

“Interrogative operator” or bias marker?

Nemde in Old and Middle Hungarian questions

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Proto-Hungarian is assumed to have been a head-final language, with SOV as basic word order (É. Kiss 2014). The polar interrogative marker *-e* was cliticized to the sentence-final V, so it had sentence-final position (Kenesei 1992: 692). This characteristic changed during the period of Old Hungarian (896–1526). According to the theory of É. Kiss (2014), the V-head moved to the beginning of the VP. As a consequence, the *-e* interrogative particle lost its peripheral position. This latter change is taken to have had two effects: (i) double marking with the *-e* particle: both on the V head and sentence finally, and (ii) the sentence-initial occurrence of “interrogative operators”, such as *nemde*, *minemde*, *midenem* with the V + *-e* marking. Finally, the sentence-final *-e* became redundant, and disappeared. Data from codices seem to support this theory: in most cases, *nemde* or other variants (*minemde*, *midenem*) appear sentence-initially in interrogatives marked by *-e*.

However, one should consider that most Old Hungarian data originates from the earliest Bible-translations, and biblical texts contain a great deal of non-canonical question forms (see Elbert 2004; Estes 2013; Molnár 2024) whose main function is not seeking for information, but rather conveying rhetorical or persuasive acts. Pólya (1992) claims that in Old Hungarian, interrogatives containing *nemde*, *minem*, *minemde* or *midenem* particles form a special subgroup. She collected 83 interrogatives with one of these particles from the Gospel-translations of Munich Codex (1466), then looked up their parallel loci in other Hungarian translations from the Middle Hungarian period and in the *Vulgate*. She found that the translators of the Gospels of the Munich Codex were extremely consequent with regards to the interrogative forms: most loci where *nemde* appears contain the *nonne* particle in the Latin version, and where *midenem*, or *minemde* appears, they contain the *numquid* particle in the *Vulgate*. These Latin interrogatives containing *nonne* or *numquid* do not realize neutral, information-seeking questions, but they require positive, affirmative answers.

The presentation aims at demonstrating that the use of the sentence-initial *nemde*, *minemde* or *midenem* is bound to the biased context, this type of interrogatives does not appear in neutral contexts. I will argue that *nemde* cannot be treated as a simple peripheral interrogative marker that co-occurs with the non-peripheral *-e* interrogative marker, but it is a bias-marker while *-e* remains the marker of interrogativity.

References

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