

# Aye–ay: An Anglo-Frisian parallel<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The most widespread form for neutral “yes” in the *Survey of English Dialects* is not *yea* or *yes*, but *aye*. It is used not only in the North and Midlands, but also in areas of the South of England. It is a feature of Scottish English, and is familiar from government in many English-speaking countries. We also find the *aye*-like *ayuh* in Northeast America. “Aye” appears suddenly about 1575 and is “exceedingly common” around 1600; it is initially written *I* and its origin, like *yes*, is uncertain. *Ay* is also found in Old Frisian, as well as Sater Frisian today (*öäi*, *a’äi* etc.). This study reviews a number of proposed etymologies, examining which can account for the occurrence or development of *ay(e)* in both languages. Based on a wider study of change in forms of “yes” and “no” in English, I argue that *aye–ay* is a parallel development of interjection + particle. The study also suggests functional and phonological overlap with the pronominal echo *I* in English, but not Frisian, with the vocalic form of the pronoun and diphthongisation in the “Great Vowel Shift”, accounting for the popularity and spelling *I* of “aye” around 1600.

## Keywords

English, Frisian, language change, response particles, yes, no

## 1 Introduction

The most widespread form for neutral “yes” recorded by the *Survey of English Dialects* (*SED*) in traditional dialect in England is not *yea* or *yes*, but *aye*.<sup>2</sup> It is used not only in the North and Midlands, but also in areas of the South. It is a feature of Scottish English,<sup>3</sup> and is familiar from government in many English-speaking countries. We also find the *aye*-like *ayuh* in Northeast America. “Aye” appears suddenly about 1575 and is “exceedingly common” around 1600; it is initially written *I* and its origin, like *yes*, is uncertain (*OED* s.v. *aye/ay*). Shakespeare, born in 1564, makes the following play on words in *Romeo and Juliet*, written probably in 1594 or 1595:<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Rolf Bremmer for kindly sending me several examples of Frisian *ay* that have come to light since the publication of his (1989) article.

<sup>2</sup> In this study, I use *aye*, *ayuh* and *ay* to refer to variants of English “aye” and “ayuh” and Frisian “ay”. Similarly, *a(h)*, *o(h)*, *yea*, *yes*, *no* and *nay* subsume their variant forms.

<sup>3</sup> *Dictionary of the Scots Language* (s.v. *ay* interj.).

<sup>4</sup> Date of composition, Wells et al. (1988: 335). *Romeo and Juliet*, act 3 scene 2, Third Quarto, 1609, original spelling (my short s). Digital facsimile, British Library.

Hath Romeo slaine himselfe? say thou but I,  
And that bare vowell I shall poyson more  
Then the death-darting eye of Cockatrice,  
I am not I, if there be such an I.  
Or those eyes shot, that makes thee answer I:  
If he be slaine say I, or if not, no.  
Briefe, sounds, determine my weale or wo.

Ay is also found in Frisian (Wedgwood 1872 s.v. *aye*; Bremmer 1989); for example in 1537 (Gerbenzon 1967: no. 40, ll. 9–10; Rolf Bremmer, p.c. 19 April 2016):

*ende welle y dat nijer naet haebbe off dwsken awentwer naet aen gaen, so scrywe mij “aey  
off ne”*  
'and if you do not want to have the right of pre-emption or to run such a risk, then write me  
“yes or no”

The *OED* lists the following forms of *aye* in English:

1500s–1700s *I*<sup>5</sup>  
1600s *ai*  
1600s–1800s *ey*  
1600s onwards *aye*, *ay*

The *English Dialect Dictionary* (*EDD*) gives [ai, ei, oi, iə] and numerous variants, shown in Table 1.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The *I* spelling is still recorded in the 19th century in Yorkshire and Somerset (*EDD* s.v. *I*, adv.).

<sup>6</sup> The *EDD* records similar forms with different spellings. As these have different regional descriptions, I have listed them separately here.

Table 1 *Aye in the English Dialect Dictionary, simplified slightly*

Variant	Area
aye [ai, ei, oi, iə]	Scotland, Ireland and all the northern counties to Lancashire, Staffordshire, Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire Also in Leicestershire, Warwickshire, Worcestershire, Gloucestershire and in Surrey, Sussex, Hampshire, Somerset, Devon, Cornwall
	<i>Also in the forms below</i>
ay	Ireland, North Riding of Yorkshire, West Riding of Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire, north Lincolnshire
l	Antrim and Down, Sussex, Hampshire, Somerset
ai	Northumberland
aay	Northwest Derbyshire
ae	North and South Country
eigh	North Country, Northumberland, Durham, Cumberland, Westmoreland, West Riding of Yorkshire, Lancashire
ey	Westmoreland, East Riding of Yorkshire, north Lincolnshire
ei	West Riding of Yorkshire
eye	North Lincolnshire
eyeh	Northumberland
eyh	Westmoreland
ah	Nottinghamshire, northwest Derbyshire, Leicestershire, south Warwickshire, West Somerset
eea, eeah	West Riding of Yorkshire
a	Somerset
aw	Staffordshire, Warwickshire, Worcestershire, Cornwall
hey	North Riding of Yorkshire, East Riding of Yorkshire, north Lincolnshire
hei	West Riding of Yorkshire
hi	West Riding of Yorkshire, Lancashire
oi	Surrey
wyah	North Riding of Yorkshire, East Riding of Yorkshire
weyey	East Riding of Yorkshire

The two main forms recorded by the *SED* for England are *ah* and *aye* (*SED* vol. 1, part 3: 965–966; vol. 2, part 3: 947–948; vol. 3, part 3: 1176–1177; vol. 4, part 3: 1028–1030). Forms of neutral (non-emphatic and non-contradictory) “yes” recorded by the *SED* are summarised in a map by Orton and Wright (1974: M176).

A distinction between neutral “aye” and contradictory “yes” or similar is recorded quite widely in the *SED* data,<sup>7</sup> despite the *OED*’s report of the demise of the original function of *yes*.<sup>8</sup> For further discussion, including a map, see Howe (forthcoming).

We also have the *aye*-like *ayuh* in Northeast America. Stephen King, who was born in Portland, Maine, writes in *The Colorado Kid* (2005: 46 and passim):

“Oh, ayuh, but even that’s a mystery, wouldn’t you say?” Dave asked.

“Yah,” Vince agreed, and now he didn’t sound comfortable. Nor did he look it.

“You’re confusing me,” Stephanie said.

“Ayuh, the story of the Colorado Kid is a confusing tale, all right,” Vince said (...)

States recording *ayuh* or variants are Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, Pennsylvania and New Jersey (*Dictionary of American Regional English, DARE*).<sup>9</sup> The pronunciation of *ayuh* is usually [‘e(j)ə], also [‘æjə, aɪ(j)ə]; there is also an *ayup*. Trawick-Smith (2011) writes on *ayuh*:<sup>10</sup> “it has more of a standardized spelling than it does a pronunciation. I’ve usually heard it as eh-YUH (...) [eɪˈjʌ], but there’s also a pronunciation that puts more weight on the first syllable (EY-yuh), as well as EE-yuh or eye-yuh”.

## 2 Origin of *aye*

Are *aye* and *ayuh* in the British Isles and North America a borrowing from Frisian? I will suggest rather that they are a parallel development. Although I will thus disagree with Rolf Bremmer’s conclusions in his (1989) paper, his publication on the Frisian forms is for me key to an explanation of English *aye* and Frisian *ay*. I will review five etymologies:

- (1) Borrowing from Frisian
- (2) From the pronoun *I*
- (3) From *ay* or *ei* ‘ever, always’
- (4) From *yea*
- (5) From interjection + *ye(a)*

<sup>7</sup> *SED* locations recording neutral *aye* and contradictory *yes* or similar:

East Midland counties: Nottinghamshire 1, 2, 3, 4; Lincolnshire 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9; Northamptonshire 3, 4; Suffolk 2, 3, 5; Buckinghamshire 1, 2, 3, 4, 5; Bedfordshire 1, 3; Hertfordshire 1, 2; Essex 1, 5

West Midland counties: Cheshire 1 (*aye-yaye*); Derbyshire 1, 2, 4; Shropshire 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11; Staffordshire 1, 4, 6, 7; Herefordshire 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6; Worcestershire 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7; Warwickshire 4, 5, 6, 7; Oxfordshire 1

Southern counties: Wiltshire 4; Hampshire 3, 6

Northern counties: Northumberland 2, 6, 8; Cumberland 1, 3, 5; Westmorland 3; Lancashire 5 (*aye-yaye*), 6 (*aye-yaye*), 10 (*aye-yah*); Yorkshire 5, 12 (*aye-yaye*), 17 (*aye-yaye*), 21 (*aye-yaye*), 28, 31, 33 (*aye-yah*)

Outside England too: one commentator on my presentation at the *3rd Southern Englishes Workshop* at UCL, John Harris (p.c., February 2016), stated that he indeed had a distinction between “aye” and “yes”.

<sup>8</sup> According to the *OED* (s.v. *yes*), in answer to a question not involving a negative, *yes* was “Formerly usually more emphatic than *yea* or *ay*; in later use taking the place of these as the ordinary affirmative response word”; in answer to a negative question, the distinction from *yea* “became obsolete soon after 1600, and since then *yes* has been the ordinary affirmative response word in reply to any question positive or negative”.

<sup>9</sup> Map of “ayuh”, question NN1 “Other words like ‘yes’: Are you coming along too?” [www.daredictionary.com/view/question/NN1](http://www.daredictionary.com/view/question/NN1) (accessed 4 April 2016).

<sup>10</sup> I have standardised italics, capitalisation and punctuation in blog quotations.

For further discussion of *aye* as well as references, see Bremmer (1989) and Liberman (2010, 2014a). For discussion of the development of “yes” and “no” particles in English and more generally, see Howe (forthcoming).<sup>11</sup>

## 2.1 From Frisian *ay*, *aij*, *aei*

The oldest example of *ay* on the Continent is from about 1445, in Middle Low German with strong Frisian influence (Bremmer 1997: 382, 385–386):

*Soe sprac dy hogheste van den cloestere: “Hebbe y siin legenda nicht hoert?”*

*Soe sprekenze altomael: “Aey”*

‘Then the superior of the monastery says: “Have you not heard his legend/life?”

Then they say altogether: “Aye”’

This seems to confirm Rolf Bremmer’s conclusion (p.c., April 2016) that the affirmation was already current in Frisian in the 15th century, i.e. over a century before the first record in English (though see 2.5). A further noteworthy example is in Reiner Bogerman’s *De Originum Fresonum*, completed in 1551: part two begins with the words in Latin on “Donger” Frisians (in the north of West Friesland, cited in Bremmer [1989: 96]): “*Aij dictio Phrisonica est affirmativa, maxime jnter illos Frysones, qui vocantur Dungere Fresen*” ‘*Aij* is the Frisian phrase for the affirmative, particularly amongst those Frisians that are called *Donger Frisians*’.

For East Frisian, Müller records *e* ‘yes’ in Harlingerland in 1691 (König 1911: 57); Siebs (1901: §95) reports *e je* for ‘yes’ in Harlingerland and *æi* (*êi*) for Wangeroog. Bremmer is uncertain whether these Frisian variants are connected, as the Harlingen and Wangerooge forms phonologically “cannot be direct descendants of OFris *ay*” (1989: 100). However, as the English forms of *aye* illustrate, variation is usual in “yes” and “no”. Response particles have a wide range of accent variation, and emotional colouring is significantly more common than for most words; all this can produce a variety of forms. Further, it would be difficult to justify a link between Frisian and English *ay(e)* but not between the various Frisian forms.

*Ay(e)*-like forms are also found in present-day Sater (East) Frisian: Kramer’s (2014) *Formen-Wörterbuch des Saterfriesischen*, a corpus based on around 200 hours of recordings, has *öäi* and *a’äi* for ‘yes’ a few times (rarely *häi*) beside the far more usual *jee*. Kramer also tentatively lists *äh*, *äi* and *üi*, *üi* as ‘yes’. There is also *öi*, *ööi* and *eei* for (mostly) ‘doubting yes’.

Bremmer (1989: 94) dismisses parallel independent development of English and Frisian as too great a coincidence, *ay(e)* appearing in the two languages around a century or so apart. This is a valid point, though we could argue that many Germanic languages show parallel developments that are not the result of borrowing. He also dismisses the possibility of Frisian *ay* being a loan from English, firstly because of the earlier attestation on the Continent, and secondly because English loans in Frisian are rare in that period (1989: 94). Bremmer believes English *aye* to be instead a borrowing from Frisian,

<sup>11</sup> Naively, one might assume that “yes” and “no” are straightforward. However, a moment’s reflection will bring to mind the standard *yes* and *no*, informal *yeah* and *nah*, and regional or archaic *yea*, *nay* and, the subject of this paper, *aye*. We can also say *yep* and *nope*, use the military *affirmative* and *negative*, and even combine them as *yeah-no* (e.g. Moore 2007). Constructions such as the matrimonial *I do* hint that “yes” and “no” might not, in fact, be universal in human language. And, of course, there are significant differences between languages and cultures in what “yes” and “no” can signify. In addition, we have vocalised *uh huh* and *uh-uh* and the gestures of nodding and shaking our heads. So we have more than a dozen ways in English — and three modalities — of communicating “yes” or “no”. The trimodality — language, vocalisation and gesture — of “yes” and “no” is quite exceptional, making them an interesting and potentially significant area of research in understanding human communication and its origins.

comparing it to modern-day *OK* from American English.<sup>12</sup> He points to the influx of words into English from the Low Countries, particularly in the 16th century, and Protestant refugees, stating that “Beside the many Flemings and Hollanders (...) there must have been Frisians, too” (1989: 95). He sees a nautical route as equally likely, given the other maritime borrowings from the Low Countries, “although obviously Frisian loans have so far not been noticed in this context” (1989: 95). Sandahl (1951: 22), in his study of Middle English sea terms, writes referring to Low German and Dutch:

The great influx of Low German and Dutch terms started early; since the beginning of the Middle Ages English and Low Dutch intercourse on the sea has been unbroken. Up to the end of the 16th century the mercantile contact at sea between England and the Continent was close, and the sailors of the two races met and mingled not only in the sea ports of Holland and England but also in other ports at which they both traded (...) Later on, in the 17th century, the naval wars and maritime rivalry of England and the Netherlands brought them into prolonged contact with each other, and a steady borrowing of Dutch terms has been going on till the present day.

Borrowing of forms of “yes” and “no” is certainly possible, as in English we have *nay* from Norse and an Afrikaans loan or influence in South African *ya*; we also have a suggested African origin for *uh huh* and *uh-uh*,<sup>13</sup> and possible Celtic influence in echoes (Vennemann [2009]), a type of response that echoes the question (as in the matrimonial *I do*). In recent times, the spread of the yes-like *OK* reflects the popularity of American culture. *OK* has been borrowed by speakers of many languages, including Frisian and Dutch.<sup>14</sup> And in *yeah*, the US form and particularly the spelling have become widespread in other English varieties through popular culture (see Howe, forthcoming).<sup>15</sup>

We would need to establish similar prestige, overt or covert, to explain the borrowing of *ay* from Frisian and its popularity in English. With a nautical route, we would need to show why a maritime usage would be generalised. And, of course, borrowing would still not explain the development of *ay* in Frisian.

## 2.2 From the pronoun *I*

The fact that English “aye” is first written *I* prompted Jespersen ([1909] 1961: 437) to suggest an origin from the pronoun as a formula of assent: “the word probably is nothing else than the pronoun *I*, used at first as an answer after such questions as ‘Will you..?’ ‘I’ (= I will), and later extended to other answers”. This would then be a form of echo. In closely-related Dutch, for example, we find pronominal echoes, in this case “yes” or “no” particle + pronoun, and in some dialects generalisation to other persons and numbers. In his (1989) paper, Bremmer points out Middle Dutch constructions of particle + pronoun such as *nenik* < *neen* + *ik* ‘no I’, *neni* < *neen* + *hi* ‘no he’, *neent* < *neen* + *het* ‘no

<sup>12</sup> The standard etymology of *OK* is an abbreviation of *oll correct*, a 19th-century jocular alteration of “all correct” (*OED* s.v. *OK*; see recently Metcalf [2011] with references).

<sup>13</sup> Wells writes that *uh-uh* ‘no’ is “a recent importation from the States or from West Indian English” and that “some British people are confused by Americans’ use of it”. He believes it is probably African in origin. *Uh-huh* ‘yes’, on the other hand, is “quite at home in Britain” (1982: 556). Dalby ([1973] 1990: 139) writes that “African usage can (...) explain the frequent use by Americans of the interjections *uh-huh*, for ‘yes,’ and *uh-uh* for ‘no.’ Similar forms, especially for ‘yes,’ occur in scattered parts of the world, but nowhere as frequently and as regularly as in Africa”. Dalby cites no cross-linguistic statistics to substantiate this claim, however. Japanese, for instance, has *un* ‘yes’ and *uun* ‘no’. The *OED* states merely that *uh-uh* ‘no’ is “imitative” and chiefly US; *uh-huh* ‘yes’ is “imitative” and originally US (s.v. *uh-uh*, *uh-huh*).

<sup>14</sup> *OK* is also used in Japanese. Metcalf (2011: 171–173) lists eleven languages “among many others” whose speakers say *OK*.

<sup>15</sup> As illustration, Paul McCartney tells the story of when the Beatles wrote *She loves you* (recorded in 1963): we “played it to my dad and he said, ‘That’s very nice, son, but there’s enough of these Americanisms around. Couldn’t you sing, “She loves you. Yes! Yes! Yes!”’” (Miles 1997: 150). John Lennon recalled: “I don’t know where the ‘yeah, yeah, yeah,’ came from. I remember when Elvis did ‘All Shook Up’, it was the first time in my life that I had heard ‘uh huh’, ‘oh yeah,’ and ‘yeah, yeah,’ all sung in the same song” (Badman 2009, “She loves you”).

it', and *yaic* 'yes I', *yai* 'yes he', *jaet* 'yes it', *jawi* 'yes we' (1989: 88). He cites a similar usage in Old Frisian (1989: 97):

*Wellat J thet lowia mitha hondum?*  
*Ge, God, wi*  
 'Do you want to promise this with your hands?  
 Yes, by God, we (will)'

We also find a parallel in OE *nic*, early ME *nich*, *nyk*, a contraction of "ne" + "I" with the meaning 'not I; no'; compare *The Owl and the Nightingale* (l. 266) (*OED* s.v. *nich*):

*þu seist þat ich me hude adai; parto ne segge ich nich ne nai*  
 'Thou sayest that I hide myself by day; to that say I neither no nor nay'

And in Middle English *ze* is indeed sometimes augmented by a pronoun repeating the pronominal subject of the question; the *OED* (s.v. *yea*) cites examples from the *Ancrene Riwe* (c. 1225), including:

*Mei ich Preoue þis. ze witerliche ich*  
 'Can I prove this? Yes, certainly I can'<sup>16</sup>

In modern English traditional dialect, *yealtou*, *yelta* or *yeltow* 'yea, wilt thou?' and *yelly* 'yea, will ye?' are found as exclamations of surprise (*EDD* s.v. *yea*); these are conventionalised responses, with univerbation of the particle and tag question.

However, we would need to explain why the 1st person singular became the general affirmative and not 2nd or 3rd person pronouns, or the 1st person plural. We could cite frequency: in present-day English at least, in the *London-Lund Corpus of Spoken English* (Svartvik et al. 1982: 43–46), the pronoun *I* is the third most-frequent word and the most frequent personal pronoun, although all subjective and objective forms are in the top 200 (see Howe [1996] 2013: 51). Even more decisively, if English and Frisian *ay(e)* share a parallel origin, we cannot easily explain Frisian *ay* if it is to derive from the pronoun *ik*, where both the vowel and the final consonant *-k* are problematic (on Frisian pronouns, see Howe 2013 and 2014).

However, the pronoun is significant in English in the sense that "aye" was first written *I*, suggesting an association in speaker's/writer's minds. The pronominal echo will be taken up again at the end of this paper.

### 2.3 From *ay* or *ei* 'ever, always' or *nay* 'never'

A further hypothesis is that *aye* derives from *ay* 'ever, always'. This etymology would seem plausible, paralleling *no* from "never": the *OED* points out the Germanic parallels, stating that English *no* is "cognate with or formed similarly to Old Frisian *nā*, *nō*, Old Saxon *nia*, *nio*, *neo*, Old High German *nio*, *neo* (...) all in [the] sense 'never'". Storm (1896: 543) suggests an origin from Old Norse *ei* 'always', as a counterpart to *nay* from Norse *nei*, suggesting that "Die Bedeutung 'ja' kann sich auf engl. *Boden* als Gegensatz zu *nay* 'nein' entwickelt haben". However, the *OED* writes that *ay* 'ever, always' "rhymes, in the literary speech, and in all the dialects, with the group *bay*, *day*, *gay*, *hay*, *may*, *way*. On the other

<sup>16</sup> Millett (2009: 153).

hand, *aye* ‘yes’ does not rhyme with these” (s.v. *ay*, *aye*, adv.). Further, as already mentioned, “*aye*” was first written *l*, “a spelling never found with *AY* [‘ever, always’]”; though it may have been a dialectal form, passing “through the senses of *always*, *in all cases*, to *by all means*, *certainly*, *yes*” (*OED* s.v. *aye*, *ay*, *no*, adv. 1 and 2, *nay*). For further references, see Bremmer (1989: 87–88).

Dobson (1968: §233) points out that the pronunciations and spellings of *aye* present problems. He cites forms going back to ME *ai* or ME *ī*, and notes the variation in spellings in the 16th and 17th centuries. Stating that derivation from *ay* ‘ever’ would account for the modern spelling but not the modern pronunciation or normal early spelling *l*, and that derivation from *l* would account for the modern pronunciation and early spelling but not the modern spelling and 17th-century variant pronunciation [ai] or [æi], he concludes that only a dual origin is plausible. He suggests that “Probably we have to do with two synonyms of different origin that have been confused”, both back-formations from negatives: one from the *nich* ‘not I; no’ noted in 2.2, the other from *nay* ‘never’ “used as a strong negative ‘no’ (...) the positive *ay* used in affirmation”. Although I do not share Dobson’s etymologies, I, too, will suggest a hybrid explanation for English.

## 2.4 From *yea*

Following this brief discussion of borrowing, “*l*”, and *ay*, *ei* and *nay*, we can ask whether the *aye* forms in English are significantly different from those of *yea*. That is, is *aye* a variant or derivative of *yea*? This would account for its lack of earlier record, and the general lack of overlapping distribution with *yea*/*yaye* in the *Survey of English Dialects* data (see Orton & Wright [1974: map M17]).<sup>17</sup>

One further noteworthy point are the *y*-less forms of “yes” in Table 2, in many areas, contrasting with the absence of *y*-less variants of “yea” in the *EDD*, see Table 3.<sup>18</sup> An interesting question, then, is whether *aye* could be in origin a *y*-less development of *yea* of some kind.

<sup>17</sup> Note that the *EDD* description for *yea* [jē; jī, joi] “In general dialectal use in Scotland, Ireland and England” differs from Orton & Wright’s map for *yaye* based on *SED* data.

<sup>18</sup> For late Medieval English, the *eLALME* map “Forms lacking initial [j] in YET, YODE (WENT), YOU, YOUR, YEAR, YIELD” shows *y*-less forms in a relatively restricted area of the West Midlands, a few locations in the Southwest and sporadically elsewhere.  
[http://archive.ling.ed.ac.uk/ihd/elalme\\_scripts/lib/create\\_feature\\_map.php?mapid=4320005](http://archive.ling.ed.ac.uk/ihd/elalme_scripts/lib/create_feature_map.php?mapid=4320005) (accessed 4 March 2016).



Table 2 “Yes” in the *English Dialect Dictionary*

Variant	Area
[jes; jis, ĩs; unstressed jəs]	Various dialect forms and uses in Scotland, Ireland and England
	<i>Dialect forms</i>
eece, eece, ees(e, eess, or eez	Yorkshire, Northamptonshire, Shropshire, Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire, Berkshire, Suffolk, Essex, Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Wiltshire, Dorset, West Somerset, Devon, Cornwall
es(s	North Devon, Cornwall
e-us	Berkshire
yahs or yas	Sussex, south Devon
vis(s	Scotland, Shetland Isles, Ireland, Cumberland, west Yorkshire, south Staffordshire, Leicestershire, Warwickshire, Gloucestershire
yus	West Yorkshire, Worcestershire, Kent
iss, also written hiss [is]	Warwickshire, Worcestershire, Shropshire, Herefordshire, Gloucestershire, Suffolk, Wiltshire, Somerset, Devon, Cornwall

Table 3 “Yea” and “ya” in the *English Dialect Dictionary*

Variant	Area
yea [jē; jī, joi]	In general dialectal use in Scotland, Ireland and England
ya [jā, ja]	Scotland, Yorkshire, Lancashire, Cheshire, Derbyshire, Suffolk, Devon
	<i>Also in the forms below</i>
yai	Cheshire
ye	Devon
yee	Wexford, Leicestershire
yeh	East Lancashire
yeigh	West Riding of Yorkshire, Lancashire
yhi	Lancashire
yi	East Lancashire, northwest Devon
yigh	North Country, West Riding of Yorkshire, Lancashire, Hampshire
yih	West Durham
yoi	North Country, West Riding of Yorkshire, Lancashire, Nottinghamshire
yoigh	South Lancashire
yoy	West Riding of Yorkshire, Lancashire, Cheshire, Derbyshire, Leicestershire

Malone (1949: 95–96), cited in Langenfelt (1950: 33), suggests that *aye* developed from a loss of initial [i] in ME *yie*, OE *gie*, *gi*, as in *if* and *itch* from OE *gif* and *giccan*; presumably then with diphthongisation in the “Great Vowel Shift” to *aye*. However, this type of explanation would again not explain the diphthong in Old Frisian *ay*, *aij* etc. Contrast English *aye*, *I*, *ice*, *bite* with Old Frisian *ik* ‘I’, *īs* ‘ice’, *bīta* ‘bite’, for example. We must be able to account for the Frisian vowel forms in *ay* in the absence of a similar change.<sup>19</sup>

Further, this straightforward etymology does not account well for disyllabic forms such as Northumberland *eyeh*, Yorkshire West Riding *eeah* and Northeast American *ayuh*. In Frisian, too, we find Harlingen *e je* and Saterlandic *öäi* and *a’äi*, as already noted.

After examining various explanations, Liberman (2014b) offers his own “half-baked” etymology, suggesting that *aye* is a variant of *yeah*<sup>20</sup> and that Frisian borrowed from English rather than vice versa:

My half-baked reconstruction resolves itself into the following. Among the rather numerous variants of the word *yeah*, the variant *aye* (that is, *i* or *I*) developed among British sailors and became part of international nautical slang. Later, landlubbers in Frisia and Britain began to use it too. This process must have taken place some time before 1500.

The issue of why a nautical usage would be generalised has already been raised. In addition, the distribution in Orton & Wright’s map for modern traditional dialect does not lend itself easily to a maritime explanation. *Aye* is common far inland, right across the country, for example in land-locked Derbyshire. It is generally not common along the south coast, the southeast coast or the Wash. The Thames Estuary has *yaye* or *yes*, and the areas surrounding Portsmouth and Plymouth have *yes*. Of course, this is a few hundred years after the first occurrence of “*aye*”, and the neutral form has been replaced by *yes* in some areas, obscuring the earlier distribution.

## 2.5 From interjection + *ye(a)*

Another possibility, suggested by Langenfelt (1950), Varty (1957) and Kohler (1968, 1970), is interjection + particle:<sup>21</sup>

a(h) + ye(a) > aye

Langenfelt postulates a development of *a ye* to *aye* as follows:

aje: > aji: > aji > aj<sup>i</sup> > ai: > ai

*Aye* can thus be considered, in this explanation, an etymological spelling (Kohler 1968: 56).

Langenfelt (1950: 36) suggests that in *a ye* “the preceding *a* can be stressed to such an extent that the final *e* becomes incorporated in the [i]”. He adds (1950: 37) that “more strength was certainly infused into *ye* when *a* was put before it”, i.e. in the terminology of Howe (forthcoming) *yea* was augmented. Kohler states (1970: 28): “Die Verbindungen von Interjektion und Satzadverb der Polarität

<sup>19</sup> Note also OFris *gē*, *ie*, *jee*, *ye* etc. ‘*yea*’, pronounced /je:/ or possibly /jæ:/ (Bremmer [2009: 49, 51, 197; 1989: 93]), and *grēne* ‘green’, *trē* ‘tree’, for example.

<sup>20</sup> As pointed out by Nicholas Warren (Fukuoka Women’s University, p.c. 2016), *yeah* is attested only relatively recently (see Howe, forthcoming). Liberman likely means a variant of *yea*.

<sup>21</sup> Varty cited in Liberman (2010, 2014a).

(also *a yea* und *a nay*, vielleicht auch *a yes* und *a no*) bildeten ein zusätzliches System der Intensität, das dem der Polarität angegliedert war“.

Like Dobson above, Kohler sees problems in the various forms of *aye*. Citing dialects in Scotland and Suffolk, and descriptions of the English grammarians, he argues (1968: 57) that some variants of *aye* cannot be explained by Langenfelt's etymology. He also quotes Ellis, who writes in *Essentials of Phonetics* (1848: 96):

The diphthong *qi*, which is of rare occurrence in English, being only found in the single word *qi* (*aye*), meaning *yes*, is represented by the conjunction of its two components.<sup>22</sup>

Kohler (1968: 58) suggests the combination *æ3ea!*, with the Old English exclamation *æ3*:

Owing to the strong stress on the first syllable, *ea* was reduced to /ə/ and dropped so that the two words were felt as one unit, the original elements being no longer conspicuous. They formed a new lexical item, presumably with the meaning of a more forceful affirmation than the commoner O.E. *3ea*, M.E. *ye*.

He continues (1968: 58):

The length of the vowel must have varied a great deal according to the speaker's expressiveness so that short and long versions existed side by side. The variant with the short vowel could thus follow the development of M.E. /ai/ and later produce the spelling *ay(e)*. Beside it the long vowel continued to exist. In the 16th century, when M.E. /i:/ had become /ɛi/, the long variant could either join the further evolution of the /i:/-words, and was then spelt *i*, or still remain separate as a member of a very small group of words.

He adds (1968: 58–59) that if a form /ɛi/ still existed in the 18th century, the /ɛi/ could shift to /a:/ in the South, while in the North /ɛi/ remained “or was shortened due to the perfectly normal fluctuation in quantity”.

Augmentation is an important process in response particles. Etymologically, “yes” and “no” particles are highly abbreviated, conventionalised responses. Their meaning and use are a function of the conventionalisation in each language or dialect (thus although there are many similarities, “yes” and “no” are not identical cross-linguistically). However, because particles are highly abbreviated and conventionalised, they are often augmented to specify, clarify, emphasise or expand the speaker's meaning.<sup>23</sup> “Yes” and “no” are frequently combined with interjections — *oh yes*, *oh yeah*, *oh no*, *oh*

<sup>22</sup> Compare the *OED* on *aye* and *eye* (s.v. *aye/ay*, int.): “*Aye* and *eye* (which many identify in pronunciation, and which differ at most only in the ‘broader’ or more back sound of *aye*)”. Ellis's original is in phonetic script; the quotation here is cited as in Kohler (1968: 62). Kohler concedes (1968: 59) that “Some of the 19th-century references to a diphthong /a:i/ are at least partly due to a deliberate effort to keep the two obsolescent words *ay(e)* ‘yes’ and *ay(e)* ‘always’, ‘ever’ distinct”.

<sup>23</sup> Note that augmentation can also soften or tone down a response (cf. examples in Ungerer et al. [1984: 27], cited in Vennemann [2009: 314–315]):

We're being a bit extravagant, aren't we?  
Yes I think we are

Would you like a cup of tea?  
Yes please

*aye* and so on, but they can also be augmented in other ways — *aye and like*, *yes of course*, *yessir*, *nossir*, *abbut* ‘aye but’, *yebbut* ‘yes but’ and *yes it is*, for instance. Table 4 shows examples of augmented forms of “yes” and “no” in English traditional dialect, standard and regional varieties.<sup>24</sup> Note that augmentation can be pre- or postposed. We also find a form of augmentation in reduplication, the most obvious example of which of course is *aye aye*. With frequent use, an augmented particle, too, may undergo univerbation, reduction and bleaching.<sup>25</sup>

Table 4 Augmented “yes” and “no” in traditional dialect, standard and regional varieties

Augmented “yes” and “no”	
well aye	yes sir, yessir; yes siree < “yes” + siree
aye and like	no sir, nossir; no siree < “no” + siree
by gum aye	yeah mums, yeah man, yeah yute, yah safe
oh yes	yealtou ‘yea, wilt thou’, yelly ‘yea, will ye’
oh yea(h)	why aye, wuh yiss
och aye, oh aye, oh ah	why neea, why no
?a(h) + ye(a) > aye	aye aye
?“yea” + “is so” > yes	deed ay(e) ‘yes indeed’
yes fay	aye but, abbut
yes sure	dear yes > jearse, dear no > dow

A development of interjection + particle would also vocalise the *y-* of *ye(a)*, and could thus account for the difference in *y*-lessness in the forms of “yes” and “yea” as catalogued in the *EDD* (2.4).

However, Bremmer raises the important question of why we do not find parallel forms such as *oy*, i.e. from *o(h)* + *ye(a)*, given the frequency of the exclamation *o* (1989: 89). In fact, we do find the variant *oi* in the *EDD*, as cited, alongside [ai, ei, iə] (Table 1). On the interjections *a(h)* and *o(h)*, Aijmer (2002: 97) writes for present-day English:

It is difficult to imagine a conversation without a large number of *ohs* and *ahs*. Their frequency suggests that they can be inserted almost anywhere to pep up the conversation. However to a considerable extent they have been conventionalised. There are conventions

<sup>24</sup> Data from *EDD*, *SED*, *DSL*; *OED* (s.v. *yes siree*, *no siree*); Caribbean (Barbados) English (*yeah mums* etc.) — thanks to Kevin White (Kyushu Sangyo University, p.c. December 2016) for these forms; Howe (forthcoming) (*jearse* and *dow*).

<sup>25</sup> As Kohler suggests (1968: 58), the original combined meaning of *aye* was likely stronger. Compare *yes*, likely from “yea” + “is so” (Wallage & van der Wurff 2013), which is now an ordinary affirmative response in standard English (though see the Introduction). Thus, a formerly emphatic or contradictory particle can be generalised as a neutral form. None of the following standard works on grammaticalisation has entries for “yes” and “no”: *Grammaticalization* (Hopper and Traugott 1993), *World Lexicon of Grammaticalization* (Heine and Kuteva 2002) or *Oxford Handbook of Grammaticalization* (Narrog and Heine 2011). However, the processes that are important in the conventionalisation of responses are chunking, the “process behind the formation and use of formulaic or prefabricated sequences of words” (Bybee 2010: 34), and univerbation, the unification or fusion of a phrase or construction into a single unit (Brinton and Traugott 2005 and many others). The bases for such conventionalisation and reduction are neurolinguistic and the speaker and hearer in conversation. Neurological because “repeated sequences of neuromotor commands and actions tend to be processed as single units” and “repetition of neuromotor sequences leads to greater overlap and reduction of the component articulatory gestures” (Bybee 2007: 11), and linguistic because a frequently used construction is known to the hearer and can be abbreviated by the speaker.

for where they can be placed, how they are prosodically intoned, collate with other elements, what functions they can have.<sup>26</sup>

Historically, the interjection *a* is probably an imitative or expressive formation, communicating invocation, surprise or admiration (*OED* s.v. *a*, int.1). Somewhat ambiguously, the longer *ah* is a “Variant of *A int.* (...) after Anglo-Norman and Old French, Middle French, *a*, *ah* (...) expressing variously imprecation, emphasis, joy, sadness, and anger” (*OED* s.v. *ah*, int. and n.). Langenfelt (1950: 33–34) states that “It is natural that OE *á* develops into ME *ô* (...) But it is just as natural that a new ME *á* was formed since it was indispensable as an interjection”, adding that “It cannot be that the numerous interjections *a* in ME are loans from the French”. According to the *OED*, *o* is of multiple origins, partly a borrowing from Latin and partly a borrowing from French, though “independent formation of such a natural utterance is very likely”, too. It can express, according to intonation, appeal, surprise, lament and so on, and is used mainly in imperative, optative or exclamatory phrases, often also emphatically in *O yes*, *O no* etc. It is generally rare in Old English; in Middle English *o* often varies with the interjection *a*, especially in northern writers (*OED* s.v. *O*, int. and n.2).<sup>27</sup> The longer *oh* is originally a variant of *o*, and in early use was interchangeable with it in all contexts. It occurs especially standing alone and in exclamations, but in the 17th and 18th centuries is often also found in imperative, optative or exclamatory phrases and in these uses has again become common since the early 20th century (*OED* s.v. *oh*, int. and n.1).

In her study of interjections in present-day English, Stange (2016: 22) notes the “enormous” number of occurrences of *Oh!* in her corpora and its different meanings depending how speakers change pitch. We can perhaps infer a similarly high frequency of *a(h)* earlier in speech. In Middle English, *ā* is “An exclamation used in a great variety of situations to express attitudes and emotions ranging from admiration to scorn and from joy to grief”; *ō* expresses “surprise, awe, anger, scorn, anguish, emphasis, etc.” (*eMED* s.v. *ā* [interj.], *ō* [interj.]). Langenfelt cites (1950: 34) a considerable number of examples of the *a* interjection in Middle English. Chaucer has quite a few examples of both *a* and *o* (see Oizumi 2003). However, Langenfelt (1950: 34) states incorrectly that *a* does not appear with *yes*, *ye* etc. — we can indeed find examples of interjection + particle in Middle English, from the 14th century, both with *a* and with *o*. Compare the examples below (*eMED* and Oizumi 2003, emphasis mine, dates in brackets).<sup>28</sup>

*What nedith you, lady, my name ben desyrand? A yis gracysows aungyl (...)*

‘What need is there for you, lady, to be desiring my name? Oh, yes indeed, gracious angel (...)’

*Ludus Coventriae* 358/100 (possibly 1475)

*O yis, yis, Quod he to me, that kan I preve*

‘Oh yes, yes indeed, said he to me, that I can prove’

Chaucer *The House of Fame* 706 (ms. 1450, composition 1380)

*How shulld I penne bryng him downe? Oo yes, sone, with treson.*

<sup>26</sup> For a review of the functions of *oh* in present-day English, and a comparison of *oh* and *ah*, see Aijmer (2002: 97–151). For *ah* and *o(h)* in Early Modern English, see Culpeper & Kytö (2010: ch. 10).

<sup>27</sup> On the change OE [v:] to ME [ɔ:], Northern/Scots [a:], see for example Lass (1992: §2.3.2) and recently Minkova (2014: 200–204) and Stenbrenden (2016, ch. 2).

<sup>28</sup> For reasons of space, references to the examples here are simplified. For full bibliographical details, see *eMED* and Oizumi (2003).

‘How should I then bring him down? Oh yes, son, with treason.’

*The Siege of Troy* (1) 1665 (1475)

**A, nay**, lat be!

‘Ah, well, forget it!’<sup>29</sup>

Chaucer *The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* G.862 (1395)

Fy, mannyssh, fy, **o nay**, by god I lye.

‘O you virago! No, by God I lie!’<sup>30</sup>

Chaucer *The Man of Law’s Tale* B.782 (1390)

A ye is recorded in the *Second Shepherds’ Play*. A number of interpretations are possible, discussed by Langenfelt (1950: 34–36) and in brief by Bremmer (1989: 89 and 98), one of which is ‘ah yea’. I quote the passage below (Stevens and Cawley 1994: ll. 504–516, emphasis mine), believed to have been authored by the 15th-century dramatist, the “Wakefield Master”:

1 PASTOR. Resurrex a mortuus!

*Haue hold my hand.*

Iudas carnas dominus!

*I may not well stand;*

*My foytt slepys, by Iesus,*

*And I water fastand.*

*I thought that we layd vs*

*Full nere Yngland.*

2 PASTOR. **A, ye?**

*Lord, what I haue slept weyll!*

A recent anthology of medieval drama (Fitzgerald & Sebastian 2012: 164–165, emphasis mine) transcribes the second shepherd’s first line into modern spelling as ‘Ah, yea!’:

FIRST SHEPHERD. Resurrex a mortuis! *Have hold my hand!*

Judas carnas dominus! *I may not well stand.*

*My foot sleeps, by Jesus! and I water fastand* [fasting].

*I thought that we laid us full near England.*

SECOND SHEPHERD. **Ah, yea!**

*Lord, what, I have slept well!*

We also find two possible but inconclusive early “ayes” in the *Second Shepherds’ Play*, the second noted by Langenfelt (1950: 36). Fitzgerald and Sebastian transcribe the two passages into modern spelling as follows (2012: 166 & 169, emphasis mine). The first is from lines 438–440:

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<sup>29</sup> Wright (1985: 434).

<sup>30</sup> Wright (1985: 135).

MAK. *But I may cry out "Harroo!"*

*The sheep if they find.*

WIFE. *Hearken, **aye**, when they call: they will come anon.*

The second is from lines 587–588:

SECOND SHEPHERD. *Ill-spun weft, I wis, ay comes foul out.*

***Aye**, so?*

Stevens and Cawley (1994: ll. 634 and 850 respectively) have, without comment in the notes or glossary, "Harken ay when thay call" and "Ay, so!" Note that neither of the examples, in either edition, is written as later *I*.

Turning to Modern English and Frisian, we may find traces of an interjection + particle origin or process. For English, Beattie writes in the 18th century that "a peculiar stress is laid upon the sound of the first vowel" of the affirmative particle *ay* (1783: 266, my short *s*). In East Frisian, as already cited, we have Harlingerland *e je*. In the *EDD*, we find *eeah* (Yorkshire West Riding) and *eyeh* (Northumberland). In Northeast America, we have *ayuh*. *DARE* (s.v. *ayuh*) and Trawick-Smith (2011) list the following pronunciation spellings of *ayuh*: *aaay-yuh*, *aiah*, *ay-a(h)*, *a-yeh*, *ea*, *eyah*, *eh-YUH*, *EY-yuh*, *EE-yuh* and *eye-yuh*.

What is the origin of *ayuh*? It is not listed in the *OED*; however, *DARE* gives its etymology as probably *aye* + *yes* or *yea*, thus a type of augmentation, namely reduplication of "yes". A similar origin is suggested by Gould (1975: 38), who adds that "A generation or so ago a good many old Mainers would say *aye-yes*". Reduplication, at least of the same form, is common in "yes" and "no", including of course *aye aye*; we have already cited Chaucer's *yis*, *yis* and the Beatles' *yeah*, *yeah*, *yeah*. An alternative interpretation, however, might be that this initial "aye" is a form of the interjection, as also suggested by *ayup*.

Trawick-Smith (2011) writes: "What I find unique and intriguing about *ayuh* is that it looks like the only real American relative of the *aye* heard in various parts of the British Isles. Most of America uses *yeah*, *yup*, *yep* or the African-American-derived *uh huh*. But only in remote parts of New England does it seem a relative of *aye* is used". *DARE* does not include an entry for "aye" other than "ayuh". For *DARE* survey question NN1, *aye* is listed once for New Hampshire and once for Massachusetts, and *ay* and *ah* once each for New York State.<sup>31</sup> This is somewhat surprising considering the extent of *aye* in the British Isles. Could then *ayuh* be "aye"? Given the demographics of English emigration to New England between 1629 and 1640 (see e.g. Fischer [1989]) and that *aye* is "exceedingly common" in written records about 1600 (*OED* s.v. *aye/ay*), and the use of *aye*, *ei* and *ah* in parts of eastern England today,<sup>32</sup> it seems likely that New England *ayuh* is a variant of "aye", or some kind of augmented form. With the separation from the home country, could *ayuh* represent a regional, intermediate stage in the univerbation of *a(h) + ye(a) > aye*?<sup>33</sup>

Mike Szelog (n.d.), a linguist born in New Hampshire, writes on *ayuh*:

<sup>31</sup> [www.daredictionary.com/view/question/NN1?rskey=4x3eZj&result=1](http://www.daredictionary.com/view/question/NN1?rskey=4x3eZj&result=1) (accessed 31 March 2016).

<sup>32</sup> See Orton & Wright (1974: map M17) and *SED* (vol. III, 1176–1177); also David Britain *ah* (p.c. April 2016), Peter Trudgill *ah* (p.c. April 2016) and (2016: 163–164). I assume that *ah* 'yes', commonly recorded in the *SED*, is a further reduction of *aye*, thus *a(h) + ye(a) > aye > ah*.

<sup>33</sup> Compare Cressy (1987: viii) who writes "It seems to me more appropriate to consider seventeenth-century New England as an outlier of the old country, as a detached English province, than as the seed-bed of a new nation".

though it may seem at first to have a positive connotation (...) [it] may in fact be used both positively and negatively. It has extremely subtle undertones which, if you're not native, you can never hope to master. Only a native New Englander can discern exactly how the speaker intends it by the subtleties of intonation.

Could this also suggest that *ayuh* is more likely a derivative of interjection *a(h)* + *ye(a)* than *aye* + *yes* or *yea*, in that it can have a positive or negative connotation, as modern "oh yeah"? Trawick-Smith writes about his late great-great aunt, born around 1900: "she didn't say 'ayuh' in the way most of us do now, kind of clipping it off at the end. She drew out the end of it almost as a question, almost in the way someone says 'oh yeah?'" <sup>34</sup>

To summarise, augmentation is common in response particles. Langenfelt (1950: 33) proposes that English *aye* is "an early replica of to-day's *Oh yes, Ah yes*". Indeed, similar combinations of interjection + particle can easily be found in an Internet search today; "o(h) yeah/yes", for instance, are recorded over 100 million times. <sup>35</sup>

"oh yeah" 62,000,000

"o(h) yes" 38,100,000

"oh no" 129,000,000

### 3 Discussion

The *OED* states that English "yea" (OE *gæ*, *gee* etc.) corresponds "more or less exactly" to forms in other Germanic languages, including Old Frisian *gê*, *jê*, Old Saxon *jâ*, Old High German *ja*, *jâ* and Old Norse *já* (s.v. *yea*). There is, however, one important difference: English and Frisian "yea" with *æ*, *ē* vowel forms contrast with other Germanic languages with *ā* etc. vowel forms. Here we might find the reason why English and Frisian developed *ay(e)*, while other Germanic languages did not:

#### English and Frisian

Interjection "a(h)" + "yea"/"jee" > "ay(e)"

#### Other Germanic languages

Interjection + "ja" etc. > "ach ja" etc.

On this phonological difference in general, contrast for instance Modern English *yea*, *meal*, *year* and Frisian (Saterlandic, Kramer [2014]) *jee*, *jäi*, *Mäil*, *Jier* with German *ja*, *Mahl*, *Jahr*, Dutch *ja*, *maal*, *jaar*, and Swedish *ja*, *mål*, *år*. <sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> However, it is possible that the disyllabic pronunciation is simply *aye* with breaking. Trawick-Smith (2011) writes: "I'm a late-30s Mainer who lives in New York and I catch myself saying a small version of it all the time in place of 'yup'. But nothing like my great-great-aunt (died in 2005 at age 106), who had the thickest Maine accent I remember. She spoke slower than the average modern person, and 'ayuh' was the same sound she'd use for the back half of 'there'. But the other notable thing about her was that she would say 'ayuh' or interchangeably she would use a drawn-out, two-syllable version of 'yes' that was more like 'YE-yuhs', almost in a southern way".

<sup>35</sup> Searches 13 December 2015 and 13 February 2016 using Google®.

<sup>36</sup> There is some debate about whether Old English and Old Frisian retain Germanic \**æ*, or whether there was a shift in Germanic to \**ā* with subsequent fronting in Old English and Old Frisian to *æ*, *ē*. Hogg (2011: 60–61) assumes that the pronunciation had always remained phonetically front, i.e. approximately [æ]: "It therefore follows that the alleged OE, OFris shift of \*/a:/ > /æ:/ is an artefact of phonemic theory, and that there is no reason to suppose that, except before nasals, the Gmc long low vowel retracted significantly at any period in the



On the vowel of the interjection, the *OED* writes that

Middle English *ā* in this interjection did not generally undergo the Great Vowel Shift, apparently owing to its connection with the natural utterance which it ultimately represents (...) although continuations of this word showing the results of its operation may perhaps be shown by some instances of *AY int.* and *EIGH int.*<sup>37</sup>

Kohler states (1968: 56), misquoting Langenfelt, that “exclamatory” /a:/ was unshifted “due to the special nature of the word”.

In Old Frisian, we also have the interjection *ā*, meaning ‘oh!, ah!’ (Bremmer 2009: 188); for “yea”, we have *gē*, *ie*, *jee*, *ye* etc., pronounced /je:/ or possibly /jæ:/. We thus hypothesise univerbation of interjection + particle in Frisian:

“ā” + “gē” > “ay”

to give in late Old Frisian *ay*. This study therefore concludes that *aye–ay* is an Anglo-Frisian parallel.<sup>38</sup>

As Kohler suggests (1968: 58), an origin of English *aye* as a “more affective and emotional” form, restricted to conversational discourse, may explain its earlier lack of literary record. The earliest example cited by the *OED* (s.v. *aye/ay*, int.), “If you say I, syr, we will not say no”, is from *The tyde taryeth no man*, “A moste pleasant and merry commody, right pythie, and full of delight” by George Wapull.<sup>39</sup>

For Frisian, too, Bremmer (1989: 93) suggests that *ay* was more common in speech:

It seems to me that Frisian *ay* was colloquial, and consequently belonged to a lower register than *jē*. The reason for this supposition is that it is found three times in the reported speech of witnesses in court, and once in a letter between brothers-in-law.

This is a valid point, corroborated by the non-attestation, even in modern language surveys, of *jearse* and *dow*, emphatic forms of “yes” and “no” used in Eastern English from the Colne to the Humber and in Northeast America (Howe, forthcoming). We can again compare modern-day *OK* which, although highly frequent colloquially, remains comparatively rare in formal print or speech (Metcalf 2011: 20–24).

### 3.1 Possible influence of pronominal echo / in English

An outstanding question, posed by Liberman (2014b) but as yet unanswered, is what made *aye* popular in English? Kohler (1968: 59) ascribes the earlier occurrence of the spelling / to coincidence.

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development of OE”. In this explanation, then, Gmc \*[æ:] “retained approximately that pronunciation throughout the period”. In West Saxon and Kentish, this pronunciation continued; in Old Frisian and Anglian Old English, /æ:/ was raised to /e:/ at some stage. It is uncertain whether this development took place in “the pre-settlement period (...) of Anglo-Frisian unity” or was a later independent development in the two languages. On the fronting of the short low vowel in Old English and Old Frisian, Gmc \*/a/ to /æ:/, known as first fronting or Anglo-Frisian brightening, see Hogg (2011: 78–82). For further discussion of English and Frisian, see also Campbell ([1959] 1987: 51–52). On Frisian, see Bremmer (2009: 27).

<sup>37</sup> We may also note that sound changes often do not affect sound-symbolic words (shown from Grassmann on, cited in Hinton, Nichols and Ohala [1994] 2006: 9).

<sup>38</sup> The question whether English and Frisian *ay(e)* are of common origin – posed by one or two reviewers – will be left to future research.

<sup>39</sup> Reproduced in Collier’s *Illustrations of Early English Popular Literature* (1864: ch. 4, p. 12, my short s); although dated 1576, Collier assumes it is considerably older.

We may rather speculate whether the association with *I* – seen in the quotations from the 16th century – made it catchy, like *OK* today? Below I cite three examples from Middle English. The first is from the *Ancrene Riwe* above (c. 1225, emphasis mine):

*Mei ich Preoue þis. **3e witerliche ich***  
'Can I prove this? Yes, certainly I can'

The second is from *The Romaunt of the Rose*, lines 4658–4665, possibly in part by Chaucer:<sup>40</sup>

*Knowest hym ought?*  
Lamaunt. **Yhe, Dame, parde!**  
Raisoun. **Nay, nay.**  
Lamaunt. **Yhis, I.**  
Raisoun. *Wherof? Late se.*  
Lamaunt. *Of that he seide I shulde be*  
*Glad to have sich lord as he,*  
*And maister of sich seignorie.*  
Raisoun. *Knowist hym no more?*  
Lamaunt. **Nay, certis, I,**  
*Save that he (...)*

'Do you know him at all?  
*Lamaunt.* Yea, Lady, by God!  
*Raisoun.* Nay, nay.  
*Lamaunt.* Yes indeed, I do.  
*Raisoun.* Where from? Let's see.  
*Lamaunt.* Because he said I should be  
Glad to have such a lord as he,  
And master of such a domain.  
*Raisoun.* Do you know him any more?  
*Lamaunt.* No, certainly I don't,  
Save that he (...)'

*Yhis, I* is emphatic, as is *nay, certis, I* following the French *je non* (see Dahlberg [1999: 215] for reference). The former is an interesting example, because the preceding *yhe* is augmented by an oath, the response *nay* is reduplicated, and the riposte *yhis* is augmented by *I*.

The third example is from the *Complaynt D'Amours*, lines 29–33:<sup>41</sup>

*And in this wyse and in dispayr I live*  
*In love – nay, but in dispayr I dye!*  
*But shal I thus yow my deeth foryive,*  
*That causeles doth me this sorwe drye?*  
**Ye, certes, I!**

<sup>40</sup> See Benson ([1988] 2008: xxii). The text is quoted from Dahlberg (1999: 215, emphasis mine).

<sup>41</sup> Likely not by Chaucer, see Benson (2008: 637). The text is quoted from Benson ([1988] 2008: 658, emphasis mine).

‘And in this manner and in despair I live  
 In love – nay, but in despair I die!  
 But shall I thus you my death forgive,  
 That without cause makes me suffer this sorrow?  
 Yea, certainly, I shall!’

Here, too, *I* is emphatic.

Similar pronominal echoes can be found in a number of Germanic languages, including Frisian and Dutch, as already noted by Rolf Bremmer. In some Dutch dialects, there is a whole paradigm of cliticised pronouns after *ja* ‘yes’ and *nee* ‘no’ (SAND [2005: 49]).<sup>42</sup> In Afrikaans, we can also find particle + pronoun (*ja’k* ‘yes-I’, WAT [1968: 2], cited in Paardekooper [1993: 153]), as we might expect. In Middle Low German we have *ja ik* ‘yes I’ and *ja he* ‘yes he’ (see Paardekooper [1993: 164] for references). In Old High German, we find *néin ih* ‘no I’, *néin du* ‘no thou’, *nêinir* ‘no ye’, *néin iz* ‘no it’, *néin sî* ‘no she’ and *néin sie* ‘no they’ in Notker (Piper [1882] 1895 & 1883, see Paardekooper 1993: 164); and in Middle High German, *jâ* ‘yes’ and *nein* ‘no’ after questions are augmented by the 1st or 3rd person pronoun “ohne daß eine verbale Aussage hinzutritt”, for example in *Iwein* (4211): *heizt ir Lûnete? si sprach: herre, jâ ich* ‘Are you Lunete? She spoke: Sir, yes I’ (Paul, Wiehl & Grosse 1998: §405).<sup>43</sup>

Paardekooper was unable to find data in English. However, as shown we indeed find the pronominal echo here, too. We have, then, a functional overlap of particle and echo, “aye” and “I”, the two main types of response in human languages. In a Stanford universals study of *yes–no* questions and their answers, Moravcsik (1971: 163–165, 171–172) describes three types of answers to positive and negative questions: echo, particle, and particle + echo.<sup>44</sup> She suggests that the echo

<sup>42</sup> For example the following West Flemish variety:

1st p. sing. *jaa-k* ‘yes-I’  
 1st p. plural *jaa-w* ‘yes-we’  
 2nd person *jaa-je* ‘yes-you’  
 3rd p. sing. masc. *jaa-ie* ‘yes-he’  
 3rd p. sing. fem. *jaa-s* ‘yes-she’  
 3rd p. sing. neuter *jaa-t* ‘yes-it’  
 3rd p. plural *jaa-s* ‘yes-they’

<sup>43</sup> Citing the absence of such data in the overviews of person agreement in Corbett (1991, 2000) and Siewierska (2004), SAND concludes (2005: 50) that subject cliticisation after response particles seems not to have been found in any other language. However, in addition to the Germanic examples, including English, we find a similar construction in French: in the oldest French texts *o* ‘yes’ can be augmented by *il*. We also find *o je* ‘yes I’, *o nos* ‘yes we’ and *o vos* ‘yes you’, and the negatives *naje* ‘non ego’ and *nenil* ‘non ille’ (Lerch 1934: 209, 211 & 219, cited in Paardekooper 1993: 164). French *oui* shows generalisation of the 3rd person response to all contexts, Latin *hoc ille* ‘this (s)he [did]’ with ellipsis of ‘did’ > *o il* > *oui* ‘yes’ (see Wallage & van der Wurff see 2013: 194 for references).

<sup>44</sup> Echo, an affirmative or negative statement that echoes the question:

Did you go?  
 I did  
 I didn’t  
  
 Didn’t you go?  
 I did  
 I didn’t

Particle, an affirmator or negator alone:

Did you go?  
 Yes  
 No

might occur in all languages, though the conditions on deletion and substitution differ, and that the other two types are found in only some languages.<sup>45</sup> Holmberg (2016: 3), in his recent study of the syntax of *yes* and *no*, believes that probably close to half the world's languages use verb-echo answers, though many languages with such answers "are reported to also have the alternative of using an affirmative particle" (2016: 68).

*SAND*'s term *clitic* is somewhat problematic: examining the Dutch data and citing a number of sources, Paardekooper (1993: 156–158, 166) concludes that combination of particle and pronoun seems to be for emphasis, emotionality or expressiveness. Indeed, some Dutch varieties have unaccented, accented and emphatic forms (e.g. *jaak*, *jake*, *jakik* 'yes-I'). Note also that the English examples are emphatic, and that the particle and pronoun can be separated, as in *Ye, certes, I*, also in Frisian *Ge, God, wi*. *Agreement* or *concord* are not ideal terms either, as one form can be generalised to other persons and numbers (see Paardekooper [1993: 162 & 165] and *SAND* [2005: 50, 52, 54] on Dutch *jaat* 'yes it' and *jaak* 'yes I', and note French above). Holmberg's term *verb-echo* is too narrow – we clearly have pronominal echoes. Nor is the pronoun straightforwardly an echo; rather it is coreferential with the subject of the preceding question or statement (*Knowest hym ought? [...] Yhis, I*) (cf. *SAND* [2005: 49]).

As illustrated by the examples in footnote 44, ellipsis is usual in echo responses. Quirk et al. (1985: 889) define ellipsis quite generally as "grammatical reduction through omission". As they point out (1985: 88–89), "Reduction (...) and information focus (...) enable users of language to suppress those elements of meaning which are informationally predictable, and to highlight those which are informationally important". This is obviously a core function of "yes" and "no" in the interaction between speaker and hearer. Pronominal echoes, then, likely derive from further ellipsis of pronoun-and-verb echoes. Compare Devos (1986: 176–177, cited in *SAND* [2005: 50]), who examined the distribution of two forms of "yes" + "you" in West Flemish; she found that it correlated with the form of *proclitic* pronouns and not with that of enclitics, suggesting that pronouns after *ja* and *nee* are originally sentence initial.

We can illustrate such a development with the following simple example in English:

Do you really love me?  
Yes, I do  
Yes, I

The Middle English examples show how the pronominal echo "I" could in some senses overlap with "aye", meaning that "a(h) + ye(a)" could be interpreted as "I" by speakers. So-called "folk etymology"

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Didn't you go?  
Yes  
No

Particle + echo, an affirmative or negative statement preceded by an affimator/negator:

Did you go?  
Yes, I did  
No, I didn't  
  
Didn't you go?  
Yes, I did  
No, I didn't

<sup>45</sup> For other forms of answer, see Howe (forthcoming) and Holmberg (2016: 61–62).

is surely more common prior to widespread literacy.<sup>46</sup> Note also that *a(h) + ye(a)* and the pronominal *aye* were both probably emphatic in origin. Association with *I* would suggest that the etymology of *aye* was already opaque. This would mean, if this hypothesis is correct, that its origin is significantly earlier than the first record, as it already has a simplex form.

Can we link the popularity of “aye”, written *I*, to the prestige of the “Great Vowel Shift” diphthong /aɪ/? Such an association was absent from the consonantal pronoun form *ich* in English (as in the first example above, from the *Ancrene Riwe*) and from Frisian where *ik* is not a homonym of *ay*. Reinforcement is possible, however, with the vocalic form of “I” and with the shift of /i:/ to /aɪ/, meaning that “aye” and “I” become homophones or near-homophones. We then have a functional and phonological overlap. On the vocalic form, Oizumi (2003, s.v. *ich*) records 7840 occurrences of the 1st p. singular pronoun in her Chaucer concordance. Of these, over 99% are vocalic (*I*, *y* or *Y* 7775 times); less than 1% are consonantal (*ich*, *ik* or consonantal clitic forms 65 times).<sup>47</sup> On the shift of /i:/ to /aɪ/, Minkova summarises the most recent view as follows (2014: 256):

the consensus is that the high and the upper-mid long vowels /i:/, /u:/, /e:/ and /o:/ were the “leaders” of the shift, with the high vowels becoming diphthongal and the high-mid vowels reaching their PDE height by c. 1550 in the variety of Southern English that was recognised as “standard” after the seventeenth century.

The dates of the shift /i:/ > /aɪ/ and the popularity of *I* “aye” thus appear to fit, “aye” appearing suddenly about 1575 and “exceedingly common” about 1600 (*OED* s.v. *aye/ay*). Minkova argues (see [2014: 253] including references) that “the raising of [e:] and [o:] and the diphthongisation of [i:] and [u:] started simultaneously in parts of the East Midlands and the West Midlands in the course of the thirteenth century”. Stenbrenden (2016: 187 & 188) concludes that “Diphthongisation of eME *ī* is (...) indicated in the E Midlands and the South in the early fourteenth century”, and that “Clearly, the Midlands, both East and West, stand out as a locus of change”. Shakespeare, from Stratford-upon-Avon, puns “aye” in *Romeo and Juliet*, as shown at the beginning of this study. The play was performed by 1597, probably first at the *Theatre*, in Shoreditch, and then at the *Curtain*,<sup>48</sup> and we can thus conclude that “aye” would have been familiar to London audiences.

## 4 Conclusions

The poor record of spoken language means that we probably cannot provide a definitive answer for the origin of *ay(e)*. However, by examining response particles cross-linguistically, and the development of the various forms of “yes” and “no” in English, we can frame the proposed etymologies theoretically and empirically — which are well-attested and thus perhaps more likely, and which are unattested and perhaps less likely. Viewed in this context, a parallel development of interjection + particle in English and its closest related language, Frisian, is a credible hypothesis.

<sup>46</sup> The term is elitist; it rather shows how all humans, irrespective of socioeconomic origin, look for relevant meaning in language (cf. Howe [2014: 236–237]).

<sup>47</sup> For a discussion of early phonological changes in *I*, see recently Lass & Laing (2013).

<sup>48</sup> British Library *Shakespeare Quartos*, British Library *Shakespeare's Theatre*.

[www.bl.uk/treasures/shakespeare/romeo.html](http://www.bl.uk/treasures/shakespeare/romeo.html) and [www.bl.uk/treasures/shakespeare/playhouses.html](http://www.bl.uk/treasures/shakespeare/playhouses.html) (both accessed 14 February 2017).

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