

**A DIACHRONIC ANALYSIS OF SMALL TALK AND PHATIC UNITS IN ENGLISH: BASED ON WRITTEN SOURCES**

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**The Old English Period (AD 450–1100)**

**Phatic Units in *Beowulf* and Anglo-Saxon Sources.**

The diachronic study of small talk and phatic units in English begins with the Old English (OE) period — from approximately AD 450 to 1100. The principal written source of this period is the epic poem *Beowulf*,<sup>1</sup> composed between the 8th and 11th centuries AD and preserved in a single manuscript (Cotton Vitellius A.xv, c. 1000). As A.H. Jucker (2011)<sup>2</sup> notes, Old English greeting formulae fall into two main categories: attention-getting expressions and health-wishing formulae — both of which constitute the core of small talk.

The primary Old English greeting formula — *Wæs þu hāl* (West Saxon dialect) or *Wes þu hāl* (other dialects) — translates literally as 'Be well' or 'Be whole'.<sup>3</sup> This formula appears in *Beowulf* (line 407) when the hero addresses King Hrothgar. It is also found in Ælfric's Grammar (AD 995)<sup>4</sup> as a gloss for the Latin *salve*. The formula's direct descendant — the word 'wassail' — survived in Middle English festive ceremonies, demonstrating the remarkable durability of phatic units across centuries.

The Old English greeting system was essentially a health-wishing system: social contact was established by wishing the interlocutor physical wholeness. According to B. Malinowski's (1923)<sup>5</sup> theory of phatic communion, such expressions are used not to convey pure information but to establish social 'ties of union'.

**Table 1. Phatic Units in Old English (*Beowulf* and Ælfric's Grammar)**

No.	Original Text (Old English)	English Translation	Phatic Function	Source / Reference
1	<i>Wæs þu, Hrothgar, hal!</i>	Be well, Hrothgar! / Hail, Hrothgar!	Formal greeting; health wish	<i>Beowulf</i> , line 407 <sup>1</sup>
2	<i>Ic þe þancas do</i>	I give you thanks	Gratitude formula; social bond reinforcement	Ælfric's Grammar, AD 995 <sup>4</sup>



3	<i>Beo gesund</i>	Be well / Farewell (singular)	Informal farewell; health wish	Ælfric's Grammar, AD 995 <sup>4</sup>
4	<i>Beoth gesunde</i>	Be well (plural)	Plural farewell formula	Ælfric's Grammar, AD 995 <sup>4</sup>
5	<i>Hwæt!</i>	Listen! / Lo! / Indeed!	Attention-getting; conversation opener	Beowulf, line 1 (opening word) <sup>1</sup>
6	<i>Hal wes þu, Iudea cyning!</i>	Hail, King of the Jews!	Ceremonial address; social recognition formula	Mt (WSCp) 27.30 <sup>6</sup>
7	<i>Sie þu hal, leof!</i>	Be well, lord / dear one!	Formal address; respectful greeting	Ælfric, AECHom II.14.1.144.197 <sup>6</sup>
8	<i>Ic þancie þe</i>	I thank you	Gratitude expression; social interaction	OE grammar sources <sup>4</sup>
9	<i>Fara hal</i>	Go in good health / Farewell	Parting farewell formula	OE etymological source; Fairfax 2011 <sup>6</sup>
10	<i>Gretan mid Godes gretinge</i>	To greet with God's greeting / blessing	Phatic opening in letters and formal texts	OE letter formulae; Ælfric sources <sup>4</sup>

Analysis of the table shows that the defining feature of Old English phatic units is their derivation from the root *hal* ('whole, healthy'), which reflects the grounding of social interaction in physical well-being. As D. Crystal and D. Davy (1975)<sup>7</sup> note, such formulae — regardless of era or culture — signal a desire for social engagement rather than the transmission of information. The imperative mood (*Wæs*, *Beo*) is interpreted within J. Austin's (1962)<sup>8</sup> theory of performative speech acts: the very utterance of the expression performs the social act of greeting.

### The Middle English Period (1100–1500)

#### Phatic Expressions in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*

The Middle English (ME) period witnessed dramatic shifts in the English phatic system, driven principally by the Norman Conquest of 1066 and the powerful influence of French lexis and social customs. A.H. Jucker (2011)<sup>2</sup> identifies two new greeting categories that emerged in ME: time-of-day wishes and enquiries about the interlocutor's health — both reflecting the



influence of French courtly culture. The primary source for the study of ME small talk is Geoffrey Chaucer's (c. 1343–1400) *Canterbury Tales* (c. 1387–1400).<sup>9</sup>

The defining feature of ME phatic communication was the emergence of time-of-day greetings: 'Good morrow', 'Good day', 'Good e'en' — all borrowed from the French *bon matin*, *bon jour*, *bon soir*. Simultaneously, expressions such as 'How farest thou?' and 'How art thou?' became standard small talk openers. As A. Wierzbicka (1991)<sup>10</sup> argues, culturally specific phatic patterns encode deep social values; in the ME period, enquiring about a person's health was a marker both of courtesy and of social status recognition.

**Table 2. Phatic Units in Middle English (Canterbury Tales and Court Usage)**

No.	Original Text (Middle English)	English Translation	Phatic Function	Source / Reference
1	<i>God yow speede</i>	God speed you / May your way be blessed	Farewell blessing; social unity marker	<i>Canterbury Tales</i> , General Prologue, line 769 <sup>9</sup>
2	<i>Ye goon to Caunterbury — God yow speede</i>	You go to Canterbury — God speed you!	Sending-off wish; ceremonial farewell	<i>Canterbury Tales</i> , General Prologue, line 769 <sup>9</sup>
3	<i>Good morrow</i>	Good morning (from French <i>bon matin</i> )	Time-of-day greeting; social opening	General ME usage; Chaucer's works <sup>9</sup>
4	<i>How farest thou?</i>	How do you fare? / How are you?	Health/welfare enquiry; small talk opener	ME court usage; Jucker 2011 <sup>2</sup>
5	<i>Wel met!</i>	Well met! / Happy to see you!	Chance-encounter formula; positive phatic expression	General ME usage; Arnovick 1999 <sup>11</sup>
6	<i>God yow save</i>	God save you	Religious greeting-blessing formula	<i>Canterbury Tales</i> , various passages <sup>9</sup>
7	<i>I bidde yow good day</i>	I bid you good day	Formal farewell; polite leave-taking	ME letters and court usage <sup>11</sup>
8	<i>How dost thou?</i>	How do you do? / How are you?	Informal health/status enquiry	General ME usage; early ancestor of 'How do you do' <sup>9</sup>



9	<i>Gramercy!</i>	Many thanks! (from French grand merci)	Gratitude formula; French borrowing	General ME usage; Chaucer's works <sup>9</sup>
10	<i>By my fader soule!</i>	By my father's soul! (mild oath)	Phatic intensifier; social bonding device	Canterbury Tales, General Prologue, line 781 <sup>9</sup>

The table demonstrates the transition, under French influence, from the OE health-wishing system to a far more varied phatic repertoire. The addition of time-of-day greetings created temporal indexicality, identified by J. Laver (1975)<sup>12</sup> as a core feature of phatic deixis: the interlocutor is socially located within a shared temporal frame. The ME period thus represents the formative stage in which the essential character of modern English small talk took shape.

