



Variations on *what for* in the history of English

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Abstract Constructions that question kinds have been discussed widely in Germanic, Slavic, and Baltic, but English and earlier stages of English have mostly been overlooked. This paper presents data on kind questioning constructions in English, followed by an analysis of these constructions. The Old English *what* followed by a partitive genitive noun, labeled the ‘*what* partitive construction’ (WPC), questions the kind and, unlike in other languages, it also questions the number of the noun. I analyze the WPC as including an unpronounced noun that heads the DP, as is evident from the agreement on the verb. In Middle English, an overt light noun (e.g., *kind* and *number*) replaces the WPC which initially functions as the head of the entire DP but later grammaticalizes into a higher functional category. There is also a stage with a ‘*what for* construction’ (WFC) but, unlike in the history of German, the English WFC appears a few centuries after the loss of the WPC, seems unrelated to the WPC, and is not long-lived. The analysis of the English WFC involves a PredP, adapting ideas from earlier proposals. The main contribution of the paper is to present a new set of data and a synchronic analysis for them.

Keywords DP · Grammaticalization · Kind · NP · Number · PredP · *What for*

Abbreviations

ACC Accusative
Card Cardinal (head of CardP)
DAT Dative
DEM Demonstrative

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EXPL	Expletive
F	Functional category (head of FP)
GEN	Genitive
NEG	Negation
NOM	Nominative
P	Plural
Pred	Predicate (head of PredP)
PST	Past
QP	Quantifier phrase
REL	Relative marker
S	Singular
SC	Small clause
SUBJ	Subjunctive
WFC	<i>what for</i> construction
WPC	<i>what</i> partitive construction

1 Introduction

Constructions that question kinds¹ of nouns, such as the *wat voor* ('what-for') construction (WFC) in (1), have received a lot of attention in the generative literature (Bennis 1983; den Besten 1985; Corver 1991; Leu 2008; Vangsnes 2008a). Either the complete *wat voor* phrase can move to initial position, as in (1a), or the *wh*-element can be moved on its own, as in (1b).

- (1) a. **Wat voor mensen** heb jij ontmoet? Dutch WFC
what FOR people have you met
 b. **Wat** heb jij **voor mensen** ontmoet?
what have you FOR people met
 'What kinds of people have you met'

Modern English does not have a WFC but shows an equivalent with a light noun *kind*, which the translation in (1) makes clear. In earlier English, however, there are WFCs, as in (2). These have not been discussed in the linguistic literature, as far as I know.² They appear in the late sixteenth century, are not frequent, and mostly die out in the nineteenth century.

¹ I use italics (*kind*) when I refer to the actual word, single quotes ('kind') when referring to the meaning, and capitals (KIND) when the noun is unpronounced.

² Footnote 8 in Leu (2008) briefly mentions their occurrence in the OED and acceptance by some speakers of American English. Jim Wood (p.c.) mentions an American regional use from Wisconsin but this may be German-influenced.

- (2) **What** is he **for a Ladde** you so lament? WFC
what is he for a boy you so lament
 ‘What kind of boy is he that you so lament?’ (OED, 1579, *Spenser Shepheardes Cal.* Apr. f. 12)

As Danylenko (2001), Blümel and Coniglio (2019), Hobich (2017, 2019) and others have argued, the WFC appears in the history of German in the fifteenth century. They all point to an earlier kind-questioning construction as the origin of the WFC, namely the *what* followed by a partitive genitive, and here referred to as the ‘*what* partitive construction’ (WPC). This construction also occurs in Old English, as in (3).³

- (3) **Hwæt** syndon ge **searohæbbendra**, byrnum werede? WPC
what are you armor_having.GEN.P coat_of_mail.DAT.P defended
 ‘What kind of warriors are you, defended by a coat of mail?’
 (OED, *Beowulf* 237)

In (3), the *wh*-word is separated from its genitive and the entire phrase functions as the subject predicate to the subject *ge* ‘you’, with which the verb agrees.

In this paper, I will first provide a description of the characteristics of the WPC, the older kind-questioning construction in (3), and of the WFC in (2) in the history of English. The WPCs turn out to have a broader meaning than what has been documented in other languages. The WFC, when it arises, has a more limited meaning and is not an obvious successor to the WPC. The paper aims to bring new data to the question of the structure of the nominal phrase and what parts of it can be questioned. The goal of the paper is not quantitative; rather, it aims to examine the types and their structures. The main contribution is to present a new set of data and to provide a synchronic analysis for them.

The framework that is used to analyze the kind-questioning DPs is a cartographic one (Rizzi 1997; Cinque 1999) with the use of null heads where needed (Kayne 2005). The WPC uses an unpronounced noun that heads the DP. The WFC is argued to involve a PredP, as in the work of Leu (2008), Hobich (2019), and Blümel and Coniglio (2019) but is more articulated in making less use of FPs in favor of KindPs and AdjPs. Since different stages of a language are discussed, I use a generative approach to grammaticalization and change (van Gelderen 2004, 2011; Roberts and Roussou 2003), i.e. one where change is constrained by how language is acquired. Grammaticalization, in generative terms, is typically from specifier to head and from lexical to grammatical categories, as will be obvious in these structures too.

The resources that have been used are the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), York-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Old English Poetry and Prose (YCOE),⁴ Dictionary

³ In the translation, I use the plural *kinds* when the meaning of the head word is plural; I use ‘kind’ rather than ‘manner’ or ‘type’ or ‘sort’ for consistency.

⁴ A useful tag is WPRO^N hw+at, for instance, which finds nominative instances of WPC *hwat*.

of Old English (DOE), the Middle English Dictionary (MED), the Corpus of Late Modern English texts (CLMET), the British National Corpus (BNC), the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA), Early English Books Online (EEBO), Karlberg (1954), and Mitchell (1985). For more examples in a particular century, I have used electronic versions of books available on www.gutenberg.org and from the Oxford Text Archive.

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 provides some data on the WPC, showing that it questions number and size in addition to kind, and on the WFC, which only questions kind. Section 3 reviews earlier diachronic and synchronic studies to compare the data in the various languages and to set the stage for the analysis presented in Sect. 4.

2 The WPC and WFC in the history of English

As mentioned, Old English has a kind-questioning WPC, as in (3), and Early Modern English has some uses of the WFC, as in (2). In this section, I present more data for the earlier (2.1) and later (2.2) stages and examine some other constructions with *what for* (2.3) that may have competed with the WFC.

2.1 The Old and Middle English WPC

The Old English WPC that has a ‘kind’ meaning is illustrated in (4) to (9). The *wh*-element questions the kind of noun and I’ll assume that there is a KIND head that is null in (4) to (9) that assigns genitive to the noun. Reasons for this assumption will be given below (10).

- (4) **Hwæt** is **ðinga** þe bittere sie on ðæs lareowes
what is things.GEN.P REL bitterer be.SUBJ.S on that teacher’s
 mode ... ðonne se anda ðe for ryhtwisnesse bið upahafen?
mind than that anger REL for righteousness is aroused
 ‘What kinds of things exist that are more bitter in the teacher’s mind than
 the anger which is roused for righteousness?’ (OED, Ælfred, Gregory
 Pastoral Care 164.1)
- (5) Gif God him forgeaf ...
If God him forgave
hwæt eom ic **manna** þæt ic mihte God forbeodan?
what am I man.GEN.P that I could God forbid
 ‘If God forgave him, what kind of man am I that I could forbid
 God?’ (Mitchell 1985, 138, Ælfric’s Lives of Saints)

- (6) Ic þæt secgan mæg, **hwæt** ic **yrmpa** gebad.
I that say can what I misery.GEN.P endured
 ‘I can speak what kinds of miseries I have endured.’
 (Karlberg 1954, 176, Wife’s Lament 2-3)
- (7) **Hwæt** is þis, la, **manna**, þe minne eft þurh fyrngeflit
what is this oh man.GEN.P REL my again through old_strife
 folgap wyrdeð, iceð ealdne nið, æhta strudeð?
service spolis carry_out old hate goods plunders
 ‘Lo! what kind of man is this, who now again with ancient strife
 will ruin my service, increase the old hate, and plunder my goods?’
 (YCOE, Elene 900-902)
- (8) Þær sceal forht monig on þam wongstede werig bidan
there shall afraid many on that arena miserable wait
hwæt him æfter dædum deman wille **wraþra wita**.
what him for deeds judge will horrible punishments.GEN.P
 ‘Many frightened men will have to wait there, in that arena; what kinds of
 horrible punishments he will condemn him to, according to his deeds.’
 (YCOE, Exeter, Christ 800)
- (9) God sceawað sylf mid hwylcum gepance þær man to fare
God looks himself with which thoughts there man to goes
& hwæt þær man dreoge **wordes oððe weorces**.
and what there man perform word.GEN.S or work.GEN.S
 ‘God himself looks with which thoughts man goes and what kinds of words
 and works man performs.’ (Karlberg 1954, 179, Wulfstan, Bethurum 247/45)

In Old English, the KIND noun is always unpronounced. An overt *cynn* does not appear in this construction; the only overt *cynn* appears in (10a) and, there, the types of books are questioned, as the continuation in (10b) makes clear.

- (10) a. Saga me **hwæt boccynta** and hu fela sindon.
Tell me what book_kind.GEN.P and how many are.
 ‘Tell me what kinds of book types and how many there are.’
 (Karlberg 1954, 183, Prose Solomon 59)
- b. Ic þe secge, **kanones bec** syndon ealra twa and hundseofontig;
I you tell canon.GEN books are all two and seventy
 eallswa fela... **on gerime** and eallswa fela **leornungcnihta...**
as many in rhyme and as many scholar
 ‘I tell you there are 72 canons, as many [books] in rhyme and as many
 scholarly ones.’ (DOE, Prose Solomon 59)

Interrogatives in Old English are inflected for case but not for number (Hogg and Fulc 2011, 201). The form *hwæt* serves both nominative and accusative functions: as nominative, it can be part of the subject in (4) and of the subject predicate in (5) and, as accusative, it can be part of the object in (6). Other forms (dative *hwæm* and genitive *hwæs*) have not been identified in the WPC.

Mitchell (1985, 140) claims that the verb accompanying *wh*-subjects (as in *Hwæt sind ða strangan* ‘What are the strong?’) “is regularly plural.” The WPC shows singular agreement on the verb instead, as can be seen in (4). That means that neither *hwæt* nor the plural noun *ðinga* is the head of the construction but that the unpronounced noun is, as will be argued in Sect. 4. In (3) and (5)–(9), the function is other than subject so the agreement on the verb cannot be checked, and the WPC is coordinated in (10) and therefore plural. Later examples will show more agreement. As a reviewer points out, the fact that the questioned noun bears genitive case also means it cannot be the head in subject positions such as in (4). Another argument that the null noun is the head but still a noun and not a higher functional category is that it can be followed by a full DP, as will be shown next.

So far, we have seen examples in (3)–(9) where the kind of the noun is questioned. Old English also has a WPC that questions the number ((11)–(13)) and the size or quantity of the noun ((14)–(17)). In all number/size cases, the agreement on the verb is singular, where this is possible to see, which is similar to the WPCs questioning kinds. What makes number/size different from kind is the modification by possessives and determiners of the former, e.g. in (12), (13), and (15). That makes the number head more like a noun and less like a functional category, as will be argued in Sect. 4.

- (11) Saga me **hwæt suna** hæfde Adam?
Tell me what sons.GEN.P had Adam?
 Ic ðe secge, xxx sunena and xxx dohtra.
I you tell, 30 sons and 30 daughters
 ‘Tell me how many sons Adam had. I tell you 30 sons and 30 daughters.’
 (Karlberg 1954, 178, Prose Solomon 24)
- (12) a. becom on Romane micel moncwealm þæt hie ða æt
came on Romans much plague that they then at
 nihstan ne acsedon **hwæt þara gefarenra** wære
last not asked what DEM.GEN.P dead.GEN.P be.SUBJ.PST.S
 b. ac **hwæt heora** þonne to lafe wære.
but what 3P.GEN then then to remainder be.SUBJ.PST.S
 ‘Upon the Romans came such a plague that, finally, they didn’t ask
 what number of dead there were but what number of them survived.’
 (Karlberg 1954, 178, Orosius, Bately 87.26-8)
- (13) Ge þæt geara cunnon edre gereccan **hwæt þær eallra**
you that clearly can immediately tell what there all.GEN.P
 wæs on manrime morðorslehtes, **dareðlacendra** deadra gefeallen
was in man_number slaughter spear_warrior.GEN.P dead fallen
 under bordhagan.
under shield_wall
 ‘You can clearly recount immediately what quantity of all warriors there
 was in numbers who had fallen dead under the wall.’ (DOE, Vercelli,
 Elene 648)
- (14) Ða geseah selfa sigoro waldend **hwæt wæs monna manes**
Then saw self victory ruler what was men.GEN evil.GEN.S
 on eorðan
on earth
 ‘The king of victory himself saw how great was the evil of men on earth.’
 (Karlberg 1954, 178, DOE, Genesis 1270)
- (15) witen **hwæt ure gecwydræddene** gelæst sy.
know what our agreement.GEN.S fulfilled be.SUBJ.S
 ‘know how much of our agreement has been fulfilled.’ (Karlberg 1954, 179,
 Laws VI, Æthelstan, Liebermann)
- (16) Sorh is me to secganne on sefan minum gumena ængum
worry is me to say on mind my men any
hwæt me Grendel hafað hynðo on Heorote mid his
what me Grendel has harm.GEN(ACC).S in Heorot with his
 hetepancum, **færniða** gefremed.
hate_thoughts attack_hostile.GEN.P done
 ‘I am sorry to have to tell anyone about the quantity of harm and the attacks
 that Grendel has inflicted on Heorot with his hateful thoughts.’ (Karlberg
 1954, 179, Beowulf, 473-7)

The semantics of the construction determines the number of the noun. For instance, the WPC questioning number has a plural noun in (11)–(13) because asking about number requires a plural noun. The WPC questioning the size can be either, a singular noun following *hwæt* in (14), (15),⁵ and *hynðo* ‘harm’ in (16), but (16) has a second noun, *færniða* ‘attack,’ that is plural. Another possible WPC with size is present in (17) and this has a plural noun connected to *hwæt*. So, as for the number of the noun, one is more frequent than the other: more frequently plural with kind (in (4)–(8) but not in (9)), always plural with number (in (11)–(13)), and more frequently singular with size (in (14)–(16) but not in the second part of (16) and (17)).

- (17) þu scealt <ondettan> yfeldæda ma, hean hellegæst, ær þu
 2S shall confess evil_deeds more lowly hell_spirit before you
 heonan mote, **hwæt** þu to teonan þurhtogen hæbbe **micelra**
 hence must what 2S to hurt carried_out have great.GEN.P
manweorca manna tudre deorcum gedwildum.
 sin.GEN.P man offspring dark errors
 ‘You must confess more wicked deeds, low spirit of hell, before you may
 go, what great sins you have carried out by dark delusions to the hurt
 of the children of men.’ (YCOE, Exeter, Juliana, 455-7)

As Mitchell (1985, 138–139) writes, “the genitive may follow immediately, or be separated from *hwa* or *hwæt*.” All WPCs can be split or not: (3)–(9), (13), (14), (16), and (17) are split, and (11), (12), and (15) are not. The split is only relevant to the analysis of the *wh*-element as a specifier.

Table 1 serves as a summary of the data on the WPC, showing that its structural characteristics are fairly similar apart from the tendency of the noun in size-questioning WPCs to be singular.

The genitive case on nominal and verbal objects starts to be lost as early as the twelfth century, according to Mustanoja (1960, 74) and Allen (1995, 177). In the early thirteenth century, *of* replaces the genitive in nominal phrases, as in (18) and (19) (the accusative takes over for earlier genitive verbal objects). It is not clear if these *wh*-elements question an elided *kind* or *number* or just the noun. In the latter case, *what* is a regular determiner.

- (18) **what** shall I do **of** **gode**
what shall I do of good
 ‘What good thing shall I do.’ (Karlberg 1954, 192, ME Sermons, 298.3)

⁵ *Mane* in (14) is an adjective functioning as masculine noun (Karlberg 1954: 178); *gecwyræddene* in (15) is a feminine noun and the expected genitive plural ending would be *-a* not singular *-e*.

Table 1 The Old English WPC (S = singular; P = plural)

Meaning	Examples	S/P noun	Poss + Det	split/not	S/P verb/n.a.
Number	11, 12, 13	-/11, 12, 13	12, 13	13/11, 12	12, 13/-/11
Size	14, 15, 16, 17	14, 15, 16/16, 17	15	14, 16, 17/15	14, 15/-/16, 17
Kind	3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9	9/3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8	-	3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9/-	4/-/3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9
Total #s	14	3.5/10.5	3	11/3	5/-/9

- (19) Cast ye **what** I may selle **of new and old**,
Throw you what I may sell of new and old,
 savyng stuff for mynhows.
except provisions for my_house
 ‘Throw out the new and old that I may sell, except provisions for my house.’ (Karlberg 1954, 192, Paston Letters, 4, 125, 26)

The split construction eventually dies out and what is left is a *wh*-determiner, as in (20) and (21), without a kind or number meaning. These uses of *what* as determiner remain to the present day, and it is the head noun that determines the agreement on the verb, as (21) shows.

- (20) ‘And **what soun** is it lyk?’ quod hee.
and what sound is it like said he
 ‘And what sound is it like, said he.’ (OED, Chaucer House of Fame II.1033)
- (21) **What haukes** sitten on the perche above, **What houndes** ligen
what hawks sit.P on the perch above; what dogs lie.P
 on the floor adoun
on the floor down
 ‘What hawks are sitting on the perch above; what dogs are lying down on the floor?’
 (Chaucer, The Knight’s Tale 2204-5)

In early Middle English, as in (22), there appear instances where the light noun is overt, as well as those where the noun of quantity is, as in (23). These occur both with and without *of*. After 1600 (OED), the light nouns no longer determine the agreement on the verb, as (23) shows, which means these nouns have grammaticalized into heads of functional categories (Card or D) and no longer head the entire DP. More will be said on this in Sect. 4.

- (22) Modir she seide **what maner þing** Rede I aske of þe kyng.
mother she said what kind thing advise I ask of the king
 ‘Mother, she said, what kind of thing do you advise me that I ask of the king.’
 (OED s.v. *what* II 13a, *Cursor Mundi* Trinity 13154-5)
- (23) I never could learn **what number of vessels** were to go on this expedition.
 (OED, 1778, Ann. Reg. 1777 Acct. of Bks. 244/1)

In conclusion to 2.1, earlier English shows a WPC that questions the kind and number of a noun. The *wh*-element can be split from the noun, which gets genitive case from an unpronounced noun that agrees with the verb. Once the case is lost, a brief stage with *of* occurs, but the Old English WPC is continued with overt *kind* and *number* nouns and other expressions. As argued by a number of scholars for languages other than English (see Sect. 3), the WPC is argued to develop into the better known WFC. The next subsection shows this is not true in English.

2.2 Early Modern English WFCs

The earliest examples of the WFC in the OED (s.v. *for* VI, 19c) start from Early Modern English, as shown in (2) and (24)–(29). These question kind and not quantity and number and are, in this respect, unlike the WPC.

- (24) **What** is hee **for a foole** that betrothes himselfe to vnquietnesse?
what is he for a fool that betroths himself to restlessness
 ‘What kind of fool is he that engages himself to restlessness?’
 (Shakespeare, *Much Ado*, I, 3, 50)
- (25) When the Lacedemonians enquired, **what** Xenophon was **for a man**,
When the Spartans inquired what Xenophon was for a man,
 he answered, that .
 ‘When the Spartans asked what kind of a man Xenophon was, he answered that ...’ (OED, 1623, Bingham tr. Xenophon *Hist.* 136)
- (26) Consider ... how many, and **what for Epistles** he sent
Consider how many and what for letters he sent
 to this very City.
to this very city.
 ‘Consider how many and what kind of letters he sent to this very city.’
 (OED, 1657, Buccardus Prayse of Peireskius, Gassendi *Mirroure of Nobility* 265)
- (27) **What** is she **for a Woman**?
what is she for a woman
 ‘What kind of woman is she?’ (OED, 1707, Cibber *Comical Lovers* i. 10)
- (28) **What** are you **for a Lover**?
what are you for a lover
 ‘What kind of a lover are you?’ (OED, 1708, Brit. *Apollo* 15–17 Sept)
- (29) ‘**What** is that **for a Zenobia**?’ said Hartley.
what is that for a Zenobia said Hartley
 ‘“What kind of Zenobia is that” said Hartley.’
 (OED, 1827, Scott *Surgeon’s Daughter in Chron.* Canongate 1st Ser. II. xi. 273)

Apart from (2) and (24)–(29), the WFC is not common in Early Modern and Modern English. The Early English Books Online (EEBO), the OED (Advanced Search), and COHA include (30)–(34), which, like the other WFCs, all ask about kind, not number. These examples include the last I have found, so it can be said that the use stops in the late nineteenth century. The Late Modern English CLMET (1710–

1920), BNC, and COCA (1990–present) provide no instances,⁶ and current (native) speakers of English find the construction odd (although see note footnote 1 for possible use in American English).

- (30) **What for a creature** is't? A pretty silk-worm.
what for a creature is_it? a pretty silk-worm
 'What kind of creature is it? A pretty silkworm.' (EEBO, 1647, Robert Baron)
- (31) neither indeed would i have sayd any thing to his work,
neither indeed would I have said any thing about his work
 considering **what for a man** he is.
considering what for a man he is
 'Indeed, neither would I have said anything about his work, considering the kind of man he is.'
 (EEBO, 1649, Philodemius)
- (32) I know not **what for a passage** it was.
I know not what for a passage it was
 'I don't know what kind of passage it was.' (EEBO, 1668, Thomas Bartholin)
- (33) **What for a place** is Liddesdale gif a body canna kiss a lass ...
what for a place is Liddesdale if a person cannot kiss a girl
 'What kind of a place is Liddesdale if someone can't kiss a girl (without ...)'
 (OED, 1897, Edward Hamilton, Outlaws of Marches ix. 103)
- (34) But **what** is she **for a contortionist**?
but what is she for a contortionist
 'But what kind of a contortionist is she?' (COHA 1873 Thomas Higginson *Oldport Days*)

There is also no chronological continuation between the loss of the WPC in the twelfth century and the introduction of the WFC in the late sixteenth century. Instead, the use of *for* in (24)–(29) may follow a pattern of predicative use of *for*, as old as Old English, namely of “attributed or assumed character” (OED, s.v. *for* VI 19a), as in (35)–(37) from Old and Middle English.

- (35) Pæt þu ðe **for sunu** wolde here-rinc habban.
that 2S 2S for son want warrior have
 'that you want to adopt this warrior as a son.' (OED, Beowulf 1175)
- (36) Pæt mann hemm hallt **forr gode menn**.
that man them holds for good men
 'That man holds them to be good men.' (OED, Ormulum l. 387)
- (37) Bis word was **for dom** yholde.
this word was as judgment held
 'This word was regarded as judgment.' (OED, 1297, Gloucester's Chron. 142)

⁶ Where possible, I have looked at all cases of *what for* in sequence and then with a wildcard (or more) in between.

This *for* is a non-verbal copula, replaceable with ‘as’ or ‘be’ in the Present-day English translations in (35) to (37). Evidence for the origin of the WFC as deriving from the predicative *for* of (35) to (37) is that the use of the indefinite article before the noun in, for instance, (24) is similar to that of predicative *for* in (38). This use with indefinites starts in the fourteenth century and continues to the present, as shown in (38)–(40). The WFC appears to follow this use, when it first arises in (2) and (24)–(29).

- (38) And ȝit knewe thei cryst ... **For a parfit prophete.**
and yet knew they Christ as a perfect prophet
 ‘And yet they knew Christ as a perfect prophet.’ (OED, 1377, Langland
 Piers Plowman B xv. 577-78)
- (39) Þer ben but .vi. boonys whanne þat þou rekenest
there are only six bones when that you count
 os coronale **for oon boon.**
bone coronal as one bone
 ‘There are only six bones if you count the coronal one as one.’
 (OED, c1400, Lanfranc’s Cirurg. 110)
- (40) Hey, what do you have **for a speech?** (COCA, 2016 Movie)

So, the introduction of the WFC may be an internal change, using a PredP as a modifier because it was already used as such in other constructions.

The use of an indefinite in the WFC is also possible in the Dutch WFC and, there, an overt *soort* ‘kind’ noun may appear after the indefinite, as in (41), which the English WFC doesn’t have. The indefinite can be seen to go with the light noun⁷ and, I argue, is evidence for a null light noun in (2) and (24)–(29) as well.

- (41) Wat is zij voor **een (soort van) vrouw?** Dutch
what is she for a kind of woman
 ‘What kind of woman is she?’

Sentence (2) is from Spenser’s *A Shepheardes Calendar*, which is full of regional and archaic phrases and therefore has contemporary glosses added to help the reader. The gloss of (2) appears as (42) and this shows it is indeed a kind reading. Interestingly, the lack of the indefinite article before *Ladde* may show that *maner* has grammaticalized from noun to functional category.

- (42) Is he for a ladde) A straunge manner of speaking
is he for a boy a strange kind of speech
 .s. **what maner of Ladde** is he?
meaning what kind of boy is he
 ‘The meaning of [is he for a boy]: what kind of boy is he?’
 (Glosses of E.K to Spenser’s *A Shepheardes Calendar*)

⁷ My analysis of the Dutch indefinite article in these kinds of constructions differs from that in Bennis et al. (1998), who argue the ‘spurious’ indefinite is a nominal copula not modifying a noun.

The text that includes (27) also has (43), an alternative for the WFC with an overt *kind* head and again without an indefinite article. This text also includes *what for* as a topic marker in (44), which I will argue in Sect. 2.3 may have ousted the WFC.

- (43) And yet know not **what kind of** Woman I am to marry.
(Cibber Comical Lovers 12, 1754 edition)
- (44) **what for** my being disappointed of your Promise. (Cibber Comical Lovers 61, 1754 edition)

The early Modern English period shows frequent use of an overt light noun with a kind meaning, as in (45) and (46), the successor of the WPC, and some with a number meaning.

- (45) Is he of Gods making? **What manner** of man? (Shakespeare, AYLI III, 2, 16)
- (46) By her election may be truly read, **what kind of** man he is. (Shakespeare, Cymbeline, i, 1, 54)

Like (36), the complements of these light nouns are almost always just nouns, unlike those in the WPC. In Modern English, the complements to both *kind* and *number* nouns are also typically bare nouns, as shown in (47) and (48), although *number* nouns are less frequent even in Modern English (8 *what number(s) of* versus 2213 *what sort(s) of* and 15,855 *what kind(s) of* in COCA).

- (47) and **what kind of** people were still living there (COCA 2014 Spoken)
- (48) **What number of** Democrats support the court (COCA 2001 Spoken)

As an interim conclusion, we see that the WFC only appears a few centuries after the disappearance of the WPC and is different in character from the WPC (e.g., no number-questioning use). Its origin more likely lies in the predicative *for*, as also argued for the history of German (to be discussed in Sect. 3). And, even though there is a brief period of the WFC, it dies out and, instead, the *kind* and *number* nouns are overt and are complemented by bare nouns. There may be many reasons for the non-use of the WFC, e.g. the polyfunctionality of *for* and *what for*, as seen in (44). I'll turn to the latter next.

2.3 Possibly related constructions

The OED lists as one of the meanings of *what for* 'on account of' (OED, s.v. *what* D II 2b), as in (49)–(51). These introduce DPs during the Middle English period.

Trousdale (2014, 128), in his work on the *what with* construction, lists these examples as an instance of the “wide range of prepositions which could occur with *hwat/what*”.

- (49) Alle we beoð in monifald wawe... **hwat for** ure elders
all we are in manifold woe what for our elders'
 werkes, **hwat for** ure azene gultes.
works what for our own sins
 ‘We are all in various woe ... on account of our elders’ works
 and on account of our own sins.’
 (OED, c1175, Lamb. Hom. 145)
- (50) **zwat for** eize, **zwat for** loue, no man him ne with-seide.
what for fear what for love, no man him not against-spoke
 ‘No man spoke against him, either on account of fear or on account of love.’
 (OED, 1290, Beket 391 in S. Eng. Leg. I. 117)
- (51) Wherefor the seid reuerend fader, ..., **what for** renownecyng of
Therefore the said reverend father concerning dispensing of
 administracion of the seid testament, **what for** other cawses,
administration of the mentioned will, concerning other cases,
 may not now take vpon them the administracion thereof
may not now take upon them the administration thereof
 ‘Therefore the said reverend father, ..., concerning the dispensing of the
 administration of the mentioned will, concerning other cases, may
 not now take upon himself its administration.’ (1470, Paston Letters p. 420)

These combinations often start the sentence and may be topic markers moved in their entirety to the CP-domain (as argued by Felser and Britain 2007 for the *what with* construction). Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, *Troilus & Cresseyde*, and Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* have quite a number, as in (52)–(55).

- (52) Thisse seven yeer hath seten palamoun Forpyned,
These seven years has sat Palamon suffering
what for wo and for distresse.
what for woe and for distress
 ‘These seven years Palamon has sat wasted by suffering, on account
 of woe and distress. (Chaucer, Knight’s Tale 1452)
- (53) Hir thoughte that a lady sholde hire spare,
her thought that a lady should her hold back
What for hire kynrede and hir nortelrie ...
regarding her family and her education
 ‘She thought that a lady should be aloof, about her family and her
 education’. (Chaucer, Reeve’s Tale 3966)

- (54) Ful lusty was the weder benigne, For which the foweles,
Full pleasant was the weather mild, For which the birds
 agayn the sonne sheene, **What for** the sesoun and the yonge grene,
against the sun bright regarding the season and the young greenery
 Ful loude songen hire affecciouns.
Full loudly sang their desires
 ‘Full pleasant was the weather and mild, for which the birds, against the
 bright sun, regarding the season and the young greenery, loudly sang
 of their desires’. (Chaucer, Square’s Tale 52)
- (55) Thus, **what for** joie and **what for** drede, Al is foryeten ate nede.
Thus regarding joy and regarding dread all is forgotten at need
 ‘Thus, regarding joy and dread, all is forgotten when needed.’
 (Gower, Confessio Amantis 4.701)

The WFC, e.g. in (30)–(33), often resembles the topic marking *what for* because both are preposed. It could be speculated that, after a period of overlap, only the topic function prevailed. In this respect, it is interesting that Dutch (and German) have the WFC but do not use the *wh*-element and *for* as a topic marker.

Concluding Sect. 2, the WPC occurs in Old English to question kind and number and disappears with the loss of the genitive case at the beginning of Middle English to be replaced by a construction with overt *kind* and *number* nouns. Some centuries after the loss of the WPC, the WFC appears in English with constructions that express a meaning of ‘kind’. This construction is probably a mix with a predicative *for*-construction, as Hobich (2017, 2019) and Blümel and Coniglio (2019) also argue for German. I will turn to those analyses next.

3 The diachrony of the WFC and a synchronic structure

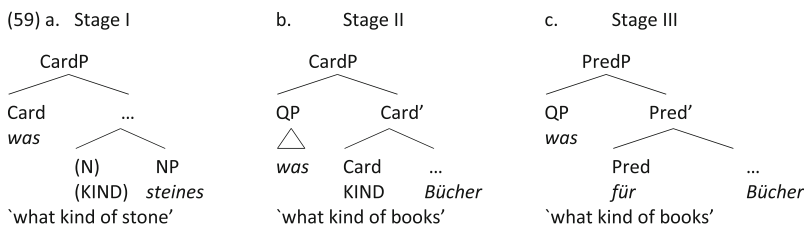
The WFC construction has been identified in German and Dutch (Bennis 1983; den Besten 1985; Corver 1991), Baltic and Slavic (Danylenko 2001; Kwon 2015) and Scandinavian (Leu 2008; Vangsnes 2008a). In this section, I first review two proposals that account for the shift from the earlier WPC to the later WFC in the history of German. Hobich (2017, 2019) and Blümel and Coniglio (2019) examine the diachrony of German and independently come to similar conclusions on the origin of the WFC but not on the analysis and the changes. Then, I look at Leu’s (2008) proposal that accounts for the Germanic WFC and split WFC. Some issues involve the status of the *for*-phrase and the nature of the functional category that is covert.

Based on work by Behaghel (1923), Hobich (2017, 2019) and Blümel and Coniglio (2019) argue that the modern WFC originates in a construction of *was* with

a genitive NP, as in (56) from Early New High German. The earliest WFCs appear in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and are split, as (57) and (58) show.

- (56) **was** **groser** **froiden** do inne were
what great.GEN.P pleasures.GEN.P EXPL in was.S.PST.SUBJ
 '[wonders] what (kinds of) great pleasures therein might be.'
 (Hobich, Mannen, Straßburg 1352)
- (57) **was** Christus mit seinen jungern **für** **speyz** genossen hat
what Christ with his disciples FOR food.NOM/GEN enjoyed has
 'What food Christ enjoyed with his disciples.' (Hobich, Eyb 1474)
- (58) Dieser erzehlete vns/ **was** die Hispanier **für ein-en Wahn** hetten
this told us what the Spaniards for a-ACC madness had.SBJV
 'He told us how mad the Spaniards were ...' (Blümel and Coniglio, Raleigh, 1599)

As for the analysis, Hobich (2017, 2019) argues that WPCs and WFCs consist of a Card(inal)P(hrase) in the early stages and a Pred(icate)P(hrase) in the later one. Following Roehrs and Sapp (2018), she claims that the quantifier can be a head or a phrase and that the decisive argument for being a head assigns genitive case. Since *was* assigns genitive, she assumes it is a head in Stage I and changes to a phrase in Stages II and III, as in (59).



This change from head to specifier would involve a counterexample to the Head Preference Principle (see, e.g., van Gelderen 2004; Jäger 2005, 2010), which states that reanalysis proceeds from more complex to less complex structures, i.e. from specifier to head. It is not actually necessary to claim that *was* assigns genitive because the closer null *KIND* head could also have assigned case. That means *was* could be a specifier of this null head and then the Head Preference Principle would not be violated.

In Stage II, the unpronounced noun *KIND* in (59b) moves from an *N* to a higher position, and the *wh*-element is reanalyzed as specifier of the *CardP*⁸ and no longer assigns genitive. Stage III is one of a predicative structure with *für* in the *Pred* head, where *für* is a copula. In my own analysis in the next section, I follow Hobich in the reanalysis of *KIND* nouns to higher functional heads (typical for

⁸ These changes may be related because *KIND* replaces *was* as the head of the *CardP*, but this is not clear.

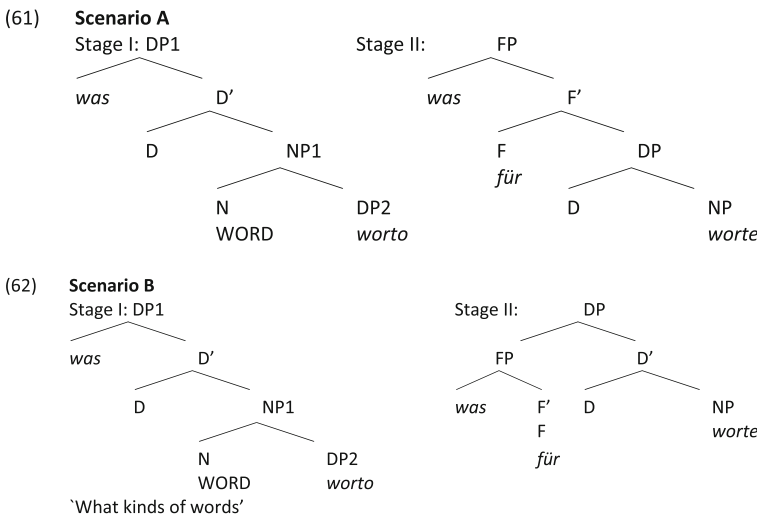
grammaticalization) and in regarding ‘for’ as a Pred head. I will provide evidence for these positions there. However, I will argue that the *wh*-element has always been a phrase, in accordance with the Head Preference Principle.

Blümel and Coniglio (2019) present a similar account of the historical development of the WPC to the WFC. They see the loss of the genitive on adjectives as a trigger for the loss of the WPC. The appearance of the WFC is linked to the use of *für* as “contamination with predicative structures headed by *für*” (2019, 146), as in (60), where the copula in the translation shows the predication.

- (60) er mercket das sie in **für ain gûten man** hat
he notices that she him for a good man has
 ‘He notices that she considers him (to be) a good man.’ (Neidhart 1486, Blümel and Coniglio 2019, 142)

In Sect. 2, I have argued that a similar mixture of predicative and quantificational constructions occurred in English.

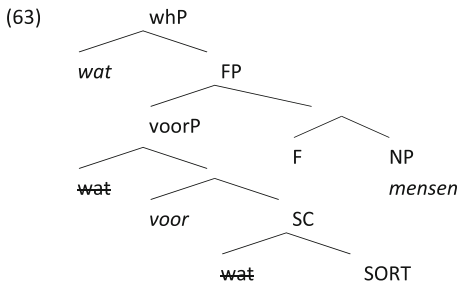
Blümel and Coniglio (2019) present two possible reanalyses from the WPC to the WFC, as shown as (61) and (62), respectively. In both scenarios, the early WPC is comprised of two DPs, with a silent noun, and the change to the WFC involves a change to only one DP; the other DP has grammaticalized. Their Stage II has a generic functional phrase (FP), headed by *für*, either above the DP with the DP a complement of *für* in (61), or the FP in the specifier of the DP with *was für* a complex determiner in (62). They present advantages for both but do not favor one over the other.



Like Hobich, Blümel and Coniglio use empty nouns but make no use of KindP or CardP, instead relying on a less specific FP. Split constructions, as in German (57), (58), and Old English (3)–(9), are easy to account for when the *wh*-element is a Specifier as in Hobich’s Stages II and III in (59) and in Blümel and Coniglio’s (61).

That is much harder when *was für* is a head in (59a) or a complex determiner in (62). In the next section, I will use Hobich's and Blümel and Coniglio's idea of where the predicative use of 'for' comes from but with slightly different structures.

For synchronic stages of the Germanic WFC, Leu (2008, 3) advocates a unitary DP for both WFCs and split-WFCs, as in (63) for Dutch. For Leu, in the split-WFC, movement of the FP occurs and then remnant movement of the *wh*-element to the specifier of the CP.



In (63), *voor* and its SC complement with a null SORT light noun are in the specifier of an FP that modifies the main noun. The advantage is that it accommodates what looks like an indefinite article before the noun in Dutch (41) and the null noun in English (2). This article is not a real indefinite as it appears before plurals, as (64) shows, and is the article of the empty noun SORT in (63).

- (64) Wat voor een zinnen **zijn** dat! Dutch
what voor a sentences be.P that
 'What kind of (strange) sentences those are.'

The agreement on Dutch (and German) verbs with a WFC as subject is determined by the noun in (65), in both the split or non-split construction. That is accounted for in (63) because *mensen* 'people' is the head of the entire DP.

- (65) a. Wat voor mensen **hebben** ons ontmoet? Dutch
what for people have.P us met
 b. Wat **hebben** voor mensen ons ontmoet?
what have.P for people us met
 'What kinds of people met us?'

I will adopt most of Leu's analysis of the WFC for the Early Modern English WPC data. Thus, I use the null light noun, which accommodates the optional article; the covert noun, which is the head of the WFC; and the predicative nature of *for*. My labels differ slightly, e.g. *voorP* is PredP and SORT is KIND. As far as I can see, this difference is terminological, not substantive.

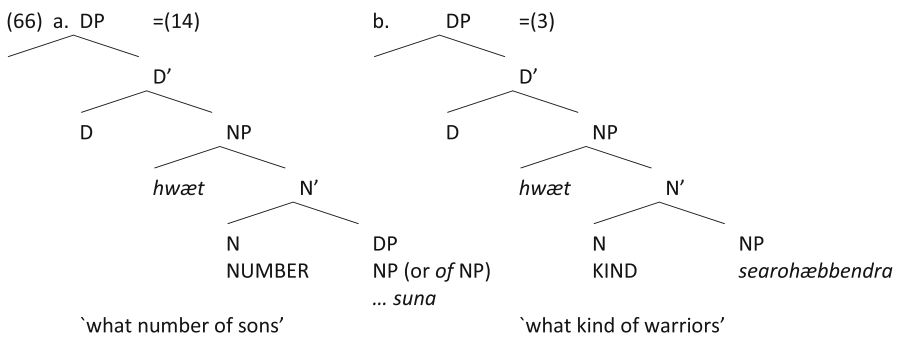
Concluding Sect. 3, analyses for the WPC and WFC are not yet agreed upon. Questions that remain involve the inclusion of empty nouns, the types of functional categories, and the position of ‘what’ and ‘for’. In the below, I adapt the ideas from Hobich, Blümel and Coniglio, and Leu on these issues.

4 The English WPC and WFC

In this section, I adapt the analyses of the previous section for the WPC (4.1) and WFC (4.2). In Sect. 2, I have argued, mainly on the basis of verbal agreement data, that the unpronounced KIND and NUMBER nouns are the heads of the entire DP in the WPC. In later English, there is evidence that the overt nouns are no longer the heads of the construction but in higher functional heads, as seen in the change to (23). This change reflects a grammaticalization process (see also Vangsnes 2008a, b).

4.1 The WPC

Based on the considerations of the previous section, I propose (66) for the Old and Early Middle English WPC: (66a) where *hwæt* questions the NUMBER noun and (66b) where it questions the KIND noun. Because the *wh*-element and its genitive can be split in the English WPC, the *wh*-element is a phrase preposed to a specifier position. There is some controversy whether or not there is a DP in Old English (because articles are absent; see Wood 2007), but nothing hinges on including it in (66).



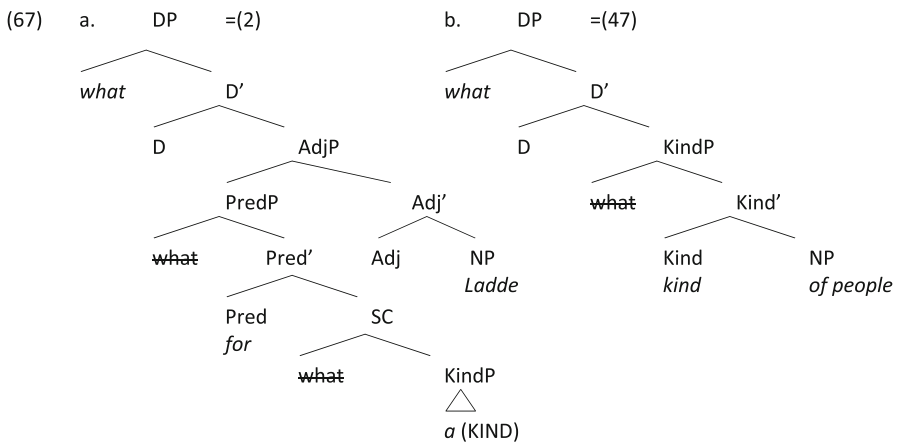
As argued in Sect. 2, the silent nouns in (66) are responsible for the singular agreement on the verb in the WPC, unlike in the Dutch WFC (63), where the nouns have grammaticalized into higher functional categories and where the lower N agrees with the verb. The number and size questioning WPCs in (12), (13), and (15) have genitive nouns accompanied by possessives or demonstratives; kind WPCs, as in (4)–(9), never have. That’s reflected in the complements of the NUMBER and

KIND null nouns in (66), DP and NP, respectively. This means the latter are closer to being higher functional categories than the former. However, since both still determine the agreement on the verb, I will argue they are still nouns. Because size nouns question quantity, I assume their structure is as in (66a).

In (66), the null/silent NUMBER and KIND nouns assign genitive case to the head noun. When the genitive case is lost, as in (18) and (19), *of* replaces it and an overt noun appears. Even though these changes are both towards a more analytic stage, they are not related since the one can appear without the other, as in (18). In (66a,b), *hwæt* can be moved to the specifier of the CP, resulting in a split WPC.

4.2 The WFC and the overt light noun

I adopt (67a) for the later WFC and (67b) for the overt *kind* nominal, the successor of the WPC in the more analytic Middle English stage. The *for* in (67a) occupies the head of a PredP, which modifies the noun. The PredP is similar to Hobich's in (60c), to Blümel and Coniglio's FP in (61), and to Leu's voorP in (63), and the KindP is adapted from Zamparelli (2000). One of the reasons for the use of an entire PredP as a modifier is that constructions like (29)–(34), with a PredP complement, may have prompted the change. Another reason is that there is a frequent indefinite article although, unlike in Dutch (41), there is never an overt *kind*, *manner*, *sort* noun with *for* in the English WFC.



What is questioned in the WFC is the kind of noun not the number, unlike in the Old English WPC. Modern English uses (67b) instead of the WFC, and its structure has an overt *kind* noun, as in (47), which assigns case by means of *of*, just like other nouns do in English. In both (67a,b), the agreement with the verb depends on the questioned noun. In (67a), that is the noun that projects into the root DP, i.e. *Ladde*; in (67b), the light nouns have grammaticalized into higher functional heads (see Selkirk 1977; Koptjevskaja-Tamm 2001 on partitives and pseudo-partitives) and

that's why the lower noun *people* agrees with the verb. Modern English also has an overt *number* noun, as in (48), which would involve an overt number head in (67b), and again the verb agrees with the questioned noun, indicating that *number* (and *sort*) are classifiers.

Concluding Sect. 4, the Old English WPC involves a kind, size, or number reading, which can be captured by means of an unpronounced noun in (66). After the loss of the WPC, there are instances of overt *kind* nouns, appearing as *maner* 'manner' in (22), that continue into Modern English. Their structure has an overt light noun which is in a higher position. This is shown in (67b). The English WFC can be captured by (67a) using Leu's structure with a null noun that accommodates the frequent indefinite article and a PredP modifier.

5 Conclusion

The Old English WPC questions the kind, size, and number of the noun but, after the genitive case is lost, the construction disappears. Instead, a construction with an overt noun, e.g. *kind* and *number*, replaces it. The English WFC appears a few centuries after the loss of the genitive, seems unrelated because it only questions kind, and probably originates in another predicative construction. The indefinite article (in (24)–(29)) is frequent in the early WFC, and this provides a clue to the analysis, namely with a null KIND noun and a PredP modifier. A predicate use with *for* is used at the same time, and this may have been the model for a PredP modifier.

WPCs and WFCs continue to interest linguists because they provide insight into the architecture of the nominal, e.g. the light nouns used and their hierarchy. Nominal structures may include information on number and kind, and these can be questioned through a variety of structures, e.g. using light nouns, as in (66) and (67b), or a PredP with a light noun in its complement, as in (67a). As morphological genitive case is lost and the language turns more analytic, the evidence for a null, unpronounced noun is less obvious and overt nouns are used.

Some of the changes that have been discussed are (a) from null nouns to overt ones, as from (3) to (22), (b) from low to high positions, as in from (22) to (23), and (c) the loss of the WFC in English. The first change is due to the loss of overt case, necessitating overt nouns. The second change is typically seen in grammaticalization; namely, when a lexical item moves, it may be reanalyzed in a higher position (see Roberts and Roussou 2003 and van Gelderen 2004). The third change is probably due to the complexity of (67a). Language learners would need very robust evidence for such complex structures. The question may be asked why the complex WFC was introduced in the first place, and that would have to be found in how 'extravagant' sentences like (2) and (24)–(29) are; that is, they would be used for emphatic and stylistic effect. Future research could look at the interaction between changes due to economy and to a need for expressiveness or, as von der Gabelentz (1901, 256) put it, between comfort and clarity.

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