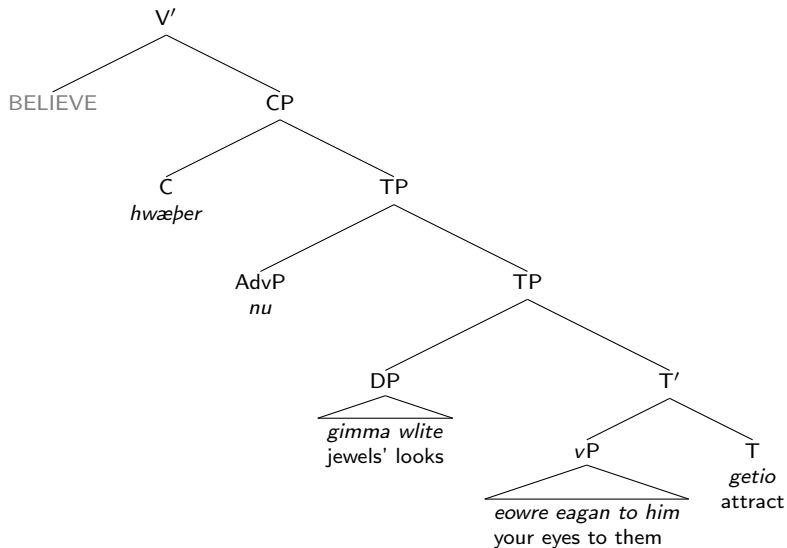
Unembedded *hwæþer*-questions often contain *nu* (23/43), described by van Kemenade & Links (2020) as a discourse particle specialized for questions.

Usual analysis: *hwæper* is in C^0 , hence the verb cannot move there.
BUT:

- ▶ Unembedded clauses in OE are not usually introduced by a complementizer
- ▶ Doesn't (per se) explain use of the subjunctive
- ▶ Other evidence for head status is lacking (Walkden, 2014, 149)

Analysis adopted here: unembedded *hwæper*-questions are synchronically derived via ellipsis of a matrix predicate

Syntactic structure



A semantic puzzle

- (5) **oððe wenstu hwæþer** hine ænig þara ealne weg
or think-you hwæther these any of.these all ways
habban mæg þe hine nu hæfð?
have may who it now has?
'(Tell me, now, whether thou hast ever heard, that [wealth and power] always remained to any one who was before us?) Or thinkest thou that **/*whether** any one who now has it can always have it?' (Old English Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, p. 102)

Karttunen (1977); Uegaki (2016, 2019): Q embedding under *believe* predicates, as in (5), violates semantic universal.

Diachrony

hwæþer as embedded polar question introducer comes from *hwæþer* meaning 'which of two'.

- (6) þa þæt folc gesamnod wæs þa cwæð Pilatus, **hwæþer**
There the people collected was then said Pilatus, whether
wylle ge þæt ic eow agyfe þe Barrabban ðe þone hælynd
want you that I you give or Barabbas or the saviour
ðe is Crist gehaten?
that is Christ called?
'When the people was assembled, Pilate said: Which one do you
want that I should give you, Barabbas or the saviour who is called
Christ?' (cowsgosp,Mt_[WSCp]:27.17.2019)

This is the only use attested for the Gothic cognate *hwaþar*
(cf. Wulfila Bible).

Gothic *hwæþer* = which of two

- ▶ *hwæþer* means the same as *which* over a contextually given domain D of size 2: $[[hwæþer_i]]^D = D$, Psp: $|D| = 2$
- ▶ D can be specified by appositions (e.g., *Barabbas or Christ?*)
- ▶ $[[hwæþer_i]]^{\{A,B\}} = \{A, B\}$ and combines with further parts of the sentence by pointwise composition (Hamblin question semantics)
- ▶ $[[hwæþer_i]]^D$ is of flexible type. D can be domains of type e or of type $\langle s,t \rangle$: '*hwæþer* do you believe, S or T ?'
- ▶ Syntactically, *hwæþer* is complement of matrix verb / adjunct of matrix clause. By movement to CP it leaves coindexed trace t_i

Gothic *hwæþer* = which of two

'*hwæþer* do you want, Barabbas or Christ?'

1. LF structure [*hwæþer*₁ do you want *t*₁]

2. [[want]]^{w,g} = $\lambda z \lambda x. WANT_w(x, z)$

3. [[you want *t*₁]]^{w,g} = $WANT_w(ad, t_1)$

4. [[*hwæþer*₁ you want *t*₁]]^{w,g}
= [[*hwæþer*₁]]^{w,g} \oplus [[1]]^{w,g} \oplus [[you want *t*₁]]^{w,g}
= [[*hwæþer*₁]]^{w,g} \oplus $\lambda t_1. WANT_w(ad, t_1)$
= { *A*, *B* } \oplus $\lambda t_1. WANT_w(ad, t_1)$ by pointwise composition
= { $\lambda w. WANT_w(ad, A)$, $\lambda w. WANT_w(ad, B)$ }

{ 'You want Barabbas', 'You want Christ' }

In Boethius, we find examples with only one clause S to specify D .

- (7) hwæper þu nu wene þæt þæs cyninges geferræden
whether you now think that the.GEN king.GEN companions
and se wela. and se anweald, þe he gifð his deorlingum.
and the good and the richness that he gives his friends
mæge ænigne mon gedon weligne oððe wealdende.
may any man do well or powerful
W: 'whether' thou think **that the king's familiarity, and the
wealth and the power which he gives to his favourites, can
make any man wealthy or powerful?** (Old English Boethius,
Consolation of Philosophy)

We assume that S_1 specifies $D = \{[[S]], \neg[[S]]\}$ by pragmatic enrichment.
Under this analysis, the example can be captured by the former (Gothic)
semantic derivation as before.

hwæþer = which of two

Simplified Boethius:

(8) *hwæþer þu (nu) wene þæt S?*
whether you (now) think that S
W: Dost thou think **S**?

1. LF structure: [*hwæþer*₁ you think that *t*₁, S]
2. [[think]]^{w,g} = $\lambda p \lambda x. THINK_w(x, p)$
3. [[you think *p*₁]]^{w,g} = $THINK_w(ad, p_1)$
4. [[*hwæþer*₁ you think *p*₁]]^{w,g}
= { [[S]], ¬[[S]] } \oplus $\lambda p_1. THINK_w(ad, p_1)$ pointwise composition
= { $\lambda w. THINK_w(ad, S)$, $\lambda w. THINK_w(ad, \neg S)$ }

Simplified Boethius:

- (9) *hwæþer þu (nu) wene þæt S?*
whether you (now) think that S
W: Dost thou think **S**?

Reanalysis

new semantic denotation: $[[\textit{hwæþer}]]$ = $\lambda p \lambda q (q = p \vee q = \neg p)$

new scope at LF: below matrix verb, above S_1 .

new composition: pointwise composition (as before) at low scope (new).

Syntax: *hwæþer* is now base-generated in C^0 .

Simplified Boethius:

- (10) *hwæþer þu (nu) wene þæt S?*
whether you (now) think that S
W: Dost thou think **S**?

1. LF structure: [you think [*hwæþer* S]]
2. $[[hwæther]]^{w,g} = \lambda p \lambda q (q = p \vee q = \neg p)$
3. $[[hwæþer S]]^{w,g} = \lambda q (q = [[S]] \vee q = \neg[[S]])$
4. $[[\text{think } hwæþer S]]^{w,g} = \{ \lambda x. THINK_w(x, S), \lambda x. THINK_w(x, \neg S) \}$
5. $[[\text{you think } hwæþer S]]^{w,g} =$
 $\{ \lambda w. THINK_w(ad, S), \lambda w. THINK_w(ad, \neg S) \}$

'Do you think that S, or do you think that not-S?'

- (11) odde wenstu **hwæþer** hine ænig þara ealne weg
or think-you hwæther these any of.these all ways
habban mæg þe hine nu hæfð?
have may who it now has?
'(Tell me, now, whether thou hast ever heard, that (wealth and
power) always remained to any one who was before us?) Or
thinkest thou that any one who now has it can always have it?'
(Old English Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, p. 102), see
(5).

Karttunen (1977); Uegaki (2016, 2019): Q embedding under *believe* predicates, as in (10), violates semantic universal.

ALTERNATIVE DIAGNOSIS: This type of example overtly shows LF of semantic composition in (10).

- (12) (odde) wenstu hwæþer S?
(or) think-you hwæther S?
'do you think that S?'

1. Licit LF [wens tu hwæþer S]
2. $[[hwæþer S]]^{w,g} = \lambda q(q = S \vee q = \neg S)$
3. $[[wens tu t_i]]^{w,g} = \lambda p_i.BELIEVE_w(ad, p_i)$
4. pointwise combination:
 $\{\lambda w.BELIEVE_w(ad, S), \lambda w.BELIEVE_w(ad, \neg S)\}$

- (13) hwæper nu gimma wlite eowre eagan to him getio
whether now jewels.GEN looks your eyes to them attract
...
...
'Do jewels attract your eyes...?'

1. LF with tacit embedding predicate: [wens tu hwæper (13)]
2. $[[hwæper (13)]]^{w,g} = \lambda q(q = (13) \vee q = \neg(13))$
3. $[[wens tu t_i]]^{w,g} = \lambda p_i.BELIEVE_w(ad, p_i)$
4. pointwise combination:
 $\{\lambda w.BELIEVE_w(ad, (13)), \lambda w.BELIEVE_w(ad, \neg(13))\}$

hwæper Q with a tacit embedder

$\{\lambda w.BELIEVE_w(ad, (13)), \lambda w.BELIEVE_w(ad, \neg(13))\}$

The pragmatics of *hwæper* Q:

- ▶ ask about addressee's opinions, beliefs, feelings about Q
- ▶ contrast addressee's opinion to speaker's opinion
- ▶ pedagogical question: Find out about Q yourself
- ▶ rhetorical questions: Answer is obvious, think for yourself!
- ▶ Compare Zimmermann (2008); Eckardt & Beltrama (2019); Eckardt (2020) on *wohl*-questions

Summary and conclusion

hwæþer Q with a tacit embedder: Syntactic advantages

- ▶ Explains absence of V2 with *hwæþer*
(in the sense that V2 in OE is a main clause phenomenon; Salvesen & Walkden (2017))
- ▶ Explains use of subjunctive morphology
(subjunctive is conventionalized in some embedded contexts in OE)

Summary and conclusion

Proposed trajectory can explain the peculiar features of root clause *hwæþer* sentences in Old English:

- ▶ Syntax. Weird syntax explained.
- ▶ Semantics. Reanalysis of *hwæþer*: From *wh*-Pronoun to question complementizer
- ▶ Pragmatics. Predict special flavour of question type: pedagogical, or rhetorical “think for yourself” question

Thank you for listening!

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Extra slides

There are two cases where B objects:

- (14) hwæþer þu nu wene þæt þæs cyninges geferræden
whether you now think that the.GEN king.GEN companions
and se wela. and se anweald, þe he gifð his deorlingum.
and the good and the richness that he gives his friends
mæge ænigne mon gedon weligne oððe wealdende.
may any man do well or powerful
W: Dost thou think that the king's familiarity, and the wealth
and the power which he gives to his favourites, can make any
man wealthy or powerful?
B: Well, why not? — contrary to W's suggestion (p102)