

THE IMPERSONAL USE OF VERBS IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

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The aim of this paper is to present a syntactic and to some extent also semanto-pragmatic characterization of the verbs that Shakespeare used in subjectless constructions in his plays. The analysis of data will be preceded by a short historical introduction on the development of impersonal constructions in the history of the English language and followed by a summary and conclusions.

1.1. There were numerous impersonal or "quasi impersonal" verbs (cf. Visser 1963—73, Gaaf 1904, Elmer 1981) (i. e. appearing in subjectless constructions) in OE. Thus, for instance, OE *hungrian* and *lician* required an accusative and a dative case in subject position as in (a) and (b) respectively: (a) *hine hingrode*, (b) *him gelicode* ... (some of the verbs, Visser (1963) lists at least 40 of them, were followed by a nominal or sentential complement). The majority of the verbs disappeared from the language or were personalized during the period of ME. According to the classical accounts of the transition from the impersonal to personal construction Gaaf (1904), Jespersen (1909—1949) the phonological reduction of inflectional endings and the pressure of SVO word order in LOE and EME are the main factors leading to the change.

It is important to note the fact that already in OE some of the impersonal verbs were used in personal constructions e. g. *sceamian*, *lystan*, *behofian*. Others like *gerison*, *gelimpan* or *of byncan* could undergo pseudo-subjectivization (this term is taken from Fisiak 1976), i. e. they could appear in sentences where the 'introductory' *it* was inserted in the subject position. (For OE data cf. Elmer 1981).

The conclusions that can be drawn from these two facts are as follows: *firstly*, the transition from impersonal to personal construction probably

originated already in OE, *secondly*, the phonological reduction and the pressure of the SVO word order could not possibly be the cause of the change in OE, *thirdly* — the two "classical" factors explaining the transition can be at best said to favour or accelerate the change.

The process of personalization of impersonal verbs has a long history. It was not until the seventeenth century that the last major group of impersonal verbs was personalized. Some verbs, for instance, *list*, *methink*, *seem*, preserved their impersonal uses till the nineteenth century. Moreover, the pseudo-subjectivalized constructions originated in OE have been preserved in Modern English (e. g. constructions with *become* and *behave*). It should be remembered that the impersonal pattern in ME was productive enough to attract new members (both words of native origin and French borrowings), e. g. *him irks*, *him drempte*, *him nedeth*, *him repenteth*, *us mervailleth*, *me avaieth*, *him booteth*, *me lacketh*, etc. All in all, the theory of a 'wholesale' transition from impersonal to personal paradigm at a specified period in the history of the English language is a simplification hardly finding corroboration in the diachronic data.

The indeterminacy of the term *impersonal* for OE and ME pointed out in Moessner (1984) seems to be historically valid (i. e. for OE and ME). For the language of Shakespeare it is irrelevant because the impersonal uses of verbs in that language historically derive from the pseudo-subjectivalized constructions of OE with the exception of the verb *methink* deriving from OE constructions with the dative case in the subject position. Thus, in this paper the term *impersonal verb* will refer to any verb preceded by a dummy subject *it*, and the verb *methink*.

2. The language of Shakespeare possessed more than thirty verbs that could be used in impersonal constructions. Most of the verbs (except for those referring to weather phenomena, e. g. it rains, it shines, etc.) were used in personal constructions: as a matter of fact their impersonal use was rather infrequent, often stylistically marked. One of the aims of the present analysis is the specification of the pragmatic (contextual) restrictions on the use of impersonal verbs. The pragmatic characterization will be only partial, including the following contextual elements of speech situation: a) speaker, b) hearer, c) discourse type, d) medium, e) genre. The type of discourse is in fact a continuum with the formal vs. informal type (style) at the opposite ends of the continuum. The medium is the poetry or prose in the play. The genre will be specified as the tragedy, comedy, etc. The relation between the speaker and hearer may be represented as that of equality, inferiority or superiority of one or the other (often referred to in terms of power and solidarity).

The present analysis includes the following verbs: *abhor*, *avail*, *become*, *befit*, *behave*, *betide*, *boot*, *chance*, *charge*, *dislike*, *faint*, *grieve*, *happen*, *import*,

irk, *joy*, *lack*, *light*, *like*, *methink*, *please*, *rain*, *repair*, *seem*, *shine*, *skill*, *snow*, *stand*, *suffice*, *think*, *thunder*, *yearn*. The verbs above do not form a homogeneous syntacto-semantic class or a lexical field: none the less, it will be very useful to single out, for the purpose of our analysis, some groups of semantically related verbs, expecting that they may exhibit similar syntactic or even syntacto-pragmatic behavior. Accordingly, the following semantic subclasses of impersonal verbs can be distinguished:

(A) verbs referring to weather phenomena:

light, *rain*, *shine*, *thunder*, *snow*

(B) verbs of fitting:

become, *befit*, *behave*

(C) verbs of happening:

betide, *happen*, *chance*

(D) verbs of grieving:

yearn, *irk*, *grieve*, *faint*

(E) verbs of seeming:

seem, *think*, *methink*

(F) verbs of availing:

avail, *boot*

(G) verbs of liking and disliking:

like, *joy*, *dislike*, *abhor*

a pair of closely related synonyms (H) and a pair of antonyms (I) respectively:

(H) *import*, and *skill*

(I) *suffice* vs. *lack*, finally four semantically unrelated lexical items:

(J) *charge*, *repair*, *stand* and *please*.

2.1. The verbs specified in (A) above, i. e. *light* — *rain* — *shine* — *snow* — *thunder* are not used frequently in Shakespeare's plays, often they convey figurative meaning as in the sentences below:

1. And that shall be the day, when'er *it lights*, ... 1H4, 3.2.138
2. But for the sunset of my brother's son *It rains* downright. RJ. 3.5.129
3. *It rain'd* down fortune showering on your head, ... 1H4, 5.1.47
4. Let *it shine* then. 2H4, 4.3.63
5. If *it should thunder*, as it did before ... Tem. 2.2.22
6. ... let *it thunder* to the tune of 'Green Sleeves' ... and *snow* eringoos; MWW. 5.5.21

As can be seen, the impersonal verbs in (1—6) can be used both intransitively as in (1), (2), (4), (5) and *thunder* in (6) and transitively as in (3) and *snow*

in (6). *Rain* and *snow* take nominal complements: *thunder* takes a sentential complement in (5).

The verbs in (A) expressing natural weather phenomena (in Gaaf (1904) referred to as "really impersonal verbs", i. e. they can have no other subject than *it*) are neutral from the syntacto-pragmatic point of view, due to the fact that they do not possess a syntacto-pragmatically (i. e. stylistically) motivated variants, i. e. they seem to be indifferent to the elements of contextual restrictions mentioned above. Accordingly, the verbs in (1–3) are used in a formal type of discourse by characters of a high social standing (i. e. prince Hal, Capulet and Worcester respectively): the medium of discourse is poetry. On the other hand the sentences in (4–6) are produced by low-life characters (i. e. Falstaff-Trinculo-Falstaff respectively) in an informal conversation, in the medium of prose. As could be expected, the data confirm the claim that the verbs in (A) are pragmatically indifferent.

The verbs of fitting in (B): *become* — *befit* — *behave*, (especially *become* and *behave*) derive their impersonal use from the OE origin, i. e. from the OE *becuman* and *behofian*. Their use in Shakespeare's plays is exemplified in the following sentences:

7. *It would become* me as well... Tem. 3.1.28
8. For as *it would* ill *become* me to be vain.... LLL. 4.2.31
9. ... *it shall become* him well; MM. 3.2.270
10. But *it becomes* me well enough, does't not? TN. 1.3.106
11. Set this Diamond safe ... as *it becomes*. 1H6.5.3.17.
12. *It fits* us then to be as provident As fear may teach us ... H5.2.4.11
13. The memory be green, and that *it us befitted* to bear our hearts in grief ... Ham. 1.2.2
14. Master Silence, *it well befits* you to be of the peace. 2H4.3.2.98
15. While these do labor for their own preferment, *Behoves it* us to labor for the realm. 2H6, 1.1.182
16. You do not understand yourself so clearly
As *it behoves* my daughter and your honour. Ham. 1.3.97
17. Which he to seek of me again, perforce, *Behoves* me keep at utterance. Cym.3.1.73

The impersonal verbs in (7–17), except for (11), are used transitively. The basic type of complementation is a nominal complement as in (7), (9), (10), (16), and a nominal followed by an infinitival complement as in (8), (12), (13), (14), (15), (17). The two structures can be represented respectively, as follows:

18. (a) It — V — NP
- (b) It — V — NP — S

Thus, (9) can be represented at the level of DS (i. e. before the insertion of *it*) as follows:

19. [[NP^e] INFL [v_P become him well]]

In the process of derivation *it* is inserted in the place occupied by the empty category NP^e in (19) above.

The syntactic representation of (13) is the following:

20. and that [[NP^e] INFL [v_P befit us [_SPRO to bear our hearts in grief]]]

After the insertion of *it* in the subject position and the attachment of required inflectional endings an optional rule of object fronting will place the object before its predicate to produce the required SS in (13). (For the syntactic analysis of empty categories cf. Chomsky 1981).

From the pragmatic point of view *behave* and *befit* tend to be restricted to a formal type of discourse, the medium is poetry, except for (14) where Falstaff addresses for the first time a new acquaintance — Silence in a rather formal and patronizing manner. All other speakers in (13–17) are kings or lords, i. e. they use the language of the nobility. The use of *become* seems to be less restricted. *Become* appears both in poetry and prose in formal and informal speech, although the speakers in (7–11), i. e. Miranda, Sir Nathaniel, Duke and Sir Andrew respectively, belong to the high social strata.

The verbs of happening: *betide* — *happen* — *chance* appear in the following sentences:

21. And so *betide* to me as well I tender you and all of yours! R3.2.4.71
22. ... how unluckily *it happened*, that I should purchase the day before... TA, 3.2.45
23. That if *it chance* the one of us do fail, ... 146, 2.1.31
24. But *it chances* the stealth of our most mutual entertainment ... MM. 1.2.157

The verbs *betide* and *chance* take nominal complements in (21), (23) and (24), *happen*, on the other hand, takes a sentential complement in (22). An interesting thing is the derivation of (21). It seems that at least two different derivations could be offered. According to the first *so* is inserted instead of *it* in the place of the empty category NP^e producing the desired SS; according to the second *it* is inserted in the subject position (i. e. NP^e) in DS and deleted in SS.

Pragmatically, *betide* (both in personal and impersonal uses) tends to be used in a formal type of discourse, *happen* and *chance* seem to be less restricted and appear both in formal as in (23) and informal conversation as in (22) and (24).

The verbs of grieving in (D) above — *faint* — *grieve* — *irk* — *yearn* are exemplified in the following sentences:

25. ... it *faints* me to think what follows. H8.2.3.103
26. O! my dear Orlando. how it *grieves* me to see thee wear thy heart in a scarf, AYLI.5.2.22
27. It shall no longer grieve without reproof. Per. 2.4.19
28. It *grieves* me for the death of Claudio; MM.2.1.294
29. It *grieves* me much more for what I cannot do for you than what befalls myself. TN.3.4.363
30. And yet it *irks* me, the poor dapple fools ... should in their own confines with forked heads have their round haunches gored. AYLI.2.2.22
31. It *irks* his heart he cannot be revenged. 1H6.1.4.105
32. To see this sight, it *irks* my very soul. 3H6.2.2.6
33. It *yearns* me not if men my garments wear. H5.4.3.26
34. She laments for it, that it would *yearn* your heart to see it. MWW3.5.45

The verbs in (25—34) except for (27), are used transitively in both structures, i. e. It — V — NP and It — V — NP — S are present. Thus, (28), (29), (30), (32) exhibit the former and (25), (26), (34) the latter. The sentences (31) and (33) represent the structure It — V — NP — \bar{S} : Accordingly, (31) may be analyzed as follows:

- (35) [[NP^e] INFL [VPirk [NP his heart [sthat [she cannot be revenged]]]]

After the insertion of *it* in the subject position, the attachment of inflectional endings and the deletion of complementizer in \bar{S} , the following structure is arrived at:

- (36) [[NPIt] [VPirks [NPthis heart [s [she cannot be revenged]]]]

Pragmatically, *faint* and *irk* are used in formal type of discourse by dukes, kings or queens; *grieve* is used by upper social strata in less formal type of conversation; the medium is often prose. On the other hand, *yearn* seems to be the least restricted (pragmatically) from the verbs of grieving. It is used in (33) by King Henry in a formal poetic style and in (34) by Mistress Quickly — a representative of the lower social strata, in an informal, prosaic discourse,

The verbs of seeming in (E): *seem* — *think* — *methink*, are illustrated in the sentences below:

37. Where it *seems* best unto your royal self. R3.3.1.63
38. It *seems* you loved not her, to leave her token. TGV.4.4.75
39. The sky, it *seems*, would pour down pitch, Tem. 1.2.3
40. Me *seemeth* then, it is no policy ... 2H6.3.1.23
41. Me *seemeth* good, that, with some little train ... R3.2.2.120

42. Doth it not, *thinkst* thee, stand me now upon? Ham. 5.2.63
43. Looking on the lines of my boy's face, *methoughts* I did recoil twenty three years. WT.1.2.153
44. *Methoughts* that I had broken from the Tower. R3.1.4.9
45. So say I: *methinks* you are sadder. MAdo.3.2.16
46. ... *methinks* strangely, for he hath not used it before. MM.4.2.120
47. Methought I heard a voice cry 'Sleep no more!' Macb. 2.2.35

The impersonal verb *seem* can be used intransitively as in (37), (41) (in both cases complemented by an adjective) or complemented by a *that*-clause as in (38), (40) any probably also (39) which could be derived from: *It seems that the sky would ...* (42) is thy only indisputable occurrence of *think* in the sense of "seem" (although sometimes amended to *methinks*). The doublet *methink/methought* in (43—47), except for (46), is complemented by *that*-clause often reduced by the deletion of the complementizer. Accordingly, the initial phrase marker of (45) can be represented as follows:

48. [[NPMe][VPthink [sthat [syou are sadder]]]

From the pragmatic point of view the use of *seem* and *think* is restricted to the speakers of high social status, but they seem to appear freely in both mediums and at different levels of formality. The use of *methink/methought* in the plays of W. Shakespeare is so abundant and so varied that the establishment of any pragmatic constraints on their use, if at all possible, would require a very elaborate research.

The verbs of availing in (F) above: *avail* — *boot* are exemplified in the sentences below:

49. Now will it best *avail* your majesty to cross the seas... 1H6.3.1.179
50. ... it small *avails* my mood, ... Lucr. 1273
51. And what I want it *boots* not to complain. R2.3.4.18.
52. No, I will not, for it *boots* thee not. TGV.1.1.28
53. ... it shall scare *boot* me To say 'Not guilty'. WT.3.2.26

The syntactic structures exhibited by the verbs in (49—53) are the following: It-V-NP in (50), and (52): It-V-NP-S in (49), (51) and (53). (The object of *boot* in (51) — *me* is deleted in the S-structure.)

Pragmatically, *avail* seems to be constrained to formal poetical style, *boot*, on the other hand, appears also in prose, although the speakers come only from the upper social strata.

The verbs of liking and disliking in (G) i.e. *like-dislike-abor-joy* are represented in the following sentences:

54. It *likes* well me. TSh.4.4.61
55. So *like* you, sir. Cym.2.2.59

56. *It likes* us well: young princes, close your hands. KJ.2.1.533
 57. *May it like* your grace to let my tongue excuse all. H8.5.3.148
 58. *It dislikes* me. Oth.2.3.49
 59. 59. I cannot say 'whore': *It does abhor* me now I speak the word. Oth.4.2.162
 60. ... and much *it joys* me too To see you are become so penitent. R3.1.2.219

As can be seen, the syntactic patterns of the verbs in (54—60) include the familiar structures, i.e. It-V-NP and It-V-NP-S. The meaning of (55) is *if it pleases you, sir*. The speakers of the sentences belong to the nobility, except for (55), where a messenger addresses politely the king — Cymbeline. The verbs appear both in poetry and prose.

The verbs in (H) above: *import* — *skill* are used in the sentences below:

61. *It doth import* him much to speak with me. TC.4.2.50
 62. ... *it imports* not reason that with such vehemency he should pursue faults proper to himself. MM. 5.108
 63. *It skills* not greatly who impugns our doom. 2H6.3.1.281
 64. ... *it skills* not much when they are delivered. TN.5.279

The syntactic structure of the sentences (61—64) assumes the form of It-V-NP-S. In (63) and (64) the D-structure object of *skill* is deleted in the S-structure. The meaning of both verbs is 'be important'; *skill* is used in negative and interrogative sentences; *import* appears in declarative statements.

The use of *skill* does not seem to be pragmatically constrained. It is used in a formal context by York in (63) and informally, in prose, by a clown in (64). *Import*, on the other hand, seems to be more restricted than *skill*, because it is used only by the speaker of high social status i.e. Aeneas in (61) and Duke in (62) in formal speech situations, although Aeneas utters (61) in a dialogue with Pandarus.

The use of the verbs in (I) above: *suffice* — *lack* is represented in the following sentences:

65. What hour now? I think *it lacks* of twelve. Ham.1.4.3
 66. Here *lacks* but mother your for to say amen, ... TA.4.2.44
 67. *Sufficeth* my reasons are both good and weighty. TSh.1.1.252
 68. *Sufficeth* I am come to keep my word. TSh.3.2.108
 69. *Sufficeth* a Roman with a Roman heart can suffer... Cym.5.580
 70. *Sufficeth* not that we are brought to Rome... TA.1.109
 71. ... *it sufficeth* that Brutus leads on me... JC.2.1.333
 72. Let *it suffice* thee... that I love thee. MWW.2.1.10
 73. *It shall suffice* me ... LLL.2.167
 74. Let *it suffice* the greatness of your powers To have bereft a prince of all his fortunes. Pet. 2.1.8

The main syntactic structures exhibited by *lack* and *suffice* are the following: (a) It-V-NP-S in (66), (72) and (74), (b) It-V-S as in (67), (68), (69), (70), (71), (73). The reduced form *sufficeth* in (67—70) derives from *it sufficeth that* as exemplified in (71).

Clearly, the reduced form, i.e. *sufficeth*, is less formal, used mainly in prose by various speakers (Lucentio, Petruchio, Lucius, Tamora), whereas *it suffice that* seems to be restricted to formal types of discourse. (72) comes from a letter; the king and Pericles are the speakers in (73) and (74) respectively. The use of *lack* does not seem to be pragmatically constrained. Both speakers, i.e. Horatio and Aaron, belong to the middle social strata of their respective societies.

The final group of verbs in (I) above: *charge* — *please* — *repair* — *stand* is illustrated in the sentences below:

75. *It charges* me in manners the rather to express myself. TN.2.1.12
 76. *Please it* you that I call? TSh.4.4.1
 77. Her hair shall be of what colour *it pleases* God. MAdo.2.3.37
 78. ... *please it* your majesty command me any service? LLL.5.2.311
 79. Will *it please* your worship to come in? MWW.1.1.275
 80. ... as long as *it pleases* his grace, ... H.5.4.7.114
 81. ... *please* you, further, ... Tem.1.2.65
 82. ... where if *it please* you, you may intercept him ... TGV.3.1.43
 83. *please it* your grace, there is a messenger TGV.3.1.52
 84. ... so *it please* thee hold that ... Son. 136
 85. ... *pleaseth* you walk with me down to his house... CE.4.1.12
 86. ... *pleaseth* your grace to answer them directly ... 2H6.4.2.52
 87. ... *pleaseth* your grace to appoint ... H5.2.78
 88. *It much repairs* me To talk of your good father. AWW.1.2.30
 89. ... when *it stands* well with him *it stands* well with her.. TGV.2.5.23
 90. ... shus *stands it* with me, ... MM.1.2.149
 91. ... thus *it stands*. TSh.1.1.184
 92. For my wife I know not how *it stands* ... 2H6.2.1.192
 93. Doubtful *it stood*... Mcb.1.2.7
 94. ... *it stands* agreed. H.8.5.3.87
 95. ... to both *it stands* in like request, ... Cor.3.2.51

Please, *stand* and *methink/methought* are the verbs most frequently used in impersonal constructions in Shakespeare's plays. For that reason, this paper presents only a selected number of data exemplifying the most typical uses of the verbs.

Accordingly, *please* appears in the following constructions: (1) ... *it please(s)* ..., (b) conditional — *if it please* or *so it please* as in (82) and (84) respectively, (c) in a reduced form as *please* or *pleaseth* in (81) and (85—87) respectively.

The main syntactic structures of *please* assume the following forms: IT-V-NP in (80), (81), (82) and (83); It-V-NP-S in (78), (79), (85), (86) and (87). *Stand* in (98–95) is used only transitively; sometimes an inversion takes place as in (90) where *stand* precedes its subject.

In the pragmatic description of the use of *please* in impersonal constructions the distinction between the superiority, inferiority and equality of the speakers involved in the speech interaction comes into focus. Accordingly, the unreduced forms are, as a rule, used in a polite address of the inferior to the superior member of speech interaction (i.e. *it please(s), if it please, so it please*); on the other hand, the reduced form *pleaseth* is used in the conversation between equals as in (86) and (87) for example. In (86) Westmorland address Lancaster (both lords), in (87) the French king address the English king (both kings).

The relation *superior vs. inferior* concerns also the use of *like* in polite address forms as *so like* or *so like it* exemplified in (55) above, where a messenger addresses the king.

Stand seems to be hardly constrained pragmatically. It occurs in all sorts of media, styles, levels of formality and is used by members of all social strata from the lowest characters like Sly, Tranio, Launce through the middle (Hume, Claudio, Petruchio) to the highest social strata (Gloucester). From the pragmatic point of view the use of *stand* reminds of that of *methink/methought*.

Finally, *charge* in (75) is used informally, in prose, and *repair* (88) formally (by the king) in poetry.

The distribution of the impersonal uses of verbs according to the literary genre is the following: (a) histories — 25, (b) tragedies — 11, (c) romances — 8, (d) problem plays — 6, (e) comedies — 17. (The most frequently used verbs i.e. *methink/methought, please* and *stand* were not included in that account.) It may be concluded on the basis of the results in (a–e) above that the literary genre does not constrain the use of impersonal constructions in Shakespeare's language. They appear in all genres (specified in a–e) and moreover, they seem to be almost equally distributed between the genres (taking into account the number of plays belonging to each genre). However, the number of occurrences — 25 for histories seems to indicate that they appear in that genre more frequently than in others.

The main impersonal structure in the language of Shakespeare is *it*-construction descending from OE (few attested data from that period preserved), during the ME period relatively productive, in Shakespeare less so. In addition two impersonal verbs appear in Shakespeare's plays i.e. *methink/methought* descending from OE and *meseems* from ME.

(96) below presents an overall view of the syntactic structures underlying the impersonal constructions in Shakespeare's language (analyzed in detail above):

96. a) It—V
 (b) It—V—NP
 c) It—V—NP—S
 (d) It—V—NP— \bar{S}
 (e) NP—V— \bar{S}

The structure in (e) represents the underlying representation of the constructions with *methink/methought* and *meseems*.

From the pragmatic point of view the verbs analyzed in this paper can be divided into three sub-classes according to the degree of liability to pragmatic constraint. Accordingly, the use of verbs in (A) below including the following verbs:

(A) *avail, behove, betide, faint, import, irk, repair* and *suffice* is restricted to the speakers of high social status in formal speech situation by the medium of poetry. The use of verbs in (B) below is less restricted. In addition to the contexts specified for the verbs in (A), they can appear in prose and an informal speech situation:

(B) *abhor, become, befit, boot, chance, charge, dislike, grieve, happen, joy, lack, like, seem, skill* and *yearn*

The verbs in (C) seem to be the least liable to pragmatic constraints:

(C) *light, rain, shine, thunder, methink/methought* and *stand* (i.e. there are no social constraints on their use) nor any other. This claim, however, is relative to what has been specified as an element of pragmatic constraint in this paper (above).

Finally, as has been shown, the verbs *suffice* and *please* appear in unreduced and reduced forms as formal and informal variants respectively. *if it please(s)* vs. *pleaseth* and *it sufficeth that* vs. *sufficeth*.

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