

Minor details in the history of a language sometimes involve issues of theoretical significance. For example, major dictionaries record contradictory accounts of stylistic variations among the expressions **no**, **nay**, **yes**, and **yea** for Middle and Early Modern English.

Although the expressions are all recorded in writing, distinctions among them are systematically preserved only in the compositions of highly literate minds engaged specifically in writing and reading as opposed to speaking and hearing.

The basis of the distinction lies in the mental processes of composition rather than in the written or spoken forms of expression. Distinctions among the two sets of forms are not the product simply of care, grammatical precision, formality, or poetic excellence. For in Middle English the compositions of Chaucer may be distinguished in their use of the forms from poetry of the alliterative revival, which was composed for speech and hearing.

In Chaucer **no** and **yea** are marked expressions for performative, often specifically behabitive, speech acts. They occur only in responses in which behabitive involvement between interlocutors must clearly be interpreted, as, for example, between the Nun's Priest and the Host, or between the jealous Carpenter and his Wife in "The Miller's Tale."

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Toward a Visual Stylistics: Assent and Denial in Chaucer

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In this essay I describe a distribution among various expressions meaning "yes" and "no" in the poetry of Geoffrey Chaucer. Although it is true that the distinctions receive phonological as well as graphic expression, it is nevertheless my argument that the **systemic** character of the contrasts belongs fundamentally and essentially to visible rather than to audible language. I demonstrate this by showing that variations in the spelling of these expressions, distinguishing **no** from **nay** and **jis** from **yea**, are quite explicable systematic in the highly literate poetry of Chaucer, but in free variation in records preserving the oral traditions of alliterative verse. The implication of this research which I believe will most interest students of writing is this: If it is true that these contrasts — which are expressed both in writing and in speech — are systemic only in writing, then the visible form of expression must be afforded the status of **language** in every significant sense of that term as used in modern linguistics. In this research we have, in other words, further evidence that writing and speech are not simply alternative modes of expressing language, but rather that each is quite fully and integrally a language in its own right.

It is perhaps worth emphasizing here that the case for the autonomy of visible language is strengthened rather than weakened by the fact that these written variations correspond to differences in pronunciations. For the fact that **no** and **nay**, for example, correspond to speech variants only shows that the phonetic material was available for systemic distinction in audible language. But the important fact is precisely that no such systemic was employed in speech while it demonstrably was in discourse which was conceived for visible expression. It is not, in the final analysis, an issue of audibility versus visibility, but rather of system versus free variation.

The research that led to this conclusion began with glossaries, so I begin with them. The glossary to F.N. Robinson's edition of Chaucer's **Works** asserts without explanation that **jis** is an emphatic form of **yea**, but it says nothing of any distinction between **no** and **nay**.¹ In fact, however, the forms of assent and denial

in Chaucer's poetry are distributed in a pattern that suggests nuances of meaning beyond propositional affirmation or negation.

1.
F. N. Robinson, ed.,
**The Works of Geoffrey
Chaucer**,
2nd ed.
(New York: Houghton
Mifflin, 1957),
Glossary, s.v. **Jis**.

The principal historical dictionaries of English, however, give confusing and sometimes contradictory accounts of the bases of discriminating among the forms; and so it would seem worthwhile to explicate their stylistic value in the profoundly literate idiom of Chaucer's text. I will undertake this explication by discussing the lexicographical history of the forms, setting out the communicational features by which they may be distinguished, and interpreting their meanings in the poetry of Chaucer.

According to the **Oxford English Dictionary**, the forms **nay** and **yea** were usually employed when the preceding sentence did not have a negative word in it. **No** and **yes** were used when a negative was expressed in the sentence being responded to. The distinction is "clearly stated," says the dictionary, in the 1557 edition of Thomas More's **Confutation of Tyndale's Answer**.²

At that place in the **Confutation**, Tindale is chastized for using **no**, rather than **nay**, to translate John I: 21: "Arte thou a prophete? And he answered, 'No.'" The use of **no** is incorrect, according to More, because "**Nay** answereth the questyon framed by the affirmative.... And a like difference is there bytwene these two adverbis **ye** and **yes**."

Neither More nor the **OED** mention emphasis as a criterion governing the distribution of forms. The authority for Robinson's assertion would appear to be the unabridged **Etymological Dictionary** of W.W. Skeat.³ According to that source the distinction between **yea** and **yes** is "commonly well marked," **yea** being a simple affirmative, **yes**, "a strong asseveration, often accompanied by an oath" (s.v. **Yea**). The distinction between **no** and **nay** was based, according to Skeat, on the presence or absence of a negative in the sentence to which the particle is a response, and, "Besides this **nay** was the simple, **no** the emphatic form, often accompanied by an oath" (s.v. **Nay**). According to Skeat, the distinction is found until the time of Henry VIII. Little is added to this by other dictionaries, though the entry in the **Century** has some interest: "the fine

distinction alleged to have formerly existed between **no** and **nay**, according to which **no** answered questions negatively framed... is hardly borne out by the records" (s.v. **No**).

2. **The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary: Complete Text Reproduced Micrographically**, II (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1971), s.v. **Nay**.

3. **An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language**, 3rd. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1898).

However, it characterizes **yes** as "a stronger term...chiefly used in answer to questions containing a negative or otherwise implying a doubt. But the distinction does not appear to have been rigidly maintained" (s.v. **Yea**).⁴ Thus there is no general agreement among authorities about the stylistic or semantic distinctions among the terms. It is clear enough, of course, that the alternatives in each set are stylistically distinct in present day English, **nay** and **yea** bring reserved for formal and elevated speech. But the question that concerns us here has to do with usage before the time of Henry VIII; so the investigation must be historical in character. Both the model and the method of investigation bear some explanation. I shall write first of the model or conceptual framework.

When we consider the stylistic character of the affirmative and negative responses we cannot be concerned only with their categorematic function as affirming or negating propositions contained in a preceding statement, question, or command. For any verbal structure actually has three dimensions: the propositional, the modal, and the contextual.⁵

The propositional dimension extends into the dispassionate world of ideational reference where cognitive content, truth value, and taxonomic relationships are defined and delimited. Interpretation of the behavioral mode, however, involves more than logical analysis of verbal structure; it involves an understanding of the action effected by means of the locution, including recognition that some sentence is in fact a statement, command, wish, prediction, request, and so on. The contextual dimension has to do with the social and linguistic institutions in which any formulation participates, including the field of discourse (as distinct from logical reference of the proposition), social function of the discourse, relations among the interlocutors, relation of the specific sentence to the rest of the discourse, genre of the discourse, and so on.

Although responding "yes" or "no" is done by means of a very small set of expressions, variation in any one or any combination of functions in any of the three dimensions of the communication may motivate variation in the visible form of the expression. In modern English **yes**, **yeah**, and **yep** are just such

variations. But their meaning is not self-evident.

Because there are many fewer forms of expression than there are communicative purposes, the interpretation of language is always an inferential process which attempts to derive epistemic content from the visible form of the signs themselves, from their configuration in the linear structure of discourse, and from hypotheses about the nature of the physical and social contexts in which they occur.

4. **The Century Dictionary**, 12 vols. (New York: Century, 1889).

5. Cf. M. A. K. Halliday, "Language Structure and Language Function," **New Horizons in Linguistics**, ed. John Lyons (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), pp. 140-165.

Although the term **catagorematic** leads one to expect that **yes** and **no** expressions respond only or primarily to the propositional content of a question, command, wish, or exclamation, they in fact respond to the entire formulation.

Consider, for example, the character of some possible responses to questions. To begin with, the question itself may be propositionally, behaviorally, or contextually oriented. The affirmative form of a question, say,

Has the train arrived?

does not grammaticize actional, attitudinal, or contextual features,⁶ and so interpretation of such features depends upon analysis of the context and on hypothesis concerning the situation of its formulation. But the so-called tag-questions and the negatively framed question all suggest some special involvement on the part of the speaker in his question. All three of these forms actually have a negative in them:

1.
The train hasn't arrived, has it?
2.
The train has arrived, hasn't it?
3.
Hasn't the train arrived?

It is said of these forms of question that they "expect" or "hope for" some particular form of response.⁷ Such expectation or hope is fundamentally behavioral rather than propositional in character. The linguistic form of questions such as these does not indicate whether the involvement of the speaker is primarily cognitive or affective—in the one case

the speaker finds his ideas contradicted by some aspect of the situation, in the other some feature of the situation has alarmed or otherwise affectively contradicted the speaker's sense of the way things ought to be in the matter—but the form of the question clearly indicates that there is involvement in the behavioral dimension as well as in the propositional.

Such a question, of course, becomes part of the context in which one responds; and the response addresses the entire formulation, not just the propositional dimension. Notice the meaning of the responses to the negatively framed question (which will serve to illustrate the dynamics of all the behaviorally marked forms):

Hasn't the train arrived?

1.
Yes, I'm happy to say it has.
2.
No, I'm sorry to say it hasn't.

6. On the notion of **grammaticization** see M. L. Samuels, *Linguistic Evolution with Special Reference to English*, Cambridge Studies in Linguistics, 5 (Cambridge, Cambridge U. P., 1972), pp. 58-60.

7. Cf. Randolph Quirk, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech, and Jan Svartvik, *A Grammar of Contemporary English* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1972), para. 7.58; and Otto Jespersen, *A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1940), V, para. 25.1.

Notice that the affirmative and negative adverbs, **yes** and **no** respectively, actually address the behavioral modalities as much as they respond to the propositional content. In fact, in one sense they address the behavioral more so, inasmuch as **yes** actually judges the articulated proposition to be false:

Yes: **It is FALSE that the train has not arrived.**

It is AFFIRMED that the questioner's hope or expectations have been successful or felicitous.

No: **It is TRUE that the train has not arrived.**

It is DENIED that the questioner's hope or expectation has been successful.

Notice also that it is curious to respond in the following manner:

Hasn't the train arrived?

Yes, I'm sorry to say it has.

This response is curious, not ungrammatical or incorrect. It gives pause because it announces that the speaker is

responding in terms of his own internal hopes rather than those of the questioner. It announces a conflict in interpersonal relations.

In these modern English examples the affirmative and negative particles have been amplified in such a way that the categorematic and behabitive functions are clearly expressed. But such amplification is almost required because a monosyllabic response would be interpreted as curtly indifferent to the affections of the questioner.

In vocalized discourse, of course, there would be numerous ways of conveying behabitive sympathy by intonational means; but in visible language the lone occurrence of **yes** or **no** is itself an expression of behabitive curtness as a response to a negatively framed question. The point here is that these particles unmistakably carry implications of involved behavioral relations between participants in the speech situation.

When the **OED**, following Thomas More, suggests that the form of response in older English is conditioned by the presence of a negative in the preceding sentence, I suspect that what is incompletely perceived is the behabitive character of the speech situation in which it is most typically used. My use of the term **behabitive** here is indebted to a conception of the philosopher J.L. Austin who, in **How to Do Things with Words**, explains behabitive illocutionary force as "the notion of reaction to other people's behaviour and fortunes and of attitudes and expressions of attitudes to someone else's past conduct or imminent conduct."⁸

8. **How to Do Things with Words** (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. P., 1962), p. 159.

My investigation of the early history of assent and denial in English suggests that **yes** (or **yis**, the form more commonly found in Chaucer) and **no** are behaviorally marked forms, especially in texts that are carefully composed for reading rather than merely transcribed records of fundamentally oral language. It is widely agreed that Chaucer's poetry is composed in such a carefully formulated idiom, and so it is not surprising that distinctions among the forms are quite clearly preserved in his works.

The distinctions between **yis** and **yea** and between **no** and **nay** do not inhabit the central areas of the language where formal variation is clearly recognized by all speakers and acknowledged by grammars and dictionaries. Rather they are found in the outlying areas of stylistic nuance, encountered for the most part only by those who haunt such places. Chaucer was clearly such a man, not only intelligent and experienced but scholarly and learned, a reader of "old bokes" who encountered thought visually displayed and who planned in his composing for its visible representation. It is on this fact that an investigation of the forms must be focused; for there is reason to suspect that the distinctions among the forms are proper to the linguistic competence of such men and, in effect, rather special to them. A couple of curious printed errors first suggested this notion to me.

In attempting to research the primary sources on which the citations in Skeat's **Etymological Dictionary** and the **OED** were based, I was surprised to find contradictions which at first suggested inaccurate reporting by the lexicographical authorities. The researches on which the statements in Skeat's dictionary were based were done partly in preparing his edition of **William of Palerne**, a fourteenth-century alliterative poem; and, indeed, the first publication of Skeat's opinion about the distribution of the forms is recorded in the glossary of his edition.

A glance at Figures 1 and 2, however, will show that Skeat had first expressed an opinion contrary to that recorded in his later dictionary. And yet the **Dictionary** cites the edition as illustrating the distinctions recorded under its entry for **yea**. For its part, the **Oxford English Dictionary** observes that the distinction between **no** and **nay** is "clearly stated" in the 1557 edition of the **Works** of Thomas More. But an examination of that edition shows (See Figure 3) what More's modern editors, Lewis Schuster, **et al.**, term "an ironic blunder."⁹

A glance at Figure 3 shows that for the sentence: "Nay answereth the questyon framed by the affirmative," the text actually reads:

No answereth the question framed by the affirmative.

Thus the primary sources cited by both the major lexicons show confusion between the negative forms. Both instances appear to have much the character of mere lapses in linguistic performance.

9. Lewis A. Schuster, Richard C. Marius, James P. Lusardi, and Richard Schoeck, eds., **The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer**, Vol. VIII, part i of

The Complete Works of St. Thomas More (New Haven, Yale U. P., 1973), p. 1421.

But they are not insignificant lapses nevertheless, not mere slips of the pen or momentary inadvertencies. Rather, they suggest, I think, a refinement in the linguistic competence of authors whose reflections about the written word are more delicate than the idiom of daily speech.

It is not surprising that Skeat should have confused the distributions of **no** and **nay** and **yes** and **yea** in his edition of **William of Palerne**, for one cannot be certain that the distribution holds up there. A number of the instances of the forms are of uncertain interpretation, and some seem to contradict the pattern. But the poem, in spite of its being a translation from a French source, is not a literate composition. It comes from about the middle of the fourteenth century, when Chaucer was a child, and is written in an already obsolescent verse form conserved chiefly in remote and provincial communities.

Its alliterative meter, formulaic diction, and oral-thematic modes of amplification — none of which would remain viable after about 1450 — looked backward toward a time when literacy was unknown among the Germanic peoples. Fine distinctions in the usage of individual words are much more proper to the deliberate compositions circulating among aristocratic, urban, and progressively literate audiences whose usage reflected a mental organization which to some extent may be said to have been created by visible language.

In the idiom of such poetry, **yes** and **no** are reserved for utterances which are emotively or attitudinally involved in a way beyond the normal, neutral giving of an answer to a question. The question being responded to has irritated, frightened, delighted — involved — the respondent; or else it has given evidence of some affective state in the questioner which must be responded to in an involved way. In either case the response is itself behaviorally marked. It should be recognized that the use of the unmarked forms **yea** and **nay** does not necessarily mean the absence of such involvement, but that **no** and **yes** signify such involvement.

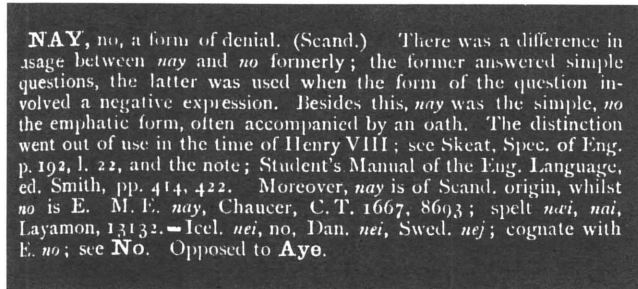


Figure 1:
Entry For *Nay* in Skeat's
Etymological Dictionary
(1889).

Note the contradiction
with the glossary of
William of Palerne (Figure 2). The distinctions
between *no/nay* and
yes/yea are specific to
written composition.

They are the visual
counterparts of epi-
stemic features
expressed in speech by
intonation.

All evidence leading to such a conclusion must, of course, come directly from interpretation of the text, and such interpretation cannot be regarded as self-evident. But certain linguistic forms suggest the correctness of an interpretation when they occur in the immediate context of such a reply. In reading the text of Chaucer I recorded four classes of such evidence:

1. Some overt expression explicitly characterizes the speaker as involved.

2. Some overt expression explicitly characterizes a response as so involved.

3. The occurrence of generic features of character and/or situation make it reasonable to interpret a response as behaviorally involved.

4. Repetition occurs as a device expressing such involvement; or an oath or other collocated expression makes such involvement reasonably interpreted, but only when concatenated with one of the other three classes of evidence.¹⁰

(The requirement of concatenation is, of course, made necessary by virtue of the fact that some expressions and oaths are simply metrical fillers.) The evidence of classes one and two were regarded as strongest; three less so, especially if not accompanied by evidence of class four; and four not at all unless accompanied by evidence of one of the other three classes.

We turn now to Chaucer's text. **Yea** and **nay** can be regarded as the unmarked forms which express behaviorally neutral, categoric responses. By and large all formal variations from these expressions mark some deviation from functionally categoric neutrality though, of course, not all to the same degree. Moreover, particular variations in form do not invariably express the same function under all circumstances. Nevertheless there is some justification for ranking formal variation according to a degree of markedness. Collocation with an oath or other attitudinally colored expletive in general carries the least functional force, at times constituting virtually a metrical filler, as in "The Pardoner's Tale," VI, 692: "'**Ye goddes armes, quod this riotour.**'"¹¹

10. On the grammatical and stylistic functions of repetition in English, and especially for the repetition of **yes** and **no**, see Gunnar Persson, **Repetitions in English, Part I: Sequential Repetition**, Studia Anglistica Upsaliensia, 21 (Uppsala: Uppsala U. P., 1974), pp. 96, 101.

11. The text of Chaucer, hereinafter cited in the text, is quoted from the edition of John H. Fisher, ed., **The Complete Poetry and Prose of Chaucer** (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977), which follows manuscript spelling of texts not from the Ellesmere MS more closely than Robinson, cited above. I have used the notes in Robinson, as also the editions of W. W. Skeat, **The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer**, 7 vols.

(Oxford: Clarendon, 1894-1897), and John Koch, **Geoffrey Chaucers kleinere Dichtungen** (Heidelberg: Winter, 1928).

Still, an examination of the context shows that the collocation serves somewhat to characterize the speaker. In "The Miller's Tale" 3719 the modal **certes** "of a certainty" has a slightly more specific meaning. Absalon has been tirelessly seeking the favor of Alison, who has not encouraged him and would be rid of him. When he asks for a kiss, she replies,

"Wiltow thanne go thy wey therwith?"

"Ye, certes, lemmon," quod this Absalon. [beloved]

The question itself is not formally marked, but its content is clearly less than encouraging to Absalon. In his reply he uses the unenthusiastic **ye**, but is nevertheless concerned to assure her her wish in order that he may at least get his kiss. There are very many such collocations in the text of Chaucer, but their stylistic force, though discernible, is of negligible interest.

Repetitions represent somewhat more forceful responses, and still more so when they also involve the lexical variants **yeis** and **no**, which are strongly marked in any case. Since all the variations in form happen to occur in "The Franklin's Tale," we can see the stylistic implications illustrated there first. The tale concerns the knight, Arveragus, his much loved wife, Dorigen, and the

squire Aurelius, who pines after her. When the knight went abroad for two years, Aurelius approached Dorigen with his proposition that they become lovers. She refused him in what she thought to be no uncertain terms:

**"Looke what day that endelong Britayne
Ye remoeve alle the rokkes, stoon by stoon,
That they ne lette ship ne boot to goon—**

[the length of]

[hinder]

**I seye, whan ye han maad the coost so clene
Of rokkes that ther nys no stoon ysene,
Thanne wol I love yow best of any man.
Have heer my trouthe in al that evere I kan."**

"Is ther noon oother grace in yow?" quod he.

"No, by that Lord," quod she, "that maked me!"

[V, 992-1001]

The exclamation point is, of course, editorial; but it indicates at least one informed reader's understanding that the response should be interpreted as affectively marked. Such marking is clearly indicated, in any case, by the content of the passage preceding; it is clear that unnatural events would have to occur before Dorigen would accept the squire's advances.

Moreover, her behabitively marked response, **no**, is collocated with an invocation of the Lord's witness to her refusal. In this case, the evidence of behabitive involvement is of the third kind, arising out of the context and generic features of the situation which make it reasonable to interpret behabitive force.

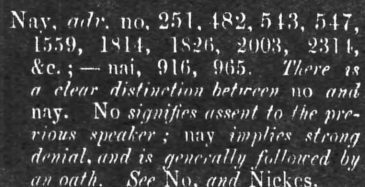
Although I regard evidence of the third kind as "scientifically" weaker than that of the first two kinds, it is nevertheless quite clear in this instance that a behabitive interpretation of the response is correct.

Nay, on the other hand, is a more simply propositional response, as can be seen in this example of its occurrence later in the tale. Aurelius, dismayed by his rejection, bargains with an astrologer for power to make the rocks **seem** to disappear. It will cost him a thousand pounds, but the transaction is concluded. Aurelius is anxious to return home and would have preparations speedily concluded. He says to the astrologer,

**"But looketh now, for no negligence or slouthe
Ye tarie us heere no lenger than to-morwe."**

"Nay," quod this clerk, "have heer my feith to borwe." [as pledge; 1232-1234]

The astrologer is not involved in the urgency felt by the clerk, and his strategy in the speech situation is precisely to allay fears by giving the assurance of a propositionally oriented reply. He is in control of the situation; and from the point of view of Chaucer's narrative strategy, there is no reason to suggest behabitive involvement of a minor character who may just as well remain undifferentiated in the background.



Nay, *adv.* no, 251, 482, 543, 547, 1559, 1814, 1826, 2003, 2314, &c.; — nai, 916, 965. *There is a clear distinction between no and nay. No signifies assent to the previous speaker; nay implies strong denial, and is generally followed by an oath. See No, and Nickes.*

Figure 2:
Entry For *Nay* in Skeat's
William of Palerne
(1867).
This edition, cited by
the *Oxford English Dic-*
tionary as evidence of a
clear distinction

between *no* and *nay*,
actually has *no* instead
of *nay* at the place indi-
cated. It is a printer's
error. The edition of
1533 has it right. This
copy was owned by,

and has the signature
of, the poet John
Donne. It is from the
Rare Book Collection of
the Library of The Cath-
olic University of
America.

Aurelius then returns home and uses his power to delude Dorigen who, in a literal-minded fashion, finds herself trapped by her own conditions. She tortures herself by contemplating the legends of good women undone by sexual abuse. Suicide occurs to her:

Hath there nat many a noble wyf er this,
And many a mayde, yslayne hirself, allas,
Rather than with hir body doon trespas? [1364-1366]

And she answers herself, dramatically,

"Yis, certes, lo, these stories beren witnesse."

There can be no doubt of the behabitive character of this response. It is formally marked not only by the **yis** form, but also by the accompanying epithets, **certes** and **lo**. The specific context, moreover; the character of Dorigen as it has been consistently delineated throughout the tale; and predispositions implied by the **compleint** genre of this speech she is uttering; all make it quite reasonable to interpret this occurrence of the form as marking behabitive involvement.

Dorigen was still in an agitated state when her husband returned home. She went to him and "toold hym al as ye han herd bifore":

This housbonde with glad chiere in freendly wyse
Answerde and seyde as I shal yow devyse.
"Is ther oght elles, Dorigen, but this?"

"Nay, nay," quod she, "God heple me so as wys!
This is to muche, and it were Goddes wille."

"Ye, wyf," quod he, "lat slepen that is stille.
It may be wel, paraventure, yet today."

[1467-1473]

At first glance the occurrence of unmarked forms here seems peculiar. After all it is quite clear that Dorigen is extremely distraught. But it is easy to miss the tone of the delicately drawn relations between husband and wife. Dorigen's **nay, nay** surely reflects her agitated state; but it does not constitute a behabitive involvement with the question put by her husband. She is not making an emphatic denial that there is "oght elles"; for the question is not put as a proposition or charge which is to be denied or rejected. Notice the affirma-

tive framing of Arveragus' question (**oght elles**, not **noght elles**) followed by a trivializing **but**, as if to say, "Is this what you are upset about? Is this all there is to it?" The husband is not pressing Dorigen about the facts of the situation.

Rather "with glad chiere in frendly wyse" he is trying to allay her fear, to calm her, to reassure her. "There, there," he says in effect, "It may work out yet." His first question is no doubt put calmly, dispassionately, "Is ther oght elles, Dorigen, but this?" Since there is complete trust between them, there is no need to answer this question with any great force of denial. Indeed, Dorigen is reluctant to allow that "this" is such a little matter as her husband seems willing to take it.

He makes too light of it. The editors, by placing the terminal punctuation (!) at the end of her call for God's witness, suggest that this phrase attests to the truth of her denial.

Rather it ought to be associated with the following line: "God helpe me so as wys — This is to muche, and it were Goddes wille." I would paraphrase her response as follows: No, my dear, there is nothing but this. But this, God help me indeed, is too much if it were God's will. Within the conventions obtaining in this tale there is no possibility of interpreting anything but absolute trust between this husband and wife; and hence there is no reason to interpret Dorigen's reply as an emphatic denial of the proposition that there has been "oght elles" between Aurelius and herself. The response of Arveragus, likewise, is comforting rather than an emphatic agreement that "This is to muche."

Ye is an appropriate form because it represents mild assent to the proposition articulated as well as intentional downtoning of the emotionally charged state of Dorigen: Yes, wife, this is too much; but don't make it worse than it is. It may yet be well. In this instance the context is quite explicitly in support of an interpretation of **ye** as behaviorally muted.

The next occurrences of the responses are highly charged with involvement. It is agreed between husband and wife that Dorigen must keep her pledge to the squire, and Arveragus sends her off to do so. But Aurelius, hearing of the knight's magnanimity, releases her from her obligation and returns to the astrologer unsatisfied in his claim for Dorigen and still owing a thousand pounds for his hallucinatory power. He has just asked for time to pay that money to the astrologer when he is asked:

"Have I nat holden covenant unto thee?"

"Yes, certes, wel and trewely," quod he.

"Hastow nat had thy lady as thee liketh?"

"No, no," quod he, and sorwefully he siketh.

[1587-1590]

The behaviorally muted involvement here lies in the painful acknowledgment. The astrologer **has** held covenant; Aurelius **does** owe the thousand pounds; and he **has not** had the favor of his lady. It has all been for worse than nought. The form **yes** marks

an emotively colored behabitive involvement, but hardly an emphatic agreement. The orthographic variation between **yes** and **yis** may or may not be significant. Michael Samuels has noticed that in forceful articulation of speech, there is a tendency to front and raise vowels.¹²

Presumably this is an articulatory correlate of the kinesic tension accompanying excitement or agitation. If this is so, and I am inclined to believe that it is, and if such a raising were institutionalized graphically by an *i* spelling for *e*, then the orthographic variation **yis** : **yes** may be Chaucer's visible means of conveying a stylistic distinction between enthusiastic or emphatic asseveration and, as here, deeply felt, deliberate, and unpleasant acknowledgment. But there are very few **yes** spellings in the major manuscripts of Chaucer's text, and it is difficult to draw any conclusions.

The squire's absolute denial of the astrologer's expectations about his having had the favor of his lady, on the other hand, is quite clear. Here the form of the response, **no**, is formally reinforced by the repetition and by the explicit statement of the narrator, **sorwefully he siketh**. Thus "The Franklin's Tale" provides at least one instance of each of the variants for "yes" and "no"; and each instance can be seen as marking a character's involvement in the events of the story.

The combination of overt statement about a character's feelings and lexical choice in the form of his response is used to good advantage by Chaucer in at least three places in **Troilus and Criseyde**. In the first of these Criseyde provides visual evidence of the confused state of her feelings about becoming amorously involved with Troilus. She and Pandarus are seated

on her balcony watching the Trojans return from battle, discussing what response she should make to Troilus's discreet suit of her:

**And right as they declamed this matere,
Lo, Troylus, right at the stretes ende,
Com rydyng with his tenthe som yfere,
Al softly, and thederward gan bende
There as they sete, as was his way to wende
To palays-ward. And Pandarus hym aspyde
And seyde, "Nece, yse who comth here ryde.**

[group of ten together]

[did tend toward]

**"O fle naught in — he seeth us, I suppose, —
Lest he may thynken that ye hym eschuwe."
"Nay, nay," quod she, and waxe as red as rose.**

[II, 1247-1256]

The visualized form of her speech doubtless represents her attempt to appear composed, and hence the unmarked lexical form **nay**. But it is repeated, and anyway her complexion gives away what she suddenly experiences. She is a woman of very delicate sensibility throughout the poem, but nowhere more so than here in this early revelation of her feeling.

Criseyde's public position in Troy is an uncertain one. She is a widow and the daughter of a deserter. No one in Troy has any particular interest in her well-being and, except for a potential and necessarily secret association with the Royal house by virtue of a possible **affair d'amour** with Troilus, she can only trust in herself. She is understandably upset, then, to hear of a law-

12. Samuels, *Linguistic Evolution*, p. 23.

suit pending against her. Pandarus, hoping to nudge her closer to the embraces of Troilus, reveals it to her:

Be ye nought war how false Polyphete
Is now abowte eftsoones for to plete
And brynge on yow advocacies newe?"
I? No," quod she, and chaunged al hire hewe.

[bring a legal case]

[II, 1467-1470]

"Lo, Pandare, I am ded withouten more,
Hastow nought herd at parlement," he seyde,
"For Antenor how lost is my Criseyde?"
This Pandarus, ful dede and pale of hewe,
Ful pytously answerde and seyde, "Yis,
As wysly were it fals as it is trewe,
That I have herd and wot al how it is."

[know; IV, 376-382]

The behaviorally marked form, collocated with an explicit representation of her agitation, visualizes for us the extent of her alarm. A good contrast to this personal expression of feeling is provided later when the **parlement** discusses whether or not to trade Criseyde to the Greeks for Antenor, who had been captured by them.

For which delibered was by parlement
For Antenor to yelden up Criseyde,
And it pronounced by the president,
Althey that Ector "nay" ful ofte preyede.

[although;
IV, 211-214]

We can imagine some constraint and control in his use of **nay**, which was likely the properly decorous form for public and official expression of negation. But **no** and **yis** serve for the expression of deep feeling to intimate acquaintances. Thus when it is concluded that Criseyde will indeed be traded to the Greeks, conversation between Troilus and Pandarus uses the marked form:

Once again we have the behaviorally marked form, accompanied by the narrator's description of a man gone pale and dead looking. In addition to this it is placed in rhyme position, giving it still further visual emphasis in the rhyme royal stanza.

Another stylistic feature which can be discerned in Chaucer's patterning of the forms for "yes" and "no" is the revelation of courtly sensitivity in the address of some characters of refined sensibility. For example, the form of "yes" used by Deiphebus, brother of Hector and Troilus, gives almost the only evidence in the poem which shows his refined and noble nature. He plays a very small role in the poem, but larger than he does in Chaucer's source, *Il Filostrato* of Giovanni Boccaccio. Nevertheless Chaucer's conception of Deiphebus would seem patterned after Boccaccio's. And Boccaccio shows him as a person very sensitive to the feelings of others, for example in the following:

Deifebo s'accorse allor, che quello
 Fosse che lo stringnea, **e fatta vista**
D'audito non l'aver, disse: fratello
 Che no conforti omai l'anima trista?

[Deiphebus then perceived what it was
 that constrained him (Troilus),
and affecting not to have heard, said:
 Brother, Why dost thou not now comfort
 thy sad soul?]¹³

Chaucer expanded the role of Deiphebus by having a dinner party and meeting between Troilus and Criseyde take place at his house. The poet employs some delicate touches when Pandarus first approaches Deiphebus to set this meeting:

Quod Pandarus, "I pray yow that ye be
 Frend to a cause which that toucheth me."

'Yis, parde,'" quod Deiphebus, "wel thow most
 In al that evere I may, and God tofore,
 Al nere it but for man I love most,
 My brother Troylus. But sey wherfore
 It is, for sith that day that I was bore,
 I nas, ne nevere mo to ben I thynke
 Ayens a thyng that myghte the forthynke."

[by God! knowest]

[II, 1406-1414]

Pandarus has here addressed Deiphebus in the second plural forms of polite, formal discourse (**yow, ye, be**); but, perhaps in response to the word **frend**, Deiphebus responds encouragingly in the singular forms proper to the discourse of intimates (**thow, most, the**) and to emphasize his willingness to cooperate, Chaucer writes, "Yis, parde."

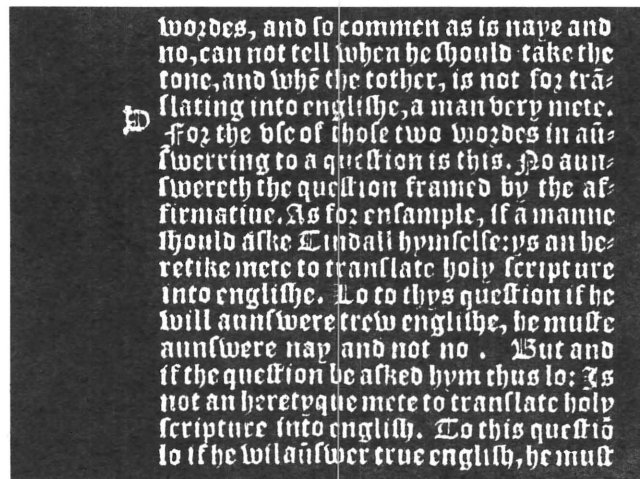


Figure 3:
 No and Naye Distin-
 guished in *Workes of Sir*
Thomas More (1557).

This is an alliterative poem of the fourteenth century. Though pre-
 fests organizational,
 grammatical, and stylistic features more proper
 to the oral language of
 speech than to the visible
 idiom of literacy.
No/naye and *yes/yea*
 are not kept distinct in

served in writing, alliterative poetry mani-
 fests this text, and line numbers cited in the glossary by Skeat sometimes contradict his interpretation here.

13.
 Cited from the edition and translation of N. E. Griffin and A. B. Myrick, *The Filostrato of Giovanni Boccaccio* (Philadelphia: U. of Pennsylvania, 1929), Canto VII, line 78.

The form **yis** is used in a similar way in the **Book of the Duch-ess** to characterize the gentility and good manners of an aristocratic character who is probably also the person for whom the poem was composed, and hence a possible benefactor of honorific intent. The narrator comes upon a figure contemplating, otherwise alone, in a garden:

'But at the last, to sayn ryght soth,
He was war of me, how y stooode
Before hym and did of myn hoode, [removed]
And had ygret hym as I best koude, [politely]
Debonayrly and nothyng lowde.
He sayde, "I prey the, be not wroth.
I herde the not, to seyn the soth, [no matter]
Ne I sawgh the not, syr, trewely."

'A, goode sire, No fors," quod y,
'I am ryght sory yif I have oughte [goodly]
Destroubled yow out of your thoughte.
Foryve me yif I have mystake."

'Yis, th'amendes is lyght to make,"
Quod he, "for ther lyeth noon therto.
There ys nothyng myssayd nor do."
Loo, how godoely spak thys knyghte, [arrogant nor
affected]
As hit had be another wyghte:
He made hyt nouthre towgh ne queynte. [514-531]

In his edition (p.551) Fisher cites this passage as an instance of "Chaucer's 'good ear' for voice as a clue to character." But no one actually talks in verse, nor did in the fourteenth century. The passage is carefully visualized to reveal character: the narrator uses polite, deferential, formal second person pronominal and verbal forms while the other person uses more intimate singular forms to put the narrator at ease. The form **yis** emphasizes how lightly the amends are to make, and by virtue of that, the grace and gentility of the speaker.

In the **Canterbury Tales** Chaucer uses the unmarked form **yea** five times as frequently as the marked **yis**, and **nay** is used at least ten times more frequently than the behaviorally marked **no**.¹⁴ It is thus quite clear that **yis** and **no** are more restricted than **yea** and **nay**, and contextual analysis shows unmistakably that the marked forms are reserved for expressing behaviorally involved involvement of stylistic significance. Of the ten instances of **yis**, eight occur within individual tales. Two of these have already been treated in the discussion of "The Franklin's Tale." Three of the remaining six occur in "The Miller's Tale," all as responses to negatively framed questions that themselves have behaviorally force. The tale tells of the cuckolding of the carpenter, John, by his young wife, Alison — **Jalous he was, and held hire narwe in cage** [I, 3224] — and a clerk, Nicholas. The wife, however, is terrified of her husband's jealousy:

Myn housbonde is so ful of jalousie
That but ye wayte wel and been privee,
I woot right wel I nam but deed," quod she.

[3294-3296]

John and Alison are awakened one night by the sound of a love song performed by Absalon, another of her admirers. John asks,

“What, Alison, herestow nat Absalon,
That chaunteth thus under oure boures wal?”
And she answerde hir housbonde therwithal,
“Yis, God wot, John, I heere it every deel.”

[3366-3369]

Given John's jealous nature, there is doubtless some agitation in the negative framework of his question, as there is also in his use of **thus** to characterize the immediacy and erotic quality of the chanting. The line might also be scanned with non-syllabic **r** in **under**, giving metrical and rhetorical prominence to three successive words: **und'r oure boures wál**. Her response is clearly behabitive, marked not only by **yis**, but also by the oath, and amplified by the degree expression **every deel** “every bit of it” giving a sense of her desire to express absolute cooperation in her husband's indignation.

The other two instances in “The Miller's Tale” reveal character as well as situation. The opportunistic clerk, Nicholas, sets up an elaborate scheme by which to get the carpenter out of the way so he can make love to Alison. But he must get the carpenter to take the initiative in entering the trap. Nicholas's eagerness shows when John asks,

“Is ther no remedie in this cas?”
“Why yis, for Gode,” quod hende Nicholas.

[3535-3536]

Thus has the fish taken the bait; Nicholas has in mind a perfect “remedy,” though it will not benefit John. Slightly later, as part of his developing scheme, Nicholas asks,

“Hastow nat herd hou saved was Noe...?”
“Yis,” quod this Carpenter, “ful yoore ago.” [3533, 3537]

The carpenter would have Nicholas know that he is no fool; of course, he knows the story of Noah, and has known it for a long time. This is not only the answer Nicholas wanted to hear, but the very eagerness he wanted to hear in it. In this way Chaucer shows the jealous carpenter's gullible cooperation in the seduction of his wife. A similar use of **yis** is seen in “The Friar's Tale” when the avaricious Summoner, having elicited a question which, he thinks, will lead to money in his pocket, responds, “Yis... pay anon — lat see — / Twelf pens to me, and I wol thee acquite” [III, 1598-1599]. **Yis** is used in “The Parson's Tale” to answer the rhetorical question, “Is nat this a cursed vice?” [X, 555-560]. And it is used with scurrilous emphasis in “The Summoner's Tale” [III, 1685].

Of the three occurrences of **no** within the tales themselves, two, from “The Franklin's Tale,” have already been discussed. The third occurs in “The Physician's Tale” when, like Dorigen, the maiden Virginia must choose between death and dishonor. She cries out to her father:

And seyde, “Goode fader, shal I dye? [must]
Is ther no grace, is ther no remedye?”
“No, certes, deere doghter myn,” quod he. [VI, 235-237]

The three marked forms of response which occur in the pilgrimage framework of the **Canterbury Tales** are all examples of irony. By the very exaggeration of response, expressed by use of the marked forms, characters indicate meanings contradictory to the expressions used. The first instance occurs in the "Prologue to the Manciple's Tale." The Manciple, purchasing agent for a college, who juggled his accounts for personal profit, has openly derided the drunken Cook, with whom he may have done business in the past. The Host warns him:

'But yet, Manciple, in feith thou art to nyce,
Thus openly repreve hym of his vice.

[silly]

Another day he wole, paraventure
Reclayme thee and brynge thee to lure —
I meene, he speke wole of smale thynges,
As for to pynchen at thy rekenynges
That were nat honeste, if it cam to preef.'

[per chance]

[loss]

'No," quod the Manciple, "that were a greet mescheef!
So myghte he lightly brynge me in the snare.
Yet hadde I levere payen for the mare
Which he rit on than he sholde with me stryve.
I wol nat wratthen hym, also moot I thryve!'

[as I may prosper]
[IX, 69-80]

The Manciple's use of **no** is exaggerated; for he says that he will make it up to the Cook by giving him a draft of good wine although the Cook is already thoroughly soused. And then, addressing the rest of the Pilgrims, he adds:

"And right anon ye shul seen a good jape.
This Cook shal drynke therof, if I that may.
Up peyne of deeth, he wol nat seye me nay."

[joke]

[84-86]

The Manciple's derision did not end with the Host's warning, it only changed in character. For the Cook accepted the drink, and the narrator interjects:

What neded hym? He drank ynough biforn.
And whan he hadde pouped in this horn
To the Manciple he took the gourde agayn.

[puffed]

[89-91]

As Fisher notes, the **double entendre** is unpleasant; but it appears the Manciple has treated the Cook with great contempt and sarcasm.

The Friar uses **yeis** with ironic courtesy when, after cutting off his argument with the Summoner, the Host demands that the Wife of Bath begin her tale:

"Do, dame, telle forth youre tale, and that is best."
"Al redy, sire," quod she, "right as yow lest.

[please]

If I have licence of this worthy Frere."
"Yis, dame," quod he, "tel forth and I wol heere."

[III, 853-856]

The remaining instance of a marked form in the **Canterbury Tales** occurs in one of the most interesting and commented upon bridges in the entire work. The interminable "Monk's Tale" has been interrupted by the Knight, and the Host looks about for another teller:

**Thanne spakoure Hoost with rude speche and boold,
And seyde unto the Nonnes Preest anon,**

"Com neer, thou preest, com hyder, thou sir John!

Telle us swich thyng as mayoure hertes glade.

[such]

Be blithe, though thou ryde upon a jade.

[nag]

What thogh thyn hors be bothe foul and lene?

If he wol serve thee, rekke nat a bene.

Looke that thyn herte be murie evermo."

"Yis, sire," quod he, "Yis, Hoost, so moot I go.

But I be myrie, ywis, I wol be blamed."

And right anon his tale he hath attamed,

[entered upon]

And thus he seyde unto us everichon,

This sweete preest, this goodly man sir John.

[VII, 2809-2820]

The tale that follows this is among the most sophisticated of Chaucer's compositions, a tale of wit, gentle satire, and irony directed both at literary forms and conventions and at particular tales and tellers within the fiction of the pilgrimage. If it is at all true that Chaucer made some effort to fit tale and teller, then the Nun's Priest must be regarded as a man of refined linguistic capabilities. His response to the Host's rudeness is not disappointing. The Host has used derisive terminology, familiar grammatical forms proper to the address of an intimate or a menial, and the bald second person imperative.

The Nun's Priest has responded with exaggerated courtesy, overtly subservient but with masterful irony. There is too much evidence here of exaggeration to indicate any real subservience. For one thing the phrase **so moot I go** may very well refer to an imagined threat of physical abuse by the Host. **Moot**, "have opportunity, be permitted, be obligated to," is entirely ambiguous; but **go**, "walk, pass from place to place, move," usually refers in Middle English to physical movement, and it could hardly be used without at least an association of such movement. But however crude the Host may be, there is no suggestion, here or elsewhere, of his threatening physical violence. The reference of the Nun's Priest constitutes, by its exaggeration, a behabitive response to the Host's unseemly behavior.

Chaucer marks this response not only by the lexical form **yis** and the ironically courteous **sire**, but, with greatest visible effect, by splitting the repetition of **yis** to give an effect of its being not one repeated response, but rather an iteration of instances:

"Yis, sire," quod he, "yis, Hoost, So moot I go."

14.
John S. P. Tatlock and Arthur G. Kennedy, **A Concordance to the Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer and to the Romaunt of the Rose**, 2 vols. (Washington: The Carnegie Institution, 1927).

The subservience is so clearly exaggerated that the response can only be interpreted as another example of the subtly formidable wit of "this swete preest, this goodly man sir John."

Whatever we come to know of Chaucer's mind or artistry, we come to know from reading his words on a page. Such interpretation, an act of assimilation by which the organism derives from spatial configurations a material structure for its internal processes of consciousness, is possible for three reasons: first, because the organism has learned how to accommodate the world of visibility and to take advantage of it; second, because visible text perseveres and the aggregate of human experience has provided a mechanism by which translation through time is possible; and third, because Chaucer, in the very externalization of his consciousness, has planned for its transmission by visible means. He more than once expressed his concern, perhaps most eloquently at the conclusion of **Troilus and Criseyde**:

Go litel bok, go litel myn tragedye....

**And for ther is so gret dyversite
In Englyssh and yn wrytyng of oure tonge,
So prey I God that noon mysywryte the,
Ne the mysmetre for defaute of tonge.
And red wherso thow be, or elles songe,
That thow be understonde, God I beseche—**

[V, 1786,
1793-1798]

And, in an apparently somewhat aggravated mood, he wrote:

**Adam scryveyn, if ever it thee byfalle
Boece or Troilus for to wryten newe,
Under thy long lokkes thow most have the scalle
But after my makyng thow wryte more trewe!
So ofte a daye I mot thy werk renewe
It to corecte and eke to rubbe and scrape;
And al is thorough thy neglygence and rape!**

[scribe]

The sense of vivid reality, the depth of vision, the profound realization of nature, the world, and the human condition in the fourteenth century come to us, finally, through his ability to choose visible forms of expression that would convey, and continue to convey. Without help and without feedback. The particular contours of thought traced from his expressions for "yes" and "no" are perhaps less significant in themselves than in illustrating the extent of detail to which he carried his effort to be understood through visible means. No wonder he took writing so seriously "it to corecte and eke to rubbe and scrape."