Modal particles in the history of English from a West-Germanic perspective

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This paper analyses the history of English modal particles. The term *modal particle* is inspired by the literature on the West-Germanic languages, in particular German. We define modal particles here as short forms derived (grammaticalised) from adverbs. (e.g. Abraham 1991 and subsequent work; Cardinaletti 2011; Struckmeier and many others). They have semantically bleached epistemic meanings that relate to the expressive rather than the propositional meaning component, which distinguishes them from epistemic adverbs (e.g. Zimmermann 2011 and refs. cited there). They express speaker attitude and interact with both clause type and illocutionary force. For Old English, they include minimally *þa*, *þonne* 'then'; *git* 'yet'; *eac* 'also'; *la* 'lo'; *na* 'no'; *nu* 'now'. I give two examples of root clause questions here:

(1) Hu   mæg **la** se blinda lædan þone blindan, (ÆHom_14:18.2015)
       How may lo the blind lead   the   blind?

(2) Wene ge   **nu**   ðæt ic ænigre leohtmodnesse bruce, … (CP:42.308.6.2065)
       Think you now   that I any   levity   possess
       "Do you really think that I employ any levity?"

We should emphasise at the outset that what we call particles here can also be used as adverbs or subordinating conjunctions. Some clear particle uses can be distinguished though, particularly by their distinct syntax. The niche of particle use is primarily in root clauses with V to C movement. The following table gives an indication of the matching between clause types and three of the particles (work in progress):

	Declaratives	Yes/no questions	Wh-questions	Imperatives	Optatives	Exclamatives	Wh –exclamatives
tha	X					X	X
thonne		X	X		X		
La						X	X

The particle position in root V to C contexts is entirely categorical: it is a high C-related position which separates pronominal from nominal subjects as in (1) (nominal subject right of the particle) and (2) (pronominal subject left of the particle. It has been well-established for present-day German that particles are a root clause phenomenon, with the exception of some specific types of sublauses, for instance those analysed by Haegeman (2003) as "peripheral adverbial clauses". In Old English root V to C contexts (wh-questions, V1 clauses, negative-initial clauses, clauses introduced by *þa*, *þonne*), the particle position in (1-2) is categorical, see e.g. Kato (1995) for *la*, van Kemenade (2000; 2011) for *na*, van Kemenade (2002) for *þa*, *þonne*. We analyse this according to the following structure:

(3) [$_{CP}$ XP [$_C$ Vf   [pro subject   [particle   [NPsubject ….]]]]]

We assume that the particle position is in the specifier of a functional head that attracts an adverb. We take this to be one stage in a grammaticalisation process (movement of a lexical element to a functional specifier). The next stage might be that the particle is reanalysed as a functional head. The particle uses of our adverbs were, however, largely lost in the transition to Middle English. We will, however, present some evidence from Northern Middle English that there were functional head particles at that stage.

There is a second context in Old English in which particles occur on a substantial scale, though their behavious is somewhat less than categorical, and this is in nonroot clauses (see van Kemenade & Milicev (2012), and, quantitatively, van Kemenade, Milicev & Baayen (2008). This at first sight problematic. However, subclauses featuring particles typically introduce a correlative pair:

(4) gif hine **ðonne** ðæt fleah   mid ealle ofergæð, ðonne ne mæg he noht geseon.
                                                      (CP:11.69.17.448)
    if   him then   the albugo with all   covers,   then   not-can he naught see
    'if it [the pupil of the eye] is entirely covered with albugo, he cannot see anything.'

We analyse subclauses introducing a correlative pair as peripheral adverbials in the sense of Haegeman (2003), who argues that these adverbial clauses have the functional structure of root clauses, embedded under a complementiser. This makes sense of the paratactic properties of correlative pairs in Old English, where the use of the resumptive adverb (the second *ðonne* in (4)) indicates that the subclause is adjoined to the main clause CP (Kiparsky 1995).

The transition to Middle English first and foremost saw substantial losses in the use of particles: this includes the loss of *þa* (the most frequent particle), the loss of correlatives, the loss of (demonstrative adverbial complementisers), but we will present evidence that the skeleton for root clauses (4) remained intact and continued to support particle use in V to C contexts, until well into the early Modern period. We also present an alternative pattern in root clause questions in Northern English which suggests that particles could be incorporated as heads in a wh-phrase (along the lines of Bayer & Obenauer Particle use in nonroot clauses was completely lost, and we suggest that this was the result of the loss of hypotaxis in the transition to Middle English.

References

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