

***Wit* and *Know* in Letters from the 15th to the 17th Century**

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1. Introduction

Not just in many modern Indo-European languages but also in Finnish, which belongs to the Uralic language family, do there exist two frequent basic verbs used in meanings indicating knowing, as shown in Table 1. Old English also has two verbs corresponding to this pair, that is, *witan* and *cunnan*. In Modern English, however, neither of the two verbs is the chief one used in this field of meaning, but *know*. Ono (1975: 35) describes well what has happened in the semantic field of knowing:

... in the history of English, [...] *witan* became obsolete while *cunnan* has shown a remarkable development as an auxiliary verb (*can*). The obsolescence of one of the chief verb meanings ‘to know’ and the development as an auxiliary of the other left a gap in the field of meaning. *Cnawan* (*know*) may be said to have developed to fill the gap. (Ono 1975: 35)

The purpose of the present study is to discuss the obsolescence of the verb *wit* compared to the synonymous verb *know*, examining the Parsed Corpus of Early English Correspondence (PCEEC), which consists of letter collections from late Middle English to

Early Modern English.

Table 1. Verbs of Knowing in Modern Languages (Tabulated from Rissanen [1993: 195]).

	‘have cognizance of’ ‘be aware of’ (cf. <i>OED</i> s.v. <i>know</i> v. III)	‘have cognizance of’ ‘be aware of’ (cf. <i>OED</i> s.v. <i>know</i> v. III)
German	<i>wissen</i>	<i>kennen</i>
Swedish	<i>veta</i>	<i>känna</i>
French	<i>savoir</i>	<i>connaître</i>
Italian	<i>sapere</i>	<i>conoscere</i>
(Latin)	<i>scire</i>	<i>(cog)noscere/nosse</i>
Finnish	<i>tietää</i>	<i>tuntea</i> (also ‘feel’)

2. Previous studies

The major previous studies on the development and decline of the verbs of knowing in the English language are conducted by Ono (1975), Gutch (1979), Rissanen (1993) and Tani (2013b).

2.1. Typological Findings

Ono’s (1975: 33-34) findings indicate how differently *witan* and *cunnan* in Old English, and their cognates in other Germanic languages of the same period (shown in Table 2) developed:

... in the corresponding parts of the Four Gospels, *kunnan* is more frequent than in Gothic, while the reverse is the case in Old English: Gothic *kunnan* 53: *witan* 45, Old

English *cunnan* 30: *witan* 74.

On the other hand *kunnan* does not appear in the language of Tatian (Old High German of the 9th century). We have to wait for its development until the period of Notker (†1022). In *Heliand* (Old Saxon of early 9th century) we find only 12 instances (10.9%) of *kunnan* as against 98 instances (89.1%) of *witan*. Similar distribution is seen in the whole of the Four Gospels in Old English, in which the frequency of *cunnan* is 47 (24.1%), and that of *witan* is 148 (75.9 %). (Ono 1975: 33-34)

Table 2. Verbs of Knowing in Germanic Languages (Tabulated from Ono [1975: 33]).

Old English	<i>witan</i>	<i>cunnan</i>
Gothic	<i>witan</i>	<i>kunnan</i>
Old Norse	<i>vita</i>	<i>kunna</i>
Old High German	<i>wizzan</i>	<i>kunnan</i>
Old Saxon	<i>witan</i>	<i>kunnan</i>
Old Frisian	<i>wita</i>	<i>kunna</i>

Considering these findings, he assumes that the development of *cunnan* (*kunnan*) was “later in West Germanic than in East Germanic (Gothic)” (Ono 1975: 33-34). Another typological study is done by Tellier (1962: 31-32, 41), who claims that inanimate objects tend to be used both with *witan*, *vita* and *kunnan*, *kunna* in Gothic and Old Norse, while animate objects

only with *kunnan*, *kunna*. He further points out that such a tendency could not be seen in Old Saxon and *Beowulf* (Tellier 1962: 51-52, 100).

2.2. Old English

The preterite-present verbs, *witan* and *cunnan* originally meant ‘to have seen’ (*OED* s.v. *wit* v¹.) and ‘to have learned, to have attained to knowledge’ (cf. *OED* s.v. *can* v¹.) respectively. Although it could be considered that the difference in the original meanings might still be seen in Old English, “in many cases the difference seems to be in delicate shades of meaning and it is difficult to distinguish between them” (Ono 1975:35).

However, the usages of the two verbs in Old English are substantially different. Ono (1975) examines the frequency of the verbs of knowing in the four manuscripts of poems (that is, Junius Manuscript, Vercelli Book, Exeter Book and *Beowulf*), *Pastoral Care*, and the Four Gospels and categorises the instances according to constructions in which they occur. The result of his examination is shown in Tables 3 and 4. Moreover, with some rare or exceptional cases excluded, most of which occur in poetry, Table 5 shows the general tendency of constructions used with *witan* and *cunnan*.

In Table 5, constructions with accusative objects are the only overlapping usage. However, as for kinds of objects *witan* and *cunnan* take, Ono (1975: 48) finds that, only in the Four Gospels among the texts he examined, there is a tendency that *witan* occurs with inanimate objects and *cunnan* with animate

ones. As mentioned above, it is worth noting that the same dichotomy is also found in Gothic and Old Norse (Tellier 1962: 31-32, 41). Moreover, according to Ono (1975: 53), although high frequency of the two verbs with complex constructions in poetry seems to make choice of verbs depend more on other factors than types of objects, there is more difference between *witan* and *cunnan* in prose:

Roughly speaking, objects peculiar to *witan* are facts and abstract notions such as ‘mischief’, ‘benefit’, ‘thought’, ‘frivolity’, ‘sin’, ‘will’, while those peculiar to *cunnan* are persons, concrete things such as ‘desert’, and things learned or acquired such as ‘language’, ‘letters’. (Ono 1975: 52)

Table 3. Frequency of *Witan* in Some Old English Texts (from Ono [1975: 42]).¹

	<i>witan</i>					
	Jun	Ver	Ex	<i>Beow</i>	<i>CP</i>	Gosp
absolute	0	1	2	0	3	5
with <i>be</i>	0	0	0	0	0	1
acc	13	9	29	9	40	39
gen	1	0	0	0	0	0
acc & comp	12	4	14	0	0	0
acc & inf	0	1	6	4	3	0
acc & <i>pæt-cl</i>	3	1	1	0	0	0
gen & <i>pæt-cl</i>	0	0	0	0	2	1
acc & cl without conj	0	0	0	1	0	0
acc & indir q	0	2	4	0	0	0
<i>pæt-cl</i>	10	7	8	7	38	62
cl without conj	2	0	1	0	1	1
indir q	7	4	10	3	26	38
inf	0	0	2	0	0	0
pp	0	0	0	0	1	1
Total	48	29	77	25	114	148
% (<i>witan</i> : <i>cunnan</i>)	54	40	52	43	69	76

¹ Objects of verbs are generally shown in the leftmost columns of Tables 3 and 4, while “‘absolute’ indicates the absence of objects and ‘pp’ means that a verb itself is in the past participle.” (Ono 1975: 37) Abbreviations are as follows: Jun = Junius Manuscript, Ver = Vercelli Book, Ex = Exeter Book, *Beow* = *Beowulf*, *CP* = *Pastoral Care (Cura Pastoralis)*, Gosp = the Four Gospels, acc = accusative, gen = genitive, comp = complement, inf = infinitive, cl = clause, indir q = indirect question, conj = conjunction.

Table 4. Frequency of *Cunnan* in Some Old English Texts (from Ono [1975: 42]).

	<i>Cunnan</i>					
	Jun	Ver	Ex	<i>Beow</i>	<i>CP</i>	Gosp
absolute	2	2	10	0	3	0
with <i>be</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0
acc	18	15	27	10	9	40
gen	0	0	1	0	0	0
acc & comp	0	0	0	1	0	0
acc & inf	0	0	0	0	0	0
acc & <i>pæt</i> -cl	0	0	0	1	0	0
gen & <i>pæt</i> -cl	0	0	0	0	0	0
acc & cl without conj	0	0	0	0	0	0
acc & indir q	0	0	1	1	0	0
<i>pæt</i> -cl	0	0	0	0	0	0
cl without conj	0	0	0	0	0	0
indir q	2	4	3	3	0	2
inf	6	14	11	6	37	4
pp	13	8	17	11	2	1
Total	41	43	70	33	51	47
% (<i>witan</i> : <i>cunnan</i>)	46	60	48	57	31	24

Table 5. General Tendency of Constructions Used with *Witan* and *Cunнан* (from Ono [1975: 42]).²

	<i>witan</i>	<i>cunнан</i>
acc	+	+
acc & X	+	-
cl	+	-
inf	-	+
pp	-	+

As is evident from Tables 3 and 4, indirect questions occur both with *witan* and *cunнан*. However, no instances of *cunнан* are seen in this use in *Pastoral Care*. Ono (1975: 45-46) infers that, together with the fact that *cunнан* is used with infinitive much more often in the same text, it shows a new tendency, which might “be due to such factors as the date of composition and MS, dialect and style” (Ono 1975: 46) of *Pastoral Care* (Hatton MS, late 9th century). These findings make him conclude that “*cunнан* was on the way to becoming an auxiliary verb already in Old English” (Ono 1975: 60).

Apart from *witan* and *cunнан*, there is another verb indicating knowing, *cnawan*, which developed as Modern English *know*. This verb seems to be used only with prefixes in early Old English. No instances of the unprefixes form appear in Ono’s (1975) study. No occurrences are found in the Old English

² The occurrence and non-occurrence of *witan* and *cunнан* are indicated by the signs + and -. ‘Acc & X’ means all constructions in which accusative object are followed other syntactic elements such as complements, infinitives, and *pæt*-clauses.

sub-section of the Helsinki Corpus (Rissanen 1993: 196). Furthermore, no examples in the *OED* are cited earlier than a1100.

(1) *Noscuntur, .i. intelleguntur*, þa beoð cnawane. (a1100 Napier *O.E. Glosses* 76 qtd. in *OED*, “*know* v.”, Def. 1a.)

Prefixed forms of *cnawan* are as follows: *acnawan*, *becnawan*, *gecnawan*, *oncnawan* and *toconawan*. However, these verbs are not as frequent as *witan* and *cunnan* in the Old English period. Ono (1975: 60) and Rissanen (1993) attribute this low frequency of *-cnawan* to “an aspectual colouring” (Rissanen 1993: 196) indicated by the prefixes. However, “the aspectual role of these prefixes weakens by the end of the Old English period, and they rapidly disappear in Early Middle English, first in the North and Midlands” (Rissanen 1993: 196-197). He further finds that *gecnawan* becomes obsolete later than the other prefixed forms of *-cnawan*, and it also becomes no longer in use in the Early Middle English period in accord with the general loss of the prefix *ge-/y-* itself in the same period (Rissanen 1993: 197).

To sum up what has been noted so far, *witan* is the most predominant verb of knowing in Old English which could be used in various syntactic environments except with infinitives and in past participles. *Cunnan* shows some indications already in Old English that it is growing to be an auxiliary verb. *Cnawan*, which is not as frequent as the other two verbs, usually occurs with the

prefixes indicating dynamic actions at least in early Old English. However, as late as late Old English, the prefixed forms become infrequent. Moreover, instances of the unprefixed form of *cnawan*, which later becomes the chief verb of knowing, Modern English *know* start to be found in the same period.

2.3. Middle English and Later

As already discussed above, in the process of the loss of its prefixes, which had already started in Old English, *know* (*cnawan*) was also deprived of the aspectual meanings indicated by them. In response to this, Middle English experienced a significant development of *know*, whereas *wit* was going out of use. As is clear from Table 6, which is quoted from Rissanen's (1993) work based on the Helsinki Corpus, the predominance is reversed in late Middle English. Gutch's (1979) and Tani's (2013b: 311) studies also show that the momentous period of the development of *know* is the fourteenth century. Furthermore, examining the individual texts, Rissanen claims that "the turning point can be dated at c. 1350" (1993: 200).

Table 6. *Wit* and *Know* in the ME and EModE Sub-Sections of the Helsinki Corpus (Simplex Forms Only) (quoted from Rissanen [1993: 198]).³

period	<i>wit</i>	(/10,000 wds)	<i>know</i>	(/10,000 wds)
ME1 (1150-1250)	129	11.4	12	1.1
ME2 (1250-1350)	96	9.8	47	4.8
ME3 (1350-1420)	244	13.2	278	15.1
ME4 (1420-1500)	150	13.3	265	23.4
E1 (1500-1570)	36	1.7	333	15.6
E2 (1570-1640)	13	0.7	451	23.7
E3 (1640-1710)	7	0.4	344	20.1

Textual and regional preference in the process of the substitution of *wit* and *know* is also discussed. Tani (2013b: 314) claims that *know* is preferred in the southern parts of England, especially in London after the 14th century. He further argues that “the frequent use or establishment of *know* is closely linked to standardization of English beginning in the fourteenth century,” while “*wit* survived in dialects” (Tani 2013b: 314). Rissanen mentions that *wit* “was perhaps regarded as a stereotyped marker of non-standard speech” (1993: 203) in Early Modern English. According to the *OED*, the only existent usage *to wit* is used mainly in legal documents.

³ Rissanen excludes the examples of *wit* with the proclitic negative *n-* such as *nyste* and *nat* because “[t]he number of these instances is low and they mainly occur in the first two ME sub-periods” (1993: 199). The normalized frequencies of both verbs in ME4 and E1 in his data would probably have been miscalculated for possible use of the numbers of the total words of E1 and E2 as those of ME4 and E1 respectively, and are revised here.

2.4. Reasons for the Substitution of *Know* for *Wit*

As for why the substitution of *know* for *wit* took place, Rissanen (1993) proposes several reasons:

- (a) The capacity of *-cnawan* to take clausal objects
- (b) The homonymy between the Middle English forms of *wite* ‘know’ and *wite* ‘depart’, ‘punish’, ‘protect’
- (c) The general loss of those preterite-present verbs which were not reanalysed as auxiliaries in Middle and Early Modern English (Rissanen 1993: 197-198)

Considering that Old English *cunnan* does not occur with clausal objects except for indirect questions and gives way to Old English *witan*, it seems to be true that with what kind of construction a verb could be used is one of the key factors in its predominance as a chief one in the same semantic field. In fact, Rissanen (1993: 97) points out that *-cnawan* occurs with *þæt*-clauses as early as Old English. Furthermore, Koivisto-Alanko and Rissanen (2002: 16) claim that the use of *know* with clausal objects increases in Middle English, which makes the verb penetrate into “the syntactic-semantic domain of *wit*” (Rissanen 1993: 201).

- (2) forþam þe he oncneow, þæt he þa gita [=yet] on þære his wædle [=poverty] wæs swyðor geangsumod [=made anxious].
(Greg. Dial. H [GDH] 57 qtd. in Rissanen [1993: 196])

(3) For ich knew þat our Lord is gret, and our God is to-fore allse
goddes. (c. 1350 Prose Psalter 163, MPPSALT qtd. in
Koivisto-Alanko and Rissanen [2002: 17])

However, it should be noted that *wit* is no more defective than *know* in terms of the quality of the object. Ono's (1975) study indicates that the prefixed forms of *cnawan* occurs with clauses and more with accusative objects, while, as evident from Table 5 above, Old English *witan* could take both clausal and nominal objects. According to Rissanen (1993: 198), it is also the case with Middle English *wite*.

As for the existence of the homonymous Middle English verbs *wite* 'depart', 'punish', 'protect', Rissanen himself admits that homonymy could not be considered to be a conclusive factor in the extinction of *wit* 'know' because it is "always a shaky explanation for the loss of a lexical item" (1993: 198), and Gutch (1979) also doubts the validity of the explanation. Moreover, as Koivisto-Alanko and Rissanen point out, "the verbs indicating 'protect' and 'depart' seem to have disappeared from the language earlier than *wit* 'know'" (2002: 29).

The quality of a preterite-present verb is also questioned. Gutch (1979: 204-207) mentions that *wit* could have developed a new paradigm of conjugation, which allows it to belong to the category labelled as "regular verb" as did *owe* 'be in debt' and *con* 'learn'.

After all, none of Rissanen's (1993:197-198) proposals mentioned above could hardly be regarded as a conclusive factor

in the extinction of *wit*. In addition, after all her exhaustive discussion of the potential syntactic and semantic factors in the obsolescence of *wit*, Gutch (1979: 204-221) finds no incontrovertible explanations. Rissanen finally concludes that the dying out of this verb is caused by “the sum total of many different but unidirectional factors” (1993:198), as is the case with other many syntactic developments.

3. Data

3.1 Parsed Corpus of Early English Correspondence

The material investigated in the present research is the Parsed Corpus of Early English Correspondence (PCEEC). This corpus was compiled based on the Corpus of Early English Correspondence (CEEC). Unlike the original corpus, the PCEEC is provided with 3 versions: plain text files, part-of-speech tagged files, and syntactically parsed files. Due to the problem of copyright, the material in the PCEEC is somewhat less than the original CEEC. The data of CEEC and PCEEC are shown in Tables 7 and 8. The letters in the PCEEC is divided into several periods following the Helsinki Corpus.

3.2 Letters as a Linguistic Material

Letters are records of real communication, with an identifiable writer and recipient, across distance and time. In many cases, they follow certain rules such as opening and closing formulae and dates. According to Görlach’s (1999: 141) genre categorisation, correspondence is independent, original, written,

non-fictional, non-technical prose. Biber (2001: 98-99) discusses typical characteristics of letters closely. Nurmi & Palander-Collin (2008) argues that letters are less standard than other materials published in the same period. Palander-Collin et al. (2009) asserts that letters provide a chance to investigate languages close to the vernacular of the past and languages as a means of interactive communication.

Table 7. Corpus Description of CEEC and PCEEC.

	CEEC	PCEEC
Words	2,597,795	2,159,132
Collections	96	84
Letters	5,961	4,970
Writers	778	666
Time span	c. 1410–1681	1410–1681

Table 8. Word and Type Count Information of PCEEC by Period.

Period	Date	Word count	Type count
M3	1350-1419	19,505	684
M4	1420-1499	364,317	20,039
E1	1500-1569	309,220	11,056
E2	1570-1639	910,675	44,067
E3	1640-1710	555,415	29,185

4. Result and Analysis

4.1. Overall Distributions

In the present study, *vyt*, *vyte*, *weet*, *weete*, *wet*, *wete*, *weten*, *wett*, *wette*, *wetyn*, *whet*, *whete*, *whet*, *wit*, *wite*, *witt*, *witte*, *wot*, *wyt*, *wyte*, *wytt*, and *wytte* are counted as an infinitive form. Present tense forms include *vot*, *wat*, *wete*, *wett*, *wetyn*, *whot*, *whote*, *whotte*, *wit*, *wite*, *witeth*, *witt*, *witteth*, *woot*, *woote*, *woott*, *wot*, *wote*, *wott*, *wotte*, *wottys*, *wottyth*, *wotys*, *wotyth*, *wyst*, and *wyte*, whereas *quytte*, *vest*, *west*, *whyst*, *wist*, *wiste*, *wost*, *woste*, *wote*, *wott*, *wust*, *wyst*, and *wyste* are found as a past tense form. The other forms found in the present study are as follows: *wittying*, *wytyng* for the present participle; *west*, *wete*, *wette*, *wist*, *wust*, *wyst* for the past participle; *vyt*, *weet*, *wete* for the imperative.

The absolute frequencies of *wit* and *know* in the PCEEC are shown in Table 9. Although absolute frequency is useful enough for comparison of within each period, the raw data have to be normalized by the aggregate number of words in each period in order to make possible the comparison of both verbs between the periods. Therefore, the relative frequencies of the two verbs per 10,000 words are also given in Table 9 with the percentage of *wit* to the full total instances of *wit* and *know*. In addition, the percentages and the normalized frequencies of *wit* and *know* are graphed out respectively in Figures 1 and 2 with those of the Helsinki Corpus shown in Table 6 above.

Figure 1 indicates that the substitution of *wit* and *know* takes place in a more gradual and steady rate in the Helsinki Corpus. On the other hand, in the PCEEC, although both verbs are

used on the same level in late Middle English, the ratio of *wit* decreases dramatically in the Early Modern English period. Figure 2 explains the situation more precisely. Although the increase in the normalized frequency of *know* in the PCEEC starts already in the late Middle English period, it seems to lag a century behind that in the Helsinki Corpus. Another crucial difference between the results of the two corpora is that the frequency of *wit* rises noticeably in the M4 period and falls sharply in the 16th century in the PCEEC, while the Helsinki Corpus shows little fluctuation in that same period. It is this rise and fall of frequency of *wit* that makes the substitution appear to proceed suddenly at the beginning of Early Modern English in the PCEEC.

Table 9. Absolute and Normalized Frequencies and Ratio of *Wit* and *Know* by Period.

period	absolute freq.			normalized freq. (/ 10,000 wds)			<i>wit</i> (%)
	<i>wit</i>	<i>know</i>	total	<i>wit</i>	<i>know</i>	total	
M3 (1350-1419)	12	12	24	6.2	6.2	12.3	50.0
M4 (1420-1499)	708	584	1292	19.4	16.0	35.5	54.8
E1 (1500-1569)	54	727	781	1.7	23.5	25.3	6.9
E2 (1570-1639)	12	2013	2025	0.1	22.1	22.2	0.6
E3 (1640-1710)	6	1372	1378	0.1	24.7	24.8	0.4
total	792	4708	5500	3.7	21.8	25.5	14.4

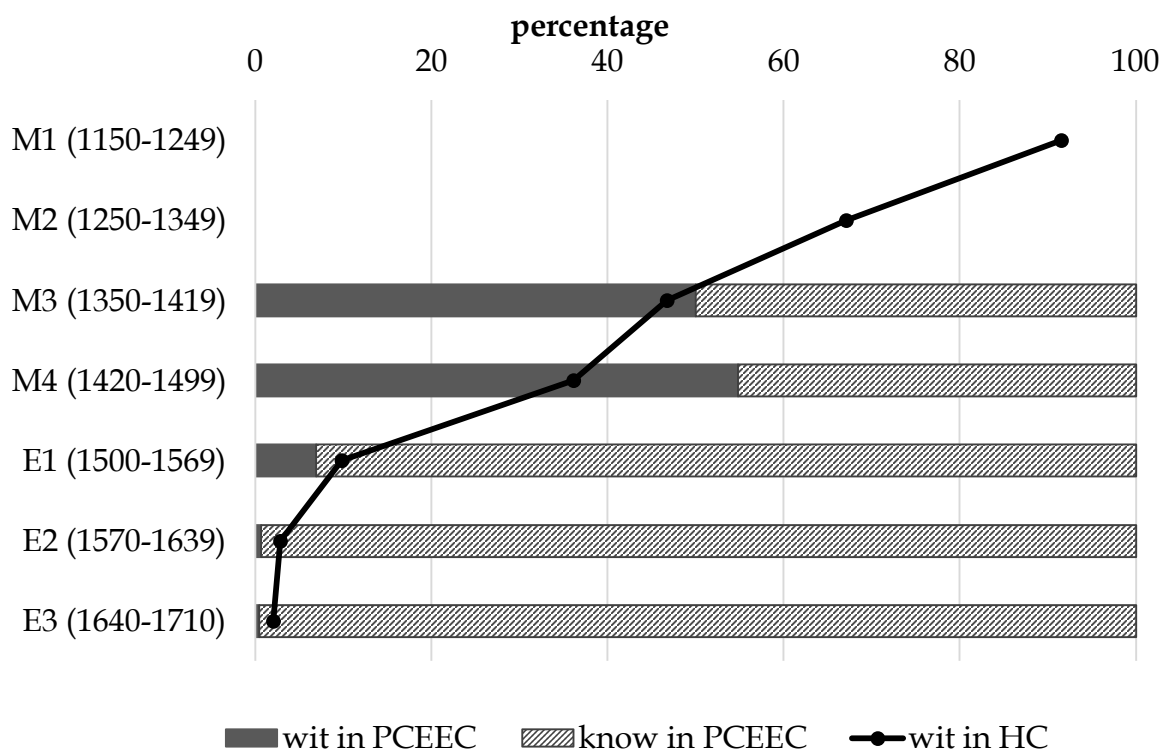


Figure 1. Ratio of *Wit* and *Know* by Period.

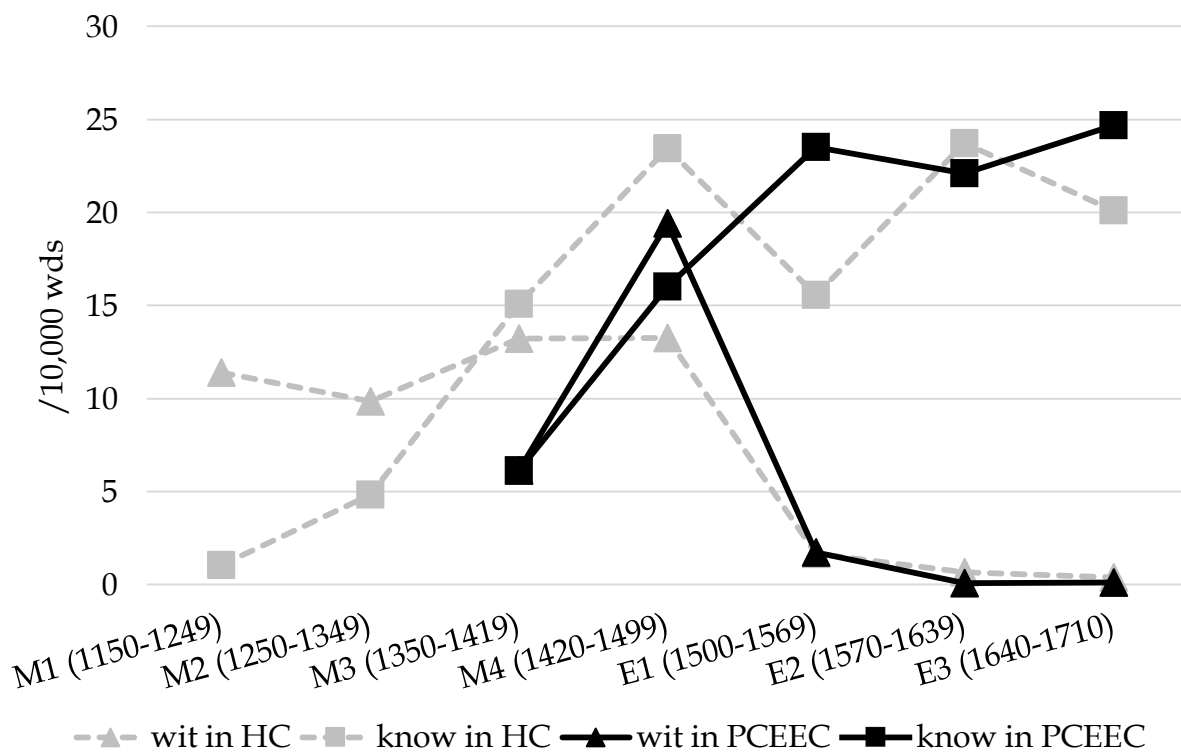


Figure 2. Normalized Frequencies of *Wit* and *Know* by Period.

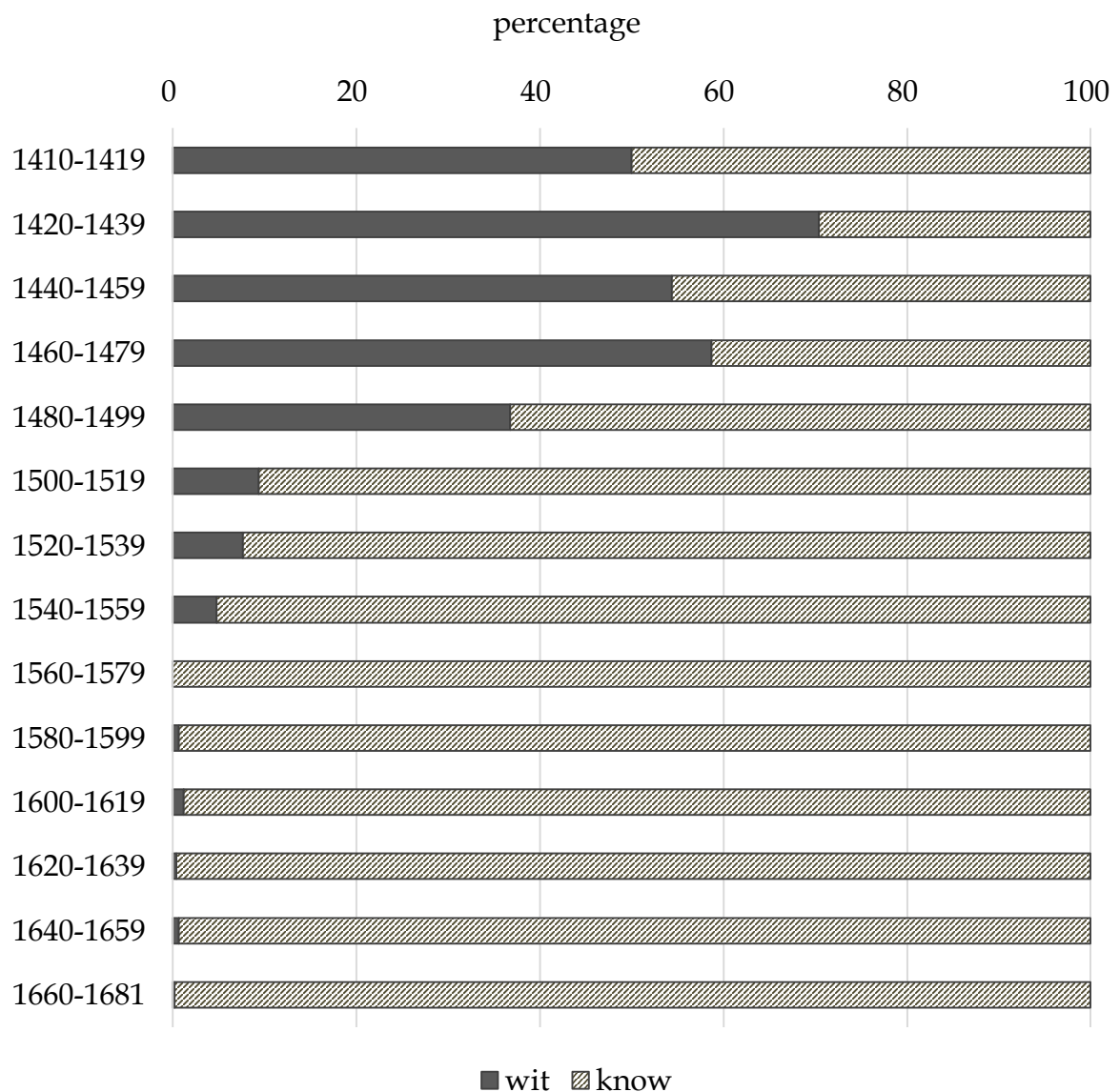


Figure 3. Ratio of *Wit* and *Know* by Two-Decade Period.

In order to examine the fluctuation of *wit* more closely, the ratio of the two verbs is divided into two-decade periods in Figure 3, in which *wit* shows a somewhat more steady decrease at the start of the 16th century in its percentage than in Figure 1. This verb seems to start falling into a decline by the end of the late Middle English period even in the PCEEC.

4.2 Idioms of *Wit*

The key feature of an idiom is the non-compositionality of its meaning. The meaning of an idiom cannot be worked out from its constituents. Another feature is that an idiom is syntactically more fixed. For example, in the case of *kick the bucket*, the verb can take various inflected forms (*kicked*, *has/had kicked*), but the noun cannot be pluralised (**kick the buckets*), nor can the clause be passivised (**the bucket was kicked*) (Jackson 1988: 106). However, the degree of idiomatisation varies and clear-cut distinctions from literal to idiomatic usages are often hard to make. Furthermore, it is worth noting that Nunberg et al. (1994) distinguish “idiomatically combining expressions”, which are semantically compositional, from “idiomatic phrases”, which are not semantically decomposable.

Formulaic phrases are clearly related to the substitution of *wit* and *know* as Rissanen (1993: 202-205) attributes the obsolescence of *wit* to the increasing use of the idiomatic expressions. Tani (2013b: 320-325) also discusses the idiomatisation of *wit*, listing the phrases found in his study: *that is to wit*, *it is to wit*, *it were to wit*, *to wit*, *like X to wit*, *please X to wit*, *do X to wit*, *let X to wit*, *God wot*, and the imperative use. Examples (1-3) above are the idioms according to his categorization. Tani (2013b) further asserts the relationship between the idioms and the forms of *wit* in his study of the Middle English Prose Corpus of the ICAMET as follows:

[I]diomatic uses of *wit* are mostly limited to the

WIT-form, i.e. *wit*, *wyt*, *wet*, *weet*. That is to say, 1945 out of all the 1961 idiomatic examples are of the WIT-form (with 16 examples in the WOT-form). In fact, 65.7 percent of all the examples of the WIT-form are idiomatic uses. (Tani 2013b: 318)⁴

In the PCEEC, 480 of all the 792 instances of *wit* are idiomatic phrases listed by Tani (2013b), and all of the infinitive forms in the PCEEC but Example (4) are the WIT-forms. Moreover, 432 examples of the idioms appear in the infinitive form. More surprisingly, 91% of the infinitive forms are used in the idiomatic phrases. It goes without saying that the WIT-form includes not only the infinitive but also the present form, as in (5). However, taking it into consideration, more than 80% of the WIT-form still occur in the idiomatic phrases.

(4) ... but I shall wot in hast yf I may. (MARGARET PASTON, Paston_123, M4)

(5) ... whether my lettre be come to hym or no, I wete ner. (HUMPHREY FORSTER, STONOR_013, M4)

Table 10 shows that normalized frequencies and ratios of idiomatic usage of *wit*. A sharp decrease of the idioms along with the non-idioms in Early Modern English suggests that the decline of the verb itself in this period is not caused by the idiomatic

⁴ Tani (2013b) classifies the forms of *wit* into two categorisations, namely the WIT-form (*wet*, *weet*, *wist*, *wit*, *wust*, *wyst*, *wyt*, *ywit*, *ywyt*) and the WOT-form (*wast*, *wat*, *woot*, *wost*, *wot*).

usage. The ratio of the idioms, although it fluctuates, increase on the whole. Rissanen (1993: 203) observes that “some 40%”⁵ of *wit* in the ME4 period in the Helsinki Corpus are the idiomatic uses, and Tani (2013b: 317) mentions as follows:

[T]he idiomatic uses begin to increase in the fourteenth century and [...] they suddenly increase to more than 40 percent in the fifteenth century. (Tani 2013b: 317)

Table 10. Normalized Frequencies and Ratio of Idioms of *Wit*.⁶

	idioms	non-idioms	total
M3 (1350-1419)	2.56 (42)	3.59 (58)	6.15
M4 (1420-1499)	10.84 (56)	8.59 (44)	19.43
E1 (1500-1569)	0.84 (48)	0.91 (52)	1.75
E2 (1570-1639)	0.11 (77)	0.03 (23)	0.14
E3 (1640-1710)	0.07 (57)	0.05 (43)	0.13
total	2.04 (55)	1.64 (45)	3.68

The result of the PCEEC shows a relatively similar tendency to that of Rissanen’s (1993) and Tani’s (2013b) study, but a higher frequency of the idiomatic usage, especially in the infinitive or WIT-form. It is probably because the PCEEC is a collection of the correspondence. Davis (1965: 238), for instance, points out that *please you to wit* and *like you to wit* are the expressions characteristic of the letters. In order to examine closely the usage

⁵ Rissanen (1993) counts *wit well*, *God wot*, *(for) to wit* as the idioms.

⁶ The normalized frequencies per 10,000 words are indicated in each cell with the percentages of each usage in the round brackets.

in the letter corpus, each expression needs to be focused on, and the raw frequencies of the respective phrase are shown in Table 11.

Table 11. Idioms of *Wit*.

idioms	M3	M4	E1	E2	E3	Total
<i>that is to wit</i>	0	3	6	0	0	9
<i>it is to wit</i>	0	0	1	0	0	1
<i>to wit</i>	0	3	0	10	4	17
<i>like X to wit</i>	1	47	2	0	0	50
<i>please X to wit</i>	0	178	4	0	0	182
<i>pray X to wit</i>	0	28	0	0	0	28
<i>beseech X to wit</i>	0	1	0	0	0	1
<i>do X to wit</i>	3	13	0	0	0	16
<i>let X wit</i>	1	147	9	0	0	157
<i>X will (that) Y wit</i>	4	8	0	0	0	12
<i>wit-IMPER</i>	0	1	1	0	0	2
<i>God wot</i>	0	3	2	0	0	5
non-idioms	3	276	29	2	2	312
total	12	708	54	12	6	792

Although the first citations of *that is to wit* and *it is to wit* in the *OED* are from the 14th century and that of *to wit* from the 16th century, Tani (2013b: 321) gives 12th-century examples of *that is to wit*, *it is to wit*. According to the *OED* (s.v. *wit*), *that is to wit* might be a calque from Anglo-French *cestasavoir*. However, Rissanen (2008), using Old and Middle English

corpora, observes that these expressions are found often in the Old English translations from Latin and thus much more influenced by Latin *sciendum est* and *notandum est*.

In the PCEEC, *that is to wit* and *to wit* are found from the M4 period, whereas no instances occur after E1. *To wit* is the only idiomatic phrase appearing after the E1 period. This finding is consistent with the *OED*'s explanation that *that is to wit* was replaced by *to wit*, and with the fact that *to wit* is the only surviving use of *wit*. As for *it is to wit*, Rissanen (2008: 234) observes that it is almost restricted to translations from Latin later than Middle English. Example (7), which is the only example in the PCEEC, seems to function as an appositive marker in the same way as *that is to wit* and *to wit* rather than a discourse marker, unlike Rissanen's (2008: 235) findings and the *OED*'s definition.

Definitions (s.v. *wit* v¹. 10 a., b. and c. in *OED*)

that is to wit "that is to say, that is, namely"

it is to wit "it is to be observed, noted, or ascertained"

to wit "that is, namely, scilicet"

(6) *that is to wit*

For, Syr, as for the fyrst mater, that is to witt my lettre or communication with the nonne the whole discourse wherof in my formar lettre I have as playnely declared vnto yow as I possibly can, so pray I God to withdrawe that scruple and dowl of my good mynde, owte of the Kyngis noble breste and

none other wise, but as I not onely thowght none harme, but also purposed good, and in that thing moost, in which as I perceiue his Grace conceiveth moost grieffe and suspition, that is to witt in my lettre which I wrote vnto her. (THOMAS MORE, MORE_030, E1)

(7) *it is to wit*

And, as far as I remember, Mr. Heynes, Blagge, and Mason beyng at the table, the woordes wer also with a moor bitter addition, it is to wit, ‘By godds bodie, I woold, he might be soo serued, and then were he well serued.’ (EDMUND BONNER, WYATT_008, E1)

(8) *to wit*

... for, in truth, those gates which we commonly call the Gaole gates are the Castle gates, the Gaole being part of the Castle, to wit, the outwardmost part, ... (MILES STAPYLTON, COSIN_084, E3)

As mentioned earlier, *like X to wit* and *please X to wit* are the expression often used in the letters (1965: 238). In addition, in Tani’s (2013b: 321) study, *like X to wit* is found solely in letter collections and *please X to wit* is also employed mostly in the same collections. The PCEEC, which consists only of letters, shows a high frequency of both phrases, especially in the M4 period. Considering that all of Tani’s (2013b: 320) findings of these two expressions are from the 15th century, it could be

concluded that they are the expressions characteristic of letters in that period.

As Tani (2013: 321) points out, these phrases have some variations in the uses. Impersonal verbs *like* and *please* sometimes appear with the expletive *it*, as in (9a) and (10a), and sometimes not, as in (9b). There are some cases in which the verb merges with an expletive subject, as in (10b). Although, in many cases, the verb takes subjunctive mood in order to express politeness, as in (9a) and (10a,b), indicative mood is also sometimes found, as in (9b), and *youre good maistirship* is employed instead of *you* in (9a).

A significant characteristic of these phrases is that a conjunction *that* is hardly omitted when *wit* takes a clause as its object. In the PCEEC, 44 of 49 instances of *like X to wit* and 161 of 176 examples of *please X to wit* occur with the conjunction *that*.

(9) *like X to wit*

- (a) Sovereyn Lord, after moost humble recommendacion with hele bothe of body and of sowle, as zour selfe and alle zour liege men desire, lyke zow to wyte that the first Soneday of Lenton the dwk of Excester zour huncle sent for me to the Frer Prechours, wer I fond with him zour preest and bedeman Thomas Fyshborn, ... (HENRY CHICHELE, ORIGIN1_001, M3)
- (b) Lyekyth it yow to wet that, acordyng to yowyr desyir in dyuers of your lettyrs sent on-to me, I haue spook wyth

Heydon for the deed of Bekham whyche he hathe; ...
(JOHN PASTON III, PASTON_182, M4)

(10) *please X to wit*

- (a) Please youre good maistirship to wete that my lord of Norffolke yaf in comaundement to Cristofre and to the balif of Colneise to laboure with us acording to youre mocion. (JOHN RUSSE, PASTON_322, M4)
- (b) ... pleseyt yow to wyte I have ressevyde a byle frome yow wherby I undyrstonde My lorde Morlay dissyrres to sugiorne with yow: ... (JANE[JOAN] STONOR, STONOR_017, M4)

(11) *pray X to wit*

- (a) Ryt+g wurschifful hosbond, I recommawnd me to +gou, praying +gou to wete +tat my kosyn Clere dynyd wyth me +tis day, ... (MARGARET PASTON, PASTON_065, M4)
- (b) Also I pray yow to wete that I was at Mauteby, ... (JOHN_OSBERN, PASTON_242, M4)

(12) *beseech X to wit*

Right reuerent and wurchepfull ser, I recomand me to you, besechyng you to wete that Wharles told me that Partrych seid that his lord knewe wele that ye were entred pesibilly in the manere of Gresham; where-fore he seid thow the tenauntes and fermores pay you the rentes and fermes the

tyme that ye be in possession, his seid lord, thow he entre ageyn, wuld neuer aske it them. (JAMES GLOYS, PASTON_268, M4)

Pray X to wit and *beseech X to wit* seem to have a similar function to *like X to wit* and *please X to wit*. While *beseech* is used in the present participle in the only example (12) of the phrase in the PCEEC, *pray* is seen both in the present participle and the present tense form, as in (11). Both expressions always take a clausal object without a conjunction *that* omitted. An important fact on these two phrases is that they are employed solely in the *Paston Letters*. All of the 28 examples of *pray X to wit* are from the letters written to John Paston I and, among them, 18 instances are from the ones sent around 1450 by his wife, Margaret Paston.

(13) *do X to wit*

- (a) Right reverent and wurshypfull Brothyr, I recomawnd me unto yowe, good Brothyrhod, desyryng to here of yowre wellfare, the whych Almyg+gty God contynue long to hys plesyr and yowre hertys desyr: doyng yow to wyt y have spokyn with +te parson of Penyngton of the matyr +tat I have spokyn to yow off, ... (EDMUND STONOR, STONOR_036, M4)
- (b) ... and do yow wete +tat +tis same Wedneseday I receyved your lettre whiche was wretyn on Saterdag last passed, wherby ye willed me to send yow worde of your

matiers, &c. (JAMES GRESHAM, PASTON_251, M4)

- (c) It was done me to wete +tat dyuerys of +te Lord Moleynys men saydyn jf +tei myt gete me +tey xuld stele me and kepe me wyth-jnne +te kastell, (MARGARET PASTON, PASTON_064, M4)

(14) *let X wit*

- (a) Syr, I recomaunde me on-to yow, latynge yow wete that, as for John Petyrsons mater, as +gett it is not spedde. (WILLIAM PASTON III, PASTON_221, M4)
- (b) And as for William Milsent, I lete hym wete hough ye vndirstood he was disposed to goo hoom to his faders, wherof ye were pleasid and wold he shuld do so. (JOHN PAMPYNG, PASTON_455, M4)
- (c) And I pray you, madam, let not my M=rs=. your daughter wit of it,... (ANN ABBOT, PLUMPTO_103, E1)
- (d) He letethe me wite +tat he wyll be wel gouerned in tyme commyng. (THOMAS SCALES, PASTON_247, M4)
- (e) Please it you to wytte that it is lete me witte by on +tat owith you good wyll that +ter is leid awayte up-on you in +tis cuntre' yf ye come here at large, to bryng you to +te presence of suyche a lord in the north as shall not be for your ease, but to iopardie of your lyf or gret and importable losse of your goodes. (MARGARET PASTON, PASTON_087, M4)

As for a causative construction *do X to wit*, *wit* appears in

the bare infinitive in only 2 cases from the letters sent by James Gresham including Example (13b). In all cases, the object of *wit* is a clause with a conjunction *that* expressed, except for (13a). Example (13c) shows a conspicuous characteristic of the phrase that *do* can be passivized. Although the *OED* lists citations of *do X to wit* from the 12th to the 17th century, no instances are found after the 15th century in the PCEEC.

Another causative construction *let X to wit* is different from the other idioms in that it can take an indirect question as its object, as in (14b), whereas it is also used in the introductory part of a letter as are many other idioms, as in (14a). Furthermore, Examples (14b, c, d) show that the semantic subject of *wit* is not limited to second person. The phrase can be made negative and passive, respectively as in (14c) and (14e). In spite of its various usages, the PCEEC records no examples of the expression after E1, although the latest *OED*'s citation is from the 19th century.

(15) *X will (that) Y wit*

- (a) Thomas Gnateshale, I wul +ge wite it was oute of my remembrance that Paston hade put in my determinacion the discort betwene you and hym. (THOMAS SCALES, PASTON_509, M4)
- (b) And we wol ye wyte +tat +te priour of oure hows of saint Bartholomew in Westsmythfeld of London haa+t poured vnto vs here on +tis side +te see for confirmacion of alle +te yiftes grantes priuileges franchises and libertees graunted vnto oure saide hows

by oure progenitours and predecessours ... (HENRY V
SIGNET [TOLY], SIGNET_058, M3)

As for *X will (that) Y wit*, 4 examples in the M3 period are from the letters sent by Henry V in the *Signet Letters*, and 8 instances in M4 are from the *Paston Letters*. Among 10 cases with a clausal object, Example (15a) is the only one in which a conjunction *that* is omitted. It is worth noting that *wit* takes the WIT-form in all 12 instances in the PCEEC.

(16) *wit*-IMPER

- (a) ... and vyt ze my lorde that I have spokyn vy=t= James Aborrow and he hath schwn to me that ze and the lordys of Cownsel vould not that I schuld cam to Bayners castel to day. (MARGARET STUART [N.TUDOR], ORIGIN1_027, E1)
- (b) For till the seyde accomptes be made ordynatlye, whych be of a grete charge yeerlye, wete ye for certeyn my maister shall neuere know whethyr he goth bakward or forward. (WILLIAM WORCESTER, PASTON_341, M4)

According to Tani (2013b: 320), the imperative *wit* shows high frequency in the Middle English Prose Corpus of the ICAMET. However, it occurs only two times in the PCEEC, as in (16a, b). Tani (2013b: 322) points out that this expression has a function as a discourse marker. Its usage in various texts of Caxton is extensively discussed by Tani (2013a).

(17) *God wot*

- (a) ... and I wote not what to do, God wote, ... (ISABEL PLUMPTON, PLUMPTO_095, E1)
- (b) ... and God wote she made me right sulleyne chere with hir countenance whyles I was with hir: ... (THOMAS BETSON, STONOR_072, M4)

God wot is also a frequent expression in the Middle English Prose Corpus of the ICAMET (Tani 2013b: 320), but not in the PCEEC, with only 5 instances. However, there seems some variations in its usage. *God wot* is used parenthetically in (17a), but seems not to be syntactically independent in (17b).

As for the cause for the development of these idiomatic usages, Tani (2013b) attributes it to the inflectional deficiency of *wit* “because the meanings of idioms come from the entire phrases not from their constituents” (Tani 2013b: 325). The morphological ambiguity of this verb is also pointed out in the *OED*:

The original conjugation, typically represented by *to wit* or *wete*, pres. *I* and *he wot*, *thou wost*, *we*, *ye*, and *they wite*, pa. tense *wist*, pa. pple. *witen*, presented many apparent anomalies, and various attempts at normalization were made by means of analogical formations and irregular extension of the use of certain forms, with the result that new infinitive and present-stem forms came into existence which it is

necessary to treat separately. (s.v. *wit* v¹. in the *OED*)

In the PCEEC, most idioms are employed in the infinitive or the WIT-form, which have less inflectional ambiguity. Taking it into consideration, the use of *wit* in idioms seems to have been prompted in order to avoid the problem of the morphological deficiency.

4.3 Non-idioms of *Wit*

In this section, attention will be paid to what is not labelled as idioms by Tani (2013b). Non-idiomatic uses are classified according to their complements in Table 12.

Table 12. Non-Idiomatic Use of *Wit*.⁷

		M3	M4	E1	E2	E3	total
active	<i>wit</i> + <i>that</i> -clause	2	27	1			30
	<i>wit</i> + zero- <i>that</i> -clause	1	59	1			61
	<i>wit</i> + indirect question		130	17			147
	<i>wit</i> + (pro)nominal object		12	3			15
	antecedent + S + <i>wit</i>		6		1		7
	<i>wit</i> + to-infinitive			1			1
	<i>wit</i> + prepositional phrase		26	3	1	1	31
	absolute use		14	2			16
	passive		2	1		1	4
	total	3	276	29	2	2	312

The most noticeable characteristic of the non-idioms is that when the verb takes a clausal object, a conjunction *that* is often omitted: 30 instances with *that*-clause and 61 with zero-*that*-clause. Considering that many idiomatic phrases are almost always found with *that*, this feature of the non-idioms appears to be more marked. What is more intriguing is the relationship between *wit* and *well*. These two words alliterate with each other. Furthermore, as Table 13 shows, *that* is omitted mostly when *wit* occurs with *well*, as in (18).

⁷ Instances in which *wit* is followed by *if*- or *whether*-clause are included in *wit* + indirect question, and a case below where another complement is preceded by the nominal object is counted here as *wit* + (pro)nominal object.

... and quytte hym a gode man to us. [JOHN SHILLINGFORD, SHILLIN_012, M4]

Table 13. Omission of *That* with Non-Idiomatic Use of *Wit*.

	<i>well</i>	<i>others</i>	total
<i>that</i>	18	12	30
zero-<i>that</i>	54	7	61
total	72	19	91

- (18) Neuerthe-lesse I wote wele he hath not ben grettly aquentyd wyth yow. (JOHN PASTON II, PASTON_128, M4)

According to Ono (1979) and Rissanen (1993: 201), a construction with clausal objects are the chief usage of *wit* in Old and Middle English. In the PCEEC, a construction with an indirect question is the most frequent usage. There are only 2 examples questions occur with 17 instances in the E1 period. This result with *that*-clause in Early Modern English, whereas indirect suggests that the complements *wit* could take are limited to indirect questions in the process of its obsolescence. Moreover, in 37 of 147 instances with indirect questions, the word order is inverted, as in (19), although the inversion seems to have little influence on its meaning, as evident from (20a, b).

- (19) And, as the worlde is nowe facioned, I wot not what counforte we shuld take in promyses, be they never soo assured by bandes of marchauntes or hostages, ... [STEPHEN GARDINER, GARDIN_012, E1]
- (20) (a) I wot not what it menyth. [AGNES PASTON, PASTON_015, M4]

- (b) ... what it menyth I wot not. [JAMES GRESHAM, PASTON_312, M4]

Another conspicuous construction is the one with prepositional phrases. Although it is not as frequent as clausal objects, it is an expression found until the E3 period. Among all of the 31 instances, 21 examples are employed in the relative clause, as in (21) and 3 examples are seen in *as*-clause, as in (22).

- (21) What great thinges hee design'd when hee was put into power, and how many of those designes hee brought to perfection, a scribler you wot off hath donne him the favour to put out in his Diary: ... [RICHARD STEWARD, COSIN_041, E3]
- (22) He hate also ij sadelys, on off my brotherys and an other hyred, as ye woot off. [JOHN PASTON II, PASTON_149, M4]

Even among what Tani (2013b) does not call an idiom, there are some frequent expressions such as *wit well* and *ye wot of*, and these phrases might have to be included in the category of idioms, or, at least, be treated on the same level as the idioms.

5. Conclusion

In the present study, the obsolescence of the verb *wit* in the PCEEC was discussed compared to the synonymous verb *know*. The PCEEC, which consists of letter collections from late Middle

English to Early Modern English, shows generally the similar tendency to the previous studies, although a higher frequency of idioms is recorded. A close investigation on the idiomatic expressions reveals that a conjunction *that* is not omitted in many idioms. Moreover, among what is not regarded as an idiom by Tani (2013b), there are some frequent phrases such as *wit well* and *ye wot of*. In order to clarify the cause for the idiomatisation and obsolescence of *wit*, further studies on the development of *know* and the substitution of the two verbs are needed.

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