IMPERSONAL CONSTRUCTIONS IN EARLY MIDDLE ENGLISH[1]

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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 pioneer 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 hails*, 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. *bitiden*, *ilimpen*, *wurþen*. The Early Middle English syntagm *þa wes hit ilumpen o þan daȝen ... þat Julius Szezar wes iuaren ... from Rome into France* (LB 7195ff.) 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 rewen sore* (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*

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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 1904:142).

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 hreoweþ* 'I rue'
(2) *me hreoweþ þæs* 'I rue (of) this'
(3) *me hreoweþ þæt ...* '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 *Altenglische 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.[2] This definition is based on the assumption that there are two verb classes in Old English, one with inflected forms only for the third 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 *sceamian* in personal constructions[3]; according to Pilch *sceamian* 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 -þ for example which in Old English verbal morphology characterized unambiguously the third person singular indicative present had coalesced with the former ending -aþ for the plural indicative present under -þ or -eþ 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*.[4]

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: *þe day bigan to springe* (KH 495) 'day began to break'
(2) pronominal syntagm: **Hit was þare Hule eardingstowe** (ON 28)
    'it was the owl's dwelling-place'
(3) infinitive construction: **an eue to go mid him** *ne þu [n] chet hire no shome* (LS 79f.)
    'to go with him in the evening does not seem a shame to her'

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[2] "Die Auswahl zwischen persönlicher und unpersönlicher Konstruktion regiert bei verbalen Prädikaten das jeweilige Verbum". (Pilch 1970:161).

[3] Elmer 1981: 32; besides: *birisen* 'befit, become': impers. Bod. Hom. 78, 15; pers. LB 9820f.

[4] "The verbs customarily called impersonal have no subject at all or have only a formal subject, *it*." (Mustanoja 1960:433).

(4) nominal relative clause: *cum liðen on londe þæt wes leodisc king* (LB 2143f).
'[one] who was a king of the people came to the country'

(5) clause: *betere þe bicome þi word were helden* (PA 490f.) '[it] would become you better if your words were kept'

(6) conjunctional clause: *him ilomp wel luðere þat alle his riche earles & alle his heʒe beornes makeden muchel unfrið* (LB 2785 ff.)
'[a very bad thing] happened to him: that all his rich earls and all his noble barons started a great quarrel'

Besides there are sentences without any subject at all, e.g. *and þis inc be-seche þat we al wurðen sele* (LB 5636 f.) 'and this I beseech you, that we all be well'.

The crucial case is number two, and then only if the subject is realized by *hit* or *þat*.[5] In our example *hit* refers to *an old stoc* a few lines before; it commutes with that nominal syntagm. Commutation with a nominal syntagm is not always possible, e.g. *ofte hit ham sel riewe* (PM 21) 'often they shall rue it'. The cause for their repentance may be gathered from the context *þet wel ne doð þer wile hi muʒe* 'those who do not do good deeds while they can'. So *hit* refers to the fact that during their life time they did not do any good deeds. This is a different kind of reference, the referent not being explicitly expressed in the context. I will call it therefore implicit (indefinite) reference. In the first case I will speak of explicit (definite) reference. It seems reasonable to distinguish between subjects with explicit and those with implicit reference; and we may call the first personal, the second impersonal subjects. But it has to be stressed that this is a semantic, not a syntactic distinction. There is no justification for setting up different clause patterns on the basis of the different kinds of subjects, because the subject-predicate relation is the same in both cases, namely the relation of subordination with the predicate as nucleus and the subject as satellite. This is corroborated by the fact that in Early Middle English the subject is an optional constituent. All clause types are indeterminate (neutral, unmarked) with regard to the opposition personal vs. impersonal.

The examples under (3)—(6) have a subject with explicit reference. I assume that this analysis will not be accepted unanimously. Infinitive constructions and *that*-clauses at least ((3) and (6)) are not considered subjects by everybody. Elmer calls both constructions sentential complements, Visser uses the terms 'causative complement' and 'causative object'. His argument for not considering them as subjects is that they never — or very rarely in the case of infinitive constructions — occur in the typical subject position before the verb.[6]

What complicates the matter is the fact that the same syntagms may also occur with an introductory *hit*:

(3a) *ne feolle hit þe of cunde to spuse heo me bunde* (KH 421f.) 'nor would it befit one of your high birth to be bound as spouse to me'

(4a) *hit wes god þet heo spæc* (LB 3533)
'it was good what he said'

(5a) *bifel it so, a [ful] strong dere Bigan 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 lut ʒere þat þe 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 conjunctional clause (6a); second, an introductory *hit* also occurs in syntagms of type (1) with a nominal syntagm as subject, cf.

(1a) *hit sprang dai-liʒt* (KH 124)
'day broke'

I very much doubt that anybody would be inclined to analyse *dai-liʒt* 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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[5] Perhaps also *þis*.

[6] "The complement of the phrase of the type *me hriwþ* often takes the form of a *that*-clause. The probability of this clause not being a causative complement, but the subject, is slight, since it is never placed before the verb". (Visser 1963: vol. I. § 32). "Beside the type *him scamede + that*-clause Old and Middle English know the type *him scamede + infinitive*... Whether the infinitive was apprehended at the same time as a causative object or a subject is as hard to ascertain as in the case of the *that*-clause." (Visser 1963:vol. I. § 33).

3. Application of the personal vs. impersonal vs. pseudo-impersonal trichotomy to the synchronic description of Early Middle English

a. Subjectless syntagms

The verb *ofþunchen* 'repent' is usually listed among the impersonal verbs. But the syntagm *him ofþinket* (PA 531) 'he repents' has none of the properties which are required for impersonal constructions by van der Gaaf or Elmer. 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 ofþinket* 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' syntagms

Syntagms of the type *man ofþenched his misdede* (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 misdede* as object; or it is analysed as a so-called impersonal construction without subject and — to use Elmer's terminology — a non-nominative noun phrase in subject position (*man*) and a nominal complement (*his misdede*). Syntagms of this kind seem to have puzzled Pilch for Old English, too. He calls them 'durch Kommutation abgeleitet' and describes them as derivations from syntagms with impersonal predicates.[7] 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.[8]

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[7] "In den elementaren Satztypen III und IV mit unpersönlichem Prädikat (...) wird das unpersönliche Subjekt ausgedehnt auf eine geschlossene Teilklasse 'echter Subjekte.' (Pilch 1970:171).

[8] As long as one cannot prove that *man* commutes with *he* rather than with *him*, 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 misdede* 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 Elmer, the tendency to interpret the animate noun phrase as subject and the tendency to generalize the SVO word order.

c. 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.[9] That does not mean that impersonal subjects do not occur at all in passive syntagms, cf. *þat was we(l) sene* (HK 656) 'that was clearly seen'. *þat* does not commute with a nominal syntagm, and it has no explicit reference in the context. Implicitly *þat* refers to Havelok's physical condition (*Couþe he nouht his hunger miþe* (652) 'he could not conceal his hunger' *him hungrede swiþe sore* (654) 'he was very hungry', *þre dayes þer-biforn... Et he no mete* (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 syntagms. The fact that I have not yet found passive counterparts of all the types established for active syntagms is a mere accident. My data record the following types:

(1) *þo saulen of us mote bien isauued a domes dai* (KS 33, 7f.)
   'our souls must be saved on doomsday'
(1a) *but now it es þis appell etten* (Cursor 873, MS Cotton, quot. Mustanoja 1960: 132)
   'but now this apple is eaten'
(2) *neren hi nouht ihud* (PL 645)
   'they were not hidden'
(2a) —
(3) *wæs gesewen innan Barrucscire æt anan tune blod weallan of eorþan* (PC 1100, 3ff.)
   'blood was seen to well out of the earth near a town in Berkshire'
(3a) *hit was don ðone Pape to understanden þet he hæfde underfangen ðone [þ] ær(c)e þbiscoprice togeanes þe muneces of þe mynstre and togeanes rihte* (PC 1123, 59ff.)
   '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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[9] Pilch 1970: 303f.; Mustanoja 1960: 438. The same is true for the Modern English example quoted by Pilch *it is believed that...* (Pilch 1970: 203).

(4)   *Turnus was ihoten þet wes of Tuscanne duc þet lufede þet maiden* (LB 154)
      '[he] who was duke of Tuscany who loved that girl was called Turnus'
(4a) —
(5)   —
(5a) *hit is isene war is þe snelle* (ON 525f.)
      'it will be seen which of us is the bold one'
(6)   *æ ðere hilte wes igrauen þat þa sweord wes i-cleoped inne Rome Crocia Mors*
      (LB 7638 ff.)
      '[it] was engraved on the hilt that the sword was called Crocia Mors in
      Rome'
(6a) *whilen hit wes iseid ... þat moni mon deð michel vuel al his vnðankes*
      (LB 8279 ff.)
      'formerly it was said that many a man does much evil against his will'

It has been shown that the personal vs. impersonal vs. pseudo-impersonal
trichotomy not only allows an adequate analysis of those Early Middle English
syntagms which according to one or the other definition are considered imper-
sonal, but that their structural patterns can be integrated without difficulty
into a syntactic model of Early Middle English clause types. If we look at the
problem diachronically, we notice a number of changes some of which I will
point out in the last part of my paper.

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 nere neuere ... In a þede samened two* (HK 2889f.) 'never were
two [persons] put together in a place'. In Modern English the combination of a
pseudo-impersonal subject *it* and a personal subject is still possible. If the per-
sonal subject is realized by an infinitive construction, a nominal relative clause
or a (conjunctional) clause (=types (3a) — (6a)), GCE considers the combina-
tion of a pseudo-impersonal subject with a personal subject even more natural
than the personal subject alone (=types (3) — (6)).[10] If the personal subject is
realized by a nominal syntagm, however, the combination with the pseudo-im-
personal subject *it* 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 it be provid-*

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[10] "It is worth emphasizing that for clausal subjects, the postponed position is more
usual than the orthodox position before the verb" (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, Svartvik
1972: § 14. 36).

ed ... a reward.[11] It is worth mentioning that this combination is still a cur-
rent 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 arri-
ved'.

b. Syntactic relations between verbs and their accompanying nominal syntagms

Another syntactic change is illustrated by the Early Middle English syn-
tagm *þe þine 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. More-
over, it is a direct object, because *like* in Modern English allows passivization.
As *þe* in the Early Middle English syntagm is an inflected form of the pronoun
þu, it must be an object; *þine 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 *forþenchen* 'grieve' governs either only a (personal)
subject or an (impersonal) subject and an object:
Wat for þingketh þat ic do min i-wil (KS 34, 8f.)
'why grieveth [it thee] that I do my will'
sore hit him sel vorþenche (PM 372)
'it shall grieve him bitterly'
From the 14th century onwards the subject position of *forþenchen* may also be
filled by a combination of a pseudo-impersonal and a personal subject, cf. *me
forthynkith hit ... that...* (Mal. 119, 30; quot. Elmer 1981: 87) 'it grieves me
that...'. Under the hypothesis that personal, impersonal and pseudo-impersonal

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[11] Carstensen 1958: 201. According to Visser the concurring construction with *there*
instead of *it* died out in the 16th century (Visser 1963: vol. 1, § 66) Jespersen quotes an
example from the 19th century: *there lay an iron shoe-buckle.* (Jespersen 1909—49: 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 different 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.

Sore hit me forþynkeþ Of þe dede þat ich haue don (Piers Pl. quot. Visser 1963: v. I, § 48)
'I am very sorry for the deed that I have done'
Of my wraththe it me forthinketh (Gower, C. A. quot. Visser 1963:v. I, §.48)
'I am sorry for my wrath'

SOURCES

HK *Havelok*. Ed. F. Holthausen. Heidelberg 1928³.
KH King Horn. *Middle English metrical romances*. Ed. W. H. French and C. B. Hale. New York 1930. 25—70.
KS Old Kentish sermons. *An Old English miscellany*. Ed. R. Morris. London 1872. EETSO.S. 49. 26—36.
LB *Layamons Brut or chronicle of Britain*. Ed. F. Madden. London 1847. 3 vols.
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ON *The owl and the nightingale*. Ed. E. G. Stanley. Manchester 1972.
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