IMPERSONAL CONSTRUCTIONS IN EARLY MIDDLE ENGLISH

Lilo Moessner
University of Freiburg

1. Definitions of 'impersonal construction' and discussion of these definitions

The meaning of the expression 'impersonal construction' seems self-evident. That one should distinguish at least two kinds of impersonal constructions was pointed out by van der Gaaf in his pioneering study of the subject, *The Transition from the Impersonal to the Personal Construction in Middle English*. On the one hand, there are what he calls 'really impersonal verbs'; they express natural phenomena like *it rains, it hail*, etc., and they can have no other subject than *it*. On the other hand, there are what he calls 'quasi-impersonal verbs', and he characterizes them as follows: "although generally or originally personal verbs, have it for their grammatical, provisional subject, while the real, logical subject is expressed in the form of a clause" (van der Gaaf 1904:2). Whereas the 'really impersonal verbs' have not undergone any change in their construction in the course of the history of the English language, most of the 'quasi-impersonal verbs' have either died out or are constructed personally in Modern English. Among those which no longer exist in Modern English are a number of verbs with the meaning 'happen', e.g. *bitilen, ilipen, iwerfen*. The Early Middle English syntagm *for wes hit ilipen a hon dagen ... hat Julius Caesar wes iwaren ... from Rome into France (LB 7195E)* corresponds to Modern English 'then it happened at that time that Julius Caesar travelled from Rome to France'. The impersonal Early Middle English syntagm *hit him sel reuen ove* (PM 356) corresponds to the personal Modern English syntagm 'he shall rue it bitterly'. It is normally said — as is implied in the title of van der Gaaf's study, too — that the transition from the impersonal to the personal construction took place in the Middle English period. It goes without saying that this change was not effected from one day to the next. Modern English syntagms like *it behoves me*
to be careful about what I am saying are considered relics of an earlier impersonal construction. These observations are summarized by van der Gaaf as follows: "With a few exceptions all type A verbs [= quasi-impersonal verbs] began to be used 'personally' in the first half of the 14th century. In the case of most of them the original construction continued to exist beside the new till about 1500; in the case of some the old construction kept its ground a century and a half longer, while a few have preserved the A construction till the present day" (van der Gaaf 1964:142).

Whereas van der Gaaf's approach is mainly diachronic, there is a fairly recent publication by Willy Elmer which deals with impersonal constructions synchronically and diachronically, although its title Diachronic Grammar. The History of Old and Middle English Subjectless Constructions suggests only a diachronic approach. As a matter of fact, the book contains two parts. In the first, synchronic part the author describes the impersonal constructions of Old English, and in the second, diachronic part he deals with their development in Middle and Early Modern English. Instead of the term 'impersonal constructions' he uses the expression 'subjectless constructions'. He characterizes them in the following way: "Predicates occurring with non-nominative noun phrases in place of nominative subjects will be called 'subjectless'" (Elmer 1981: 1). He illustrates the constructions with three examples:

1. *me hroucep 'I rue'
2. *me hroucep pas 'I rue (of) this'
3. *me hroucep fast ... 'I rue that ...'

Without any further explanation, examples of type (1) are disregarded in the rest of the book. Examples (2) and (3) are considered representations of two typical construction types, one being characterized by a nominal, the other by a sentential complement. The sentential complement has two variants: an infinitive construction on the one hand, and a *that-clause on the other hand. The nominal complement has also two variants, it may be either in genitive or in nominative case.

From this description we can see that Elmer not only excludes what van der Gaaf called 'really impersonal verbs', but also all those constructions without a nominal constituent in the place of a subject. On the other hand, for van der Gaaf the so-called 'grammatical subject' it is a defining feature of impersonal constructions, whereas Elmer considers impersonal constructions with it a variant which occurs for the first time in the 13th century. So the data which are handled under the heading 'impersonal construction' or 'subjectless construction' are quite different. Elmer seems to have been aware of the dilemma arising from the lack of an adequate definition of the term, cf. "The term 'impersonal' has generally not been defined more specifically and remains vague, especially with regard to syntax." (Elmer 1981: 6 n.4).

For Old English, a language with a fully-fledged morphology, Pilch tried another approach in his Allgemeine Grammatik. For him an impersonal construction is characterized by the presence of an item from a closed class of verbs which have inflected forms only for the 3rd person singular. This definition is based on the assumption that there are two verb classes in Old English, one with inflected forms only for the 3rd person singular, the other with inflected forms for all persons and numbers. This assumption can easily be refuted by the data. Elmer quotes two examples of the verb *seceaman in personal constructions; according to Pilch *seceaman belongs to the verbs which govern impersonal constructions. Even if a refutation, on the grounds of material adequacy were not possible, Pilch's definition would be inadequate for Early Middle English, because by this time unequivocal endings no longer existed. The ending -f for example which in Old English verbal morphology characterized unambiguously the third person singular indicative present had coalesced with the former ending *-ef for the plural indicative present under -f or -ef in the southern dialect areas.

The dichotomy personal verbs vs. impersonal verbs which has been shown to be an inadequate descriptive device for Old English is also used by Mustanoja in his Middle English Syntax.

2. Impersonal as a semantic property of pronouns

It seems to me that the discrepancies and inadequacies which I discovered in the previous studies of the subject are due to the fact that their authors regard impersonal as a syntactic property of verbs. In the following section I will set up and discuss the hypothesis that impersonal is not a syntactic property of verbs, but a semantic property (reference property) of pronouns.

For present purposes we are only interested in pronouns which occur in subject position. For this position the following syntactic patterns are recorded in my Early Middle English data:

1. nominal syntagm: be day bigen to springe (KH 485) 'day began to break'
2. pronominal syntagm: Hit was pur frule hardingstone (ON 28)
   'it was the owl's dwelling-place'
3. infinitive construction: an ece to go mid him ne bu [n] chet hire no shone (LS 78f.)
   'to go with him in the evening does not seem a shame to her'

4 "The verbs customarily called impersonal have no subject at all or have only a formal subject, it." (Mustanoja 1980:433).
What complicates the matter is the fact that the same syntagms may also occur with an introductory hit:

(3a) *we felle hit he of cunde to spuse heo me bende* (K.H. 421f.) 'nor would it befit one of your high birth to be bound as spouse to me'
(4a) *hit wes god fet heo spese* (LB 3533)
   'it was good what he said'
(5a) * bifel it se, a [ful] strongere Biscan to rise of korn of bred* (HK 824f.)
   'it so happened that a very great dearth of corn [and] of bread arose'
(6a) *hit ilomp inne hit zeret hit fader was dead* (LB 388)
   'it happened after a short time that the father died'

In none of the examples does hit commute with a nominal syntagm. So it looks like an impersonal subject, and Elmer’s and Visser’s analyses seem correct. I cannot agree for two reasons: first, the introductory hit has an explicit reference in the text, namely the infinitive construction (3a), the nominal relative clause (4a), the clause (5a), the conjunctive clause (6a); second, an introductory hit also occurs in syntagms of type (1) with a nominal syntagm as subject of.

(1a) *hit sprang dai-ligt* (K.H. 124)
   'day broke'

I very much doubt that anybody would be inclined to analyse dai-ligt as a (causative) complement. Therefore I propose to analyse all (a) types as syntagms with two subjects. Hit sharing some properties with impersonal subjects (non-commutability with nominal syntagms) and others with personal subjects (explicit reference in the context), we may call it a pseudo-impersonal subject. Again it has to be stressed that the ensuing trichotomy personal vs. impersonal vs. pseudo-impersonal is a semantic, not a syntactic property. If one wishes to speak of personal, impersonal and pseudo-impersonal constructions, these labels can be reasonably used only as abbreviations for construction with a personal, construction with an impersonal, and construction with a personal and a pseudo-impersonal subject. In the next part of this paper I will show how the personal vs. impersonal vs. pseudo-impersonal trichotomy can be usefully applied to the synchronic analysis of notoriously controversial cases of Early Middle English syntax.

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* Perhaps also *pis.*

* "The complement of the phrase of the type *me bripe* often takes the form of a *that*-clause. The probability of this clause not being a causative complement, but the subject, as slight, since it is never placed before the verb". (Visser 1963: vol. I, § 32). "Beside the
3. Application of the personal vs. impersonal vs. pseudo-impersonal trichotomy to the synchronic description of Early Middle English

a. Subjectless syntagma

The verb of *punchen* 'repent' is usually listed among the impersonal verbs. But the syntagm *him ofpincet* (PA 531) 'he repents' has none of the properties which are required for impersonal constructions by van der Gaaf or Elmar. There is neither a provisional nor a logical subject, there is no nominal or sentential complement either. Under our hypothesis that personal, impersonal, and pseudo-impersonal are properties of pronouns (in subject position), the problem whether *him ofpincet* is personal or not turns out to be non-existent, because there is no subject at all. The syntagm is indeterminate with regard to the personal vs. impersonal vs. pseudo-impersonal trichotomy.

b. Syntactically 'ambiguous' syntagmas

Syntagmas of the type *man offenchet his misdade* (PM 132) 'man repents his misdeeds' are usually considered syntactically ambiguous. The syntagm is analysed either as a so-called personal construction with *man* as subject and *his misdade* as object; or it is analysed as a so-called impersonal construction without subject and --- to use Elmar's terminology --- a non-nominate noun phrase in subject position (*mana*) and a nominal complement (*his misdade*). Syntagmas of this kind seem to have puzzled Pilch for Old English, too. He calls them 'durch Konjunktion abgeleitet' and describes them as derivations from syntagmas with impersonal predicates. They do not represent elementary, but derived clause types. Whether they are personal by virtue of their personal subject remains unclear. Under our hypothesis the most straightforward solution of the problem is to call *man* the personal subject of the syntagm.

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2. As long as one cannot prove that *man* commutes with *he* rather than with *his*, two alternative analyses cannot be completely excluded, although they are not very probable: either the syntagm has no subject at all, then it is indeterminate with regard to the personal vs. impersonal vs. pseudo-impersonal trichotomy; or *his misdade* is the subject and *man* is the object, then it is again personal. Both analyses have the disadvantage that they do not respect two tendencies pointed out by Elmar, the tendency to interpret the animate noun phrase as subject and the tendency to generalize the SVO word order.

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e. The impersonal passive

The classification of subjects into personal, impersonal and pseudo-impersonal ones may also be usefully applied to the description of the Early Middle English passive. In historical studies of the English language two kinds of passive are usually distinguished: the personal and the impersonal passive. Impersonal passives are those which have an impersonal subject. Under our definition of impersonal subject all examples quoted by Pilch and Mustanoja turn out to be personal or pseudo-impersonal passives, none of them containing an impersonal subject. That does not mean that impersonal subjects do not occur at all in passive syntagmas, cf. *pat was wel(l) ene* (HK 656) 'that was clearly seen'. *Pat* does not commute with a nominal syntagm, and it has no explicit reference in the context. Implicitly *pat* refers to Havelok's physical condition (Coupes he nouht his hunger wiphe (682) 'he could not conceal his hunger' him hungrede swip eore (684) 'he was very hungry', *pre dayes ber-biforn... Et he no mene* (655f.) 'for three days he had not eaten anything'). More frequent than impersonal subjects are personal subjects or combinations of personal and pseudo-impersonal subjects in Early Middle English passive constructions. Basically there is no difference in the syntactic pattern of the subjects in active and in passive syntagmas. The fact that I have not yet found passive counterparts of all the types established for active syntagmas is a mere accident. My data record the following types:

(1) *po saulen of us mote bien issauven a domes daie (KS 33, 7f.)*
   'our souls must be saved on doomsday'

(1a) *but now it es fis appett etten* (Cursor 873, MS Cotton, quot. Mustanoja 1960: 132)
   'but now this apple is eaten'

(2) *weren hi nouht thud* (PL 645)
   'they were not hidden'

(2a) ---

(3) *was gesween innan Barracceis set anan tune* *blod weullan of eorhan* (PC II 100, 3f.)*
   'blood was seen to well out of the earth near a town in Berkshire'

(3a) *hit was don done Pepe to understunden pet he heofde underfangen done [f] er(e) blicepriec toeganes pe muneces of he mystre and toeganes rihete* (PC 1123, 50ff.)
   'the pope was made to understand that he [=the bishop] had received the archbishopric against [the will of] the monks of the minster and [against] the law'

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* Pilch 1970: 363f.; Mustanoja 1960: 438. The same is true for the Modern English example quoted by Pilch "it is believed that..." (Pilch 1970: 203).
4. Diachronic changes

a. Realization possibilities of the subject syntagm

In Early Middle English the pseudo-impersonal subject *hit* may co-occur with a personal subject realized by a nominal syntagm, cf. *it* ... *gan a wind to rise* (HK 723) 'a wind began to rise'. This occurrence is not restricted to active syntagms, cf. *it were never ... In a fede samened two* (HK 2889f.) 'never were two [persons] put together in a place'. In Modern English the combination of a pseudo-impersonal subject *hit* and a personal subject is still possible. If the personal subject is realized by an infinitive construction, a nominal relative clause or a (conjunctural) clause (=types (3a) — (6a)), GQG considers the combination of a pseudo-impersonal subject with a personal subject even more natural than the personal subject alone (=types (3) — (6)).19 If the personal subject is realized by a nominal syntagm, however, the combination with the pseudo-impersonal subject *hit* is ungrammatical in Modern English: type (1a) has been lost, cf. *‘it came a man*... Carstensen quotes a number of examples which prove that the construction was still well alive in the 15th century, cf. *that* he *be provid-

... a reward.11 It is worth mentioning that this combination is still a current feature of Modern High German syntax. There is free variation between *ein Unfall war passiert* and *es war ein Unfall passiert* 'an accident had happened', or *ein Zug war angekommen* and *es war ein Zug angekommen* 'a train had arrived'.

b. Syntactic relations between verbs and their accompanying nominal syntagms

Another syntactic change is illustrated by the Early Middle English syntagm *be fine wise wel lyke* (PA 233) and its Modern English equivalent you may like your condition well. The analysis of the Modern English syntagm does not present any difficulty: you being a pronoun in the second person is undoubtedly a personal subject, your condition cannot be anything else but an object. Moreover, it is a direct object, because like in Modern English allows passivization. As *be* in the Early Middle English syntagm is an inflected form of the pronoun *be*, it must be an object; *fine wise* is the (personal) subject of the syntagm. So what was subject in Early Middle English is object in Modern English and vice versa. A similar change can be observed in all the verbs which are said to illustrate the transition from the impersonal to the personal construction. Elmer mentions two factors which may have helped to bring about that change: first, the tendency to generalize SVO word order, second, the tendency to interpret animate noun phrases as subjects.

c. Acquisition of an additional valency structure

The third and last kind of diachronic change which will be dealt with may be described as the acquisition of an additional valency structure. In Early Middle English the verb *forpencen* 'grieve' governs either only a (personal) subject or an (impersonal) subject and an object:

*Walt for pingeth hat ic do min i-will* (KS 34, 86)

'why grieveth [it thee] that I do my will'

*sore hit him sel vorpencen* (PM 872)

'it shall grieve him bitterly'

From the 14th century onwards the subject position of *forpencen* may also be filled by a combination of a pseudo-impersonal and a personal subject, cf. me forthlynkhit ... that... (Mal. 119, 30; qnat. Elmer 1981: 87) 'it grieves me that...'. Under the hypothesis that personal, impersonal and pseudo-impersonal

11 Carstensen 1958: 201. According to Visser the concomitant construction with *there* instead of *it* died out in the 19th century (Visser 1983: vol. 1, § 66) Jespersen quotes an example from the 19th century: *there lay an iron shoe-buckle* (Jespersen 1909—40: vol. VII, § 3.12)
is not a syntactic property of verbs, but a semantic property of pronouns that
does not mean a change of the valency structure of the verb. The case is differ-
ent with examples from the 14th century quoted by Visser in his Historical
Syntax of the English Language. They prove the acquisition of an additional
valency structure which is characterized by a subject, an indirect object and a
prepositional object, cf.

Sure hit me forpynkef Of be dede pat ich haue don (Piers Pl. quot. Visser 1963:
v. I, § 48)
'I am very sorry for the deed that I have done'

Of my wrathe it me forthinketh (Gower, C. A. quot. Visser 1963: v. I, § 48)
'I am sorry for my wrath'

SOURCES

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EETOS S. 49. 188-91.
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