

A COUPLE OF HISTORICAL QUESTIONS

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1. Introduction

The Middle English (ME) period (c. 1150-1500) is characterized by the most extensive and fundamental changes recorded in the history of the English language. Internal linguistic pressures motivated a continuation of developments which had begun to manifest themselves in Old English (OE). External pressures produced by the Norman Conquest and the language contact situation which followed motivated other changes. Thus, during the roughly three centuries after the Norman Conquest, English underwent major syntactic, morphological, and phonological changes (such as a greater constraint of word order, leveling and vowel reduction, respectively), many of which had already begun in OE, and major lexical additions and substitutions, most of which were a result of the influence of French (Pyles, 1971). From our point of view, at the beginning of this period English is a language which must be learned like a foreign tongue; at the end it is intelligible and almost Modern English (MnE).

Obviously, therefore, ME is an important transitional stage between OE and MnE which provides some of the richest data for studying the evolution of English. In addition, however, changes involving centers of influence within England also strongly affected the form standard MnE was to take, and diachronic research of this period is vitally concerned with the study of ME dialects. While it will not be within the scope of this research to examine the causes, among the results of these shifts of influence are the increase in the prestige attributed to linguistic features of the ascendant dialect areas and

the spread of the newly prestigious pronunciations, vocabulary, etc. to other areas of England.

The local dialects of ME were not merely spoken varieties of English, but had distinct written forms as well. As Moore and Marckwardt (1969) point out, these written forms represented their corresponding spoken forms as accurately as the varying skill of the writers and the "inadequacy of their alphabet" permitted. This was not only true of records and memoranda. Until about 1450, all the literary works of the period were written in the local dialects of ME as well. For this reason numerous dialect studies have examined ME manuscripts for regional variation in phonology, spelling, morphology and vocabulary (Mossé, 1952; Moore & Marckwardt, 1969; etc.). Unfortunately, however, the few studies examining ME syntax have either primarily ignored this regional variation (e.g. Traugott, 1972) or have concentrated on only one specific region (e.g. MacLeish, 1959; Jacobson, 1970). It is the purpose of this paper, therefore, to trace the spread of selected syntactic changes throughout the dialects of ME.

2. ME Syntax

In non-dialectal research, word order has been the most studied aspect of diachronic syntax in English (e.g. Venne-mann, 1974; Lightfoot, 1975; Bean, 1988; etc.). Such research generally focuses on the change from the "freer" word order of OE to the more "fixed" word order of MnE. While arguably true in the case of declaratives, this is not an accurate picture of the situation with regard to the word order of questions. In the case of questions the opposite situation holds. The word order in OE is more rigid than that in evidence in ME. Therefore, unlike the historical development of declarative word order, the development of question word order parallels that of morphology, phonology, and the lexicon in which the ME period is one of greater variety. In fact, with respect to question word order, both OE and MnE are stable, and it is only ME that exhibits variation.

In OE all WH but only some *Yes-No* questions¹ require inversion. Unlike MnE, *Yes-No* questions could be introduced by *whether* (*hwæper=hw-ægper*, 'Which of two, whether'), and such questions featured declarative word order, e.g.:

- (1) *Hwæper ge nu secan gold on treowum?*
"Whether you now seek gold in trees? = Do you now seek gold in trees?"
(Bo. 73.24 cited in Traugott, 1972:73)²

In OE, therefore, both direct and indirect questions beginning with *whether* (spelled *hwæper*, *hwæper*, *wheper*, *wher(e)*, etc.) were in declarative word order. In MnE only indirect (embedded) *Yes-No* questions may be introduced by *whether* (gradually being replaced by *if*), e.g.:

- (2) Can you tell me whether you now seek gold in trees?

Traugott (1972) maintains that speakers used *whether* in earlier forms of English when they anticipated a negative answer or wished to emphasize doubt or incredulity. (These also happen to be the situations calling for the subjunctive.) Traugott (1972) claims that uninverted *whether/Yes-No* questions were completely lost in ME. She suggests that the pressure of inverted word order in direct discourse caused the formation of an inverted direct *whether/Yes-No* question in ME. Presumably *whether* was then felt to be redundant and was, therefore, subsequently dropped. Thus, the most conservative forms of this type of question would be *whether* with declarative word order and a transitional form would be *whether* with inverted word order. (The "modern" form exhibiting inversion and the dropping of the word *whether* of course collapsed with the other *Yes-No* questions and is indistinguishable from this latter group.)

¹ *Yes-No* questions are those which may be answered with a *yes* or a *no*, e.g.: "Can you see this?" WH questions are introduced by interrogative pronouns, e.g.: "Who can see this?"

² These citations first refer to the original OE manuscript. Bo. refers to Bodleian; ÆLF. refers to Ælfric, etc.

Additionally, in OE, as in questions still in evidence in modern Indo-European languages such as Spanish, questions which are inverted may feature the inversion of the subject and a finite verb, e.g.:

(3) Hwi forbead God Eow...?

"Why forbade God you...?"

(4) Hwi dydestu *þæt*?

"Why did you that?"

(Ælf. Coll.21.28 cited in Algeo, 1966:138)

In MnE all WH and all *Yes-No* questions feature inversion of the subject and auxiliary, and one source of instability in questions during the ME period is the expansion of the set of available auxiliaries used in the inversion. Additions made to this set significantly altered the possible forms for both WH and *Yes-No* questions. Specifically, at this time certain preterite-present verbs of OE (*sculan, willan, etc.*) were reanalyzed as "modals" (*shall/should, will/would, etc.*). In addition, it is during the ME period that the main verb *do* of OE gained the periphrastic, or auxiliary, function that it has today (Traugott, 1972; Lightfoot, 1974, 1979; etc.). Thus, e.g., all of the questions given above require a periphrastic *do* in MnE, e.g.:

(5) Why did God forbid you...?

(6) Why did you do that?

Lightfoot (1979:119) lists the chronological stages in the use of periphrastic *do* as 1) only in anaphoric verb phrases, 2) "almost anywhere" and 3) in inverted interrogatives, negatives, anaphoric verb phrases and tag questions. Stage 1 describes the situation in OE; stage 2 is usually taken to have been the situation between late ME and Early Modern English (EMnE); and stage 3 describes the distribution of periphrastic *do* in MnE.

Studies speculating about the provenance of periphrastic *do* have proposed different dialectal origins.³ Roister (1914),

³ The origin of periphrastic *do* has been disputed in centuries of scholarship. Ellegard's (1953) monumental study outlines the conclusions of some of this scholarship.

Moore (1918) and Zilling (1918) (as reported in Langenfelt, 1931) argue that periphrastic *do* originated in the Midlands. Ellegard (1953, as reported in Lightfoot, 1979) argues that periphrastic *do* arose in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth centuries as a result of the "special conditions" of the Southwestern dialect at this time:

The decisive factor was that causative *do* in this dialect had come to be used almost solely in positions where a periphrastic interpretation was also possible without changing the meaning of the whole context. This 'equivocal' *do* had an exact correspondence in French, which undoubtedly had some influence in the spread of its use (Ellegard, 1953:20).

However, Bynon (1983:110) while agreeing that periphrastic *do* can be claimed to have first appeared in the Southwest, argues that it was promoted in "lower class speech." He claims that periphrastic *do* had subsequently become a feature of lower-class London usage by the sixteenth century and that it is a marker of popular speech in Shakespeare, where it coexists with the older, "upper class" inversion of subject and main verb. Thus, the spread and standardization of this innovation may have reflected the rise in the socio-political prestige of London which increased markedly during the ME period and, of course, continues today.

An interesting question is whether either of the syntactic changes discussed above spread in a pattern parallel to that found in previous studies of the phonological, morphological, and lexical features of ME. The non-syntactic studies have indicated that most "modern" forms appeared earlier in the North of England and spread South. Based on nonsyntactic criteria, such studies have arrived at the following ranking of the six dialect regions from most to least innovative: North, NE Midland, W Midland, SE Midland, Southern (or Southwestern) and Kentish (Bennet & Smithers, 1968; Moore & Marckwardt, 1969; etc.) (See map.) Thus, for example, the third person singular present indicative inflection *-es*, the unrounding of OE *ȳ, y*, and the use of *them* for the third person plural pronoun are all Northern innovations which spread southward and are evident in MnE (Moore & Marckwardt, 1969:116-7). Therefore, it is reasonable to hypothesize that modern forms of

questions will be dominant earlier in Northern dialect regions, and this dominance will be evident in the South last. Conversely, recessive forms would be expected to leave Northern dialects first and be seen latest in Southern dialects. Thus, one would expect that uninverted *whether/yes-no* questions would disappear from Northern manuscripts first and be found last in Southern texts. On the other hand, the late emergence of periphrastic *do* could indicate that it would exhibit the opposite developmental pattern, spreading from the South to the North of England, reflecting the growing dominance of London during this period as the socio-economic center of England.

MIDDLE ENGLISH DIALECT AREAS*



*adapted from Fyles (1971)

3. Methodology

Research in ME dialect studies is necessarily hampered by the relatively small number of extant ME texts whose provenance can be determined with any amount of certainty and by the unevenness of the dialectal and chronological distribution of these texts (i.e. for some periods in some dialects no texts are available). In addition to the gaps in the data, the stylistic aspects of the texts (such as prose vs. poetry, rhyme, and alliteration) can affect the syntax and further complicate the undertaking of research into the syntactic features of ME dialects. Therefore, because of the difficulties inherent in examining dialect features of a language not only no longer spoken, but limited in its written remains, this study necessarily examines as many ME texts as possible. The following anthologies were chosen for the reliability of the glossaries and information concerning the dates and provenance of the manuscripts included in each: Robinson's *The Poetical Works of Chaucer* (1933), Mossé's *Handbook of Middle English* (1952), Bennet and Smither's *Early Middle English Verse and Prose* (1968), and Sisam's *Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose* (1975).

Not counting items included in more than one anthology or works of Chaucer other than *Canterbury Tales*, some 96 manuscripts were examined. Questions were taken from works as short as two lines to the lengthy *Tales*, and the total number of lines examined is roughly 35,000. Of the original 96 works of both prose and poetry, 63 were unhelpful, in some cases because the date or provenance proved too obscure, more often because the work contained no questions. Classified on the basis of non-syntactic data, the remaining 33 works offer eight manuscripts from the North, seven from the South, five each from the NE Midland, W Midland, and SE Midland, and three from the Kentish dialect area. (See Appendix A for titles and sources.)

Adopting Bennet and Smither's (1968) classification, this study will consider works written before 1300 examples of Early ME and those written after 1300 examples of Late ME. Thirteen manuscripts exemplify Early ME and twenty manuscripts exemplify Late ME. (See Appendix B for the

chronological distribution of manuscripts belonging to each dialect.)

These 33 manuscripts furnished 533 questions. Questions were identified solely by the presence of a question mark, although instances were observed in which some ME questions were apparently not followed by the appropriate punctuation.⁴ However, obviously any factor of error introduced into the data because of the omission of unmarked questions would be far less than that introduced by identifying questions based solely on their word order in a study of the same. Fragments of questions were also not included in the data.

Moreover, questions in the passive voice and those containing impersonal constructions of the type frequently found in ME were not admitted as word order data because the noun phrases in impersonal constructions underwent reinterpretation during this period. Thus, such constructions were reinterpreted either as new active sentences, as in (7) or as passives, as in (8):

(7) Hem nedede no help.
"They needed no help."

(8) Me wæs gegiefan an boc.
"I was given a book."

(Vennemann, 1974:350; Visser, 1969).

4. Findings and Discussion⁵

4.1 Whether/Yes-No Questions

Seven *whether/Yes-No* questions were gleaned from the corpus. These conservative forms were found in Late ME manuscripts from three dialect areas: Kentish, W Midland, and SE Midland. As indicated in the chart below, the word orders of these questions range from the very conservative a) which features *whether* in an uninverted question to the more

modern c) which still retains the old *whether* but in a question which features inversion of the subject and auxiliary similar to MnE. Both b), which contains *whether* and exhibits inversion of the subject and main verb, and c) illustrate the transitional stages predicted above.

WHETHER YES-NO QUESTION

	Early ME		Late ME	
a) Uninverted questions			1 Kent	1 W Mid
b) Subject & main verb inverted				1 W Mid 5 SE Mid
c) Subject & auxiliary inverted				1 SE Mid
	13th C.		14th C.	15th C.

Examples of the three types of *whether* questions are:

a) Hauder me ssolle any þing vynde þet by worþ?⁶
"Whether one shall any thing find that be of worth?"

Where þei wolen alle be women in ydelnesse, and suen not Iesu Crist in life and prechyng þe Gospel, þat He comandþ Hymself boþ in þe olde lawe and newe?⁷
"Whether they will all be women in idleness, and follow not Jesus Christ in life and preaching the Gospel, that He Himself commands both in the old law and new?"

⁴ For example, in Mossé's (1952:224) comparison of four versions of the same story, three in dialects of ME and one in Old French, in one of the ME texts a question is not followed by a question mark. It was encouraging to note that the syntax of the ME did not appear to be influenced at all by the Old French.

⁵ In the charts which follow the forms are listed from most conservative to most modern; # before a form indicates that it is acceptable in MnE.

⁶ (Footnotes #6-15 will cite only the name of the work and the line. For information concerning the anthology they are taken from refer to the appendix.) *Ayebite of Inuyt*, 24-5.

⁷ *Of Faigned Contemplative Life* 63-6.

b) This Palamon, whan he tho wordes herde, dispitously he looked and answered, 'Whether seistow this in earnest or in play?'⁸

"This Palamon, when he those words heard, he angrily looked and answered, 'Whether say you this in earnest or in play?'"

More weper louyly is me my gyfte to do wyth myn quat so me lyke3?⁹

"More whether lawful is for me my privilege to do with mine whatsoever pleases me?"

c) Wher shal I calle yow my lord daun John, or daun Thomas, or elles daun Albon?¹⁰

"Whether shall I call you My Lord Sir John, or Sir Thomas, or else Sir Albon?"

The existence of two questions of type a) contradicts Traugott's (1972) claim that there are no uninverted *whether/Yes-No* questions in ME. In fact both occur in late ME. Although Kentish is predictably conservative, from this limited data, SE Midland appears to be more innovative than W Midland contrary to the nonsyntactic evidence. The presence of inverted questions with *whether* supports Traugott's claims that ME exhibited this transitional form. While the lack of a construction does not prove or refute anything, the existence of an uninverted *whether* question in W Midland this late indicates that this form of *Yes-No* questions may have, in fact, "receded" in a North to South direction, but that the elimination of this construction proceeded extremely slowly and could only be said to have become complete in the fifteenth century at the earliest. A less plausible but alternative possibility is that: 1) not the North, but the SE Midland (whose focal area, London, had become an important center by the late fourteenth century) was the source of the transitional form in which the *Yes-No* question is still introduced by *whether* but features inversion of subject and finite verb, and that 2) there is

⁸ *Canterbury Tales: The Knight's Tale* 1123-5.

⁹ *The Pearl* 205-6.

¹⁰ *Canterbury Tales: The Monk's Prologue* 1929-30.

is merely insufficient data from the Northern dialect regions to indicate the existence of *whether/Yes-No* questions there. The number of questions gleaned from late Northern texts would seem to be sufficient to refute this latter possibility.

DIALECT MAP

Whether/Yes-No Questions



=== Northern boundary for the distribution of questions with whether

4.2 Periphrastic Do

All 93 Yes-No questions involved the inversion of the subject and main verb. Questions of the main verb type were found in all dialect areas except Kentish and from all time periods. This corpus contained no *Yes-No* questions featuring the use of periphrastic *do*.

YES-NO QUESTION

	Early Me		Late ME	
a) Subject & main verb inverted	2 NE Mid 15 W Mid 8 South	1 South	3 W Mid 49 SE Mid	15 North
	13th C.	14th C.		15th C.

Examples of *Yes-No* questions featuring subject-verb inversion are:

- a) *3evest þou þe welpē mustard?*¹¹
 "Give you the puppy mustard?"

*Herdestow evere slyk a sang er now?*¹²
 "Heard you ever such a song 'ere now?"

Of 128 WH questions requiring inversion, only one featured the use of periphrastic *do*. The 127 questions involving inversion of the subject and main verb were taken from manuscripts representing all dialect regions and all time periods. The one question using periphrastic *do* is from the *Canterbury Tales* (late 14th c. SE Midland).

¹¹ *Dame Sirith* 287.

¹² *Canterbury Tales: The Reeve's Tale* 4170.

WH QUESTIONS

	Early ME		Late ME	
a) Subject & verb inverted	8 W Mid	1 North 3 NE Mid 1 SE Mid 1 South 1 Kent	4 NE Mid	3 W Mid 75 SE Mid 1 South
b) Subject & <i>do</i> inverted			1 SE Mid	
	13th C.		14th C.	15th

Examples of WH questions featuring subject-verb inversion and inversion with periphrastic *do* are:

- a) *Where hadestow þis harp, and hou?*¹³
 "Where got you this harp, and how?"

A, son! *vat saystu?*¹⁴
 "Ah, son! What say you?"

- # b) *His yonge sone, that thre yeer was of age, unto hym seyde, 'Father, why do ye wepe?'*¹⁵
 'His young son, that three years was of age, unto him said 'Father, why do you weep?'

Thus, among all the questions examined, there is only one instance of periphrastic *do*, from the late fourteenth century SE Midland *Canterbury Tales*. Although it appears that one could not say much about the occurrence of only one instance of a construction, the absence of periphrastic *do* in over 200 *Yes-No* and WH questions featuring a single finite verb indicates that even into the late fifteenth century this syntactic feature was extremely limited. The first *Yes-No* question featuring periphrastic *do* cited by the Oxford English Dictionary comes

¹³ *Sir Orfeo* 532.

¹⁴ *Interludium de Clerico et Puella* 63.

¹⁵ *Canterbury Tales: The Monk's Tale* 2431-2.

from the late fifteenth century *Coventry Mystery Plays*, a manuscript not available to this study. (Negative questions examined in the course of this study but not reported here exhibited no use of periphrastic *do*.)

Even granting the North and NE Midland's smaller corpus as compared with the massive *Canterbury Tales*, one would expect to find at least one occurrence of periphrastic *do* in the later fifteenth century texts if this construction had been introduced and firmly established in these regions, especially because like the *Tales*, the Northern works contain a lot of dialogue (e.g. the *Townley Plays*). Moreover, considerations of rhyme and meter could not be a determining factor as most of these Northern works are also rhyming verse. In this regard, it is worth noting that sentence b) presented above is also the first citation reported by the *Oxford English Dictionary* for periphrastic *do* for interrogatives in English (the question from the *Coventry Mystery Plays* being the second). Therefore, the data presented here would indicate that periphrastic *do* did take hold in the SE Midland (London) area before others. These data, thus, appear to support the earlier claims of Roister, Moore, and Zilling that periphrastic *do* originated in the Midlands, as opposed to the hypothesis of Ellegard and Bynon that it originated in the Southwest. However, it must be pointed out that the proximity of these two dialect areas (as shown in the map above) and the fact that the SE Midland manuscripts are in general later than the South (west) manuscripts studied make it clear that the debate over the origin of this construction is far from settled. That periphrastic *do* eventually spread northward is, of course, a matter of history; that it spread slowly is illustrated conclusively by these data.

The single instance of a question inverting the subject and periphrastic *do* found in this study offers no support for Bynon's hypothesis that this usage was a feature of lower-class speech. Chaucer puts this question in the mouth of the son of a Count of Pisa and does not use periphrastic *do* with any of the other characters throughout the *Tales*, many of which could be considered beneath the rank of the son of Count Ugolino. The teller of the tale, the "worthy Monk" is, himself, also more educated than most. However, interestingly enough, the speaker of "Fader, why do ye wepe?" is identified as a three

year old. Linguists see children as promoters of language change, particularly in the case of, e.g. grammatical regularization. So, for example, *whom* and *who* are collapsed into one form, and irregular past tenses and plurals are regularized by younger generations. However, it is more than difficult to believe that Chaucer's intent was to reflect the process of language change. Thus, it remains to be seen what evidence can be found from ME to support Bynon's contention.

4.3 Conclusion

In general, the findings of this study indicate that the spread of syntactic features did not exclusively follow the predominantly North-South pattern in evidence for phonological, morphological, and lexical features during the ME period. Instead, the data support the prediction that early syntactic changes such as the loss of *whether/Yes-No* questions did follow the North-South pattern, while later changes such as the introduction of periphrastic *do* spread in the opposite direction. However, given the presence of even the most conservative (uninverted) form of *whether/Yes-No* questions which had been claimed to have been "completely lost" in ME, and the almost total absence of periphrastic *do* in all regions, it appears that in the case of syntax, the changes which characterize ME proceeded even more slowly than had been thought.

APPENDIX A

In the following list of works examined, the sources are abbreviated after the title: "R" stands for Robinson (1933); "M" stands for Mossé (1952); "B&S" stands for Bennet and Smithers (1968); and "S" stands for Sisam (1975).

NORTH

- A. *Interludium et Puella* (rhyming verse) B&S
- B. *Love is Life* by Richard Rolle (rhyming verse) S
- C. *On the Scots* by Laurence Minot (rhyming verse) S
- D. *On the Death of Edward III* (rhyming verse) S
- E. *Alliterative Morte Arthure* (alliterative verse) S
- F. *The York Play: Harrowing of Hell* (rhyming verse) S
- G. *Townley Play of Noah* (rhyming verse) S
- H. *Townley Play: Second Sheperd's Play* (rhyming verse) M

NE MIDLAND

- A. *Dame Sirth* (rhyming verse) B&S
- B. *Havelok* (rhyming verse) B&S
- C. *Handlyng Synne* by Robert Mannyng (rhyming verse) S
- D. *Cursor Mundi* (rhyming verse) B&S
- E. *Now Springs the Spray* (rhyming verse) S

W MIDLAND

- A. *Ancrene Wisse* (prose) B&S
- B. *Sawles Warde* (prose) B&S
- C. *The Brut* by La3amon (verse) M
- D. *Sir Gawayne and the Grene Knight* (verse) S
- E. *The Pearl* (rhyming verse) S

SE MIDLAND

- A. *King Alisaunder* (rhyming verse) B&S
- B. *The Translation of the Bible* by John Wiclif (prose) S
- C. *Of Feigned Contemplative Life* by John Wiclif (prose) S
- D. *Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer (rhyming verse) R
- E. *Adrian and Barus* by John Gower (rhyming verse) S

SOUTH

- A. *Saint Kenelm* (rhyming verse) B&S
- B. *The Owl and the Nightingale* (rhyming verse) B&S
- C. *The Fox and the Wolf* (rhyming verse) M
- D. *A Luve Ron* by Thomas de Hales (rhyming verse) M

- E. *Judas* (rhyming verse) S
- F. *Sir Orfeo* (rhyming verse) S
- G. *Piers Plowman* by William Langland (verse) S
(This work is borderline SW Midland)

KENTISH

- A. *Kentish Sermon: On the Epiphany* (prose) B&S
- B. *Kentish Sermon: Jesus Calms the Storm* (prose) M
- C. *Ayenbite of Inuyt* by Michel of Northgate (prose) M

APPENDIX B

Chronological distribution of Manuscripts belonging to each dialect

	A	B C	D E	F G H
North	A	B C	D E	F G H
NE Midland	A B	C D E		
W Midland	A B	C	D E	
SE Midland	A		B C D E	
South	A	B C D	E F (G)	
Kentish	A B	C		
	1200	1250 13th C.	1300	1350 14th C.
				1400 15th C.

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