

# Tell you what. English has quexistentials.\*

DANIEL K. E. REISINGER  
*University of British Columbia*

## 1 Introduction

A common claim in the recent literature on quexistentials is that English lacks forms that can function *both* as question words *and* as existential indefinites (e.g., Roelofsen et al. 2019; Hengeveld et al. 2023). In this regard, English seems to differ from other languages which have such forms. Consider, for instance, German *was* and Dutch *wat* which can either mean ‘what’ or ‘something’, as shown in (1) and (2). In English, on the other hand, the Wh-word *what* is usually restricted to the interrogative reading (3a), while the indefinite reading must be realized with a different lexical item, namely *something* (3b).<sup>1</sup>

(1) *German:*

- a. **Was** hat Saoirse gehört?  
QUEx has Saoirse heard  
‘**What** did Saoirse hear?’
- b. Saoirse hat **was** gehört.  
Saoirse has QUEx heard  
‘Saoirse heard **something**.’

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\* In September 2016, when I started my journey at UBC, Hotze was the first faculty member that approached me. Over a cup of coffee at the infamous *Bean around the World*, we immediately bonded over our shared history at the University of Alberta and a profound fascination with semantics. I felt privileged to have found such a knowledgeable, kind, and witty mentor. Many years have passed since then, filled with research projects, co-authored papers, and the occasional pandemic, but as for Hotze, not much has changed. He is still as knowledgeable, kind, and witty as he was back then, and I have nothing but affection for him and his guidance. *Mögest Du auf ewig jung bleiben!*

<sup>1</sup> Some English indefinites, particularly *somewhat*, *somehow*, and *somewhere*, are clearly derived from Wh-words. However, since these forms also involve additional overt morphology, namely the presence of *some-*, they tend not to be treated as “proper” quexistentials (e.g., Hengeveld et al. 2023).

(2) *Dutch:*

- a. **Wat** heeft Saoirse gehoord?  
QUEx has Saoirse heard  
'**What** did Saoirse hear?'
- b. Saoirse heeft **wat** gehoord.  
Saoirse has QUEx heard  
'Saoirse heard **something**.'

(3) *English:*

- a. **What** did Saoirse hear?
- b. Saoirse heard **something** / **#what**.

While this pattern holds for English by and large, I will argue that the absence of quexistentials in the language is not absolute. At least in a small set of idiomatic expressions, Wh-indefinites seem to have found a niche. Consider, for instance, the bolded constructions in (4) and (5).

- (4) Oh, now, listen. **I tell you what**. I have an idea. Let me finish this while you go home and have a long hot bath, and I'll call round, we'll have dinner later, okay?

*(Bridget Jones's Diary [2001 film])*

- (5) **You know what?** I just realized. That's my journal. I bought it at a bookstore down the street.

*(Jody Elizabeth Gehrman: Notes from the Backseat)*

In these constructions, the Wh-word *what* obviously does not serve as an interrogative but rather as an indefinite. This can be highlighted by substituting *what* with *something*, as in (6) and (7). The interpretation of the utterance remains unaffected by this substitution.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Some speakers might prefer the use of the *will* future in (6), i.e., *I'll tell you something...*, though a look at example sentences from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)* suggests that the version without *will* is in use as well, as exemplified in (i):

- (i) Well, **I tell you something**. The crew were fabulous, fabulous. So don't say anything wrong with the crew. They really did a great, great job.

*(CNN: "Sick at Sea" [2003])*

- (6) Oh, now, listen. **I tell you something.** I have an idea. Let me finish this while you go home and have a long hot bath, and I'll call round, we'll have dinner later, okay?
- (7) **You know something?** I just realized. That's my journal. I bought it at a bookstore down the street.

Occasionally, both types of indefinites may even occur together, as in (8) and (9), highlighting that *what* and *something* serve a similar function in these constructions.

- (8) **I'll tell you what. I'll tell you something.** My friends, if I had to lose Jonny to anyone, I can't imagine a more perfect woman than Halley. *(Serendipity* [2001 film])
- (9) **You know what? You know something? You know something?** If you had told us one year ago that we were going to come in third in Iowa, we would have given anything for that.  
*(The New York Times: "Howard Dean's Remarks to His Supporters" [2004-01-19])*

The remainder of this squib is dedicated to these two intriguing quexistential constructions. First, in Section 2, I will show how we can distinguish the indefinite *tell you what* and *you know what* constructions from other English utterances which look similar on the surface but pattern quite differently in certain crucial ways. Section 3 will examine the form and function of the *tell you what* construction, while Section 4 will do the same for the *you know what* construction. Once this has been done, Section 5 will present a short diachronic corpus survey, highlighting that both constructions do not represent a recent innovation but have — in some form or other — been in use for several hundred years. A short summary in Section 6 concludes this investigation.

## 2 Similar constructions

Before we examine the indefinite *tell you what* and *you know what* constructions in detail, it is necessary to distinguish them from some other English constructions which look similar on the surface but behave quite differently in certain respects: ellipsis constructions and echo question constructions. Consider, for instance, the utterances in (10) to (12):

(10) *The indefinite construction:*

- a. Oh, now, listen. **I tell you ↘what**. I have an idea. Let me finish this [...] (*Bridget Jones's Diary* [2001 film])
- b. **You know ↗what?** I just realized. That's my journal. [...] (Jody Elizabeth Gehrman: *Notes from the Backseat*)

(11) *The ellipsis construction:*

- a. What do you think President Trump had to do with it? **I'll TELL you ↘what**. Like, how about everything?  
(NBC News: "Today" [2018-04-29])
- b. NUDIE: Shit. What is this? Half rot-gut?  
HANK: What are you talking about?  
NUDIE: **You KNOW ↘what**. This here's more booze than soda.  
(*Eight Scenes from the Life of Hank Williams* [1990 film])

(12) *The echo question construction:*

- a. A: ... and then you will tell me that you love me.  
B: **I will tell you ↗WHAT?!**
- b. A: I know that the priest is breeding African rose beetles in his bathtub.  
B: **You know ↗WHAT?!**

As highlighted in the examples above, we can use both focus (marked by capital letters) and intonation (marked by rising or falling arrows) as cues to tell these three constructions apart. In the constructions in (10) and (11), the Wh-word *what* needs to be unfocussed to derive the desired indefinite interpretation.<sup>3</sup> This generalization seems to hold cross-linguistically (cf. Haida 2007; Roelofsen et al. 2019; Hengeveld et al. 2023). In contrast, in the echo questions presented in (12), the Wh-word has to be focussed. The latter two constructions can be further distinguished by their intonational contours. While the ellipsis constructions come with falling intonation, the echo questions showcase rising intonation.

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<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the ellipsis constructions still seem to involve focus, but it falls on the verb, not the Wh word.

In addition to these contrasts, the three constructions also differ functionally. In the indefinite constructions in (10), the Wh-word *what* acts as an indefinite which seems to point towards the next sentence(s) uttered by the speaker. In (10a), for instance, the *what* in the *tell you what* construction appears to be co-referential with the following utterance *I have an idea*.

In the ellipsis constructions shown in (11), on the other hand, *what* functions as a Wh-complementizer that introduces an elided string. Usually, these constructions are preceded by a question from which we can easily and unambiguously recover the elided material. This is illustrated in (13) and (14).<sup>4</sup>

(13) What do you think **President Trump had to do with it?** I'll tell you **what** [~~President Trump had to with it~~]. Like, how about everything?

(14) NUDIE: Shit. What is this? Half rot-gut?  
HANK: What **are you talking about?**  
NUDIE: **You know what** [~~I am talking about~~]. This here's more booze than soda.

Last, in the echo question constructions in (12), the Wh-word *what* acts as an interrogative. Here, the speaker questions a surprising proposition by repeating it partially and leaving the Wh-word *what* in situ.

Of course, the three constructions in (10) to (12) also differ in other crucial regards, such as their degree of idiomaticity, their behaviour in the *something*-substitution test (see Section 1), and their role in discourse. However, due to spatial limitations, a proper discussion of these issues will have to be postponed.

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<sup>4</sup> While it might be tempting to argue that the indefinite constructions in (10) are also the result of ellipsis, such an account seems less convincing. One issue is that — if we assume that these constructions involve ellipsis — the elided material cannot be unambiguously recovered from a previous utterance, as exemplified in (ii).

- (ii) a. **You know what** [~~I just figured out~~] I just realized. That's my journal.  
b. **You know what** [~~I am so thrilled about~~] I just realized. That's my journal.  
c. **You know what** [~~my mother was so bummed out about~~] I just realized. That's my journal.

### 3 The *tell you what* construction

Having established how the indefinite *tell you what* construction differs from other similar looking utterances, this section will take a closer look at its form and function. I will argue that this construction is best described as a “lexically filled” idiom (cf. Fillmore et al. 1988) that speakers use to draw attention to an upcoming utterance. The examples in (15) to (18) illustrate its use.

(15) Well, then we have something of an impasse. **I tell you what.** I’ll call the police — and what can I say? — if I’m wrong about the whole book-down-the-trousers scenario, I really apologize.  
(*Notting Hill* [1999 film])

(16) **I tell you what**, if they’d told me I could birth puppies from down there I might have gone for it maybe once, but doing it over and over just to get a human baby? I wasn’t doing it, No, no way!  
(Sharon Fisher Corbett: *I Tell You What!*)

(17) The only other food in the house is limes and Pop-Tarts. **Tell you what**, I’ll take you out to eat, how about that?  
(Josephine Humphreys: *The Fireman’s Fair*)

(18) Biff, first thing we gotta do when we get time is clip that big branch over the house. Afraid it’s gonna fall in a storm and hit the roof. **Tell you what.** We get a rope and sling her around, and then we climb up there with a couple of saws and take her down.  
(Arthur Miller: *Death of a Salesman*)

While the examples above all represent the declarative version of the construction, it is worth noting that a hortative variant also exists, as shown in (19).

(19) **Let me tell you what**, friends. With that kind of leader, it’s no wonder that Enron crashed and burned like no other corporation in American history. (MSNBC: “Scarborough” [2006-04-28])

However, for reasons of space, I will disregard this hortative variant for the rest of this paper and instead focus on the declarative realizations.

The indefinite *tell you what* construction, as shown above in (15) to (18), can be classified as a lexically filled idiom, as it allows little to no

variation in terms of its component parts. The subject slot needs always to be instantiated by the first-person singular pronoun *I* (which may be realized either overtly or covertly), and the verb slot can only be filled by the verb *tell*. While this verb usually surfaces as a simple present form, it may occasionally also occur with the *will* future or the *going-to* future, as highlighted by (20) and (21).

- (20) So, you guys think I should have kissed her? Well, **I'll tell you what**. I'm gonna go kiss her. Right now.

*(How I Met Your Mother: "Game Night")*

- (21) Well, **I'm going to tell you what**. You're going to go ahead and write me a dinner poem, and I'll belt that out after I choke this down.

*(The Change Up [2011 film])*

Furthermore, the indirect object needs to be realized by the second-person singular pronoun *you*, and the direct object can only be instantiated by the unfocussed Wh-word *what*. Any deviations from these tenets render the construction infelicitous, as shown in (22) to (27) below.<sup>5</sup>

- (22) *Infelicity due to inappropriate subjects:*

- a. #**You** tell you(rself) what. You'll call the police.
- b. #**She** tells you what. She'll call the police.
- c. #**We** tell you what. We'll call the police.
- d. #**They** tell you what. They'll call the police.
- e. #**Briony** tells you what. She'll call the police.

- (23) *Infelicity due to inappropriate verbs:*

- a. #**I say** (to) you what. I'll take you out to eat, how about that?
- b. #**I inform** you what. I'll take you out to eat, how about that?
- c. #**I propose** (to) you what. I'll take you out to eat, how about that?
- d. #**I suggest** (to) you what. I'll take you out to eat, how about that?

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<sup>5</sup> The attentive reader will have noticed that the *tell you what* construction meets the criteria for performative sentences, as proposed by Austin (1961). It requires a first-person singular subject, involves a performative verb (here: *tell*), and usually employs the simple present.

(24) *Infelicity due to inappropriate tense and aspect:*

- a. #I **told** you what. I'm gonna go kiss her.
- b. #I **have told** you what. I'm gonna go kiss her.
- c. #I **had told** you what. I'm gonna go kiss her.
- d. #I'm **telling** you what. I'm gonna go kiss her.

(25) *Infelicity due to inappropriate indirect objects:*

- a. #I tell **me/myself** what. I'm gonna go kiss her.
- b. #I tell **her** what. I'm gonna go kiss her.
- c. #I tell **them** what. I'm gonna go kiss her.
- d. #I tell **Lady Macbeth** what. I'm gonna go kiss her.
- e. ?I tell **you guys** what. I'm gonna go kiss her.

(26) *Infelicity due to inappropriate direct objects:*

- a. #I tell you **who**. Georgia.
- b. #I tell you **where**. London.
- c. #I tell you **when**. On Sunday.

(27) *Infelicity due to inappropriate focus:*

#I tell you **WHAT**. I'll call the police.

From a discourse perspective, the indefinite *tell you what* construction serves as an attention getting device. Thus, it cannot stand on its own but must be followed by another sentence in the imminent speech situation. In (28), for instance, the speaker uses the *tell you what* construction to draw the addressee's attention to the subsequent suggestion *How about you go back to sleep?*

(28) **I'll tell you what. How about you go back to sleep**, and then maybe Daddy will show up in your dream and then he can chase that monster away.

*(The Possession of Michael King [2014 film])*

Remaining silent or postponing the follow-up sentence until another time outside of the speech situation renders the construction infelicitous, as shown in (29) and (30).



(29) # **I tell you what.** (\*silence\*)

(30) # Tomorrow, **I will tell you what.**

But what is the nature of the following utterance? According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED 2023), the *tell you what* construction is “[u]sed to introduce a suggestion or proposal” or an “observation or comment”. An impressionistic survey of a small sample of data from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA) supports this description. Example (31), for instance, shows a case where *tell you what* introduces a suggestion, while (32) shows a case where it calls attention to an observation.

(31) **I tell you what.** I so rarely get a kindred spirit in here, my dear.  
**May I make you some tea?**

(Brenda Carre: *Embrace of the Planets*)

(32) **I’ll tell you what. He is goood lookin’.**

(*Thelma & Louise* [1991 film])

In addition, the construction also seems to be able to introduce other speech acts, such as expressives, as in (33), or promises, as in (34).

(33) **I tell you what. Fuck your plan.** Lou. (Life [1999 film])

(34) **I’ll tell you what. I’ll be back in a little while.**

(*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: “Never Kill a Boy on the First Date”)

To get a more comprehensive picture of what kinds of follow-up speech acts the *tell you what* construction is compatible with, a full-scale corpus study would be in order. Such a study, however, lies beyond the confines of this paper.

#### 4 The *you know what* construction

Just like the *tell you what* construction, the indefinite *you know what* construction can also be described as a lexically filled idiom that draws attention to an upcoming utterance. The examples in (35) to (38) illustrate its use.

- (35) “**Do you know what?**” said Grieg. “While you have slept so peacefully, I have set my penetrating and illuminating intellect upon a formidable problem that still lies ahead of us, despite all of our preparations.” (Matthew Vierling: “Return to Zero”)
- (36) **You know what**, Spike? The more I get to know you, the more I wish I didn’t. (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: “Lie to Me”)
- (37) Hey, Lou, **you know what?** These raindrops. They got legs. (Stephen Schottenfeld: “Artie Gottlieb: Consulting Philosopher”)
- (38) Hybrid intelligence. HI. **You know what?** Screw that. Sounds like a marriage between a dolphin and a Toyota. (Robert Grossbach: *An Idea Whose Time Had Come*).

As highlighted by these examples, the construction comes in the shape of a highly idiomatic yes/no interrogative. While the auxiliary *do* may or may not be overtly encoded, the rest of the construction is essentially fixed. The subject is always instantiated by the second-person singular pronoun *you*, while the verb slot needs to be filled by the verb *know* in the simple present. Last, the object slot needs to be realized by the unfocussed Wh-word *what* to derive the desired indefinite interpretation. The use of other subjects, verbs, or objects results in infelicity, as shown in (39) to (43).

(39) *Infelicity due to inappropriate subjects:*

- a. #**I** know what? Screw that.
- b. #**He** knows what? Screw that.
- c. #**Ella** knows what? Screw that.
- d. #**We** know what? Screw that.
- f. ? **You guys** know what? Screw that.

(40) *Infelicity due to inappropriate verbs:*

- a. #Hey, Lou, you **are aware of** what? These raindrops. They got legs.
- b. #Hey, Lou, you **realize** what? These raindrops. They got legs.
- c. #Hey, Lou, you **perceive** what? These raindrops. They got legs.

- (41) *Infelicity due to inappropriate tenses and aspects:*
- a. # You **knew** what? These raindrops. They got legs.
  - b. # You **have known** what? These raindrops. They got legs.
  - c. # You **had known** what? These raindrops. They got legs.
  - d. # You **will know** what? These raindrops. They got legs.
  - e. # You **are going to know** what? These raindrops. They got legs.
- (42) *Infelicity due to inappropriate objects:*<sup>6</sup>
- a. # Hey, Lou, you know **who**? Anna.
  - b. # Hey, Lou, you know **when**? In January.
  - c. # Hey, Lou, you know **where**? Regensburg.
- (43) *Infelicity due to inappropriate focus:*
- # Hey, Lou, you know **WHAT**? These raindrops. They got legs.

From a discourse perspective, the *you know what* construction strongly resembles the *tell you what* construction in that it is also used to call attention to an upcoming utterance. In (44), for instance, the speaker employs the *you know what* construction to introduce the suggestion *Why don't you come out to Los Angeles and see for yourself what kind of a mother I am*.

- (44) “Hey, **you know what?**” Cee Cee said. “Yeah?” “**Why don't you come out to Los Angeles and see for yourself what kind of a mother I am.**”  
(Iris Rainer Dart: *I'll Be There*)

Once again, the use of the construction would be infelicitous if the speaker did not provide a follow-up sentence but instead kept silent, as shown in (45).

- (45) # **You know what?** (\*silence\*)

The *OED* (2023) doesn't link the *you know what* construction to any follow-up speech act in particular, but describes it as being used “to emphasize or call special attention to what is said”. Indeed, a look at some corpus data from the *COCA* suggests that this construction can be

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<sup>6</sup> These utterances would be fine if we were talking about the ellipsis construction discussed in Section 2.

followed by a wide range of different speech acts, such as offers, as in (46), observations, as in (47), or bets, as in (48).

(46) Esther said, “**you know what?** I have an idea. **I could buy you a cappuccino**, in exchange for the cigarette. I mean, if you’re not busy.”  
(Nino Ricci: *The Origin of Species*)

(47) Sure, she had her flaws, but **you know what? The girl had heart.**  
(*The Wonder Years*: “Nemesis”)

(48) **You know what? I’ll prove it to you.** I’ll trade you Joey for Rachel and I’ll still win the game.  
(*Friends*: “The One with the Football”)

Again, it would be intriguing to conduct a more thorough examination of what kinds of speech acts may or may not co-occur with this construction.

## 5 The history of the constructions

In the previous sections, I have shown that the *tell you what* and the *you know what* constructions play a special role in English, as proper Wh-indefinites otherwise do not seem to exist in the language. Naturally, this raises some questions concerning their origin. Have these two constructions been around for centuries and represent the last surviving remnants of a once productive quexistential system, or are they rather the product of a more recent innovation in English? To shed light on this matter, I conducted a diachronic corpus survey, examining data from several historical corpora covering the period from Old English to Modern English.<sup>7</sup>

Based on the corpus data, the *tell you what* construction has been in use at least since the Early Modern English period. More specifically, its first attested occurrence can be found in Abraham Hartwell’s translation of a Latin letter written around 1565, replicated below in (49).

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<sup>7</sup> In particular, I consulted the following resources: *The Dictionary of Old English Corpus (DOE)*, *The York-Toronto-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Old English Prose (YCOE)*, the second edition of *The Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Middle English (PPCME2)*, *The Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Early Modern English (PPCEME)*, *The Corpus of Historical American English (COHA)*, *The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)*, and *Google’s Ngram Viewer*.

- (49) As for Diuynitie, **I wyll tell you what**. it is so handled of .ii. men, in .ii. bookes, within these .ii. yeres, that better it had bene the gospel had neuer peped out.

(Abraham Hartwell: *A Sight of the Portugall Pearle* | ?1565)

In the following decades, the construction seemingly vanished again, until it re-emerged and mushroomed towards the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century in the works of famous Elizabethan authors like William Shakespeare, Robert Greene, and Thomas Deloney. A selection of examples from this period is given in (50) to (52).

- (50) **Ile tell you what**, I thought my selfe as a proper fellow at wasters, as any in all our village, and yet when my wife begins to plaie clubbes trumpe with me, I am faine to sing:

(Robert Greene: *Selimus, Emperour of the Turkes (Part 1)* | 1594)

- (51) **I tell yee what**: Thursday is neere,  
Lay hand on heart, aduise, bethink your selfe,  
If you be mine, Ile giue you to my frend:

(William Shakespeare: *Romeo and Juliet* | 1597)

- (52) **I will tell thee what** (quoth Gillian) that man which needeth neither to flatter with his friends, nor borrow of his neighbours hath riches sufficient:

(Thomas Deloney: *The Pleasant Historie of Iacke of Newberie* | 1597)

Obviously, it is difficult to tell whether these examples represent an innovative use by the mentioned playwrights, or whether the sudden rise of the construction around 1600 simply reflects changing literary preferences and their effect on the composition of the consulted corpora. After all, during the Elizabethan era, plays became the most popular genre of literature. As plays are inherently dialogue heavy and consist almost exclusively of direct speech between two or more interlocutors, they offer an exceptionally fertile ground for the *tell you what* construction — perhaps more so than the genres that account for most of the textual material before then. This, however, remains pure speculation.

The *you know what* construction, on the other hand, appears to be much younger in comparison. The earliest attested instance of this

construction comes from a play written by Denman Thompson in 1885, as reproduced in (53).

- (53) RICKETY: Say, **do you know what?**  
FRANK H.: No, what is it?  
RICKETY: Well, I can climb a tree jest as good as a boy, — want to see me?  
(Denman Thompson: *The Old Homestead* | 1885)

After that, the construction dropped off the radar for several decades, until it slowly started to gain momentum in the early 1920s and has increased in frequency ever since. Examples (54) to (56) show some of the early uses of the construction.

- (54) Wonderful! The water, dripping from you, must have looked like pearls. **Do you know what?** You're some sea goddess and you're only fooling us. (Harold MacGrath: *The Ragged Edge* | 1921)

- (55) **Do you know what?** He was a thief; he was stealing this auto.  
(Percy Keese Fitzhugh: *Pee-Wee Harris on the Trail* | 1922)

- (56) MR. ZERO: Say, **do you know what?**  
DAISY DIANA DOROTHEA DEVORE: What?  
MR. ZERO: It makes me feel like dancin'.  
(Elmer Leopold Rice: *The Adding Machine* | 1923)

While these observations suggest that the *you know what* construction might be a fairly recent innovation, it is worth mentioning that, several centuries earlier, a very similar construction already existed: the Middle English *wot ye what* construction. This construction is functionally identical to the Modern English *you know what* construction but differs in the verb it selects. More specifically, it does not involve the verb *know*, but the now obsolete Middle English verb *witen* — a cognate of Modern German *wissen* 'to know' and Modern Dutch *weten* 'to know'. Examples (57) and (58) illustrate its use in Middle English.

- (57) Ye be lyke the swynt catte That wolde haue fissh, but **wostow whatte?** He wold no thinge wete his clowes.  
(Geoffrey Chaucer: *House of Fame* | 1380/1450)

- (58) In her presence we kneled down echon,  
 Presentinge up our billes, and, **wot ye what**,  
 Ful humb belly she took hem, by on and on;  
 (Anonymous: *The Assembly of Ladies* | ca. 1400–1500)

This *wot ye what* construction survived into the Early Modern English period, as shown in (59) and (60), before it slowly began to vanish.

- (59) **Wot you what?** To day the Lords you talke of, are beheaded.  
 (William Shakespeare: *Richard III* | 1623)
- (60) I found him at the market full of woe, crying a lost daughter, and telling all her tokens to the people; and **wot you what?** by all subscription in the world, it should be our new maid *Melvia*, one would little think it, therefore I was bold to tel him of her Mistriss.  
 (Francis Beaumont & John Fletcher: *The Coxcomb* | 1647)

All things considered, the diachronic corpus survey thus provides solid evidence that idiomatic quexistential constructions, like the ones discussed in this paper, have been used by English speakers at least since the Middle English period. How productive the quexistential system really was at that point, however, remains an open question.

## 6 Conclusion

In this brief survey, I examined the indefinite *tell you what* and *you know what* constructions in English. Drawing on language data from several sources, I showed that both constructions can be classified as lexically filled idioms which speakers tend to use in discourse to draw attention to the subsequent utterance. A diachronic corpus study further suggests that constructions like these have been in use at least since the Middle English period, showing that English has had proper quexistentials for several centuries — at least in a small set of fixed expressions.

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