

ON THE IMPERSONAL-TO-PERSONAL TRANSITION IN ENGLISH

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Before undertaking an analysis of certain aspects of the impersonal-to-personal transition in English let us formulate a working definition of the construction — traditionally termed 'impersonal' — as it appears in Old and Middle English. The construction in question is illustrated in examples (1), (2), (3) and (4).

- (1) Hine hingrode, OE Gosp., Luke 4, 2 (He hungered)¹
- (2) Vs merueilleth ... That Swich a pore Man oure kyng schold be,
Lovelich's Merlin 7572 (We marvel ... that such a poor man should be
our king)
- (3) Him ofhreow ðæs mannes, Ælfric, Hom. I, 192, 16 (He was sorry for
man)
- (4) Him wel gelicode his wurðfulniss, Ælfric, T. Grn. 2, 34 (He liked his
worthiness very much)²

In Old and Middle English, impersonal constructions are a productive syntactic device to express processes and situations such as physical, emotional and mental experiences, needs and obligations, possessions and 'happence' in which an animate being (regularly human) is unvolitionally involved (cf. McCawley 1976:194). An impersonal construction contains an Experiencer NP (i.e. a NP which denotes an "animate being inwardly affected by an event or characterized by a state" (Traugott 1972:34)) appearing in the dative or accusative case form and a verb in the third person singular (if it has no complement, as in (1), or if it has a sentential complement, as in (2), or if it has a nominal complement in the genitive case form, as in (3)) or a verb governed by a NP in the nominative case form, as in (4). Thus, while (1)-(3)

¹ Unless specified otherwise, the examples are quoted after Visser (1963-1973).

² Quoted after Bosworth and Toller (1921).

exemplify subjectless impersonal constructions, (4) exemplifies an impersonal construction with a grammatical subject in postverbal position.

The extinction of the impersonal constructions in English meant a gradual replacement of constructions like *us langode* or *me scamode* with constructions like *we longed* or *I was ashamed*. This happened, of course, if the verb appearing in impersonal constructions was preserved in the language.³

In their treatment of the impersonal-to-personal transition, the authors (e.g. Gaaf 1904, Jespersen 1909—1949, Visser 1963—1973) give as the causes of this change the disappearance of the contrast between the case forms (nominative, dative and accusative) of the noun and the demonstrative pronoun and the establishment of the SVO word order as the canonical one in affirmative sentences. These two developments resulted in the Experiencer NP, which appeared on the surface before the verb as object of the impersonal verb, being reinterpreted as subject of the verb. The construction thus ceased to be impersonal. This development was exemplified by Jespersen (1909—1949, Part III:209) in the following way:

(5) þam cynge licodon peran	OVS
(6) the king likeden peares	OVS
(7) the king liked pears	OVS or SVO
(8) he liked pears	SVO

In (5), which is an OE sentence, the past tense plural form *licodon* indicates that the verb is governed by the NP *peran*, which is its grammatical subject. The Experiencer NP *þam cynge* appears in the dative case form in preverbal position and it is the object of the verb.

In (6), which is a ME sentence, the past tense plural form *likeden* also indicates that the verb is governed by the NP *peares*, its grammatical subject. The Experiencer NP *the king*, appearing before the verb, is the object although it no longer is in the dative case form, as by then the dative [-ə] ending had been lost. The pronoun *him*, however, if used instead of the noun *king* in (6), would still have indicated by its form that it is an object.

Sentence (7) represents a stage at which the verb no longer has its past tense plural suffix and thus formally it is impossible to determine whether it is governed by the NP *pears* or the NP *the king*. And it is in such sentences that confusion is said to have arisen: according to the earlier pattern, *the king* continued to be regarded as object and *pears* as subject, and according to the pattern produced by the spreading SVO word order, *the king* was interpreted as subject and *pears* as object. It is in the latter case that the pronoun replacing

³ In certain cases, however, the construction which replaced the impersonal construction had *it* as its grammatical subject, as in *it seems to me that...* which replaced the impersonal *me semeth that...*

the king would have been *he*, as in (8), and not *him*, and *he* can be interpreted only as subject.⁴

It is worth mentioning that Jespersen (1909—1949, Part III: 209) also notes a semantic transition which accompanied the syntactic one, "in most cases the verb began by meaning 'give an impression' and came to mean 'receive an impression'".

When the SVO word order was gradually becoming the basic word order during the ME period, the OVS word order in sentences like

- (9a) Ond hiene hæfde ær Offa Miercne cyning, Anglo-Saxon Chron. 836
(‘And him had formerly Offa, king of the Mercians’)⁵

was rearranged to fit the basic SVO word order and in New English the sentence would be

- (9b) And formerly Offa, king of the Mercians, had him

with the SVO word order.

Since the establishment of SVO brought about the rearrangement of word order in sentences like (9a), why did the order of words in sentences (5)—(8) remain unchanged? After all, *gelician* ‘please’ could also be preceded by a subject NP as in

- (10) Aeghwylc man...þurh gode daeda Gode lician seeal, Blickl.Hom. 129, 33
(Every man ... ought to please God with good deeds).⁶

What happened instead was the reinterpretation of older object as new subject and older subject as new object, as well as a change in meaning of the verb *like* (OE *gelician*) from ‘please’ to ‘like’.

Let us consider more examples of ME impersonal constructions in (11a), (12a) and (13a). Their NE equivalents are given in (11b), (12b) and (13b) respectively.

- (11a) Me wondrep ... whi þat thei ne preche, Langland, Piers Pl. C XVI, 74
(11b) I wonder ... why they do not preach
(12a) Me meruailles of my boke, Brunne, Chron. Wace (Rolls) 65
(12b) I marvel because of [the quality of] my book
(13a) te schal ... bireowe þat sið, Hali Meidenh. (Furnivall) 11, 88
(13b) Thou shalt ... rue that time

Sentence (11a) is an example of impersonal construction with a sentential complement and the stylistically unmarked order of such sentences was

⁴ There are also constructions in which the Experiencer NP still appears in the objective case form but it seems to govern the verb. E.g., *me think we shal be strong enough*, More, Works, 1557. Thus *me* could be interpreted as subject despite its morphological form. Cf. Lightfoot (1979: 229—239).

⁵ Quoted after Rybarkiewicz (1977b:87).

⁶ Quoted after Elmer (1981:67).

Experiencer NP-V-Sentence (cf. Elmer 1981: 26). In this sentence the Experiencer NP appearing in the objective case for *m* *me* on the surface is in sentence initial position and the sentence has no grammatical subject. Sentence (12a) is an example of impersonal construction with a nominal complement and the stylistically unmarked order of such sentences was Experiencer NP-V-NP (cf. Elmer 1981:61). In this sentence the Experiencer NP appearing in the objective case form *me* on the surface is also in sentence initial position. The sentence is also without a grammatical subject and the NP complement preceded by a preposition (here: *of*) on the surface is sometimes called causative object (cf. Visser 1963—1973:23). In (3), the causative object appears in the genitive case form. Sentence (13a) is an example of impersonal construction with a grammatical subject in postverbal position; it is the NP *lat sið* that governs verb agreement. In (13a) the Experiencer NP appearing in the objective case form *te* (*þe*) on the surface is again in initial position.

The subsequent development of the constructions in (11a), (12a) and (13a) shows that the indirect object (the Experiencer NP) preceding the verb did not change its position for the postverbal one but kept standing before the verb and became subject. Thus *me wondreþ* from (11a) became *I wonder* in (11b); *me meruailles* from (12a) became *I marvel* in (12b); *te schal ... bireowe* from (13a) became *thou shalt ... rue* in (13b).

Impersonal constructions, like those in (11a), (12a) and (13a) coexisted with the corresponding personal constructions which were becoming more and more frequent in Middle English. In New English, however, impersonal constructions became very rare.

Examples (11a), (12a), (13a) and (11b), (12b), (13b) illustrating the impersonal-to-personal transition suggest that this change might also be interpreted from the point of view of the so-called 'thematic structure' or 'information structure' of the utterances in question. The thematic structure of utterances distinguishes between what has been called 'theme' and 'rheme' (or 'topic' and 'comment'). The information structure of utterances distinguishes between expressions carrying 'given' and 'new' information. Theme is the expression with which one announces what one is talking about and rheme is the expression which carries the information the speaker communicates (cf. Lyons 1977:506—507). The "theme is commonly defined as the expression which refers to what is given and the rheme as that part of the utterance which contains new information" (Lyons 1977:508). There is a high degree of interdependence between thematic structure and information structure, and Lyons (1977) decides to use the term 'thematic structure' to subsume both.

The theme of an utterance, which carries given information, is psychologically more salient and therefore serves better as the communicative point of departure than does an expression carrying new, unfamiliar, information. Thus, in thematically unmarked statements, i.e. those uttered with non-em-

phatic stress and intonation (cf. Lyons 1977:503), the theme appears in initial position. It is debatable whether the thematic expression always occurs initially but it is true "that the processes that different languages make available for the thematization of one expression rather than another frequently involve putting the expression earlier than later in the utterance" (Lyons 1977:507).

Now let us examine the thematic structure (and information structure) of utterances (11a), (12a) and (13a). In (11a), the speaker announces that he is talking about himself and the theme is the Experiencer NP *me*, appearing in initial position; the expression carries given information, i.e. familiar to the participants of the conversation. The verb and the subordinate clause are the rheme and they carry new information. In (12a), the speaker also announces that he is talking about himself and the theme is the Experiencer NP *me* appearing in initial position; the expression carries given information. The verb and the complement prepositional phrase are the rheme and they carry new information, something the speaker wishes to communicate. In (13a) the speaker announces that he is talking about his interlocutor and the theme is the Experiencer NP *te* (*þe*) appearing in initial position; the expression carries given information. The verb and the grammatical subject NP are the rheme and they carry new information. Thus we can see that in these ME utterances the theme, i.e. the expression serving as the communicative point of departure and carrying given information, conforms to the general tendency observable in languages to put it in initial position.

If we examine the thematic and information structure of (11b), (12b) and (13b), it becomes apparent that the theme and given information are associated with the same Experiencer NP's as in (11a), (12a) and (13a) respectively.

Sentences (11a), (12a), (13a) and (11b), (12b), (13b) differ however with respect to the grammatical subject. As has already been pointed out, (11b), (12b) and (13b) represent the SVO word order. Thus in (11b), (12b) and (13b) the theme and the grammatical subject coincide. In New English "there is a strong correlation between old information in semantic structures and *subject* in surface structure" (Chafe 1970:212) and New English "shows a very definite tendency to identify the thematic and the grammatical subject" (Lyons 1977:506). In its early stages, however, English — being rich in inflections — had a more diverse word order system. Thus in Old and Middle English in impersonal constructions the theme and given information were regularly associated with the object NP appearing in initial position. A diversity of word order is also true of Slavic languages (cf. Szwedek 1980:4). Slavic languages, like Czech or Polish, are highly inflected languages, as was the case in early English, and in those languages it is the inflectional forms of the nouns and not their positions in the sentence that determine which noun is the subject. Thus in those languages, as in Old and Middle English, the theme also does not necessarily correspond to the grammatical subject.

When uttering sentences like (5), (11a), (12a), (13a) or other stylistically unmarked sentences of this type a speaker first announced what he was talking about, i.e. about a human being unvolitionally experiencing certain psychological or physical states. In Old and Middle English it was normal to use a noun or a pronoun in the dative (or accusative) case to refer to such a human being and this NP functioned grammatically as object. With the expanding SVO word order a speaker, when uttering sentences of this type, as for example (8), (11b), (12b) and (13b), also first announced that he was talking about a human being experiencing certain psychological or physical states but this time he had to use a noun or a pronoun in the zero case to refer to such an individual and this NP functioned grammatically as subject. Needless to say, in the new grammatical system the unvolitionality of the experience was no longer overtly indicated in the surface structure.

Thus, there seems to emerge an answer to the question why the order of words in sentences (5)–(8) remained unchanged, i.e. why *pears* did not move to the beginning of the sentence so as to remain the subject in the new SVO word order. The original object NP's appearing initially in impersonal constructions remained in that position and became subject NP's in the new SVO word order because they were naturally used as the themes of the utterances and they carried given information. If they had not been so naturally used as themes, the new SVO word order could have been accommodated by shifting the position of the originally dative or accusative Experiencer NP to postverbal position and filling the sentence initial position with *it* (**it hungered him*) or with another NP which in OE and ME impersonal constructions had subject properties but did not normally occur in initial position, e.g. *his wurdfulniss* in (4), *peran* in (5) and *þat sið* in (13a). This, however, did not take place (with the exception of some constructions with a sentential complement which were replaced by *it*-constructions, cf. note 3). The thematic structure and information structure of utterances having the form of impersonal constructions with no complement or with a nominal complement generally resisted a rearrangement of word order.

Considering such facts it is not sufficient to say that the present-day personal equivalents of the OE and ME impersonal constructions are solely a result of the morphological changes (which eliminated the dative and accusative) coupled with the establishment of SVO as the basic word order. It should also be pointed out that in the impersonal-to-personal transition the Experiencer NP retained its initial position (thus becoming grammatical subject).⁷ This fact

⁷ A separate problem, not considered in this paper, is presented by the correspondence between the thematic structure of some impersonal constructions with a sentential complement and the thematic structure of their NE equivalents having *it* as grammatical subject (cf. note 3).

is attributable to the Experiencer NP being the expression normally used as the theme of the utterance, both before and after the transition, and there is a very high correlation between being initial in an utterance and being thematic.

In this paper an attempt was made to account for the retention by the Experiencer NP of its sentence initial position throughout the impersonal-to-personal transition in English. At least part of the answer seems to emerge from considerations of the thematic structure of the utterances in question. In thematically unmarked utterances the Experiencer NP functioned as the theme, whether before or after the transition, and the theme is usually associated with initial position. Thus the Experiencer NP continued to keep its sentence initial position, and from being the original object it became subject in the new canonical SVO word order.

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