

# The force of Old English *hwæþer*-questions

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## Summary

This poster looks at unembedded questions in Old English introduced by *hwæþer* ‘whether’, an option no longer available in present-day English. Most of our examples are from one specific text with a specific discourse situation. I argue that *hwæþer*-questions, unlike verb-first questions, are not information-seeking.

## Functions of Old English *hwæþer*

*hwæþer* can introduce embedded polar questions, like *whether* in modern English:

1. axodon ... **hwæþer** se halga Petrus þær wununge hæfde  
asked whether the holy Peter there dwelling had  
(‘Three men) asked whether Saint Peter lived there’  
(coalive,+ALS[Peter’s\_Chair]:109.2346)

*hwæþer* can function nominally meaning ‘which of two’:

2. **Hwæþer** cweðe we ðe ure ðe ðæra engla?  
whether say we or ours or the.GEN angels.GEN  
(‘Which should we say: ours, or the angels?’  
(cocathom1,+ACHom\_I,\_15:302.95.2825)

*hwæþer* can introduce unembedded polar interrogatives:

3. **Hwæþer** nu gimma wite eowre eagan to him getio?  
whether now gems.GEN beauty your eyes to him attract  
(‘Does the beauty of gems attract your eyes to them?’  
(coboeth,Bo:13.28.27.491)

This poster is concerned with the third of these uses.

## Context: syntax of questions in Old English

Old English unembedded *wh*-questions are almost exceptionlessly V2, as in (2). Polar questions (without *hwæþer*) are almost exceptionlessly V1. In embedded *wh*-questions and in embedded polar questions introduced by *gif* ‘if’ or *hwæþer* the verb surfaces in a later position, as in (1). This general system looks a lot like that found in present-day German or Dutch.

Questions with *hwæþer* as in (3) are different, as they are never V2, and instead exceptionlessly verb-late (Traugott 1972; Allen 1980; Kiparsky 1995; Fischer et al. 2000; van Gelderen 2009; Berizzi 2010; Parra-Guinaldo 2013; Walkden 2014: §4.4). Typical analysis: *hwæþer* is in C<sup>0</sup>, which prevents the verb from moving there.

It’s widely acknowledged that questions with *hwæþer* as in (3) serve as an alternative to V1 for unembedded polar questions. Largely unaddressed issue: what conditions this variation? Is it free, or is there a meaning difference?

## Force of *hwæþer*-questions: previous research

Much of the literature implicitly assumes that *hwæþer*-questions and V1 questions are interchangeable (though cf. Traugott 1972: 73, 1992: 265, ‘doubt’ and ‘incredulity’; Fischer et al. 2000: 84, ‘expression of doubt’).

Most detailed treatment: Mitchell (1985: 678–682). Three key points:

- Difference in verbal mood: unlike V1 questions, *hwæþer*-questions are almost always in the subjunctive.
- “Many of the questions with the present subjunctive are rhetorical” (1985: 682) – though he claims that they can also be genuine.
- No consistent question bias: some *hwæþer*-questions demand a negative answer, others a positive answer.

Mitchell gives one example of a *hwæþer*-question without the subjunctive, (4).

4. Hwæþer þe þin eage manful ys ... ?  
whether c/2.SG.DAT YOUR eye evil is.IND  
(‘Is your eye evil?’  
(cowsgosp,Mt\_[WSCp]:20.15.1339)

He claims that this is “explicable as the result of Latin influence”, where the corresponding verb is *est*, in the indicative (1985: 682). But note also that this is a highly unusual example in (probably) involving an overt complementizer as well as *hwæþer* (this is how it’s tagged in the YCOE). Other similar examples also contain verbs in the indicative.

## *hwæþer*-questions in Old English: methods and raw data

Old English: a West Germanic language for which our records date from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, which bears many syntactic similarities to the present-day continental West Germanic languages. Most texts are in West Saxon dialect. 1.5-million-word syntactically parsed corpus available (Taylor et al. 2003).

Starting point: what is the distribution of questions with *hwæþer*?

Method: search of the YCOE prose corpus (Taylor et al. 2003) using CorpusSearch 2 (Randall 2005–2007). Search targeted all instances of *hwæþer* (tagged as WQ) in unembedded contexts (which are parsed as containing no C head). Results were then analysed by hand to exclude false positives and potential tagging errors. Some false negatives may remain.

node: CP-QUE\*

query: (CP-QUE\* iDoms !C) AND (CP-QUE\* iDoms WQ)

Raw number of hits in corpus: exactly 100.

An additional query retrieved 10 extra examples (raw):

node: CP-QUE\*

query: (CP-QUE\* iDoms C) AND (CP-QUE\* iDoms WQ) AND (CP-QUE\* isRoot)

After manual removal of false positives (mostly examples like (1) or (2)), there are 72 unembedded polar *hwæþer*-questions remaining. All are verb-late and have finite verbs that can be analysed as being in the subjunctive.

More than half (43/72) of the examples come from a single text, the Old English translation of Boethius’s *De consolatione philosophiae* (‘The Consolation of Philosophy’). Therefore, this text was selected for further investigation in what follows. No other text contains more than eight examples.

## Fact file: *De consolatione philosophiae*

Date written	523 CE	
Language	Latin	
Author	Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius	
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 <sup>th</sup> century (MS C, prose/verse); end of 11 <sup>th</sup> /early 12 <sup>th</sup> century (MS B, prose)	
Edition in YCOE	Sedgefield (1899), mostly based on MS C	

## *hwæþer*-questions in the Consolation of Philosophy

Of the 43 *hwæþer*-questions, all are asked by Philosophy (not by Boethius).

- 17 go completely unanswered
- 12 are answered by Philosophy herself (often *nese*, *nese* “no, no”)
- 14 are “answered” by Boethius, but usually not straightforwardly

Example: the dialogue on the right.

Philosophy said: “(What do you think of the good fate that often comes to good men in this world, as if it were a foretoken of eternal good?) Can people say that this is a bad fate?”

At this I smiled and said  
“No one says that ...”

Then Philosophy said: “(What do you think of the less promising fate that often afflicts the evil as punishment?) Do people think that this is a good fate?”

At this I said: “They don’t at all think that this is a good fate, but think that they are miserable.”

Philosophy is certainly not seeking information with these questions.

Other “answers” from Boethius:

- (in response to “Does anyone think that anyone is so powerful that they can do everything they want?”)  
*Ne wend ðæs nan mon þe his gewit hæfð*  
“No one in their right mind thinks that!” (coboeth,Bo:36.110.13.2166)
- (in response to “Do you think that those who are worthy of punishment are poor and unhappy?”)  
*Ne wene ic his no, ac wat gear*  
“I don’t think it at all – I know it very well!” (coboeth,Bo:38.122.27.2442–3)
- (in response to “Does a beautiful landscape please you?”)  
*Hwi ne sceolde me lician fæger lond?*  
“Why should a beautiful landscape not please me?” (coboeth,Bo:14.29.11.500)

Observation: *hwæþer*-questions often contain *nu* (23x; lit. ‘now’) or *þonne* (3x; lit. ‘then’), which van Kemenade & Links (2018) argue are modal particles. They describe *nu* as interactive, directive, and non-factual, possibly expressing impatience, and *þonne* as a negative polarity item.

## Deliberative verb-end questions (in German)

Eckardt (2018): German unembedded verb-end questions are deliberative.

8. Wo \*(wohl) der Schlüssel ist?  
where WOHL the key is  
(‘I wonder where the key is?’)

9. Ob es hier (wohl) Kaffee gibt?  
if it here WOHL coffee gives  
(‘I wonder if there is coffee here?’)

These have been described as not requesting an answer from the hearer (e.g. Truckenbrodt 2006; Gutzmann 2011). Eckardt argues that it is not quite that simple. Her analysis:

- Verb-end questions contain a DELIB operator in C<sup>0</sup> that blocks verb-movement.
- For a sister node Q, corresponding to a cloud of question denotations, DELIB(Q) maps Q to Q<sub>G</sub>, the question denotation anchored to the maximal set among the questions in Q. (For two interlocutors A and B, G = A+B.)
- An evidential is needed to give rise to a cloud of question denotations.
- With the A+B anchoring, the only possible answer is a proposition that both interlocutors already believe.
- Pragmatically, DELIB is ruled out when it doesn’t contribute anything extra, and V1 questions are used instead.

When it’s clear to all interlocutors that the relevant beliefs are shared (in ‘Holmes & Watson contexts’), the A+B anchoring is predicted with V1 questions, hence verb-end questions are ruled out.

## Tentative proposal

Adopt Eckardt (2018)’s story but suppose, *pace* Eckardt (2018), that the pragmatic ban on DELIB in Holmes & Watson contexts in German is either a conventional implicature or part of the semantics. In Old English, DELIB is not ruled out in contexts where the interlocutors share all relevant beliefs. The conversation between Philosophy and Boethius is exactly such a context.

*hwæþer* either is DELIB in C<sup>0</sup> or is restricted to co-occur with it, in the same way as German unembedded *ob*. *hwæþer*-questions are thus anchored to the maximal set of interlocutors.

Old English subjunctive mood is plausibly evidential in the relevant sense and gives rise to a question denotation cloud – hence its obligatory presence in *hwæþer*-questions. Mood choice in Old English is ‘not adequately understood’ (Traugott 1992: 239), and is usually described in terms of doubt, irrealis, or wanting to avoid commitment. The precise semantic contribution of the subjunctive remains to be formalized.

**In a nutshell:** Old English *hwæþer*-questions are deliberative questions that can be used when the relevant knowledge and beliefs of the interlocutors are identical.

(Could this be a way to think about what it means to be a ‘rhetorical’ question in general?)

**Conclusion:** Old English *hwæþer*-questions are not information-seeking. They are plausibly both deliberative and rhetorical. More work needed – input welcomed!

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