Changes in argument structure: The development of English impersonal constructions from 1350 onwards

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1. Introduction

As its title reveals, this presentation is concerned with the later stages of English impersonal constructions. Examples (1)-(5) illustrate some of the impersonal constructions under scrutiny here:

(1) norþan   **sniwde**
    from north   snowed-3SG
    'it snowed from the north' [OE Sea 0008 (31)]

(2) ðætte oft   ðone geðyldegestan   **scamað**   ðæs siges
    that often   the most patient-ACC feels shame-3SG   the victory-GEN
    'so that often the most patient one is ashamed of the victory'
    [OE CP (Cotton) 0074 (33.226.18)]

(3) Æfter ðissum   **gelamp**   þæt micel manncwealm becom ofer ðære romaniscan leode
    After this   happened-3SG   that great pestilence came over the Roman people
    'after this it happened that a great pestilence came over the Roman people'
    [OE ÆCHom II, 9 [0042 (75.89)]]

The constructions above were frequent in Old and Middle English, as well as in other Indo-European languages like Latin, Greek, Old German or Old Icelandic (see in this respect Elvira 2009, among others). Morphosyntactically, they share the characteristic that they contain a finite verb inflected for the third person singular, but lack a subject marked for the nominative case controlling verbal agreement. Aside from this, the impersonal construction shows variation, and exhibits a number of different patterns, as illustrated in the above examples: in (1) the predicate denotes a meteorological phenomenon which does not require the presence of an argument, and hence the presence of a subject, either logical or grammatical. In the constructions exemplified in (2)-(3), there is no nominative noun phrase, but the verb takes complements that are formally realised as clauses (3), or as noun phrases marked for the accusative, dative or genitive case (2), denoting the semantic roles of EXPERIENCER (the animate and sentient entity which perceives or experiences a concrete state) and THEME ("something from which the experience emanates or by which the experience is effected", Fischer & van der Leek 1983 : 346).

Although some of the Germanic languages, such as Icelandic, have preserved their system of impersonal constructions relatively intact (Barððal 2004), in English, though, the impersonal construction has been lost. English impersonal constructions have been replaced by the following patterns, among others: a) personal constructions with a nominative subject: Middle English (henceforth ME) *hym nedde* '[there] was need [to] them' > Modern English (henceforth ModE) *they needed*; ME *me liketh* '[it] pleases me' > ModE *I like;* b) syntactic patterns with an expletive non-referential subject (so-called 'dummy *it*'): Old English (henceforth OE) *sniwde* 'snowed' > ModE *it* snowed; c) the generalisation of various personal verbs replacing formerly impersonal verbs: ME *me reweþ* '[there] is regret [to] me' (< OE *hrēowan, ME reuen)* / ModE *I regret* (< Middle French *regreter*). This

linguistic change has had important consequences, and has given rise to extensive literature on the topic, which includes classical works in Historical Linguistics dating back to the early 20th century (e.g., Jespersen 1961[1927]; van der Gaaf 1904), as well as more recent publications like Allen (1995), Elmer (1981), Fischer and van der Leek (1983), Miura (2015), Möhlig-Falke (2012) and Trousdale (2008), among many others.

2. The development of English impersonal constructions: an overview

Some of the most widespread interpretations of the historical development of English impersonal constructions date back to the 20th century. Very influential interpretations have been put forward by authors like Allen (1995), Fischer and van der Leek (1983), Jespersen 1961[1927] and Lightfoot (1991). Generally, all these proposals link the demise of the impersonal construction to the deep morphosyntactic transformations the English language underwent during the OE (449-1066) and ME (1066-1500) periods. Such changes concern mainly the simplification of the case system, the fixation of word order in declarative main sentences as S_{NOM} V O_{OBL}, the emergence of a subject requirement, and the loss of so-called lexically-assigned case in favour of so-called structurally-assigned case. More recently though, authors like Möhlig-Falke (2012) point out that the interpretation of the historical development of impersonal constructions in terms of such morphosyntactic changes is not viable, if we take into account that a great many ME verbs developed new impersonal uses between 1200 and 1450. Over this period of time, the morphosyntactic changes that are thought to be responsible for the disappearance of the construction were either in the course of development or had already taken place. Therefore, an inconsistency arises if we decide to interpret the loss of these constructions in terms of these changes alone. In this respect, it needs to be reminded that the loss of lexically-assigned case dates from c.1250, the start of the subject requirement from c.1100, and fixation of word order in the clause from c.1400. As a consequence of this inconsistency in the dates, the most recent investigations on the impersonal construction outline some additional hypotheses about the possible motivations for the change (Möhlig-Falke 2012; Trousdale 2008), or tend to show a lesser interest on such motivations in order to place the focus on the interaction between the semantics of impersonal verbs and the semantics of the constructions where they appear (e.g., Miura 2015; Möhlig-Falke 2012). The three latter studies are summarized in the following paragraphs, and they are taken as a point of departure for the development of the present project.

Möhlig-Falke's monograph (2012) focuses mainly on the Old English period. The empirical data comprise a group of 47 verbs that are documented in impersonal use in the database for the *Dictionary of Old English Corpus* (DOEC). With the purpose of complementing the DOEC database, Möhlig-Falke makes use of data from the *Middle English Dictionary* (MED), as well as from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, two sources that allow her to show that the impersonal construction did not decline in use between 1200 and 1500, but was even analogically extended to 63 new verbs (cf. Möhlig-Falke 2012: 15 y 209ff). Although Möhlig-Falke's primary interest is not looking into the reasons for the replacement of the impersonal construction by personal patterns, she proposes the hypothesis (*ibid*: 216-217) that there may exist a connection between the demise of the impersonal construction and the so-called verb-second (V2) rule. The V2-rule is a requirement that demands that the verb comes second in main clauses, always preceded

by a constituent, whatever its syntactic function (subject, object or adjunct). This initial constituent functions as the topic of its sentence. The V2-rule was characteristic of Germanic languages and is still present in the majority of them, although it disappeared in English between the late 14th century and the first half of the 17th century (Los 2009, among others). The loss of this grammatical requirement brought about not only dramatic changes in the informative structure of English clauses, but also the fixation of Present-day English word order as SVO, the subject of the clause being restricted to preverbal position (although not necessarily initial position, e.g. ModE *This morning **they** spoke to the ten men*). As a consequence of this, impersonal constructions ceased to be functional or syntactically possible, as in most cases the NP codifying the Experiencer of the event occurred in preverbal position (e.g. ME ***Me** liketh nat to lye* 'I do not like to lie').

Turning now to Trousdale (2008), another recent approach to the history of English impersonals published a few years earlier than Möhlig-Falke (2012), this article examines the loss of the English impersonal construction from the perspective of grammaticalisation studies (Hopper & Traugott 2003[1993], among many others) and their re-conceptualisation in the light of Construction Grammar (Croft 2001; Goldberg 1995, among others). Trousdale starts from the empirical data provided by Allen (1995) and Elmer (1981), and puts forward the hypothesis that the demise of the impersonal construction is a result of a large-scale readjustment of the taxonomy of the transitive construction (abbreviated TrnCxn). This taxonomy is seen as comprising various schemas and subschemas, which subsume impersonal constructions and which vary in their degree of similarity to the prototype of transitive construction. This is referred to by Trousdale as *Type T*, and is represented by examples like OE *he$_{NOM}$ acwealde [bone dracan]$_{ACC}$* 'he killed the dragon', where the subject has the semantic role of Agent. According to Trousdale (2008: 302), "the loss of the impersonal construction is tied in with the increased productivity and schematicity of the transitive construction". This increased schematicity eventually led to the possibility of "a wider range of subject types [and] a wider range of thematic relations between the verb and its arguments" (*ibid*: 311).

I conclude this brief review of some of the literature on the impersonal construction with Miura's (2015) analysis of one of the semantic domains identified by Möhlig-Falke (2012) as capable of impersonal use, namely, emotion verbs. The period examined in this monograph is ME, and the data was not extracted from a corpus of texts, but from the *Middle English Dictionary* (MED) database. Despite the limitations of such source data, Miura successfully achieves the main aim of her investigation, which is to offer a study in lexical semantics, inspired in Croft (1991) and Levin (1993), with the purpose of accounting for the fact that certain emotion verbs could be used impersonally in Middle English (e.g. c1425 *Me **liketh** not to lye* 'I do not like to lie'), while others could not (e.g. c1475 *I **loue** well to make mery* 'I love/like much to make merry').

3. Aims of the study

As regards the objectives of the present PhD project, it is important to note that I am currently in the initial stages of my investigation, and no results can possibly be advanced at the present moment. As has already been mentioned, my PhD project focuses on the Late Middle English and Early Modern English periods (c.1350-1750), with the purpose of

building on the abovementioned investigations on English impersonal constructions. However, unlike the investigations expounded above, my PhD project is developed on the basis of a corpus-based investigation, which consists in performing a large-scale analysis of data, drawn from an extensive compilation of samples of real historical language. This kind of methodology turns out to be essential for the elucidation of certain aspects that are still not fully understood about these constructions. The objectives that guide the development of my PhD project are summarised in the following paragraphs.

Previous studies on the topic (Allen 1995; Elmer 1981; Möhlig-Falke 2012) have demonstrated that impersonal uses of verbs existed in competition with various 'personal' syntactic patterns; among others: a) (in)transitive personal constructions, with the Experiencer in nominative case functioning as the subject of the clause: 13th c. *tu me ne rewe* 'you did not take pity on me'; b) constructions with a non-referential *(h)it* pronoun, the Experiencer (*þe*) in objective case and a clause as a second argument: c1275 *Hit þe likede wel þat þu us adun læidest* 'it pleased you well that you laid us down'; c) the middle reflexive construction, in which the animate participant is doubly expressed as the subject of the clause and as a reflexive objective reflexive pronoun (*hym*): c1450 *þen rewys hym þe riche kyng of vnride werkis* 'then the rich king rues his immoderate acts'; d) the passive adjectival construction, with the copular verbs *be* or *become* and the animate participant functioning as the subject of the clause and controlling verbal agreement: a1225 *Hie bieð swiðe of-shamede of hem* 'she is greatly ashamed of them'.

Using as a point of departure the extensive catalogue of verbs identified by Möhlig-Falke (2012), and by employing sources of linguistic data extracted from various historical corpora (e.g. *Penn Corpora of Historical English*, among others), the purpose here is to carry out a quantitative and qualitative analysis in order to determine: 1) the frequency of occurrence of each pattern with the investigated verbs; 2) the pace of the change from impersonal use to personal use with each of the investigated verbs or group of verbs, paying special attention to informative structure, and drawing a connection between this development and the loss of the V2-rule, expounded in section 2; 3) the stylistic or discoursive factors that may have influenced the replacement of one syntactic pattern by another one, as well as the pace of such process of replacement; 4) the extent to which the corpus evidence serves to confirm, or reject, Trousdale's hypothesis (2008: 302), also expounded in section 2, that the loss of the impersonal construction is tied in with the increased productivity of the transitive construction. For, as Denison (2008: 217) aptly points out, the connection between the loss of the impersonal construction and the large-scale readjustment of the taxonomy of transitive constructions can only be tested by making "some estimates of the relative proportions of the different kinds of constructions in different periods, to see whether the transitive construction does indeed expand at the expense of the ExpCxn ['Experiencer Construction'] in the way suggested".

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