

THE SUBJECT RELATION IN MIDDLE ENGLISH

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Writing in this journal, Nagucka (1978) suggests that the subjectless constructions exemplified by sentences (1) and (2) are susceptible to a 'Fillmoreian' analysis in which subjectivalization, the process responsible for the creation of surface subjects, simply does not apply.

(1) Me hungreth.

(2) Thunret full throly.

In this paper, I will try to show that attempts to characterize these subjectless constructions in terms of an optional process of subjectivalization are superficial and overlook the essence of the ME subject relation.

In order to properly describe the important changes in the subject relation that took place during ME, it is first necessary to have some understanding of the nature of subjecthood in ModE. For the purposes of this discussion, I will assume (following O'Grady 1980) that the events denoted by finite verbs in ModE are not represented as autonomous, self-contained phenomena, but rather that their development or 'actualization' is attributed at least in part to the intervention or existence of an outside entity (which I will call the 'actualizer'). The ModE subject is characterized by the fact that its referent functions as actualizer in the sense that it enters into a 'do-relation' with the event denoted by the finite verb. As the following sentences show, this characterization of subjecthood in terms of actualization is valid for subject NPs associated with a variety of semantic relations.¹

¹ Although I believe that this analysis can be extended, at least metaphorically, to include the subjects of copula verbs, this class of verbs has little bearing on the issue at hand and this question need not concern us further here.

- (3) Harry washed the car.
- (4) The wind destroyed the fence.
- (5) John suffered a great deal during his illness.

Despite the different semantic relations that the referents of the subject nominals in (3)–(5) bear to their verbs, each can be said to be actualizer in the sense outlined above. Thus, in (3), it is Harry who did the washing; in (4), it is the wind that did the destroying; and so on. It would seem, then, that ModE is characterized by the absence of any correlation between the actualizational relationship associated with the referent of the subject nominal and the Fillmorean semantic relations of agent, instrument, patient and so on.

The characterization of subjecthood in terms of actualization allows us to note an important difference between the subject relation of ModE and its counterpart in early ME. Whereas the ModE subject simply encodes the actualizer (in the sense outlined above) and does not reflect any obvious semantic categorization, the subject relation of early ME was generally associated with a specific type of ontological relationship. An examination of the verbal constructions of early ME reveals that the presence of a noun identifiable as subject² was generally required only when the verb denoted an event whose actualization was at least theoretically susceptible to volitional control. Subjectless constructions were used for 'weather verbs' as well as for verbs denoting non-intentional sensory and mental experiences (*pyncan, maetan*), emotional experiences (*eglian, hreowan*), physical and biological experiences (*hyngrian, pyrstan*), need, duty and obligation (*mysten, neden*), possession or lack thereof (*lakken, wanten*), and happenstance (*happen, geynen*) (McCawley 1976). Notice that all of these verbs denote events whose occurrence is not typically subject to volitional control.

We see, then, that an adequate characterization of the ME subject relation requires something other than reference to a hypothetical operation of subjectivalization. Although such an analysis can correctly predict that certain verbs do not require subjects, it overlooks the important fact that the grammaticality of subjectless constructions with the semantic properties noted above points to the existence of a special kind of subject relation in ME. Unlike its ModE counterpart, the ME subject cannot be described in terms of an abstract actualizational relationship that does not make reference to ontological notions like volition and agency.

By using the notion of actualization to define the subject relation of ModE, we are able not only to provide an attractive characterization of the properties that distinguish it from its ME counterpart, but also to account for the exist-

² I take the noun that triggers person and number agreement in the verb to be the subject at all stages in the history of English.

ence of a curious structure type in late ME which has long resisted satisfactory analysis.

Between the time in OE and early ME when the subjectless construction flourished and the point in late ME at which the subject relation was redefined and came to denote the actualizer, there seems to have been a transitional period during which case was used to signal the precise nature of the actualizational relationship that held between the referent of the subject and the event denoted by the finite verb. Jespersen (1894 : 221) reports that in the period between the demise of subjectless constructions like *us liketh* (with the verb in the 3rd person singular) and the complete acceptance of personal structures like *we lyken* (with the nominative subject triggering number agreement in the verb), there existed 'old personal' forms like *us lyken* (in which the (formerly subjectless) verb agreed with the pronoun in the objective case). Jespersen (1894 : 222), Gaaf (1904 : 94ff.) and Visser (1970 : 31) also mention a *me think(e)* construction in which the verb apparently agrees in person and number with the dative pronoun *me*. Visser (1970 : 31) gives examples of this phenomenon involving *seem* as well as *think* and the pronoun *me* and *þaym*, remarking that the dative case forms 'me and þaym are kept in spite of the fact that *thinketh* and *seemeth* are altered into *think(e)* and *seem(e)*, as if the subject were *I* or *they*'. For example:

- (6) Me think it nott necessary so to do. (1475 Plumpton Corr. 30)
- (7) Me thynke they are syngyng of placebo. (1533 Balc, King John 30)
- (8) Me-seem my head doth swim. (1571 Damon & Pithias 79)
- (9) ... at think þam is vnlefful thyng. (c 1450 Rule St. Benet 56)

Jespersen (1894 : 225–6) gives other examples in which 'the case employed seems to run counter to logic'.

Although Gaaf (1904 : 96) marvels that 'an anomalous form like *me think* should have been in use so long' (until 1600), there is really nothing illogical or deviant about this construction. Rather, the structures exemplified by sentences (6)–(9) are simply manifestations of the second of the following three stages in the evolution of the English subject relation.

I. During the first stage, subjecthood was defined primarily in terms of volition or agency, and verbs denoting events whose occurrence was not susceptible to volitional control did not typically require subject nominals³. During this stage, we find the subjectless constructions of OE and early ME described above.

³ This characterization is still somewhat imprecise in that it incorrectly predicts that *fall, trip* and so on occurred in subjectless constructions. It is apparently necessary to distinguish between accidental events and the biological, sensory and meteorological phenomena in McCawley's list.

2. During the second, transitional, stage, the broader concept of actualization came to be associated with the subject relation, but did not entirely replace the older notion of volitional agency. The result was a type of 'mixed' system in which case was used to indicate whether or not the actualizational relationship that held between the referent of the subject and the event denoted by the verb was volitional. For a time during late ME, then, the objective case was apparently used, in a limited number of constructions at least, to indicate that the referent of the subject nominal did not exercise volitional control over the actualization of the event denoted by the finite verb.

3. Finally, in ModE, the ontological status of the subject nominal lost its former importance and the subject became associated with the expression of the broad actualizational relationship outlined earlier. At this point, virtually all ModE verbs (in contrast with their OE and ME counterparts) came to have obligable subjects and the presence of a subject nominal became obligatory⁴.

To conclude, then, our very preliminary discussion of subjecthood suggests that there are grounds for believing that the ME subject relation differed from its ModE counterpart in ways that lie outside the explanatory scope of Fillmorean (and other) frameworks and that the evolution of subjecthood is best characterized in terms of the parallel development of the notion 'actualization'.

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⁴ Verbs denoting events whose actualization is in principle unidentifiable (as in the case of meteorological phenomena, for example) apparently take the dummy subject *it* in order to comply with this requirement.