

A short history of English epistemic indefinites

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Abstract

In modern English there are two primary epistemic indefinites, *some* N and *some* NP *or other*, which bear distinct pragmatic properties, differing from one another both with respect to signalling how the speaker is (un)able to identify the individual in question and with respect to their relation to specificity. This study provides a preliminary examination of the synchronic and diachronic properties of these two English epistemic indefinites.

I Introduction

In this study I examine two epistemic indefinites in English, *some* NP and *some* NP *or other*¹. The epistemic properties of English *some* NP have been examined in earlier studies, including Haspelmath (1997), Alonso-Ovalle & Menéndez-Benito (2003), Farkas (2003), Weir (2012), amongst others; here I continue the investigation of the properties of English epistemic indefinites, focussing on the differences of *some* NP from *some* NP *or other*, and the development of both these epistemic indefinites in the history of English, as well as examining other epistemic indefinites of early English.

I argue that *some* NP signals that the speaker is unable to identify the individual in question in some fashion, though he may be able to identify the individual in other ways; while *some* NP *or other* is incompatible with the speaker being able to identify the individual in question by ostension or name (though he may be able to do so by description).² These intuitions receive preliminary support from data gleaned from Google searches.

The following two examples illustrate that *some* NP can be used where the speaker can identify the individual in question by name or ostension.³

- (1) a. Example: **Some guy named Chris** has something to say
b. Context: This is the title of a webpage discussing a series of odd posters in public places (around a college campus?) put up by someone who indicates that his name is Chris; a representative example of one of Chris's posters: "If anybody else has ten dollars in library fines, meet me at this library 4pm Thursday. I think there's a way to convince them that the overdue books weren't our fault. My excuse will be that my cat died, but we could think up one for you. This will take 2+ hours, so bring soda. --Chris." [<http://www.buzzfeed.com/meganm15/some-guy-named-chris-has-something-to-say-3foz>]
- (2) a. Example: I don't get paid nearly enough to break up fights, and neither do security. Fortunately it's in their job description, so they HAVE to do it. I called them up: "Uh, hey guys. Look, there's **some guy** beating the shit out of a dude in the waiting room, you got a minute."
b. Context: The writer describes being in court when he heard screaming and cursing emanating from the court waiting room and found there one man kicking another man who was prostrate on the ground.
[<http://www.okcupid.com/profile/SoulAuctioneer/journal/4673573271806879585/>]

In (1) the speaker knows only that the person who is putting up the posters is named Chris. In (2) the speaker knows nothing about the person other than description (the man assaulting another man in the court waiting room) and the fact that he can physically locate him (i.e. he could point him out to the security guards).

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¹I focus on *some* NP only with singular NPs, as plural forms have distinct properties.

²On the identification methods discussed here, see Aloni & Port (2010, forthcoming).

³In all of the following examples **bolding** has been added to highlight the indefinites of interest; this does not reflect formatting of the original sources.

Comparable examples do not appear in Google search for *some NP or other*. Rather the examples that appear for *some NP or other* involve cases where the speaker cannot identify the individual in question by either name or ostension.

- (3) a. Example: The Cannes Film Festival is celebrating the wondrous marvel that is Gene Bradley, and of course the big man himself is there to bask in the adulation of his legions of fans and to present a television special about the event. He notices that an assassin is staying at the same hotel as him, and so, as you do, Gene breaks into the guy's room and discovers that the assassin is here to kill **some guy or other** who seems vaguely important for some reason that's really not made that clear. The ever-helpful Gene Bradley has this guy gassed into unconsciousness and takes his place, so that's alright then.
- b. This the plot description of episode six of the television serial "The Adventurer" [http://www.thevoid.com/media/adventurer/aventurer_o6.htm]
- (4) a. Example: If however, you happen to be some kind of police officer, or spy, or what the hell ever, and if you think you can really save the nation by torturing **some guy or other**, and if you really believe this is the only way to go? I think you should be willing to go ahead and do it, even though it's against the law. And you should be willing to take the legal penalty for having done so.
- b. Appears in the midst of a discussion of a Yahoo! Answers question on "Should the US permit the use of torture against suspected terrorists?" [<http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20130313182714AAiRoKV>]

In both (3) and (4) the speaker is unable to identify the "guy" in question by name or ostension. In effect the speaker can identify both by description though, i.e. "the guy who it's important for the assassin to kill"; "the guy who the CIA must torture in order to save the US", etc.

Not only do these two indefinites differ in terms of differing pragmatical signals regarding potential identification methods, they also differ with respect to specificity. In (1) and (2), the individual in question is a specific individual, even if the speaker is unable to identify him in particular ways. However, *some NP* is compatible with non-specific interpretations as well. Thus:

- (5) I really hate the name "Chris". If I ever meet **some guy** named Chris, I'm going to give him a piece of my mind—I don't care who he is.
- (6) I can't stand people who cause disturbances in court room waiting rooms. If I ever come upon **some guy** causing a commotion in the court room waiting room, I'm going to show him the door—I don't care who he is. (how rich, how important, etc.)

In (5) and (6) the speaker has no particular individual in mind. Again, similar examples with *some NP or other* do not appear in Google search results—note that these search results serve as preliminary data, and further examination is required to confirm this conclusion.⁴

This can be seen additionally from a comparison of modified versions of (3) and (4), in (9) and (10) below. Consider a case where the assassin has been sent to kill somebody, anybody, just to create confusion, or where torture of any person is enough to save the nation. These contexts can be felicitously discussed using *some NP*, as shown by (9).

- (9) a. Gene discovers that the assassin has been sent to the hotel by his boss to kill **some guy**—it doesn't matter who, he just needs to kill someone in order to create a distraction from the bigger crime that is about to take place.
- b. If you believe that the mere act of torture itself is enough to save the country, shouldn't you be willing to torture **some guy**, any guy—whoever happens to be at hand?

However, if we modify the examples from (9) to *some guy or other*, they become infelicitous, as shown by (10) below.

- (10) a. #Gene discovers that the assassin has been sent to the hotel by his boss to kill **some guy or other**—it doesn't matter who, he just needs to kill someone in order to create a distraction from the bigger crime that going on.

⁴The exception to this is where *some NP or other* appears used in a sort of "mock" ignorance or "mock" indifference reading:

- (7) "Did **some guy or other** named Homer write a book about Troy?" [http://www.unfogged.com/archives/comments_5962.html]
- (8) "Also, we're hosting the national conference of the Society of Environmental Journalists in October, which should be great. **Some guy or other** named Gore is speaking..." [<http://ask.metafilter.com/131064/What-are-some-good-interdisciplinary-grad-programs-in-the-environmental-sciences>]

- b. #If you believe that the mere act of torture itself is enough to save the country, shouldn't you be willing to torture **some guy or other**—whoever happens to be at hand?

That is, *some NP or other* appears to be necessarily specific, apparently not admitting non-specific readings. This statement requires some qualification, in that there are contexts in which *some NP or other* does allow non-specific reading. At least one such environment is where *some NP or other* appears in the scope of non-downward-entailing quantifier. That is, in examples like:

- (11) Every assassin was sent to kill some business-man or other.

the business-men can vary with respect to assassins.

The fact that modern English *some* can be either specific or non-specific is interesting from a historical standpoint given the fact that the source of *some* appears to be specific in from Old English, as discussed in Section 2 below, while the modern English reflex can be either specific or non-specific.

The remainder of this paper examines the origins and shifting properties of *some NP* and *some NP or other* and other indefinites with epistemic components from a historical perspective. The data examined here are drawn largely from textual searches of the Dictionary of Old English Corpus (diPaolo Healey 2004), with examination of search results in context via consultation of the primary texts in which they are found, or else taken from examples from the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Murray et al. 2011).

The next section, Section 2, examines the properties of *some* from Old English into the modern period. Section 3 examines the origins of *some NP or other* and of non-specific uses of *some NP*. Section 4 examines other epistemic indefinites in the history of English.

2 *Some* in early English

In Old English *sum*, the etymological source of Modern English *some*, appears as both an indefinite pronoun and also as a determiner. In its pronominal usage, it is similar in many cases to Modern English *someone*, as in example (12), or *one*, as in example (13).^{5, 6}

- (12) ond eac monigfealde modes snyttru
seow ond sette geond sefan monna.
Sumum wordlāþe wise sendeð
on his modes gemynd þurh his muþes gæst, æðele ond giet. . . .
Sum mæg styled sword,

wæpen gewyrca. **Sum** con wonga bigong,
wegas widgielle.

“ . . . And he [=God] sows manifold wisdom of mind and sets it in the hearts of men: Unto **someone** he sends wise speech in the thought of his mind, noble insight, through his mouth's spirit. . . . **Someone** can make steel swords, fashion weapons. **Someone** knows the path of the plains, the wide ways. ”
[*Christ* 662–667a; 679b–680a (Krapp & Dobbie 1936)]

- (13) eode eahta **sum** under inwithrof
“[Wiglaf] went, **one of eight**, under the evil roof.” [*Beowulf* 3123]⁷

- (14) ic winde sceal
sincfag swelgan of **sumes** bosme
“I, treasure-adorned, must swallow wind from **someone's** bosom.” [Riddle 14: 14b–15 (Krapp & Dobbie 1936)]

It does not appear to have any epistemic component, as it appears both in cases where the specific identity of the referent is unknown or irrelevant, e.g. (12)—a listing of various divine endowments upon individuals, and also in contexts where the referent is clearly known, as in (13). Likewise, it is not obligatorily specific or non-specific: it is non-specific in (14)—one of several clues in a riddle whose answer appears to be “horn”—but specific in (13). Similarly, it can also be used of things, with a following genitive:

- (15) He cyþde on **sumne** his boca þætte get Romane nama ne com ofer ða muntas þe Caucaseas we hataþ.

⁵On Old English *sum*, see further Mitchell (1985: §385–410); Rissanen (1986: 195–225); Kendall (1991: 72–73).

⁶All Old English translations are mine. The sources of the texts for the Old English quotations are indicated. All other quotations are taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary* unless otherwise noted.

⁷This and all subsequent citations from *Beowulf* are taken from the Fulk et al. (2008) edition, with all macrons and other diacritics removed.

“He has shown in **one** of his books that as then the Roman name had not passed beyond the mountains we name Caucasus.” [King Ælfred, trans. of Boethius *De philosophiae consolatione*, ch. 18 (Fox 1864)]

These pronominal uses persist up until the 18th century:

- (16) a. Whan somme good cometh to **somme**, it ought not to be reffused. [1484 Caxton, tr. *Subtyl Historyes & Fables Esope*, v.x]
 b. I feare me **some** will blushe that readeth this, if he be bitten. [1579 T. Lodge, *Protogenes* 33]
 c. Therefore. . .despise he [Antigone], and suffer the Girl to marry *some* among the Dead. [1729 G. Adams, trans. Sophocles *Antigone* III.i, in tr. Sophocles *Trag.* II.39]
 d. All such sins being easily reducible to **some** [=one] of the former three. [1656 R. Sanderson *Serm.* (1689) 405]

In contrast to its pronominal uses, as far as can be determined through philological methods, in all of the examples examined in this study, *sum* in its role as a determiner is always specific in Old English:

- (17) Martinus ferde hwilon to ualentiniane þam casere wolde for **sumere neode** wið hine spræcan.
 “Once Martin was journeying to Valentinian the emperor, wished for **some needful cause** to speak with him.” [Ælfric, *Lives of Saints* 31.651 (Skeat 1881)]

Here obviously Martin must have had a particular reason for speaking to the emperor.

None of the examples of Old English determiner *sum* examined here have any clear epistemic component. Even in (17) where it might seem plausible that *sum* functions to signal that the cause is unknown, the larger context makes it clear that the writer is not trying to signal that cause is unknown, it is simply that the cause is not central to the narrative.⁸

In some cases a translation like “a certain” is appropriate:

- (18) he þæt sona onfand
 ðæt hæfde **gumena sum** goldes gefandod
 “He [=the dragon] discovered at once that **a certain man** had disturbed the gold.” [*Beowulf* 2300b–2301]⁹

Even in cases where modern translators render *sum-* with a simple “some”, it is clear that it is to be taken in a specific sense, as in (19), where it is must surely be intended that only specific courses merit a man obtaining a golden crown.

- (19) Nis þæt eac nauht unreht swa swa gio Romana þeaw wæs and get is on manegum ðeodum þæt mon hehþ ænne heafodbeah gyldenne æt **sumes ærneweges** ende.
 “Moreover, it is not unjust that, as formerly was the custom of the Romans, and yet is in many nations, that man should have a golden crown, at **some/a certain course’s** end.” [King Ælfred, trans. of Boethius *De philosophiae consolatione*, ch. 37 (Fox 1864)]

In many cases it displays an even richer semantics, and a translation like “great” or “notable” or “worthy” etc. is required, as in example (20) and (21).

- (20) Eac we þæt gedrugnon, þæt gefyrn bi þe
 soðfæst sægde **sum** woðbora
 in ealddagum, Esaias
 “We have heard that long ago **the great/notable** prophet, Isaiah, uttered the truth about you. . .” (**not** “We have heard that long ago **a/some** prophet. . .”) [*Christ* 301–3 (Krapp & Dobbie 1936)]
- (21) **guðbeorna sum**
 wicg gewende word æfter cwæð
 “*The worthy/great warrior*, turned his horse, thereupon spoke words. . .” (**not** “*a/some warrior*. . .”) [*Beowulf* 314b–315]

In example (21), for instance, the person referred to is the coast-guard that Beowulf has just been conversing with, and thus is not a new individual being introduced into the discourse at this point, demonstrating the

⁸Here the story focuses on the emperor rebuffing Martin’s attempts to speak with him, and on God subsequently causing heavenly fire to appear over the emperor’s throne as a sign that he should receive Martin. The reason for Martin wishing to speak with him is not important to the narrative.

⁹The individual in question has in fact already been established as unidentifiable by the narrator (the gold-disturber is the same individual discussed in (31)), but the non-identifiability of the individual is not at stake in this instance; rather it is important that the dragon has discovered that *someone* has disturbed its gold.

non-equivalence of Old English *sum* NP and Modern English *some* NP. However, it should be noted that the “special”, “notable” sense of Old English *sum* NP persists in some dialects of English (particularly American), as illustrated by (22) below.

- (22) That’s **some pig**
 “That’s quite a pig” [1952 E.B. White *Charlotte’s Web*]

A parallel usage is found in *Beowulf*, provided below in example (23).

- (23) Ða þæt sweord ongan
 æfter heaþoswate hildegicelum
 wigbil wanian · þæt wæs **wundra sum**
 þæt hit eal gemealt ise gelicost
 “Then, due to the gore of the battle, that sword, the war-blade, began to wane into splinters; that was **quite a wonder** (lit. that was **some wonder**), that it all melted, just like ice.” [*Beowulf* 1605b–1608]

In sum, *some* in Old English as a determiner always takes a specific interpretation. Further, in neither its pronominal or determiner uses does it have any clear function as an epistemic indefinite, and certainly appears in instances where the individual in question is identifiable (even with respect to contextually-relevant identification methods). The possibility of *some* taking a non-specific interpretation does not appear until later, seemingly not until roughly the turn of the 16th century, as discussed in the following section. It is also around this time that we observe the appearance of the *some* NP or *other* indefinite.

3 *Some* NP or *other* and non-specific *some*

The earliest examples of *some* NP in English which clearly lack the sense of “remarkable” or “a certain” that I have been able to find date to the late 15th-century/early 16th-century; representative examples follow:

- (24) This worde sacramente. . . representeth allwaye **some promise** of God. [1528 Tyndale *Obed. Christen Man* f. lxxxix]
 a. The word “sacrament” always represents a promise of God (but not necessary the same promise).
 b. *There is a specific promise of God that the word “sacrament” always represents.
- (25) a. For certain Either some one like us night-founder’d here, Or else **some neighbour wood-man**, or, at worst, **Some roaving robber** calling to his fellows [1637 Milton *Comus* 485]¹⁰
 b. Thow Scot, abide. I trow thow be **sum spy**.
 “You Scot, wait. I trust you are a spy.” [1488 Hary *Actis & Deidis Schir William Wallace* (Adv.) ii. l. 391]
 c. He hopis **sum day** to see his sone. [1550 *Reg. Privy Council Scotl.* I. 88]

Thus it appears that it is possible that *some* NP develops a non-specific reading by the 16th-century, with the “some pig” interpretation becoming somewhat marginalised—though this conclusion must remain tentative at this point, pending examination of further data.

Also, certainly by the 17th-century we find examples of *some* NP with clear epistemic properties, as shown by examples like (25-a) and (25-c) above.

It is interesting that the earliest examples of *some* NP or *other* also date to the (late) 16th-century.¹¹ These examples all include the same epistemic component we observe for the modern idiom:¹²

¹⁰The context here is that the characters are lost in the woods and, hearing a distant “hallo’ing”, wonder who could be making that noise.

¹¹The seemingly equivalent *some* NP or *another* also appears, as in:

- (26) Certain it is that the air is impregnated with salts of **some kind or another**. [1774 O. Goldsmith *Surv. Exper. Philos.* (1776) II. 14]

¹²In the 17th century we also observe instances of *some* in its pronominal use co-ordinated with *or other*, with the sense “someone or other”:

- (27) a. I wonder **some or other** hath not resolu’d the doubt. [1631 P. Heylyn, *Hist. St. George* 113]
 b. I am halfe of opinion, that **some or other** hath abused him in this Letter. [1664 D. Fleming in *Extracts State Papers Friends* (1912) 3rd Ser. 213]

Note that *some or other* is not necessarily specific:

- (28) Word, by **some or other** could not but be carried to the good King Shaddai. [1682 J. Bunyan, *Holy War* 34]
 a. It is not possible that there does not exist an individual who informs King Shaddai.
 b. *There exists a specific individual who cannot not inform King Shaddai.

- (29) a. *Sbizzarine*, to obtaine ones longing by doing **some mad pranke or other**. [1598 J. Florio *Worlde of Wordes*]
 b. How oft. . .shal you not meet with **some exoticke and strange terme or other?** [1615 W. Bedwell *Arabian Trudgman* in translation of *Mohammedis Imposturæ* sig. K4]
 c. **By some deuise or other**, The villaine is ore-wrought of all my monie. [1616 Shakespeare *Comedy of Errors* (1623) i. ii. 95]
 d. Yet all this while I have been Sailing with **some side-wind or other** toward the Point I propos'd in the beginning. [1697 Dryden *Ded. Æneis* in translation of Virgil *Wks.* sig. a3v]¹³
 e. I received yours **some day or other** this week. [1736 Swift's *Lett.* (1768) IV. 171]
 f. Irregularities committing by **some one or other of them** which will constantly keep us on an ill footing with foreign nations. [1786 T. Jefferson *Let.* 8 Feb. in *Papers* (1954) IX. 264]

It is also in the 16th-century that we first observe the use of the phrase *some certain* NP, which would also suggest that by this time *some* NP had developed non-specific usages, necessitating use of *certain* (or *or other*) to disambiguate the sense.

- (30) a. In case **some certayne Circe** should tourne into wilde beastes al the French Kings subiectes. [1561 T. Hoby translation of B. Castiglione *Courtyer* (1577) T viij b]
 b. A man is. . .neuer welcome to a place, till **some certain shot** be paid. [1616 Shakespeare *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1623) ii. v. 5]
 c. **Some certain Point** should finish the Debate. [1746 P. Francis translation of Horace *Epist.* ii. i. 53]

Perhaps the development of non-specific readings of *some* NP arise via association with the pronominal uses of *sum/some*, discussed above, which can be non-specific (as in example (12)), and certainly do not bear the “notable” sense of the Old English determiner *sum*.

In any event, it seems to be after the development of these non-specific usages of *some* NP that the construction *some* NP *or other* first appears. From the earliest example this construction appears to display epistemic properties at least similar to those of the modern-day construction.

By the turn of the 16th century, *some* develops non-specific uses, and also around this time we find instances of *some* NP functioning as epistemic indefinites. It is also at this time that we observe the appearance of *some certain* NP and *some* NP *or other*, apparently taking over the function of earlier *sum* NP in being necessarily specific. *Some* NP *or other* from its earliest appearance exhibits an epistemic component.

The next section examines the use and development of other epistemic indefinites in English, including Old English *nathw-*.

4 Old English *nathw-* and the development of other epistemic indefinites

Though *sum* in either its pronominal or determiner uses does not appear to function as an epistemic indefinite in Old English, this stage of English did in fact possess an explicitly epistemic indefinite: in Old English we find a special post-nominal modifying epistemic element *nathw-*, e.g. *nathwylc-*, derived from *ic nat hwylc* “I don’t know which”, which is similar to the modern English phrase *some* NP *or other* in its usage. See example (31) for a typical instance of its employment.

- (31) . . .oð ðæt an ongan
 deorcum nihtum draca ricsian
 se ðe on heaum hofe hord beweotode
 stanbeorh stearcne· stig under læg
 eldum uncuð. þær on innan giong
 niðða **nathwylc**. . .
 “. . .until in the dark nights a dragon began to rule, he who in a high hall watched over a hoard, a stark stone barrow; the path under [the barrow] lay unknown to men. There went inside a man, **I-know-not-which**. . .” [Beowulf 2210b–2214]¹⁴

I.e. it was inevitable that someone told King Shaddai rather than there existing a particular person x such that it was inevitable that x would tell King Shaddai.

¹³Examples (29-d)–(29-f) are plausible interpreted as involving not ignorance of the individual in question, but rather indifference; cf. von Stechow (2000).

¹⁴Context: Some unknown man sneaks into a dragon’s lair and steals a golden cup from the dragon, causing the dragon to wake and ravage the nearby countryside in retaliation.

The full, unreduced phrase in fact appears in early Old English in *Beowulf*:¹⁵

- (32) Ðu wast gif hit is
 swa we soþlice secgan hyrdon
 þæt mid Scyldingum **sceaðona ic nat hwylc**
 deogol dædhata deorcum nihtum
 eaweð þurh egsan uncuðne nið
 hynðu ond hrafyl.
 “You know if it is as we truly have heard said—that amongst the Scyldings **some enemy, I know not which**, a furtive despoiler, reveals terrifyingly an unknown enmity, suffering and slaughter.” [*Beowulf* 272b–277a]¹⁶

In addition to the post-nominal modifier, we also find pronominal uses like *nathwær* “somewhere or other” (< “I know not where”) as in (33), and *nathwæt* “something or other” (< “I know not what”) as in (34).

- (33) Staþol min is steapheah, stonde ic on bedde,
neoþan ruh nathwær.
 “My foundation is high, I stand up on the bed, **hairy down I-know-not-where.**” [Riddle 25: 4–5a (Krapp & Dobbie 1936)]¹⁷

- (34) Hyse cwom gangan · þær he hie wisse
 stonda · in wincsele; stop feorran to
 hror hægstealdmon, hof his agen
 hrægl hondum up, · hrand under gyrdels
 hyre stondendre **stipes nathwæt,**
 worhte his willan: wagedan buta.
 Þegn onnette; wæs þragum nyt ·
 tillic esne; teorode hwæþre
 æt stunda · gehwam strong ær þonne hio, ·
 werig þæs weorces. Hyre weaxan ongon
 under gyrdelse þæt oft gode men
 ferðþum freogað ond mid feo bicgað
 “A youth come along to where he knew she stood in the corner. He stepped forth, a strapping young man, lifted up with his own hands her dress, thrust under her girdle, as she stood there, **(something) stiff—I-know-not-what**; worked his will; both of them shook. The fellow quickened, that worker was useful, a capable servant; however he grew tired at times, although strong, wearied of the work before she did. (Something) began to grow beneath her girdle, that which good men love in their hearts and buy with money.” [*Riddle 54* (Krapp & Dobbie 1936)]¹⁸

The use of *nathw-* words in riddles seems to involve a shifting of the ignorance component from the speaker to the hearer, something found also in *ever*-free relatives like “Whatever I’m cooking for your birthday dinner has lots of butter and onions in it. Guess what it is!” (cf. von Fintel 2000). In (33) the riddler obviously knows where the “hairy place” is, but does not provide this information to the guesser: the “down below” place is actually the bottom of the onion (the roots), but also suggests the possibility of a man’s crotch. In (34) the *stipes nathwæt* “some stiff thing or other” is actually the plunger or staff used to churn the butter, but the riddler must withhold its identity from the guesser in order not to give the riddle away (as well as to lead the guesser towards the obscene answer). Rissanen (1987: 417) notes that for all of the instances in his corpus, “the reference of the compound form *nathwæt* and *nathwile* is specific”; this seems consistent with the examples I have examined. Further instances of *nathw-* are provided below.

- (35) Ðuhte him wlitescyne on weres hade

¹⁵However, Bliss (1962: §79) notes that the metre of this verse is unusual and suggests that the phrase may be a scribal substitution for *nathwylc*. Even if this is a scribal substitution, the ability of an Anglo-Saxon scribe to expand such a phrase demonstrates that its morphology would have been somewhat transparent at this point.

¹⁶Beowulf and his retainers journey to Denmark to help Hrothgar, king of the Scyldings, who was friends with Beowulf’s father, against the monster who has been terrorising his mead-hall. Beowulf and his men are met by a Danish coastguard who asks them why they have come, and Beowulf explains the purpose of their visit.

¹⁷This riddle, like many of the Anglo-Saxon riddles, seems to involve double entendre, leading the guesser to suppose an obscene answer. The apparent “actual” answer to this riddle, however, is “onion”. [The answers to the riddles are not provided in the text itself.]

¹⁸Again, the riddle involves an apparent double entendre. The guesser is lead to suppose that the riddle describes a man making a woman pregnant, but the “actual” answer appears to be “churning butter”.

hwit ond hiwbeorht **hæleða nathwylc**
 geywed ænlicra þonne he ær oððe sið
 gesege under swegle.

“It seemed to him [Constantine] that **I-know-not-which warrior**—radiant and bright of hue, in the form of a man—came, more beautiful than he had seen early or late under the heavens.” [*Elene* 72–76a (Krapp 1932)]¹⁹

- (36) Is þæt wide cuð
 þæt ic of þam torhtan temple dryhtnes
 onfeng freolice fæmnan clæne,
 womma lease, ond nu gehwyrfed is
þurh nathwylces.

“It is widely known that I, happily, obtained a clean maiden, stainless, from the radiant temple of the lord; and now, has come a change **by I-know-not-what.**” [*Christ* 185b–189a (Krapp & Dobbie 1936)]²⁰

- (37) Gif þæs ondfengan ellen dohte,
 mec frætwedne fyllan sceolde
ruwes nathwæt.

“If the courage of one receiving me, adorned, prevailed, then **(something) rough—I-know-not-what**—was sure to fill me up.” [*Riddle 61: 7–9a* (Krapp & Dobbie 1936)]

- (38) Nu her þara banena **byre nathwylces**
 frætstum hremig on flet gæð,
 morðres gylpeð, ond þone maðþum byreð,
 þone þe ðu mid rihte rædan sceoldest.

“Now here **I-know-not-which son** of one of the killers, exultant in trappings, goes across the floor, boasts of murder, and wears the treasure which you by right ought to possess.” [*Beowulf* 2053–6]²¹

This Old English epistemic indefinite is reminiscent of the French constructions *je ne sais quoi* and *je ne sais qu-* NP as in:

- (39) Il nous reste encore **je ne sais quel** désir vague, **je ne sais quelle** inquiétude.
 It us remains still **I NEG know which** desire vague, **I NEG know which** restlessness.
 “We are left with some kind of vague desire, some kind of restlessness.” (Voltaire; cited in Haspelmath 1997: 133)

The *nathw-* construction itself disappears from English well before the modern period. The phrase *I know not* or *I wot not* or *I don’t know what* which appears from the 16th-century is a new development, see (40); potentially calquing the French *je ne sais quoi*, which is borrowed into English around this period, see (41).

- (40) a. They luvē no man effeminat, And haldis thame, bot **I wat not quhat**, That can nocht be w^tout thame. [c1560 A. Scott *Poems* (S.T.S.) xxx. 39]
 b. Shouting out, ‘Aha!’ and ‘Saprrrrristie!’ and **I don’t know what**. [1840 Thackeray *Barber Cox in Comic Almanack* 33]
- (41) a. JE-NE-SCAY-QUOI, four French words, contracted as it were into one, and signifies *I know not what*, we use to say they are troubled with the *Je-ne-scay-quoy*, that faign themselves sick out of niceness but know not where their own grief lies, or what ayls them. [1656 T. Blount *Glossographia*]
 b. Now this Word Post has a *je ne scai quoi* Sound of a deep Design. [1734 R. North *Examen* (1740) iii. viii. §14 592]
 c. So refined a *Je-ne-scay-quoy* was about ’em, For goddesses there was no reason to doubt ’em. [1745 *Gentleman’s Mag.* June 324/2]

We also find the phrase *know-not-what*, used as a noun, from around the same period:

¹⁹Context: The Roman emperor Constantine, on his way to fight against Huns and Hrethgoths, has a dream in which a messenger reveals to him that he will rout his enemies with a symbol which will be shown to him in the sky.

²⁰Context: Joseph finds out that his wife Mary, a virgin, is pregnant.

²¹Context: Beowulf discusses the Danish King Hrothgar’s marriage of his daughter Freawaru to Ingeld of the Heathobards. Ingeld is the son of Frotho, who was slain by the Danes. By this marriage Hrothgar hopes to end the feud between the Danes and the Heathobards. However, Beowulf predicts this attempt to end the feud will fail. And, in the passage quoted above, suggests that one of the older Heathobard veterans will goad one or other of the younger Heathobardic warriors to re-open the feud by pointing out to him that one of the Danish retinue bears treasure taken from that young Heathobard’s father in battle.

- (42) a. I ask no red and white. . . Black eyes, or little **know-not-whats**, in faces. [1642 J. Suckling *Poems in Fragmenta Avrea* (1646) 15]
 b. Those sweet **know-not-whats** about the mouth, which. . . would give resistless fascination to the most charming eyes in the world. [1796 A. Seward *Let.* 17 Dec. (1811) IV. lviii. 285]

It is perhaps unsurprising that we find a number of presumably independently developed epistemic indefinites which originate in a phrasal “I don’t know wh-”. Though it seems somewhat more marginal than *some NP or other* this epistemic indefinite persists in modern English:

- (43) a. The **I know not what** of fervor and fire which emanates from him. [1911 tr. G. Hanotaux in *Jrnl. Polit. Econ.* 19 38]
 b. Emanating from the **I-know-not-what** via an unknown process, Dasein returns the favor of existence. . . by bestowing upon Becoming..something that Becoming does not possess in its own right. [1991 F. F. Centore *Being & Becoming* 217]

5 Conclusion

Preliminary investigation suggests the following developments: the epistemic indefinite *some NP or other* first appears fairly recently in English; also recent are both the epistemic and non-specific usages of *some NP*, as this construction in earlier English meant “a specific, a notable”—a usage which survives marginally in some modern dialects. It is possible that disappearance (or marginalisation) of the non-specific sense of *some NP* is connected with the appearance of explicitly specific forms like *some certain NP* and *some NP or other*; whether there is any true casual connection between these developments is unclear, though the timing is suggestive. Old English did possess an epistemic indefinite construction, postnominal *nathw-*, but *some NP* also originally had no epistemic component: this is a later development, appearing around the same time as *some NP or other* (which, from its earliest uses functions as an epistemic indefinite).

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