Tying up syntactic loose ends: *hwæt/huat*-clauses in Old English and Old Saxon

George Walkden

Department of Linguistics, University of Cambridge

gw249@cam.ac.uk · http://www.srcf.ucam.org/~gw249/

Introduction

The problem: minority syntactic patterns that resist generalization.

In Old English (OE), the vast majority of root clauses can be argued to involve movement of the finite verb to the left periphery. The same seems to hold for Old High German (OHG; Axel 2007) and Old Saxon (OS; Walkden 2010). However, for some clauses this is demonstrably not the case.

- Pintzuk (1993) on OE: 6.3% of root clauses (though cf. Pintzuk & Haeberli 2008)
- Koopman (1995) on OE: between 0.6% and 6.1%
- Walkden (2010) on OS: 6.0% in first 2000 lines of *Heliand*

(1)   *Baloman ðonne fulgeorne feran wolde*   (OE; CP 255.22)

Ballam then very-willingly proceed wanted

'Baloman then very much wanted to proceed'

Approaches to resolving the problem:

- Dismiss these examples as ungrammatical? (but cf. Koopman 1995: 139–140)
- Analyse these examples as products of an (archaic?) competing grammar? (Pintzuk 1999; but cf. Koopman 1995: 142)
- Or examine these examples carefully, looking for generalizations within them?

Impressionistic observation when doing the data work for OS for Walkden (2010): clauses preceded by the 'interjection' *huat* seem to lack verb-movement suspiciously frequently...

Outline of the talk:

1. The traditional view of *hwæt/huat*
2. Problems with the traditional view
3. Constituent order in *hwæt/huat*-clauses
4. Synchronic analysis of *hwæt/huat*-clauses
5. Some diachronic suggestions
6. Conclusion

1. The traditional view of *hwæt/huat*

Old English *hwæt*:

- Well-known as the first word of *Beowulf*
- In editions, is often followed by a comma or an exclamation mark
- Can be '*used as an adv*[erb]. or *interj*[ection]. *Why, what! ah!*' (Bosworth & Toller 1898: 571; emphasis original)
- Extra-metrical 'call to attention' (Mitchell & Irvine 2000; but cf. e.g. Stanley 2000: 555)
- Also the neuter singular of the interrogative pronoun *hwā* 'what'.

(2)   **Hwæt** *we Gardena   in geardagum ·*

þeodcyninga   þrym gefrunon

hu ða æþelingas   ellen fremedon ·

'We truly know about the might of the nation-kings in the ancient times of the Spear-Danes how princes then performed deeds of valour'

(*Beowulf*, ll. 1–3, after Bammesberger 2006: 3)

Other translations:

- 'What ho!' (Earle 1892)
- 'Lo!' (Kemble 1937)
- 'Hear me!' (Raffel 1963)
- 'Yes,' (Donaldson 1966),
- 'Attend!' (Alexander 1973)
- 'So.' (Heaney 1999).

'Interjection' *hwæt* is also found in prose:

(3)   **hwæt** *se*   *soðlice onwriið*   *his*   *fæder*   *scondlicnesse*
     hw.   he   truly discovers   his   father.GEN   nakedness.ACC
     'he certainly uncovers the nakedness of his father' (cobede,Bede_1:16.70.15.657)

(4)   **Hwæt** *ða*   *Eugenia*   *hi*   *gebletsode*
     hw.   then   Eugeniaᵢ   herᵢ   blessed
     'Then Eugenia blessed herself' (coaelive,+ALS_[Eugenia]:171.295)

In the closely related language Old Saxon, the cognate item *huat* can be found with an apparently similar interpretation, and in the editions this is similarly partitioned off from the clause following it by a comma (e.g. Sievers 1878, and the *Heliand* text in Behaghel & Taeger 1984) or an exclamation mark (e.g. the *Genesis* text in Behaghel & Taeger 1984).

(5)   **Huat**, *thu*   *thesaro thiodo*   *canst*   *menniscan*   *sidu*
     hw.   you   this.GEN people.GEN   know.2SG   human   custom.ACC
     'You know the customs of these people' (*Heliand*, ll. 3101–2)

(6)   '**huat**, *ik iu*   *godes rîki'*,   *quað*   *he*,   *'gihêt* ...
     hw.   I   you.DAT   God's kingdom.ACC said   he   promised ...
     '"I promised you God's kingdom," he said' (*Heliand*, ll. 4572–3)

Grimm (1837: 448–51):
- Within Germanic, this use of the interrogative pronoun is specific to OE and OS
- Sense is not interrogative, since the pronoun is not followed directly by the verb
- Cannot be an artefact of translation from a Latin original, since *hwæt* in OE translations (e.g. of Bede's *Historia*) often corresponds to nothing overt in the original
- Always stands at the beginning of a clause
- Often serves to introduce speech, or even a whole poem as in the case of *Beowulf*
- Conclusion: 'ein bloßer ausruf, jedoch in sehr gemäßigtem sinn' (1837: 450).

Brinton (1996):
- *Hwæt* is a pragmatic marker[1]
- Function 'very similar to that of *you know* in Modern English' (1996: 185)
- May serve to introduce an insulting 'verbal assault' on the addressee, but may also express deference or solidarity (1996: 188)

---

[1] Not a well-defined notion. Östman (1982: 149): pragmatic particles 'tend to occur in some sense cut off from, or on a higher level than, the rest of the utterance'. As will be seen in sections 2 and 3, this is not the case for *hwæt/huat*.

- May indicate that the information to follow is common or familiar, serve to renew interest in that information and/or focus attention on its importance, but it may also precede new information (1996: 187–8)
- Frequently (but not exceptionlessly) occurs with a first or second person pronoun (1996: 185)
- Brinton suggests that *hwæt* has lost its characteristics as a pronoun, e.g. its inflectional morphology and syntactic position, and undergone 'decategorialization' to a particle or interjection. A situation of layering thus obtains.

Garley, Slade & Terkourafi (2010):
- *Hwæt* is a discourse-structuring formula, 'a marker employed in the representation of spoken discourse' (2010: 218)
- It 'signals the character's intention to begin a dialogue or a narrative' (2010: 219)
- Eight Old English poems other than *Beowulf* begin in this way (2010: 219).

All 25 of the Old Saxon examples I have found in the *Heliand* occur in the speech of a character within the text. 15 of the 25 Old Saxon examples initiate a character's speech, as in (6) above. This might also explain the frequency of 1ˢᵗ/2ⁿᵈ person pronouns in clauses preceded by *hwæt* noted by Brinton.

However, *hwæt* may also occur in the middle of a character's speech, as in the remaining 10 Old Saxon examples, e.g. (5) above. Even more problematic than this is its occurrence in texts such as Ælfric's Lives of Saints, and in particular the translation of Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, which are far less bound up with prototypical orality and in which it therefore makes little sense to view *hwæt* as being representative of speech or functioning as a 'call to attention'. Although *hwæt* clearly had this discourse-opening function in OE and OS, then, it does not suffice alone to characterize its meaning.

2. Problems with the traditional view

Stanley (2000): a recent and extensive philological discussion of *hwæt* in OE.
- Adduces metrical evidence to show that *hwæt* cannot have been a strong interjection: if it were stressed, then various instances of it in verse would have led to double alliteration, 'breaking a basic prosodic rule' (2000: 554)
- Against the view that *hwæt* was extra-metrical, he argues that 'if an opening word were felt to be divorced from the phrase that follows we might have expected it to be occasionally followed by a mark of punctuation' (2000: 555)
- In fact, OE manuscripts never show punctuation between *hwæt* and a following clause (2000: 525)

    o   The same is true of OS: no punctuation mark is ever found between *huat* and a following clause in any of the *Heliand* manuscripts (Cotton, Munich, Straubing).

- Ælfric's own grammar of Latin and OE (edition Zupitza 1880) did not include *hwæt* as an interjection: 'Ælfric's omission is surprising seeing that this word when used to open a sentence appears to function often as an interjection' (2000: 541).

The traditional view of *hwæt* as an adverb or interjection, outside the clause and potentially extrametrical, possibly serving as a 'call to attention' (Mitchell & Robinson 1998), thus suffers from a number of problems, many already noted by Grimm (1837) and Stanley (2000). These are listed below for ease of reference:

(a)   *Hwæt* must usually be analysed as unstressed;

(b)   no punctuation between *hwæt* and the following clause is ever found;

(c)   contemporary grammarians did not analyse *hwæt* as an interjection;

(d)   *hwæt* is not always found in texts connected to primary orality, and does not always serve to initiate speech.

For completeness, it must be mentioned that *hwæt* and *huat* had additional roles in OE and OS not shared by modern English *what*, e.g. as indefinite pronouns 'something/anything':

(7)   *Heo   is   uoluntas,   þæt   is   wylla, þonne heo   **hwæt** wyle*
          she   is   uoluntas   that   is   will   when she   hw.   wants
          'It is *voluntas*, that is will, when it wants anything' (coaelive, + ALS_[Christmas]:189.147)

(8)   *he   uuirkid   manages   **huat***
          he   works   many.GEN   hw.
          'he works many wonders' (*Heliand*, l. 3934)

Secondly, *hwæt*/*huat* can mean not only 'what' but also 'how' and 'why':

(9)   **Hwæt** *stendst þu   her   wælhreowa   deor?*
          Hw.   stand you   here   cruel   beast
          'Why are you standing here, cruel beast?' (coaelive, + ALS_[Martin]:1364.6872)

(10)   **huat** *uuili   thu   thes   nu   sôken   te   ûs?*
          hw.   will   you   this.GEN   now   seek   to   us
          'why do you now complain about this to us?' (*Heliand*, l. 5158)

Similar examples exist in Old Norse (Cleasby & Vigfusson 1874: 297) – as well as in other languages, both within Germanic and outside it (see section 4.1).

---

3. Constituent order in *hwæt*/*huat*-clauses

Traditional philological works on syntax make little mention of constituent order in connection with *hwæt*:

- Behaghel (1923–32) does not mention the construction at all
- Hopper (1977: 483) suggests that the *hwæt*-construction is quasi-formulaic and may therefore be likely to have the 'archaic' verb-final order, but does not go into any detail
- Mitchell (1985: 299–300, fn. 95) suggests that interjections like *efne* 'lo!/behold!' and *hwæt* may influence word order, but does not elaborate on this
- More recently, Koopman has observed that 'influence of style is ... noticeable in the word order after the interjection *hwæt*' (1995: 140)
    - o   However, the constituent-order patterns found in both OE and OS are too pervasive and significant to be ascribed to archaism or stylistic choices alone.

Early philological work on OE often suggested that constituent order in general was 'free':

- Fries (1940: 199): 'in Old English ... the order of the words in ... sentences has no bearing whatever on the grammatical relationships involved'
    - o   However, this position is a vast overstatement and oversimplification!
- Kemenade (1987): OE essentially an asymmetric V2 language like modern Dutch and German, with the verb in C^0 in root clauses
    - o   Although the evidence is not as clear-cut in OE there is nevertheless a clear asymmetry between declarative root and subordinate clauses.
    - o   In root clauses, the vast majority of clauses are verb-first (V1) or verb-second.
    - o   Subordinate clauses only V1 or V2 ~35% of the time (Fischer et al. 2000: 109).
- Erickson (1997) on OS: analyses of OE such as Kemenade (1987) may carry over to OS (cf. also Ries 1880, Rauch 1992, Linde 2009 on syntax of OS)
    - o   Walkden (2010): this is, broadly speaking, the case.
    - o   Of the 931 root clauses in the first 2000 lines of the Old Saxon *Heliand*, only 56 (6.0%) have the verb in a position later than second.
    - o   677 of 859 subordinate clauses (78.8%) display this pattern, as in Table 1.
    - o   The difference is statistically significant (Fisher's exact test; $p < 0.0001$).

***Table 1: Frequency and percentage of V1/V2 vs. V-later root vs. subordinate clauses in the* Heliand**

	V1/V2		V-later		Total
	N	%	N	%	N
Root	875	94.0	56	6.0	931
Subordinate	182	21.2	677	78.8	859
Total	1057	—	733	—	1790

What about clauses preceded by *huat*?

Under the hypothesis that *huat* is an extra-clausal interjection, separated from the clause itself by a comma in writing which corresponds to a pause in speech, the null hypothesis as regards the constituent order of the following clause would be that no difference would obtain between these and other root clauses. This prediction is not, however, borne out by the data in Table 2:

Table 2: Frequency and percentage of V1/V2 vs. V-later huat-*clauses* *vs. non-*huat *root clauses in the* Heliand	V1/V2		V-later		Total
	N	%	N	%	N
Huat	9	36.0	16	64.0	25
Non-*huat*	875	94.0	56	6.0	931
Total	884	—	72	—	956

Although the number of *huat*-clauses is very small, once again, the difference between the two types of clause is extremely statistically significant (p<0.0001). For anyone who takes *huat* to be clause-external, this result must surely be a mystery: if *huat* influences the constituent order of the clause that follows it, it must be a part of that clause, and hence not an 'interjection'. Comparing clauses preceded by *huat* to subordinate clauses, as in Table 3, is also instructive:

Table 3: Frequency and percentage of V1/V2 vs. V-later huat-*clauses* *vs. non-*huat *subordinate clauses in the* Heliand	V1/V2		V-later		Total
	N	%	N	%	N
Huat	9	36.0	16	64.0	25
Non-*huat*	182	21.2	677	78.8	859
Total	191	—	693	—	884

Here the difference between the two types of clause is not statistically significant even at the 0.05 level (p=0.0856). This suggests that these two types of clause pattern together; in other words, **clauses introduced by** *huat* **have the same constituent order as subordinate clauses**.

Similar results are found for Old English. In the translation of Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, 20 of the 29 clauses preceded by *hwæt* (69.0%) have the verb in a position later than second, and in Ælfric's Lives of Saints, excluding five examples of the true interjection *hwæt la* (cf. Stanley 2000), 112 clauses preceded by *hwæt* can be found, 63 of which have the verb in a position later than second (56.3%). The results of contingency tests based on these data are clear.

Table 4: Frequency and percentage of V1/V2 vs. V-later root vs. subordinate vs. hwæt-*clauses in Bede*	V1/V2		V-later		Total
	N	%	N	%	N
Root (non-*hwæt*)	1898	69.9	819	30.1	2717
Subordinate	1863	37.8	3067	62.2	4930
Hwæt	9	31.0	20	69.0	29
Total	3770	—	3906	—	7676

Table 5: Frequency and percentage of V1/V2 vs. V-later root vs. subordinate vs. hwæt-*clauses in Ælfric's Lives of Saints*	V1/V2		V-later		Total
	N	%	N	%	N
Root (non-*hwæt*)	3204	76.8	969	23.2	4173
Subordinate	3467	61.5	2168	38.5	5635
Hwæt	49	43.7	63	56.3	112
Total	6720	—	3200	—	9920

As in the Old Saxon *Heliand*, root and subordinate clauses pattern distinctly differently in the *Historia* translation (p<0.0001). While the constituent order in *hwæt*-clauses and root clauses is once again dramatically different (once again p<0.0001), the difference between constituent orders in *hwæt*-clauses and in subordinate clauses does not even come close to significance (p=0.5657). The argument for *hwæt*-clauses patterning with subordinate clauses is thus even stronger than for the *huat*-clauses in the *Heliand*.

Ælfric's Lives of Saints is a substantial OE text dated around 996–7. Although direct sources in Latin can be identified, Ælfric's translation is agreed to be very free and idiomatic (cf. e.g. Bethurum 1932), making it a suitable object for syntactic investigations. This text has a very different range of constituent order patterns than that found in the translation of Bede's *Historia*. While the position of the verb differs substantially between root and subordinate clauses (p<0.0001), subordinate clauses themselves far more often have the verb in an early position than in the translation of Bede. As a result, *hwæt*-clauses, which more frequently have the verb later, differ very significantly from both root (p<0.0001) and subordinate (p=0.0002) clauses. Here, then, it cannot be said that *hwæt*-clauses pattern with subordinate clauses; instead they seem to follow a pattern of their own, with the verb much more likely to be later than in other clauses in general.

The fact that broadly the same results are obtained for Old English and Old Saxon – a general preference for verb-later order in *hwæt*-clauses – makes it unlikely that the constituent order differences between *hwæt*-clauses and other root clauses are the result of innovation in both

languages; although parallel innovation (perhaps contact-facilitated) cannot be ruled out, by the criterion of diachronic parsimony it should be assumed that the verb-late pattern was the original one, and that *hwæt*-clauses patterned with subordinate clauses from their inception (on which see section 5).

To recapitulate: in terms of constituent order, **clauses introduced by *hwæt*/*huat* in OE and OS pattern statistically with subordinate clauses** (including dependent questions and free relatives), rather than with root clauses as would be expected if *hwæt* were a free-standing interjection. The constituent order data presented in this section therefore give us strong reason to doubt that *hwæt* had such a syntactic role or status.

4. Synchronic analysis of *hwæt*/*huat*-clauses

Thus far I have cast a substantial amount of doubt on the widely-held view that *hwæt* was an interjection (it is 'regarded as such by all Anglo-Saxonists', according to Stanley 2000: 541), but have not attempted to offer an alternative analysis. In this section I remedy this.

4.1 *The polysemy of interrogative pronouns cross-linguistically*

Munaro & Obenauer (1999, henceforth M&O): the meanings contributed by the interrogative pronouns in German, French and Pagotto (a dialect of Italian) do not appear to differ arbitrarily but instead intersect in several key ways. Firstly, in all three of these languages the interrogative pronoun can be used non-argumentally to mean 'why' or 'how' in questions. I illustrate from German:

(11)   ***Was*** *rennst du   so   schnell?*
       what   run   you   so   fast
       'Why are you running so fast?' (M&O 1999: 184)

As mentioned in section 2, similar examples can be found in OE, OS and Old Norse, as well as Latin (James Clackson, p.c.), Dutch, Icelandic (Svenonius & Kennedy 2006), some varieties of Norwegian (Vangsnes 2008), Afrikaans (Theresa Biberauer, p.c.) and the early Celtic languages.

Secondly, German, French and Pagotto also permit the interrogative pronoun to occur non-argumentally in exclamatives; German *was* and French *que* alternate in this role with the more usual *wie* and *comme* respectively.

(12)   ***Was*** *Otto   seine Frau   liebt!*
       what   O.   his   wife   loves
       'How Otto loves his wife!' (d'Avis 2001: 134)

(13)   ***Was*** *du   dich   verändert   hast!*
       what   you   refl   changed   have
       'How you've changed!'

This is also possible for at least Dutch (Corver 1990) and older speakers of Afrikaans (Theresa Biberauer, p.c.). For present purposes, the important thing to note about all these examples is that certain other languages systematically exhibit a range of possible uses/meanings for their interrogative pronoun that are not possible with modern English *what*.

M&O discuss two possible analyses for a given language (1999: 185):[2]
- a) These *wh*-words are identical in phonological form by chance.[2]
  - ○ Accidental homophony can't be ruled out, but when the same range of meanings crops up in language after language it becomes increasingly unlikely.
- b) The different meanings are somehow closely and intrinsically related.
  - ○ This seems more promising!

M&O suggest that the relevant interrogative pronoun in German, French and Pagotto may be **underspecified** for certain features. They adduce distributional syntactic data from these languages to illustrate this. For instance, normal *wh*-words can be co-ordinated in German, as in (14) and (15), but this is not possible with 'why'-like *was* or 'how much'-like *was*, as illustrated in (16) and (17).

(14)   *Wann   und   warum   hast   du   mit   Max   gesprochen?*
       when   and   why   have   you   with   M.   spoken
       'When and why did you speak to Max?' (M&O 1999: 226)
(15)   *Wie   laut   und   wie   lange   er   geschreit   hat!*
       how   loud   and   how   long   he   shouted   has
       'How loud and how long he shouted!'
(16)   **Wann   und   **was**   hast   du   mit   Max   gesprochen?*
       when   and   what   have   you   with   M.   spoken
       'When and why did you speak to Max?'
(17)   *****Was*** *und   wie   lange   er   geschreit   hat!*
       what   and   how   long   he   shouted   has
       'How much and how long he shouted!'

---

[2] Indeed, it seems plausible that this is the case with the Old English adjective *hwæt* 'quick, active, vigorous, stout, bold, brave', which is generally agreed to be related in no way to the interrogative pronoun *hwæt* but instead to be derived from the verb *hwettan* 'to whet' (cf. e.g. Bosworth & Toller 1898: 571).

Non-argumental uses of *was* are also unable to function as contrastive focus and cannot appear in truncated questions; the same restrictions hold in French and Pagotto (M&O 1999: 227–33).

M&O's analysis:

- A piece of word-internal syntactic structure is absent from the structure of underspecified *wh*-items (cf. Cardinaletti & Starke 1999)
- This piece of structure 'must be linked to the expression of argumenthood, and contain the semantic restriction ... [+thing]' (1999: 236)
- The correct interpretation of the *wh*-item must be vouchsafed by the particular context in which it occurs
    - (as an argument in certain questions when fully specified, as 'why' or 'how' when underspecified and non-argumental in questions, and as 'how' or 'how much' when underspecified in exclamatives)
- Specifically, in its non-argumental use speakers prefer the *wh*-item to be accompanied by an expression of the speaker's attitude, particularly of surprise.
    - This is inherently present in exclamatives (cf. section 4.2), and can be expressed in e.g. German questions by use of a modal particle such as *denn*, or by intonation.

Jäger (2000) and Holler (2009), within Minimalism and HPSG respectively, have also argued independently that there must exist a form of *was* in German that is underspecified for [thing] and therefore non-argumental.

If the underspecification logic outlined above holds in general, then it is tempting to analyse the OE/OS *hwæt/huat* along the same lines as modern German *was*, French *que* etc., namely as a *wh*-item which may occur non-argumentally in an underspecified form.

So where does this lead us with regard to examples of clauses such as (2)–(6)? They cannot be interrogative, since the word order is not that of matrix questions, *hwæt* cannot be argumental in these clauses, and no sensible interrogative interpretation is available... What if they're exclamatives?

4.2 Hwæt-*clauses as exclamatives*
The content of exclamatives must involve something related to degree/scalarity (cf. e.g. Zanuttini & Portner 2003, Rett 2008, 2009), although opinions vary on how (and whether) to encode this in the grammar. For simplicity's sake I will adopt here the semantic proposal of Rett (2008, 2009), who suggests the following two restrictions on the content of exclamatives:

(18)   **The Degree Restriction**
An exclamative can only be used to express surprise that the degree property which is its content holds of a particular degree.
(Rett 2008: 147; her (4))

(19)   **The Evaluativity Restriction**
The content of the exclamative must additionally be evaluative: the degrees it makes reference to are restricted such that they must exceed a contextual standard.
(Rett 2008: 155)

The Degree Restriction is key for our purposes. Consider (20) (from Rett 2008: 147; her (5b)):

(20)   What languages Benny speaks!

- May express surprise at the **number** of languages he speaks (the '**amount reading**')
- Alternatively, may express surprise at the degree to which the languages Benny speaks are exotic (the '**gradable reading**'). Note that no overt gradable predicate 'exotic' is present in the sentence, but this interpretation is nevertheless available. Rett (2008: 149): a null gradable predicate **P** must be posited for the gradable reading.
- In a situation where you expect Benny to speak French and Italian but discover that he instead speaks Portuguese and Romanian, uttering (20) would be expressively incorrect. The impossibility of the '**individual reading**' leads Rett to conclude that the Degree Restriction (18) is an essential part of exclamativity (2008: 151).

If (18) characterizes *wh*-exclamatives, then it follows that syntactic constructions used to express *wh*-exclamatives must be able to denote a degree property (Rett 2008: 168–9). One candidate construction is the free relative: 'in any such language I know of, exclamatives pattern in their morphosyntax with free relatives rather than with questions' (Rett 2008: 173)

Rett's claim holds perfectly in OE and OS if we assume that *hwæt*-clauses are exclamatives, since (as shown) *hwæt*-clauses pattern syntactically with embedded clauses (including free relatives).

What about the interpretation of these 'exclamative' *hwæt*-clauses? Consider examples (21)–(22):

(21)   **hwæt** se   soðlice   onwriið   his   fæder scondlicnesse
hw.   he   truly   discovers   his   father.GEN nakedness.ACC
'he certainly uncovers the nakedness of his father' (cobede,Bede_1:16.70.15.657)

(22)   '**huat**, ik   iu   godes rîki',   quað   he,   'gihêt ...
       hw.   I   you.DAT   God's kingdom.ACC   said   he   promised ...
       '"I promised you God's kingdom," he said' (*Heliand*, ll. 4572–3)

(21) receives a straightforward analysis as an exclamative. Underspecified *hwæt* must receive a degree reading, and a natural item for it to range over is the verb *onwríðan* 'to unbind/unwrap'. The interpretation of the clause would thus be 'How he truly uncovers the nakedness of his father!'

(22) is less straightforward. At first sight it appears that there is no predicate for *huat* to range over ('to promise' does not seem gradable). However, Rett's analysis allows for a null gradable predicate **P** which receives its value from context. In this case we can posit a null adverb which receives a meaning 'earnestly', 'faithfully' or something along those lines. (22) could then be viewed as meaning 'How earnestly/faithfully I promised you God's kingdom!'

We are now in a position to revisit example (23), the first sentence of *Beowulf*. Complications other than *hwæt* mean that the correct analysis of this sentence is disputed; indeed, whole articles have been devoted to these few lines alone (e.g. Bammesberger 2006).

(23)   **Hwæt**   we Gardena   in geardagum þeodcyninga   þrym   gefrunon
       hw.   we Spear-Danes.GEN   in year-days   nation-kings.GEN   power heard-of
       (Beowulf, ll. 1–2)

Here the verb, *frínan* 'to learn by enquiry', can straightforwardly be read as gradable. The exclamative hypothesis suggests that this clause can be read as 'How much we have heard of the might of the nation-kings of the Spear-Danes!'

The hypothesis presented here has significant advantages over the traditional account of the function and meaning of *hwæt* as outlined in section 1:
- it **accounts for the word order facts** (see section 3);
- it **does not need to maintain that *hwæt* is an interjection** (see section 2);
- it brings the behaviour of *hwæt* into line with that of a range of other interrogative pronouns observed cross-linguistically (see section 4.1).

5. Some diachronic suggestions
How did *hwæt* come to be potentially underspecified in the first place? Change toward underspecification, and the loss of the restriction [+thing] (and thus of the necessity of argument status), seems to be a 'natural' change; in studies of grammaticalization such 'semantic bleaching'

has often been observed (cf. e.g. Hopper & Traugott 2003), and principles of acquisition such as 'minimize feature content' have often been posited in the generative literature on syntactic change (Longobardi 2001: 294; cf. also the feature-based simplicity metric in Roberts & Roussou 2003: 201).

Among the early Germanic languages, OE, OS and (to a lesser extent) Old Norse display underspecification, while Gothic and Old High German do not. The change could be traced back to an early Northwest Germanic dialect continuum: we have ample evidence that considerable contact between what was to become the Ingvaeonic languages and what was to become Proto-Scandinavian must have taken place, and that there was a high degree of mutual intelligibility.

One hypothesis, then, could be that the underspecification of the interrogative pronoun was an innovation diffused across the Northwest Germanic dialect continuum but which did not make it as far southeast as the pre-Old High German area of Europe.

Furthermore, data exist which may help us to pin down the exact reanalysis that caused this change to happen. Interrogative examples such as (24) are occasionally found in the *Heliand*:

(24)   **huat**   uualdand   god   habit   guodes   gigereuuid
       hw.   ruling   G.   has   good.GEN   prepared
       'what good things Lord God has prepared (for us)' (*Heliand*, ll. 2533–4)

Here *huat* can still be analysed as argumental, as in essence it forms a unit with *guodes* to mean 'what of good [things]'. Such discontinuous constituents were a possibility in many early Indo-European languages (e.g. Latin, Greek). As the possibility of discontinuous constituents became rarer, learners who had not acquired this possibility would require another analysis for clauses such as (24).

Analysis of *huat* as underspecified in such cases, specifically non-argumental and generated in the left periphery of the clause rather than extracted by *wh*-movement from a nominal constituent further down the tree, would be one solution to this problem, with *guodes* itself analysed as a genitive argument of the main verb: the clause would then receive the interpretation 'how Lord God has prepared good things (for us)'.

Once *huat* had become detached from its position in the paradigm of argumental interrogative pronouns and was able to be interpreted as underspecified 'how', it could then be extended unproblematically to exclamatives as in the construction discussed in 4.2.

We thus have an argument, albeit not a watertight one, for reconstructing underspecified **hwat* as a Proto-Ingvaeonic innovation.

6. Conclusion

The traditional view of OE and OS *hwæt*/*huat* as an interjection meaning simply 'lo!' or 'listen!', as proposed by Grimm (1837) and assumed 'by all Anglo-Saxonists' (Stanley 2000: 541), is unsatisfactory because:

(a)   *hwæt*/*huat* must usually be analysed as unstressed;

(b)   no punctuation between *hwæt*/*huat* and the following clause is ever found;

(c)   contemporary grammarians did not analyse *hwæt*/*huat* as an interjection;

(d)   *hwæt*/*huat* is not always found in texts connected to primary orality, and does not always serve to initiate speech;

(e)   **clauses preceded by *hwæt*/*huat* pattern with subordinate clauses**, not with main clauses, with respect to the position of the verb.

Regardless of whether my own proposal in section 4 is accepted, these facts must be accounted for by any satisfactory theory of *hwæt*/*huat*.

According to the alternative analysis pursued in sections 4 and 5:

- There were **two variants** of *hwæt*/*huat* in OE and OS
- Both were interrogative, but one was **underspecified** for the feature [thing]
- Non-interrogative clauses preceded by *hwæt*/*huat* are **wh-exclamatives** parallel in interpretation to Modern English 'How tall you've grown!'
- The underspecification of *hwæt* may have originated in Proto-Ingvaeonic through **reanalysis of interrogatives** containing discontinuous nominal constituents.

More generally, it's worth looking for regularities within apparently recalcitrant syntactic data, rather than just assuming ungrammaticality or the existence of competing grammars! *Hwæt*/*huat*-clauses are one syntactic loose end we don't have to worry about any more. We haven't solved the problem of verb-late clauses in early West Germanic, but we're hopefully one step closer.

References (selected)

Bammesberger, Alfred. 2006. The syntactic analysis of the opening verses in Beowulf. *ANQ* 19(4), 3–7.

Behaghel, Otto. 1923–32. *Deutsche Syntax*. 4 vols. Heidelberg: Winter.

Behaghel, Otto & Burkhard Taeger. 1984. *Heliand und Genesis*, 9th edn. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer.

Bosworth, Joseph & T. Northcote Toller. 1898. *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon.

Brinton, Laurel J. 1996. *Pragmatic markers in English: grammaticalization and discourse functions*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Erickson, Jon. 1997. Some observations on word order in Old Saxon. In Christa Dürscheid, Karl Heinz Ramers & Monika Schwarz (eds.), *Sprache im Fokus: Festschrift für Heinz Vater zum 65. Geburtstag*, 95–105. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer.

Fischer, Olga, Ans van Kemenade, Willem Koopman & Wim van der Wurff. 2000. *The Syntax of Early English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fries, Charles. 1940. On the development of the structural use of word-order in Modern English. *Language* 16, 199–208.

Garley, Matthew, Benjamin Slade & Marina Terkourafi. 2010. A text in speech's clothing: Discovering specific functions of formulaic expressions in Beowulf and blogs. In David Wood (ed.), *Perspectives on formulaic language: acquisition and communication*, 213–33. London: Continuum.

Grimm, Jakob. 1837. *Deutsche Grammatik, IV: Syntax*. Göttingen: Dieterichsche Buchhandlung.

Kemenade, Ans van. 1987. *Syntactic case and morphological case in the history of English*. Dordrecht: Foris.

Koopman, Willem. 1995. Verb-final main clauses in Old English prose. *Studia Neophilologica* 67, 129–44.

Mitchell, Bruce. 1985. *Old English syntax*. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon.

Mitchell, Bruce & Susan Irvine (eds.). 2000. Beowulf repunctuated. *Old English Newsletter Subsidia* 29.

Munaro, Nicola & Hans-Georg Obenauer. 1999. On underspecified *wh*-elements in pseudo-interrogatives. *University of Venice Working Papers in Linguistics* 9, 181–253.

Nielsen, Hans Frede. 2000. Ingwäonisch. In Johannes Hoops, Heinrich Beck, Dieter Geuenich & Heiko Steuer (eds.), *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde*, 2nd edn., vol. 15, 432–8. Berlin: de Gruyter.

Pintzuk, Susan. 1993. Verb seconding in Old English: verb movement to Infl. *The Linguistic Review* 10, 5–35.

Pintzuk, Susan & Eric Haeberli. 2008. Structural variation in Old English root clauses. *Language Variation and Change* 20, 367–407.

Rett, Jessica. 2008. *Degree Modification in Natural Language*. Ph.D. dissertation, Rutgers University.

Stanley, Eric. 2000. *Hwæt*. In Jane Roberts & Janet Nelson (eds.), *Essays on Anglo-Saxon and related themes in memory of Lynne Grundy*, 525–56. London: King's College Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies.

Zanuttini, Raffaella & Paul Portner. 2003. Exclamative clauses: at the syntax-semantics interface. *Language* 79, 39–81.