

Old English

Review of the OE situation:

- In simple clauses, yes-no interrogatives are typically indicative clauses in verb-subject order (cf. 1).
- They may, however, be introduced by *hwæþer* corresponding to Polish *czy*. These questions do not show Subject-Verb Inversion. In this respect, they are like indirect questions in PdE: *hwæþer* + S +V (cf. 2)
- Content-questions contain an interrogative pronoun such as *hwæt* ‘what’, *hwa* ‘who’, *hwelc* ‘which’, *hu* ‘how’, *hwær* ‘where’, *hwæðer* ‘which of two’ (cf. 3, 4).

(1) Hæfst þu ænigne geferan? (Æcoll 28)

Hast thou any companion
‘Do you have any companion?’

(2) Hwæðer ic mote lybban oðdæt ic hine geseo?

whether I might live until I him see
‘Might I live until I see him?’

Alc.Th. 136.30 (Allen 1980:789)

(3) Hwæt getacniað ðonne ða twelf oxan buton ða XII apostolas?

What signify then those twelve oxen except those XII apostles

‘What do those twelve oxen signify other than the twelve apostles?’

(4) Hwæðer cweðe we ðe ure ðe ðara engla?

which shall-say we or ours or the angels’

‘Shall we say ours or the angels?’

Alc.Th.220.20 (Allen 1980:790)

Middle English

- Inversion of subject and finite verb is the rule (unless as in PDE the *wh*-word is the subject)

(5) wenst þu þat ic ne cunne singe? (O&N 47)

think you that I not can sing
‘Do you think that I can’t sing?’

(6) Whi seist þou so?

why say you so
Why do you say so?

- *Do* is found (rarely) in questions in ME; it is not an empty interrogative *do* but rather the constructions where it occurs are interrogative counterparts of clauses already containing *do*. The first attested example of *do* periphrasis is from Chaucer (see (6)). The sharp rise in the use of *do* in interrogative and negative sentences occurs only in early MnE.

(6) Fader, why do ye wepe? (CT VII.2432)

- *whether* could still be used but followed by inverted word-order (cf. (2))

(7) Wheither seistou (=seist thou) this in earnest or in pley? (CT I.1125)

- *Whe(the)r* can also (as in OE) introduce subordinate interrogative clauses, but *ȝif* is also found.

(8) I noot wher she be womman or goddesse (CT I.1101)

I not-know whether she is woman or godess

'I don't know if she is a woman or a goddess.'

(9) To telle hir if hir child wente oght forby. (CT VII.600-2)

Early Modern English

- *Do*-periphrasis (see (6) above for the first attested example) remains uncommon throughout the 15th c. However, in the 16th c. we see the rapid increase in the use of *do* in questions which parallels the development of *do* in affirmative sentences. (see the handout on *do*-periphrasis). *Do*-periphrasis and inversion used side by side in (10).

(10) what became of the kyng of Castell **made he** ony recovery, or **dyd he close** hymselfe in ony of his townes.

- In the second half of the 16th c. most yes-no questions employ *do*. Inversion occurs longer in *wh*-questions, where periphrastic *do* is first used to avoid awkward clusters (11), or when an unstressed object pronoun follows the verb (12).

(11) What didst thou loose Iacke? (Shakespeare, Henry IV)

(12) What doe you call him? (Shakespeare, Henry V)

- By the 18th c. the use of *do* in questions is very close to PDE norm. However, inversion remains as a marker of archaic style (common in King James Bible). Many 18th c. grammarians report that *do* can be omitted in questions. This happens most readily with such verbs as *know*, *think*, *say*, *write*.

(13) What say'st thou? (Lisle)

(14) In the name of Wonder, Whence came ye? (Farquhar)

- Most scholars regard the tendency to avoid inversion of the subject and the main verb as the primary reason for the use of *do* in questions. Periphrasis is more frequent with transitive verbs, where inversion would result in placing both subject and object after the verb hence separating the verb from its object. This could also explain the slower development of *do* in *wh*-questions (*wh*-element is often an object). Another important factor might have been phonotactics.