

## The status of *hwæt* in Old English<sup>1</sup>

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It is commonly held that Old English *hwæt*, well known within Anglo-Saxon studies as the first word of the epic poem *Beowulf*, can be ‘used as an adv[er]b. or interj[ection]. Why, what! ah!’ (Bosworth & Toller 1898, s.v. *hwæt*, 1) as well as the neuter singular of the interrogative pronoun *hwā* ‘what’. In this article I challenge the view that *hwæt* can have the status of an interjection (i.e. be outside the clause that it precedes). I present evidence from Old English and Old Saxon constituent order which suggests that *hwæt* is unlikely to be extra-clausal. Data is drawn from the Old English *Bede*, Ælfric’s *Lives of Saints* and the Old Saxon *Heliand*. In all three texts the verb appears later in clauses preceded by *hwæt* than is normal in root clauses (Fisher’s exact test,  $p < 0.0001$  in both cases). If *hwæt* affects the constituent order of the clause it precedes, then it cannot be truly clause-external. I argue that it is *hwæt* combined with the clause that follows it that delivers the interpretive effect of exclamation, not *hwæt* alone. The structure of *hwæt*-clauses is sketched following Rett’s (2008) analysis of exclamatives. I conclude that Old English *hwæt* (as well as its Old Saxon cognate) was not an interjection but an underspecified *wh*-pronoun introducing an exclamative clause.

### 1 Introduction

The Old English word *hwæt* is well known within Anglo-Saxon studies as the first word of the epic poem *Beowulf*. In editions of *Beowulf* this *hwæt* is often followed by a comma (e.g. Klaeber 1922; Fulk 2010) or an exclamation mark (Kemble 1935; Harrison & Sharp 1893). It is commonly held that the word can be ‘used as an adv[er]b. or interj[ection]. Why, what! ah!’ (Bosworth & Toller 1898, s.v. *hwæt*, 1; emphasis original) as well as in its normal sense, familiar from Modern English, as the neuter singular of the interrogative pronoun *hwā* ‘what’.

In this article I present evidence from Old English and Old Saxon constituent order which suggests that the additional punctuation after ‘interjective’ *hwæt* and its Old Saxon cognate *huat* is inappropriate: not only are *hwæt* and *huat* not extra-metrical, they are also unlikely to be extra-clausal in the vast majority of cases of their

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occurrence.<sup>2</sup> I argue that ‘interjective’ *hwæt* is not an interjection or an adverb but rather is parallel to Modern English *how* as used in exclamative clauses such as *How you’ve changed!*. In other words, it is *hwæt* combined with the clause that follows it that delivers the interpretive effect of exclamation, not *hwæt* alone.

Section 2 introduces *hwæt*, outlining the contexts in which it may be used and reviewing the previous scholarship on the subject as well as flagging up a number of defects of the traditional view. Section 3 presents the constituent order data from Old English and Old Saxon, demonstrating that clauses following *hwæt* are significantly more likely to deviate from the common verb-initial/verb-second patterns of these languages. Section 4 presents a syntactic–semantic analysis of this construction and makes a proposal regarding its diachronic origin. Section 5 recapitulates and concludes with some implications of these results for editors and translators of Old English and Old Saxon.

## 2 An introduction to *hwæt*, and what it is not

### 2.1 *The interjection hypothesis*

As alluded to earlier, *hwæt*, as well as being the nominative/accusative neuter singular of the interrogative pronoun, was able to perform an extra role in Old English, as in the first line of *Beowulf*:

- (1) *Hwæt we Gardena in geardagum·*  
 hw. we Spear-Danes.GEN in year-days.DAT  
*þeodcýninga þrym gefrunon*  
 nation-kings.GEN power.ACC heard  
*hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon·*  
 how then/those.NOM princes.NOM valour performed  
 ‘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*, lines 1–3; Bammesberger 2006: 3)

Bammesberger (2006) follows Stanley (2000) in suggesting that *hwæt* ‘can function more or less as an adverb’ (2006: 5), and accordingly translates it as ‘truly’. Other translations include ‘What ho!’ (Earle 1892), ‘Lo!’ (Kemble 1937), ‘Hear me!’ (Raffel 1963), ‘Yes,’ (Donaldson 1966), ‘Attend!’ (Alexander 1973), ‘Indeed’ (Jack 1994), ‘So.’ (Heaney 1999) and ‘Listen!’ (Liuzza 2000). The *OED* (s.v. *what*, B.I.1) states that *hwæt* can be ‘used to introduce or call attention to a statement’ in older English, citing the above example among others. Mitchell & Robinson (1998: 45) and Mitchell & Irvine (2000) go so far as to analyse this instance of *hwæt* as an extra-metrical ‘call

<sup>2</sup> In the rest of this article I use *hwæt* as a cover term for both Old English *hwæt* and Old Saxon *huat*, as the behaviour of the two is almost identical. Where differences exist, these will be flagged up in the text. I gloss the item simply as ‘hw.’ throughout.

to attention', although this is far from universally accepted (see, e.g., Stanley 2000: 555; Bammesberger 2006: 7, fn. 5).

This use of *hwæt* is found not only in early Old English verse but also in prose, as in the following examples from the writings of Ælfric and the Old English *Bede*:<sup>3</sup>

- (2) **hwæt** se soðlice onwrið 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)
- (3) **Hwæt** ða Eugenia hi gebletsode  
 hw. then Eugenia; her; blessed  
 'Then Eugenia blessed herself' (coelive,+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).

- (4) **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*, lines 3101–2)
- (5) '**huat**, ik iu godes riki', quað he, 'gihêt himiles lioht'  
 hw. I you.DAT God's kingdom.ACC said he promised heaven's light  
 "I promised you God's kingdom," he said, "heaven's light." (*Heliand*, lines 4572–3)

Grimm (1837: 448–51) remarked that within Germanic this use of the interrogative pronoun was specific to these two languages,<sup>4</sup> emphasising that the sense was not interrogative here, since the pronoun was not followed directly by the verb as in true interrogatives; furthermore, he demonstrates that the pattern cannot be merely an artefact of translation from a Latin original, since *hwæt* is often inserted in translations (e.g. the Old English *Bede*) even when it corresponds to nothing overt in the original. Grimm notes that it always stands at the beginning of a clause, and that it often serves to introduce speech, or even a whole poem as in the case of *Beowulf*. His conclusion is that it is 'purely an exclamation, albeit in a very moderate sense'.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The source for Old English examples is the *York–Toronto–Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Old English Prose* (YCOE; Taylor *et al.* 2003) unless otherwise stated. Token IDs from this corpus are given for reference. The source for Old Saxon examples is Behaghel & Taeger (1984).

<sup>4</sup> It is striking that Old High German exhibits no trace of this use. Hopper (1977) speculates that *dat* 'that' in line 35b of the Old High German *Hildebrandslied* may be a scribal error for *wat*, and notes that this would fill the surprising lacuna. However, his hypothesis cannot be confirmed, and given the heavy Old Saxon influence on the *Hildebrandslied* the occurrence of *wat* here would not be a reliable indication that the construction was native to Old High German.

In addition, Stanley (2000: 527, fn. 7) refers to Cleasby & Vigfusson (1874) for some potential Old Norse examples of *hvat* as an interjection, although he states that these are 'certainly rare'. Although I have not investigated these in detail, the examples given (1874, s.v. *hvat*, B.II) do not seem parallel to those in Old English and Old Saxon in which *hwæt* precedes a clause.

<sup>5</sup> 'ein bloßer Ausruf, jedoch in sehr gemäßigttem Sinn' (1837: 450).

Brinton (1996) analyses *hwæt* as a pragmatic marker, suggesting that its function is ‘very similar to that of *you know* in Modern English’ (1996: 185).<sup>6</sup> Brinton’s discussion reveals a remarkable range of functions for *hwæt*: for instance, it may serve to introduce an insulting ‘verbal assault’ on the addressee, but may also express deference or solidarity (1996: 188). *Hwæt* is also not uniform with respect to the status of information it introduces: it 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). Several useful observations are made: for instance, that *hwæt* frequently (but not exceptionlessly) occurs with a first- or second-person pronoun (1996: 185). Brinton also discusses a potential path of grammaticalization of *hwæt* from its origins as an argumental interrogative pronoun (1996: 199–206). She suggests that it has lost its characteristics as a pronoun, e.g. its inflectional morphology and clause-internal syntactic position, and undergoes ‘deategorialization’ to a particle or interjection. Thus a situation of DIVERGENCE, in the terminology of Hopper & Traugott (2003: 118), obtains, with *hwæt* continuing to function as an argumental interrogative in the grammar of Old English. The general view of Old English *hwæt* (and Old Saxon *huat*) as having undergone grammaticalization is a cogent one, and will be adopted in section 4.3. As argued in sections 2.2 and 3, however, the data do not support the view that *hwæt* has proceeded to become a category-neutral particle or interjection.

Garley, Slade & Terkourafi (2010) also discuss *hwæt* in relation to *Beowulf* and their article provides a useful summary of the received wisdom regarding the word. They take it to be a discourse-structuring formula, ‘a marker employed in the representation of spoken discourse’ (2010: 218). Supporting this, all 25 of the Old Saxon examples I have found in the *Heliand* occur in the speech of a character within the text. 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), and 15 of the 25 Old Saxon examples initiate a character’s speech, as in example (5) above. This might also explain the frequency of first- and second-person pronouns in clauses preceded by *hwæt* noted by Brinton. A number of cases exist, however, in which *hwæt* does not have this discourse-initiating role. Garley *et al.* note that it may also occur in the middle of a character’s speech, as in the remaining 10 Old Saxon examples, e.g. (4) above. Even more problematic than this is its occurrence (e.g. (2), (3)) in texts such as Ælfric’s *Lives of Saints*, and in particular the Old English *Bede*, which are far less associated 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 Old English and Old Saxon, this function alone does not suffice to characterize its meaning.

<sup>6</sup> As Brinton notes (1996: 30–1), the definitions of pragmatic markers found in the literature seem to bear little resemblance to one another. Östman (1982), for example, includes the suggestion that pragmatic particles ‘tend to occur in some sense cut off from, or on a higher level than, the rest of the utterance’ (1982: 149); as will be demonstrated in section 3, this is unlikely to have been the case for *hwæt*.

## 2.2 *Problems with the interjection hypothesis*

Stanley (2000) provides a recent and extensive discussion of *hwæt* in Old English, although without discussing clausal word order. His conclusions are much the same as Grimm's, and in addition he 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 Mitchell & Robinson 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, as is *hwætla* in a good Ælfric manuscript' (2000: 555). In actual fact, Old English manuscripts never show punctuation between *hwæt* and a following clause (2000: 525), and the same is true of Old Saxon: no punctuation mark is ever found between *huat* and a following clause in any of the manuscripts of the *Heliand* containing a relevant example (Cotton, Munich, Straubing).<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Stanley points out that Ælfric's grammar of Latin and Old English<sup>8</sup> (edition Zupitza 1880) did not include *hwæt* as an interjection, commenting that 'Ælfric's omission is surprising seeing that this word when used to open a sentence appears to function often as an interjection' (2000: 541).

So far, then, we have seen that the traditional view of *hwæt* as an adverb or interjection (Bosworth & Toller 1898, s.v. *hwæt*) outside the clause and potentially extrametrical, possibly serving as a 'call to attention' (Mitchell & Robinson 1998), 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 being unstressed;
- (b) no punctuation between *hwæt* and the following clause is ever found;
- (c) a contemporary grammarian did not analyse *hwæt* as an interjection;
- (d) *hwæt* is not exclusively found in texts connected to primary orality, and does not always serve to initiate speech.

To this list will be added facts from constituent order in section 3, making the case for *hwæt* as an interjection or extra-clausal particle untenable. In section 4 I propose an alternative analysis that has the merit of being consistent with the facts in (a)–(d) as well as with the constituent-order facts.

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. Visser (1969: 1547) provides several examples of what he considers to be SV word order with initial interrogative *hwæt*, but as Mitchell (1985: 680) points out,

<sup>7</sup> I was able to check the C manuscript (Cotton Caligula A VII) personally at the British Library. The other two were checked by means of digitized versions made available online by the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek.

<sup>8</sup> It has been argued (e.g. Law 1987) that Ælfric's grammar is not a grammar of Old English at all, since its primary intended use is as an aid to learners of Latin. However, 'when Ælfric explains that language is made of *andgyfullic stemn*, when he shows how patronyms are formed in English, when he divides English nouns into twenty-eight categories and English adverbs into twenty-three, he is analyzing English as a grammatical entity' (Menzer 2004: 122–3).

‘these can all be taken as non-dependent exclamations’. 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 on this point. Likewise, 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, within a generative framework, Koopman (1995), in his discussion of verb-final root clauses in Old English prose, observes that ‘influence of style is . . . noticeable in the word order after the interjection *hwæt*’ (1995: 140); as section 3 demonstrates, however, the constituent-order patterns found in both Old English and Old Saxon are too pervasive and significant to be ascribed to archaism or stylistic choices alone.

For completeness, it must be mentioned that *hwæt* and *huat* had additional roles in Old English and Old Saxon (and in other older Germanic languages) that are not shared by Modern English *what*. Firstly, Old English *hwæt* and Old Saxon *huat* can be used as indefinite pronouns:

- (6) 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’  
 (coelive,+ALS\_[Christmas]:189.147)
- (7) that he thar habda gegnungo godcundes **huat** forsehen  
 that he there had obviously holy.GEN hw. seen  
 ‘that he had seen something holy there’ (*Heliand*, lines 188–9)

Secondly, in various older Germanic languages *hwæt* and its cognates can mean not only ‘what’ but also ‘how’ and ‘why’. This is demonstrated by examples from Old English and Old Saxon in which *hwæt* cannot be an argument of the verb:

- (8) **Hwæt** stendst þu her wælhreowa deor?  
 Hw. stand you here cruel beast  
 ‘Why are you standing here, cruel beast?’ (coelive,+ALS\_[Martin]:1364.6872)
- (9) **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*, line 5158)

Similar examples exist in Old Norse (Cleasby & Vigfusson 1874, s.v. *hvæt*, A.I.3) – as well as in other languages, both within Germanic and outside it. The relevance of such examples is made clear in section 4.

### 3 Constituent order in clauses following *hwæt*

While in the past Old English philologists often expressed the opinion that constituent order was ‘free’ (e.g. Fries 1940: 199), more recent scholarship (e.g. Mitchell 1985; van Kemenade 1987; Pintzuk 1999) has come a long way in delimiting the classes of possible and probable constituent orders. Van Kemenade (1987) proposed that Old

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	2078	88.5	270	11.5	2348
Subordinate	567	25.8	1629	74.2	2196
Total	2645	–	1899	–	4544

English was essentially an asymmetric verb-second (V2) language like Modern Dutch and German, and although the evidence is not as clear-cut as for these languages there is nevertheless a clear asymmetry in Old English between declarative root and subordinate clauses. The vast majority of root clauses are verb-first (V1) or verb-second. In quantitative studies, Koopman (1995) found that between 0.5 and 6.1% of Old English root clauses had later (V3+) finite verbs, depending on the text, and Pintzuk (1993: 22, fn. 22) found that 16 of 252 root clauses (6.3%) had later finite verbs (though see Pintzuk & Haerberli 2008 for the claim that the pattern underlying this order may have been more common than previously thought).<sup>9</sup> Subordinate clauses, by contrast, exhibit V1 or V2 only around 35% of the time, with the verb usually surfacing later (Fischer *et al.* 2000: 109).

Little syntactic work has been done on Old Saxon. Erickson (1997) speculates that analyses of Old English such as that of van Kemenade (1987) may carry over to Old Saxon, and a quantitative study shows that this is, broadly speaking, the case (see Walkden 2012: chapter 3): of the 2,348 root clauses in the Old Saxon *Heliand*, only 270 (11.5%) have the verb in a position later than second. Of the subordinate clauses in the *Heliand*, on the other hand, 1,629 of 2,196 (74.2%) display this pattern, as in table 1. The difference is greater than one would expect if the distribution of clauses were due to chance (Fisher's exact test;  $p < 0.0001$ ).<sup>10</sup>

Clauses preceded by *huat* have so far not been considered. 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. Table 2 gives the verb position of all the non-interrogative clauses preceded by *huat* in the *Heliand*, as compared to other root clauses.

<sup>9</sup> I here abstract away from the interesting issue of the verb-third pattern in Old English root clauses (see van Kemenade 1987: 138–40; Haerberli 1999: 335). In addition, I leave second conjunct clauses out of consideration, since constituent order in these clauses is not well understood (see Mitchell 1985; Kiparsky 1995; Fischer *et al.* 2000: 53).

<sup>10</sup> The tests have been carried out using the raw frequency data; percentages are provided only for ease of comparison. All tests are two-tailed Fisher's exact tests.

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	%	
<i>huat</i>	9	36.0	16	64.0	25
non- <i>huat</i> (root)	2078	88.5	270	11.5	2348
Total	2087	–	286	–	2373

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	%	
<i>huat</i>	9	36.0	16	64.0	25
non- <i>huat</i> (sub)	567	25.8	1629	74.2	2196
Total	576	–	1645	–	2221

The null hypothesis is not supported by the data in this table.<sup>11</sup> Although the number of *huat*-clauses is very small, once again, the difference between the two types of clause is clearly 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’.

It is also instructive to compare clauses followed by *huat* to subordinate clauses, as in table 3. Here the difference between the two types of clause is not statistically significant at the 0.05 level ( $p = 0.2545$ ). This suggests that we should hypothesize that these two types of clause pattern together; in other words, clauses introduced by *huat* have the word order of subordinate clauses.

Similar results are found for Old English. In the translation of Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (henceforth the Old English *Bede*), 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* (see 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

<sup>11</sup> *hwæt/huat* themselves are not treated as clausal constituents in the figures given in table 2 and beyond, nor is the *þa* normally collocated with *hwæt* by Ælfric, since, if the null hypothesis is that these were true extra-clausal particles, it should not be assumed that they were clausal constituents when assessing this hypothesis. Instead these elements are discounted for the purpose of counting constituents.

Table 4. *Frequency and percentage of V1/V2 vs V-later root vs subordinate vs hwæt-clauses in the Old English Bede*

	V1/V2		V-later		Total N
	N	%	N	%	
Root (non- <i>hwæt</i> )	1898	69.9	819	30.1	2717
Subordinate	1863	37.8	3067	62.2	4930
<i>hwæt</i>	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- <i>hwæt</i> )	3204	76.8	969	23.2	4173
Subordinate	3467	61.5	2168	38.5	5635
<i>hwæt</i>	49	43.7	63	56.3	112
Total	6720	–	3200	–	9920

are clear.<sup>12</sup> Table 4 considers verb position in root, subordinate and *hwæt*-clauses in the Old English *Bede*; table 5 does the same for Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*. As in the Old Saxon *Heliand*, root and subordinate clauses pattern distinctly differently in the Old English *Bede* ( $p < 0.0001$ ). 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 falls well short of significance ( $p = 0.5657$ ). The argument for *hwæt*-clauses patterning with subordinate clauses in this text is thus even stronger than for the *hwæt*-clauses in the *Heliand*.

Ælfric's *Lives of Saints* is a substantial Old English text dated around 996–7. Although direct sources in Latin can be identified, Ælfric's translation is generally agreed to be very free and idiomatic (see, 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 Old English *Bede*. 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 Old English *Bede*. As a result, *hwæt*-clauses, which more frequently have the verb later,

<sup>12</sup> Frequency data for root and subordinate clauses in the Old English *Bede* and Ælfric's *Lives of Saints* have been obtained by searching the relevant parts of the YCOE corpus using CorpusSearch 2.0. The queries I used to obtain these values can be obtained at [www.dspace.cam.ac.uk/handle/1810/226419](http://www.dspace.cam.ac.uk/handle/1810/226419). Although the data are presented here in a single table for ease of exposition, for the purpose of the Fisher's exact tests I compared *hwæt*-clauses to root clauses and subordinate clauses separately.

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 4).

To recapitulate: in terms of constituent order, clauses introduced by *hwæt* in Old English and Old Saxon generally 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. In the next section I discuss the correct interpretation and analysis of *hwæt*-clauses, and their diachronic origin.

#### 4 The syntax and interpretation of *hwæt*-clauses

##### 4.1 *The polysemy of interrogative pronouns cross-linguistically*

As a starting point for an investigation into the role of *hwæt* it is instructive to look at other languages in which the interrogative pronoun appears to exhibit polysemy. Munaro & Obenauer (1999) discuss three such languages: German, French and Pagotto (a subvariety of the northeastern Italian dialect of Bellunese). Interestingly, the sets of meanings contributed by the interrogative pronouns in these (not very closely related) languages 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, as in examples (10) from German, (11) from French<sup>13</sup> and (12) from Pagotto:

(10) **Was** rennst du so schnell?  
 what run you so fast  
 ‘Why are you running so fast?’ (Munaro & Obenauer 1999: 184)

(11) **Que** ne partez-vous?  
 what NEG leave-you  
 ‘Why don’t you leave?’ (Munaro & Obenauer 1999: 208)

<sup>13</sup> The French examples are essentially only acceptable in negative contexts if at all; Munaro & Obenauer report that this use of *que* is rare in all registers.

- (12) **Cossa** zighe-tu?  
 what shout-you  
 ‘Why are you shouting?’ (Munaro & Obenauer 1999: 191–2)

As mentioned earlier, similar examples can be found in Old English (8) and Old Saxon (9), as well as in Old Norse:

- (13) **hvat** þarftú at spyrja at nafni minu?  
 what need-you to ask to name.DAT my.DAT  
 ‘Why do you need to ask my name?’ (Cleasby & Vigfusson 1874, s.v. *hvat*, A.I.3)
- (14) **hvat** mun ek þat vita?  
 what may I that know  
 ‘How could I know that?’ (Cleasby & Vigfusson 1874, s.v. *hvat*, A.I.3)

Latin also permits this non-argumental use of the interrogative pronoun *quid*:

- (15) **quid** plura disputo?  
 what more dispute.1SG  
 ‘Why do I dispute at greater length?’  
 (Cic. Mil. 16, 44; Lewis & Short 1879, s.v. *quis*, II.b)
- (16) **quid** venisti?  
 what came.2SG  
 ‘Why have you come?’  
 (Plaut. Am. 1, 1, 209; Lewis & Short 1879, s.v. *quis*, II.b)

Such non-argumental uses of interrogative pronouns can also be found in Dutch, some varieties of Norwegian (Vangsnes 2008), and the early Celtic languages (Lewis & Pedersen 1937: 226–9).

Secondly, German (17), French (18) and Pagotto (19) 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.

- (17) **Was** du dich verändert hast!  
 what you REFL changed have  
 ‘How you’ve changed!’
- (18) **Que** il vous aime!  
 what he you loves  
 ‘How he loves you!’ (Munaro & Obenauer 1999: 211)
- (19) **Cossa** che’l ghe piaze, al gelato!  
 what that.CL him please.3SG the ice-cream  
 ‘How he loves ice cream!’ (Munaro & Obenauer 1999: 211)

Dutch also permits exclamatives using the interrogative pronoun *wat*, as in (20) (see Corver 1990):

- (20) **Wat** ben jij veranderd!  
 what are you changed  
 ‘How you’ve changed!’

Such a construction is also possible for 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*.

Munaro & Obenauer discuss two possible analyses of this state of affairs: either the *wh*-words with argumental and non-argumental function are identical in phonological form by chance, or the two are closely and intrinsically related (1999: 185). The first view, ascribing the variety of meanings of what looks like the interrogative pronoun to accidental homophony of a variety of lexical items, cannot be ruled out, as there are many cases of such homophony throughout attested human languages: 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 not to be related to the interrogative pronoun *hwæt* but to the verb *hwettan* ‘to whet’ (see, e.g., Bosworth & Toller 1898, s.v. *hwæt*, 2). However, as Munaro & Obenauer point out (1999: 222), when the same range of meanings for the interrogative pronoun crops up in language after language it becomes increasingly unlikely that this is due to chance homophony, especially when the languages in question are not closely related.

Munaro & Obenauer instead pursue an analysis in which the relevant interrogative pronoun in German, French and Pagotto may in each of these languages be semantically 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 (21) and (22), but this is not possible with ‘why’-like *was* or ‘how much’-like *was*, as illustrated in (23) and (24).

- (21) Wann und warum hast du mit Max gesprochen?  
 when and why have you with M. spoken  
 ‘When and why did you speak to Max?’ (Munaro & Obenauer 1999: 226)
- (22) Wie laut und wie lange er geschrien hat!  
 how loud and how long he shouted has  
 ‘How loud and how long he shouted!’
- (23) \*Wann und **was** hast du mit Max gesprochen?  
 when and what have you with M. spoken  
 ‘When and why did you speak to Max?’
- (24) \***Was** und wie lange er geschreit hat!  
 what and how long he shouted has  
 ‘How much and how long he shouted!’

These non-argumental uses of *was* are also unable to function as contrastive focus and cannot appear in truncated questions (Munaro & Obenauer 1999: 227);

the same restrictions hold, *mutatis mutandis*, in French and Pagotto (1999: 229–33).

In the spirit of Cardinaletti & Starke (1999), who account for the difference between strong and weak pronouns cross-linguistically in terms of structural impoverishment, Munaro & Obenauer propose that a piece of word-internal syntactic structure is absent from the structure of underspecified *wh*-items. They do not state explicitly what the missing piece of structure is, but they suggest that it ‘must be linked to the expression of argumenthood, and contain the semantic restriction ... [+thing]’ (1999: 236). The correct interpretation of the *wh*-item – 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 – must be determined by the particular context in which it occurs. 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 (on which see section 4.2 below), and can be expressed in e.g. German questions by use of a modal particle such as *denn*, or by a particular intonation pattern.

Jäger (2000) and Holler (2009), within Minimalist and HPSG syntactic frameworks respectively, have also argued independently that there must exist a form of *was* in German that is underspecified for [thing] and therefore non-argumental, as in examples (10) and (17) above.<sup>14</sup> If the underspecification logic outlined above holds in general, then it is tempting to analyse the Old English interrogative pronoun *hwæt* along the same lines as Modern German *was*, French *que* and Pagotto *cossa* etc., namely as a *wh*-item which may occur non-argumentally in an underspecified form. Although it is not possible to test for contrasts such as those in (21)–(24) in Old English or Old Saxon for obvious reasons, the corpus data we have are compatible with the analysis outlined above. So where does this lead us with regard to examples of clauses such as (1)–(5)? Clearly, as observed by Grimm (1837: 449), these clauses 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 in the contexts in which they occur. The remaining possibility is that these clauses are exclamatives, and this is the hypothesis that I shall pursue in section 4.2.

<sup>14</sup> Another set of data potentially supporting the underspecification analysis of German *was*, as Munaro & Obenauer (1999: 236) note, is constituted by ‘expletive *wh*’-clauses such as (i).

- (1) **Was** glaubst du, wen Maria getroffen hat?  
 what believe you who M. met has  
 ‘Who do you believe that Mary has met?’ (Felser 2001: 5)

Since the literature on this phenomenon cross-linguistically is substantial and the correct analysis controversial (see Dayal 1996; Horvath 1997; Felser 2001, 2004 *inter alia*), it will not be discussed further here.

#### 4.2 *Hwæt-clauses as exclamatives*

Munaro & Obenauer (1999) have little to say about the analysis of exclamatives, or how the underspecified interrogative pronoun receives its interpretation of ‘how’ or ‘how much’, speculating only that ‘since it is structurally and . . . semantically deficient in ways parallel to ‘why’-like WHAT, the interpretation it eventually gets should again be construed from elements of the sentential context’ (1999: 248). To pursue the matter further we must turn to analyses of exclamatives themselves, since the hypothesis that *hwæt*-clauses are exclamatives can only be tested through comparison with the properties and structures of exclamatives in general.

Current and past analyses of exclamatives have generally proposed that a key component of the interpretation of exclamatives is that their content must involve something related to degree/scalarity (e.g. Bolinger 1972; Corver 1990; D’Avis 2002; Zanuttini & Portner 2003; Sæbø 2005; Rett 2008, 2009). 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:

(25) 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))

(26) 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 (27) (from Rett 2008: 147; her (5b)):

(27) What languages Benny speaks!

This can be taken to express surprise at the number of languages Benny speaks, even in the absence of any overt degree morphology, for example in the context where Benny is an American and you expect him to speak only English (the ‘amount reading’). Another context might be one where Benny is a Romance linguist and you expect him to speak only Romance languages, but in fact he speaks languages from other obscure/exotic language families; this is the ‘gradable reading’ of (27), in which surprise is being expressed at the degree to which the languages Benny speaks are exotic. Note that no overt gradable predicate ‘exotic’ is present in the sentence, but this interpretation is nevertheless available. Rett takes this to mean that a null gradable predicate  $\mathbb{P}$ , an adjective (or adverb) which receives its value from context, must be posited for the gradable reading as a ‘necessary evil’ (2008: 149). In a situation where you expect Benny to speak French and Italian but discover that he instead speaks Portuguese and Romanian, on the other hand, uttering (27) would be expressively incorrect. The impossibility of this ‘individual reading’ of (27) leads Rett to conclude that the degree

reading, and hence the Degree Restriction, is an essential part of exclamation: ‘non-degree readings are *impossible* interpretations of exclamatives’ (2008: 151; emphasis original).

It follows that syntactic constructions used to express *wh*-exclamatives must be able to denote a degree property (Rett 2008: 168–9). The two possible candidates are (degree) constituent questions and free relatives. The one systematic syntactic difference between these two types of construction in Modern English is that subject–auxiliary inversion is required in constituent questions (contrast (28) and (29)) and impossible in free relatives (30)–(31); in English, subject–auxiliary inversion is impossible in traditional *wh*-exclamatives too ((32)–(33); though see footnote 14).

(28) How big is your car?

(29) \*How big your car is?

(30) \*I’ll buy what are you selling.

(31) I’ll buy what you are selling.

(32) \*How big is your car!

(33) How big your car is!

Questions and free relatives differ morphosyntactically in many languages other than English, and here Rett makes a stronger claim: ‘in any such language I know of, exclamatives pattern in their morphosyntax with free relatives rather than with questions’ (2008: 173), although she cautions that ‘a thorough crosslinguistic study of these constructions is necessary to give any serious weight to this claim’.<sup>15</sup> In Hebrew, for instance, exclamatives and free relatives require an overt complementizer, but questions do not (2008: 175–6). While Rett’s semantic analysis is in principle neutral as to whether the morphosyntactic structure underlying *wh*-exclamatives is that of a question or a free relative, she favours the latter view.

Rett’s claim that exclamatives pattern morphosyntactically with free relatives rather than questions fits perfectly with an account of Old English (and Old Saxon) *hwæt*-clauses as exclamatives, since, as I demonstrated in section 3, *hwæt*-clauses pattern with embedded clauses in terms of verb position. Constituent questions in Old English are exceptionlessly V2 (see, e.g., Fischer *et al.* 2000: 106). In contrast, in free relatives such as (34), as in other embedded clauses and in *hwæt*-clauses, the verb is in a later

<sup>15</sup> Some examples exist that are difficult to account for under this generalization. See Nye (2009) for a discussion of ‘*how* pseudo-questions’, an inversion-exhibiting construction in Modern English that shares many interpretive properties with traditional *wh*-exclamatives although appearing formally identical to constituent questions at first sight:

(i) How cool is that?!

German exclamatives can also be V2 instead of V-final, subject to some restrictions:

(ii) Was hast du dich verändert!  
 what have you REFL changed  
 ‘How you’ve changed!’

position (Fischer *et al.* 2000: 61). Rett's generalization thus provides support for an analysis of Old English (and Old Saxon) *hwæt*-clauses as exclamatives.

- (34) forðan ic leng næbbe **hwæt** ic on his lacum aspende  
 because I longer NEG-have hw. I on his service spend  
 'because I no longer have anything to spend in his service'  
 (coalive,+ALS[Lucy]:66.2205)

What about the interpretation of these 'exclamative' *hwæt*-clauses? Consider examples (2)–(5), repeated below as (35)–(38) for ease of reference.

- (35) **hwæt** se soðlice onwriið his fæder scondlicnesse  
 hw. he truly uncovers his father.GEN nakedness.ACC  
 'he certainly uncovers the nakedness of his father' (cobede,Bede\_1:16.70.15.657)
- (36) **Hwæt** ða Eugenia hi gebletsode  
 hw. then Eugenia<sub>i</sub> her<sub>i</sub> blessed  
 'Then Eugenia blessed herself' (coalive,+ALS\_[Eugenia]:171.295)
- (37) **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*, lines 3101–2)
- (38) '**huat**, ik iu godes riki', quað he, 'gihêt himiles liht'  
 hw. I you.DAT God's kingdom.ACC said he promised heaven's light  
 "'I promised you God's kingdom,'" he said, "heaven's light.'" (*Heliand*, lines 4572–3)

Example (35) receives a straightforward and satisfying analysis as an exclamative. According to Rett's analysis outlined above, underspecified *hwæt* must receive a degree reading, and a natural item for it to range over is the verb *onwreōn* 'to unbind/unwrap'. The interpretation of the clause would thus be 'How he truly uncovers the nakedness of his father!' A similar analysis can be given for the Old Saxon example in (37). If the predicate that *huat* ranges over is understood as the verb 'to know', the clause then relates to the extent of the addressee's knowledge: 'How well you know the customs of these people!'

(36) and (38) are less straightforward. At first sight it appears that there is no predicate for *hwæt/huat* to range over, since the verbs 'to bless' and 'to promise' do not seem gradable in any intuitive sense. However, Rett's analysis allows for a null gradable predicate  $\mathbb{P}$  which receives its value from context (recall that this null predicate is independently necessary to account for English examples such as (27) under the gradable reading). In this case we can posit a null adverb which receives a meaning 'fervently' for (36), yielding a reading 'How fervently Eugenia then blessed herself!'. Likewise, (38) could be viewed as containing a null adverb 'earnestly' or 'faithfully', and receiving the reading 'How earnestly/faithfully I promised you God's kingdom!'<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> These readings of (35)–(38) make sense not only in isolation but also in context. In (36), for instance, Eugenia is blessing herself fervently as a consequence of Melantia's attempt at temptation; in (37) Jesus is praising

We are now in a position to revisit example (1), 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). I repeat it, without translation, as (39) below.

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

Here the verb, *frīnan* ‘to learn by enquiry’, can straightforwardly be read as gradable. The exclamative hypothesis suggests that this clause should be interpreted as ‘How much we have heard of the might of the nation-kings in the ancient times of the Spear-Danes’. Of the translations so far put forward, this interpretation has the most in common with Morgan’s (1952) rendering as ‘How that glory remains in remembrance’.

Other well-known poetic examples are also compatible with the exclamative hypothesis. For instance, *Dream of the Rood* begins with the clause:

- (40) **Hwæt** ic swefna        cyst secgan wylle  
 Hw. I dreams.GEN best tell will  
 (*Dream of the Rood*, line 1)

Once again, the verb ‘to want’ is clearly gradable, and so a reading along the lines of ‘How I want to tell you of the best of dreams’ is indicated by the exclamative hypothesis. Similarly (41), from the verse text *Juliana*, is neatly amenable to an exclamative analysis:

- (41) Iuliana! **Hwæt** þu glæm hafast  
 J! Hw. you beauty have  
 (*Juliana*, line 167)

The gradable element here is *glæm* ‘beauty’, suggesting a reading of ‘Juliana! How beautiful you are . . .’. Thus the content of the relevant *hwæt*-clauses seems to present no problem for the hypothesis that their illocutionary force is that of exclamatives.

In addition, *hwæt* used in this way appears to survive sporadically into early Middle English. Brinton (1996: 201) gives some examples from Chaucer, including (42) and (43).

- (42) **What**, welcome be the cut, a Goddes name!  
 Hw. welcome be the cut by God’s name  
 ‘what, welcome be the cut, by God’s name’ (*Canterbury Tales*, prologue, line 854)

the extent of Peter’s knowledge of mortal customs before contrasting it with his ignorance of the ways of God. A reviewer raises the concern that some rather restricted exclamative uses of *wh*-pronouns in present-day languages are taken as the basis for arguing for quite unrestricted exclamative use of *hwæt* in Old English. This is of course a valid concern, and the intended prediction is that exclamative *hwæt*-clauses are available in only those contexts in which they would be acceptable in the modern languages – though this prediction is difficult to test. In any case, putative examples of exclamative readings of *hwæt*-clauses should ideally be shown to be independently and contextually plausible.

- (43) Sires, **what!** Dun is in the myre!  
 Sires hw. dun is in the mire  
 ‘Sirs, what! The dun-coloured horse is in the mire!’ (*Canterbury Tales, Manciple’s Tale*, line 5)

Both of these examples occur in the direct speech of characters in the text, as is normal for Old English *hwæt*. Each also allows an interpretation consistent with the exclamative hypothesis. The first can be read as ‘How welcome is the cut, by God’s name!’ The second, in which the dun-coloured horse in the mire is taken as a metaphor for events having come to a standstill, can be read as ‘How things have slowed down!’

Further pieces of potential evidence for the exclamative hypothesis for Old English *hwæt* come from later texts: occasional apparent degree-exclamatives with *what* are found in texts dating to as late as the sixteenth century. The *OED* (s.v. *what*, B.II.4) gives (44), from 1440:

- (44) A! lorde, **what** the wedir is colde!  
 ah lord hw. the weather is cold  
 ‘Ah! Lord, how cold the weather is!’ (*York Mystery Plays* 14, line 71)

It cannot be ruled out, of course, that this pattern arose independently and is unrelated to Old English *hwæt* as found in e.g. the first line of *Beowulf*. However, considerations of parsimony suggest that this (rare) degree-exclamative use of *what* in Middle and Early Modern English represents not an innovation but the tail-end of a much older pattern.

Finally, the exclamative hypothesis has the merit of bringing into line a few further observations not accounted for by the traditional view. Brinton (1996: 189–91) considers, and rejects, the hypothesis (attributed to personal communication from Elizabeth Traugott, and defined only broadly) that *hwæt* functions as an ‘evidential’; however, she does note that ‘it does frequently precede a clause containing an evidential or an evidential-like form’ (1996: 190). It is possible that the intuition is in fact not about evidentiality *per se*, but about factivity. Under the exclamative hypothesis proposed here, *hwæt* introduces an exclamative clause, and it is well known that such clauses presuppose factivity (see, e.g., Zanuttini & Portner 2003; Abels 2010). If *hwæt*-clauses are factive, this explains why the intuition that *hwæt* has an epistemic element to its meaning seems to ring true. The exclamative hypothesis is also consistent with the suggestion made by Grein in his *Sprachschatz der angelsächsischen Dichter* (1912 [1864]: 367) that *hwæt* could be used with the same meaning as exclamatory *hu* ‘how’, and therefore that it should be distinguished from an interjection, with punctuation in editions reflecting this. As Stanley (2000: 551, fn. 75) notes, Grein’s suggestion was not adopted by later editors of Old English and Old Saxon. However, the evidence adduced in this article also suggests that this punctuation is superfluous, and that there is a partial parallel to be drawn between *hwæt* and exclamatory *hu* ‘how’.

Altogether, it can be said that the hypothesis presented here has significant advantages over the traditional account of the function and meaning of *hwæt* as outlined in

section 2.1. It accounts for the word order facts (see section 3), it does not need to maintain that *hwæt* is an interjection (with all the concomitant problems of this stance; see section 2.2), and it brings the behaviour of *hwæt* into line with that of a range of other interrogative pronouns observed cross-linguistically (see section 4.1). Furthermore, it is falsifiable: it predicts that *hwæt*-clauses must be amenable to, or at least coercible into, a degree reading. Any alternative proposal must be able to do at least as well, or better, on these counts.

#### 4.3 *On the origin of 'underspecified' hwæt*

A natural question to ask at this point is how *hwæt* came to be potentially underspecified in the first place. Intuitively, the change towards 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 (see, e.g., Hopper & Traugott 2003), and principles of acquisition such as 'minimize feature content' (Longobardi 2001: 294; see also the feature-based simplicity metric in Roberts & Roussou 2003: 201) have often been posited in the generative literature on syntactic change. In Old High German, for example, there are no examples of the cognate interrogative pronoun (*h*)*waz* in a non-argumental role (though see footnote 4), and hence no evidence that the cognate interrogative pronoun was underspecified for the feature [thing] – and yet Modern German *was* is, as illustrated in section 4.1, providing another example of this change. The fact that Modern English *what* may no longer be semantically underspecified in the same way, as shown by the ungrammaticality of examples such as \**What did you do that?* and \**What you've grown!* with intended readings of 'Why did you do that?' and 'How you've grown!' respectively, can be viewed as the result of a separate change, namely the loss of underspecified *what* as a lexical item. The situation of 'divergence' which obtained in Old English, with both argumental and non-argumental *hwæt* as lexical options in the language, thus no longer held.

As regards the origin of this underspecification in the prehistory of the Germanic languages, language contact and the wave model may be able to help us. Among the early Germanic languages, Old English, Old Saxon and (to a lesser extent) Old Norse display underspecification, while Gothic and Old High German do not. If we accept the traditional family grouping according to which Gothic is first to branch off the Germanic family tree followed by Old Norse and then Old High German, with Old English and Old Saxon forming a North Sea Germanic/Ingvaenic subgroup together (see Nielsen 2000 for discussion), then we can postulate one of two changes: either underspecification was innovated in Proto-Ingvaenic and Old Norse, or it was lost in Old High German and Gothic. A criterion of economy in terms of number of changes does not help us here. Departing from the strict tree model, however, 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 Ingvaenic languages and what was to become Proto-Scandinavian must have taken place, and

that there was a high degree of mutual intelligibility. One hypothesis 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 (45) are occasionally found in the *Heliand*:

- (45) **huat** ualdand god habit guodes gigereuud  
 hw. ruling G. has good.GEN prepared  
 ‘what good things Lord God has prepared (for us)’ (*Heliand*, lines 2533–4)

Here *huat* can 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 (see, e.g., the Latin examples in Matthews 1981: 255, and Devine & Stephens 1999 on Greek). As examples of discontinuity became rarer, learners who had not acquired this possibility would require another analysis for clauses such as (45). In such cases, analysis of *huat* as underspecified, 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 the 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 North Sea Germanic innovation.

## 5 Conclusion

In this article I have argued that the traditional view of Old English *hwæt* as an interjection meaning simply ‘lo!’ or ‘listen!’, as proposed by Grimm (1837) and assumed ‘by all Anglo-Saxonists’ (Stanley 2000: 541), is unsatisfactory. This is because (a) *hwæt* must usually be analysed as unstressed where it occurs in metrical texts, (b) no punctuation between *hwæt* and the following clause is ever found, (c) a contemporary grammarian did not analyse *hwæt* as an interjection, and (d) *hwæt* is not exclusively found in texts connected to primary orality, and does not always serve to initiate speech. Most strikingly, as discussed in section 3, clauses preceded by *hwæt* pattern with subordinate clauses, not with main clauses, with respect to the position of the verb. It is difficult to imagine how the presence of an extra-clausal interjection could have such a dramatic effect on clausal word order. Regardless of whether my own proposal in section 4 is accepted, these facts must be accounted for by any satisfactory theory of *hwæt*.

According to the alternative analysis pursued in section 4, there were two variants of *hwæt* in Old English: both were interrogative, but one was underspecified for the feature [thing] and thus able to assume a non-argument role. Non-interrogative clauses preceded by *hwæt* are *wh*-exclamatives parallel in interpretation to Modern English *How you've changed!*; it was demonstrated that a selection of such clauses were amenable to this kind of interpretation. If the logic of this argument is accepted, then the implications for editors and translators of Old English and Old Saxon texts are significant. In section 4.3 it was also suggested, more tentatively, that the underspecification of *hwæt* may have originated in late Northwest Germanic through reanalysis of interrogatives containing discontinuous nominal constituents.

Note that this proposal is in no way incompatible with the view – for which there is substantial evidence; see section 2.1, Brinton (1996) and Garley *et al.* (2010) – that *hwæt*, or perhaps more precisely clauses beginning with *hwæt*, were characteristic of speech, and were used to initiate discourse with particular pragmatic functions. Here we must distinguish sharply between the grammatical properties of a lexical item or clause and the way it is USED by speakers of the language. It could perfectly well have been the case that it was customary among speakers of early Ingvaenic languages, for whatever reason, to start one's speech with an exclamative; at least, this is as plausible as starting one's speech with an interjection. The 'exclamative hypothesis', then, does not quibble with the view that *hwæt* had this function; it simply argues that this function alone is insufficient to characterize the grammatical properties and interpretation of *hwæt* and clauses beginning with it.

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