

Unembedded *whether*-questions as pedagogical questions in Old English

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PUZZLING DATA: In Old English, unlike in Modern English, unembedded questions can be introduced by the particle *hwæþer* ‘whether’, as in (1).

- (1) *hwæþer nu gimma wlite eowre eagan to him getio*
whether now jewels looks your eyes to them attract
heora to wundriganne
their to wonder
‘Do jewels attract your eyes, to marvel at their shine?’

Hwæþer-questions have figured prominently in the literature on historical English syntax (e.g. Traugott 1972; Allen 1980; van Gelderen 2009; Parra-Guinaldo 2013; Walkden 2014). It is generally acknowledged that they serve as an alternative to verb movement (V1) as a strategy for forming direct polar interrogatives. What has not been addressed in this literature, however, is the circumstances conditioning the use of *hwæþer*-questions. For all of the aforementioned authors, the implicit assumption is that the two strategies are in free variation. This is the lacuna that the present paper aims to fill: did *hwæþer*-questions mean the same as V1 questions, and how does this relate to their syntactic properties? Our semantic-syntactic proposal builds on recent advances in the study of non-canonical questions at the interfaces.

Data is drawn primarily from the Old English Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy* (BOE, c. 900), which is notable for its large number of questions in general and of *hwæþer*-questions in particular. The most syntactically striking property of *hwæþer*-questions is that they are always verb-late. In this they pattern with embedded questions and not with unembedded polar questions (which are V1) or unembedded *wh*-questions (which are V2). The usual analysis (Allen 1980; van Gelderen 2009; Walkden 2014) is that *hwæþer* is in C⁰ and therefore blocks verb-movement to this position. This would make unembedded *hwæþer*-questions anomalous in the Old English context, though, since unembedded clauses are otherwise not introduced by complementizers in this language. The uses of *hwæþer* in BOE are also anomalous in terms of semantics. We find 18 uses of *hwæþer*-questions embedded under a matrix predicate, which at first sight seem to pattern with Modern English. Yet, 6 of these are complements of the verb *wenan* (‘believe’), as illustrated in (2).

- (2) *Oððe wenst ðu hwæþer hine ænig þara ealne weghabban mæge (...)?*
Or believeyou whether they any of.this al-ways have may
lit. *‘Or do you believe *whether* they will have any of these (goods) forever?’

This is extremely surprising, as it violates the robustly attested semantic universal that *believe*-verbs never take question complements (Karttunen 1977, Theiler et al. 2017, Uegaki 2019).

PEDAGOGICAL QUESTIONS: We propose that the uses in BOE reflect the stages in the development of *hwæþer* from *wh*-pronoun ‘which of two’ to question complementizer. The seemingly anomalous uses constitute an intermediate stage in this development, in which *hwæþer* served as marker of a special kind of questions that we call **pedagogical questions**. These are questions where the speaker knows the answer already and requests the addressee to form their own belief about the question. This intention pervades in BOE which takes the form of a dialogue between the author Boethius and *Wisdom*, a personification of Philosophy. All *hwæþer*-questions in the text are asked by *Wisdom*, not by Boethius. Example (1) above is typical in that it is not information-seeking: *Wisdom* always knows the answer (sometimes providing it herself, sometimes not allowing Boethius to answer, sometimes guiding Boethius toward a particular answer.) The full context of (1) is given in (3).

- (3) *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. **Do jewels attract your eyes, to marvel at their shine?** I know that they do so.*

Pedagogical questions are similar but not identical to rhetorical questions. In both cases the speaker knows the answer and aims to establish it in CG (Caponigro & Sprouse 2007), but pedagogical questions do not presuppose that the addressee shares the speaker's belief.

Of the 52 examples of *hwæper*-questions in the text, 24 take as complement of *hwæper* the issue *p*, as in (4). The other 28 take a propositional attitude (i.e. 'Do you believe that ...?'), as in (4). We aim to string them together in a unified analysis.

- (4) *Hwæper þu nu fægerra blostmæna fægnige on eastran*
hwæper you now fair.GEN flowers.GEN enjoy on easter
swelce þu hie gescope.
as you them made

'Do you rejoice in the fair blossoms of Easter, as if you made them?'

- (5) *Hwæðer ðu wolde cweþan þæt he waere unwryþe*
hwæper you wanted say that he was unworthy
anwealdes and weorðscipes
power and dignity

'(If you now should see some very wise man, who had very excellent dispositions, and was, nevertheless, very poor, and very unhappy,) would you say that he is unworthy of power and dignity?'

ELEMENTS OF THE ANALYSIS: Any syntactic/semantic/pragmatic analysis of pedagogical *hwæper*-questions should explain their seemingly anomalous properties. In syntax, we argue that 'unembedded' *hwæper*-questions are in fact syntactically embedded, and constitute the complement of a matrix predicate that is not spelled out. In semantics/pragmatics, we propose that pedagogical questions share the structure $\{^{\wedge}\text{THINK}(\text{hearer}, p), ^{\wedge}\text{THINK}(\text{hearer}, \neg p)\}$, as overtly exhibited in example (5). *Hwæper p* hence codes a request to the hearer to form an opinion about the prejacent *p*. We propose that semantic composition proceeds by combining the prejacent *p* with *hwæper* in its modern denotation $\lambda r \lambda q (r=q \vee r=\neg q)$. The resulting set $\{p, \neg p\}$ is combined pointwise with a matrix predicate '*you think that...*' to yield the set of propositions $\{^{\wedge}\text{THINK}(\text{hearer}, p), ^{\wedge}\text{THINK}(\text{hearer}, \neg p)\}$. The analysis rests on the assumption that pedagogical *hwæper*-questions inherit pointwise semantic composition from the earlier 'which-of-two' structure of *hwæper*-questions. This provides a semantic basis to assume a syntactic matrix predicate in cases like (1) and (4) (generalizing to (5)), thus accounting for syntactic anomaly. Likewise, the account predicts that examples like (2), under the proposed analysis, do not contravene any semantic universal.

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