Impersonal verbs in Middle English: the rise of raising

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Introduction

The present paper will attempt to do three things:

    - examine the so-called "impersonal verb construction" in Middle English and attempt to show that its gradual disappearance during the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries was not an isolated phenomenon but was part of the emergence of what we now know as modern English syntax;

    - demonstrate how the tools of generative grammar can shed light on the workings of language change;

    - attempt to solve a particular problem in modern syntax: the appearance of "raising" verbs.

I will begin by looking at the "impersonal" verbs in Old and Middle English, at the type of constructions they entered into and the relationship between word order and argument structure in these constructions. I will then look at the stages of the transition to the modern "personal" construction.

In the course of this discussion, we will see the broader syntactic implications of these changes, first of all for a number of constructions where the subject role is a crucial factor, for instance in passive sentences or infinitives.

Secondly, and this will be my personal contribution to the study of language evolution, I will try to show how the existence of subjectless constructions up till the 16th century and their complete disappearance after that time were linked to the disappearance of agreement inflection on the verb in English. This change was to have a tremendous impact on the whole system, notably by imposing the SVO word order as the principal indicator of syntactic function and of the semantic role of the arguments of the verb. Among the important changes that can be observed were the disappearance of certain "germanic" features of Middle English, such as the verb-second / verb-final constructions or of certain "French" features, such as main verb raising to the pre-negative

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particle position in negative sentences, and to the pre-subject position in interrogatives.

The application of a number of simple but powerful principles of generative grammar will reveal the inevitable nature of these changes. The rise of "subject" raising constructions will be seen to be the logical consequence of the loss of verb inflection and the imposition of SVO word order.

I. "Impersonal" verbs in Old and Middle English

There was a large class of verbs in Old English which could be used without overt lexical subjects or with the impersonal pronoun *hit*. These included:

> 1. a) "weather" verbs, expressing natural phenomena:
> *winterlaecan* 'wintercoming', *hagolian* 'hail', *ri(g)nan* 'rain', *sniwan* 'snow', *styrman* 'storm', *growan* 'grow', etc.;
>
> b) "time" verbs, denoting time in general:
> *cuman* 'come', *ferian* 'carry', *(ge)nealaecan* 'approach', etc.;
>
> seasons or religious festivals:
> *sumorlaecan* 'summer-coming" *winterlaecan* 'winter-coming';
>
> or different times of the day:
> *aefen laecan* 'evening-coming', etc.
>
> c) verbs denoting physical and mental affections:
> *hyngrian* 'hunger', *(th)yrstan* 'thirst', *reccan* ' reckon', *langian* 'long', *(ge)scamian* 'shame', etc.,
>
> as well as the state of things:
> *gebyrian* 'take place', *belimpan* ' belong'; etc.
>
> d) or expressions implying a statement, an explanation, etc.:
> *cwepan* 'say', *cypan* 'tell', *onginnan* 'begin', *seagan* 'say', etc.[1]

In Old English there were over 40 verbs of this type. Visser (1963:73) notes that many of these fell out of use before or during the Middle English period. However, the impersonal construction remained productive, since he also lists the following verbs which entered the impersonal construction in early Middle English:

> 2. him irks, him drempte, him nedeth, him repenteth, me seemeth, me wondreth, us mervaillleth, me availeth, him booteth, him chanced, him deynede, him feu, him happened, me lacketh, us moste, etc.

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[1]   This list is taken from Ogura (1986: 17-18)

Verbs like those listed above were often preceded by accusative, or more frequently by dative pronouns or nouns, corresponding to direct or indirect objects.

3. <u>hine</u>   sceal on domes daeg gesceamian
   him (acc) shall on doom's day ashamed
   'he shall be filled with shame on doom's day'

4. at last him (dat) chaunst to meete upon the way A faithlesse Sarazin
   'at last he chanced to meet a faithless Sarassin along the way'

5. <u>us</u> (obj) behoueth furst to passe'
   it behooves us to go first'

The impersonal construction was frequently followed by a complement in the form of a genitive noun or pronoun (6), or by a prepositional phrase (7), or by an NP in the zero case (8) or a that-clause (9) or an infinitive (10). In most cases, the genitive or prepositional complement corresponded to what Visser calls a "causative object", expressing "the cause or the occasion of the action or stase denoted by the verte it qualifies" (1963: 23-24).

6. me scama(th) heora unrihtes
   me (dat) shamed their misdeeds (gen)
   'I am ashamed because of their unrighteous deeds'

7. me meruailles of my boke
   me (dat) astonished of my book
   'I am astonished because of the quality (excellence) of my book'

Zero case complements could be looked on as causative objects or as subjects in some cases, which explains the two possible interpretations of (8).

8. (th)a gelustfullode (th)am cyninge <u>heora claene lif</u>
   then pleased the king their clean life
   'then the king was pleased because of their clean life/their clean life pleased the king

When the complement is a finite or non-finite clause, it appears rather to correspond to an attribute of the verb.

9. us is tima <u>(th)aet we onwaecnen of slaep</u>
   us is time that we awake from sleep
   'it's time we woke up'

10. whan that hem fil <u>to speke of any wo</u>
    when them happened to speak of any troubles
    'when they happened to speak of any troubles[2]

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2. Examples 3-10 taken from Visser (1963: 23-28), Lightfoot (1991: 230) and Strang (1970: 304).

Even this rapid and superficiel review suggests the important differences in the relationship between word order and argument structure in Old and Middle English on the one hand, and in Modern English on the other. The notion that the agent or cause of an event must logically be expressed by the pre-verb nominal expression, while post-verbal expressions necessarily correspond to theme or patient arguments has not yet taken hold. A number of factors converged in the 14th and 15th centuries to impose this pattern.
To quote Strang (1970: 211):

> (11) "The strong association, in positive, affirmative independent clauses (enormously more frequent than other types of clause), between subject and pre-verb position, led to the reshaping of sentences which would otherwise depart from the pattern."

The moving force behind this was of course the loss of inflections which, by the Middle English period, had essentially reached the modern stage as far as nouns are concerned, that is, a complete loss of case endings except for the genitive, and as far as verbs go, a system similar to that of Modern French, as we'll see below.

> (12) "More generally," says Strang (1970:211), "reduction in the specificness of person-number contrasts in verb-forms heightens the importance of indicating S-V concord positionally, though we need not question that the positional pattern was fairly welldefined before the loss of inflections."

II. The change from impersonal to personal constructions

Opinions among specialists may differ, but most cite W. van der Gaaf, whose *The Transition from the Impersonal to the Personal Construction*, (Heidelberg, 1904) is generally considered to be the definitive study. Van der Gaaf considers that constructions of the type *me wondreth, me hungreth*, with preceding pronoun in the objective case, had become obsolete about the end of the 15th century.[3] The stages of this transition, as summed up in Ogura (1986:19), are:

13. Type A: The verb governs a dative or an accusative, as, *methinks; meseems, melists, it behoves me, woe is me.*

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[3] Though see Barber (1976: 286): ...Personal uses like I list 'I desire, wish' are first found in the 14c, and occur throughout our period. In the 16c we find the personal and impersonal side by side, but in the early 17c the impersonal use diappears; the last exemple in the OED (apart from archaic ones in the 19c) is dated 1633. Exceptionally the forms methinks 'it seems to me' and methought 'it seemed to me' survive right through our period. It is noteworthy that we do not find forms like *him thinks or *them thought; the two forms that survive are isolated fragments of a paradigm.

Type B: The noun or pronoun connected with the verb may, as far as external evidence goes, be taken either for a nominative or for an objective, as,
> *'the wind bloweth where it listeth'* (John II 6)

Type C: The verb governs a prepositional dative, as,
> *it seems to me; it happened to us; it is better for you.*

Type D: The original dative or accusative has become a nominative with the verb for its predicate, as,
> *'he did just as he pleased; I like the book'.*

Van der Gaaf gives a number of causes for this transition, for instance the fact that confusion in the hearer's mind could arise when the noun or pronoun preceding the verb was not clearly marked as its (direct or indirect) object. This was more and more the case during the Middle English period as the inflectional marks on nouns and pronouns began to simplify and disappear. For instance, in the case where a third person singular verb was both preceded and followed by a singular NP, or when verbs lost the inflectional difference between singular and plural in the preterite, or when the difference between accusative and dative pronouns began to disappear.

This confusion could be compounded when Type A verbs entered into *objective with infinitive* constructions.

> (14) In such constructions it is impossible to gather from their form whether the object is governed by the preceding finite verb or by the infinitive following. We may, however, safely assume that the fact that in other cases the objective belonged to the preceding verb, while in its turn it governed the infinitive (instead of being governed by it, as in *'that made me to mete'*), helped ultimately to subvert the original relation between the infinitive and its complement in the case of type A verbs. (Van der Gaaf, 1904: 32)

As already mentioned, the steady erosion of case and agreement endings on nouns and verbs led to the establishment of the SVO order, in conjunction with intonation, as the principle indicator of predicate-argument relations.

II. 1. Argument structure

Otto Jespersen (MEG, III, II,2) illustrates the effect of this phenomenon on impersonal verbs. As we saw above, impersonal verbs place a dative, sometimes accusative, indirect object to their left and often a cause or instrumental construction to their right. Thus a sentence like

(15) should be read from right to left if we are to relate the arguments to the predicate in a modern fashion:

> 15. (th)am cynge licoden peran
>   the king (dat) liked (pret.pl.) pears
>   'pears pleased the king' or 'pears were pleasing to the king'

As NPs lost case inflection, the pre-verbal argument could no longer be identified as an indirect object, though the plural ending on the verb showed that it agreed with 'peares' rather than with 'the king'.

> 16. the king liceden peares
>   Pret P1 P1
>   (same as above)

The disappearance of the singular / plural opposition in the preterit removed the last morphological traces of agreement, producing:

> 17. the king liked pears

which finally resulted in:

> 18. he liked pears

And thus a reorganisation of the argument structure of the verb 'like', which we now think of as somehow 'transitive' with an 'experiencer' subject and a 'theme' direct object. The same can be said of many other former impersonal verbs: *need, think, dream, be, like, wonder, thirst, hunger, long, must, ought,* and so on. The power of analogy in this case is such that it is difficult for us nowadays to mentally represent the semantic organisation of these impersonal verbs. Yet, once we are able to do so, much of what is strange in Old and Middle English syntax becomes clearer.

II.2. *Larger syntactic patterns*

The increasing sense that the subject position had to be filled by something and that this something should preferably be an animate subject led, according to Strang, to a number of parallel changes in larger syntactic patterns. For instance:

> (19) "we witness the growth of the so-called introductory subject forms *it, there.* In the 9c King Alfred can write *Swae feawa hiora waeron* ('so few of them were'); but to translate this, we need to supply the subject spot-filler 'there' - 'so few of them there were' or, more naturally, 'there were so few of them' " (Strang 1970: 16)

There is also a change in passive structures, where:

> (20) "we observe a growing acceptance of transformations with the indirect object of the corresponding active taking subject role. This is one aspect of a yet wider tendency, namely to prefer human, especially first person, subjects where possible. Thus, though we understand them, we would hardly now produce such passive structures as Shakespeare's *attorneys are deny'd me, it was told me,*

or Bacon 's *Ther was given us* (modern: I have been denied attorneys; I was told; We were given) " (Ibid, p. 151)

A third type of change is the rise of infinitive clauses of the type *for* + NP + TO + verb. Originally, in a sentence like

21. 'it is good for a man to live with a woman'

the PP 'for a man' would have been analysed as governed by the main verb, and followed by an infinitive. Little by little the feeling grew that the sentence could be divided into two detachable clauses: 'it is good' and 'for a man to live with a woman'. This led to a growing autonomy of the infinitive with 'for + NP', which came to be used in subject or object position.

III. Subjectless verbs in generative grammar

In the generative grammar tradition, two cases of the absence of an explicit lexical subject are discussed, though not usually in terms of each other. The first is the case of passive verbs and so-called 'raising' verbs. The second is the ability of so-called 'pro-drop' languages, like Italian or Spanish, to omit pronominal subjects. I will try to show in the following section that, in the case of medieval English 'impersonal' constructions, the two phenomena were in fact linked and also how the transition from impersonal to personal constructions is tied to the growing rigidity of the SVO order and the loss of agreement inflection on English verbs.

III.1. Raising constructions

In the government and binding tradition, passive verbs are analysed in terms of two interdependent features:

22.a. the passive verte is unable to assign accusative case
to its theme argument;

b. it does not have an 'external', or subject, argument.

These two factors, known in the literature as 'Burzio's generalisation', combine to produce a situation where the direct object has no choice but to 'raise' out of the post-verbal position to the empty subject position.

23. a. [$_{IP}$ e [$_{VP}$ was broken [$_{NP}$ the vase]]]

b. [$_{IP}$ the vase$_i$ [$_{VP}$ was broken [$_{NP}$ t$_i$]]]

Alongside the passive, there are a number of verbs which have certain characteristics in common:

a) they tend to take expletive subjects;

b) in languages like French or Italian (or Middle English) they take 'be' as the perfective auxiliary;

c) they usually express motion, state or change of state. In English these verbs are 'rain', 'snow', 'seem', 'appear', 'happen', among others. Like passives, these verbs are analysed in terms of Burzio's generalisation, that is, they have no subject argument in deep structure, and they are unable to assign accusative case to their theme argument. As a result, the deep-structure object 'raises' to the subject position.

24.a. [IP e [VP seem [IP John to be happy]]]

b. [IP John$_i$ [VP seems 1 IP t$_i$ to be happy]]]

An alternative to this, in the case of raising verbs, is for the subject position to be filled with an expletive subject. This gives us structures like 'It seems that John is happy' or 'There is a man in the garden'.

Now, interestingly, the modern raising verbs (but also various modal auxiliaries, 'weather' verbs, etc.) are the direct descendants of the Old and Middle English impersonal verbs, which as we have seen, progressively evolved from a situation where they could be used with no subject or with expletive 'it', to one where it was felt necessary to fill the subject slot with an animate lexical subject. However, the type of semantic reorganisation we observed for 'like' in the example from Jespersen has taken place in a number of these former impersonal verbs, like 'must, need, dream, feel, come' and so on, and this tends to mask the origin of these verbs, which are now felt to be 'normal' 'transitive' type verbs.

The first point I would like to make therefore is that, like modern "raising" verbs and passives, Old and Middle English impersonal verbs lacked an external or subject argument in their lexical entry. As the pre-verbal position came to be regular, then rigidly associated with the subject and had to be filled, preferably with an animate noun phrase, then the dative or accusative object of the impersonal verb, which in most cases was already to be found in the pre-verbal position, came in certain cases to be considered as its subject, lost its object case form and eventually even came to be interpreted as the agent or the experiencer argument of the verb.

III.2. *"Pro-drop" languages*

It is well-known that most Romance languages (French is a notable exception) need not express the pronominal subject explicitly.

25. Piove. (Ital)[4]
    '(it) is raining'

26. Baila bien. (Span)
    '(he) dances well'

In the G-B tradition, this phenomenon is linked, following Pollock (1989), to the 'morphological richness' of subject-verb agreement in these languages. As we see below, Italian explicitly indicates all six person and number features of the subject in the verbal inflection.

    27. io parlo / tu parli / lei parla / noi parliamo / voi parlate /
        loro parlano

The situation in Middle English is somewhere between that of Italian and that of Modern English, in fact it is strikingly similar in a way to that of Modern French. Pro-drop languages, like Italian and Spanish (or according to Fourquet (1938), Germanic, the ancestor of Old English), express morphologically and phonologically all six person-number combinations Modern English, the most rigid SVO language after Chinese according to Jespersen, expresses only the third person singular in the present indicative. Modern French and Middle (and Old) English are somewhere in between these two extremes as each expresses the difference between singular and plural person and within one of the number paradigms, plural for Modern French, singular for Old and Middle English, the 1st/2nd/3rd person distinction.

    28.a. je pars, tu pars, il part // nous par<u>tons</u>, vous par<u>tez</u>,
        ils par<u>tent</u>

      b. I com<u>me</u>, thou com<u>st</u>, he com<u>eth</u>, // we, yow, thei com<u>men</u>

According to Jean-Yves Pollock, languages like French, though they are not sufficiently "morphologically rich" to allow pro-drop, nonetheless show a number of features which distinguish them from modern English. For instance, main verb raising to the inflection head and from there to the complementizer position. The former can be observed in affirmative sentences when one compares the position of the inflected main verb relative to VP adverbs in French and in English (29-30), or in negative sentences, when one observes the position of the inflected main verb relative to the negative particles *pas* or not. (31). The latter is visible in the interrogative construction, where we see the main verb rising to the pre-subject position in French but not in English (32).

    29.a. Jean mange souvent des patates.
       b.*Jean souvent mange des patates.

    30.a. John often eats potatoes.
       b. *John eats often potatoes.

    31.a. Jean mange pas de patates.
       b. *John eats not potatoes.

    32.a. Mange-t-il des patates?
       b. *Eats he potatoes?

Now, in this respect, Middle English resembles Modern French more than it does Modern English. That is, as in Modern French, we find

main verbs raising to the inflection position in affirmative and negative sentences and to the pre-subject or complementizer position in interrogative sentences.

> 33. But I sey net therfore that thou art oon (Chaucer, 3153)
>   but I say not therefore that you are one
>   'but I don't say that you are one for all of that'

> 34. On which he made a-nyghtes melodie (Ibid, 3214)
>   on which he made by night music
>   'on which he would play a tune in the evening'

> 35. Fareth every knyght thus? (Ibid, *Wife of Bath 's Tale*, 1088)
>   behaves every knight so
>   'does every knight behave like this?'

My second point concerning impersonal verbs is this: the existence of a person distinction in the singular paradigm allowed these subjectless verbs to survive into and sometimes beyond the 16c. As seen earlier, impersonal constructions usually involved a dative or accusative direct or indirect object noun or pronoun placed in the pre-verbal position, as well as a nominal, prepositional or clausal complement in the post-verbal position. The impersonal verb agreed with the latter (we can still see this pattern in the *there is/there are* construction). Given the syntactic nature of the post-verbal element, agreement would often be in the third-person singular. Since this form was clearly marked in Middle and Old English, no confusion was possible as long as the pre-verbal element was a case-marked pronoun, or an NP whose number inflection differed from that of the verb. So I will hypothesise that Middle and Old English satisfied the requirements for an intermediate position between a fully pro-drop language and a rigidly SVO language, enough at least to allow the existence of a construction like the impersonal construction. It was only when the verb endings finally dropped off almost completely and the pre-verb position came to be rigidly associated with the subject that this situation was no longer tenable.

Moreover, as Radford (1997:227) points out[5], other "subjectless" constructions were not uncommon, even as late as Shakeapeare:

> 36. *Hast any more of this?* (Trinculo, *The Tempest*, II, ii)
>   'have you any more of this?'

> 37. *Sufficeth, I am come to keep my word.*
>   (Petruchio, *Taming of the Shrew*, III, ii)
>   'it is enough that I have come to keep my word'

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5   Actually, Radford claims that Early Modern English, and so by extension Middle English, was a "pro-drop" language, based on examples like (36- 39). I do not agree with this claim but it does appear that subjectless verbs did appear in certain circumstances, as I argue here.

38. *Would you would bear your fortunes like a man.*
            (Iago, *Othello*, IV, i)
    'I wish you would...'

39. *Lives, sir.*
    (Iago, *Othello*, IV,i, in reply to *"How does Lieutenant Cassio?"*)
            'He lives.'

Finally, the long tradition of "verb-second" constructions in Old and Middle English, of which examples abound in Chaucer (40-41), favoured the continuing existence of constructions where the pre- verbal position was not filled by the subject of the verb.

40. In al the route nas ther yong ne oold / That he ne seyde it was
    a noble storie
    'in the company NEG-was there anyone young or old/ who
    didn't agree that it was a fine story'
                    The Miller's Prologue (3110-3112)

41. In Flaundres whilom was a compaignye / Of yonge folk that
    haunteden folye,
    'There once was a group of young people in Flaunders /who
    practised madness'   *The Pardoner's Tale*, (463-464)

Thus in cases where the subject could be recovered fairly easily from the context (which is what I argue, contra Radford, accounts for (36-39)) or where there was no "subject argument" in the semantic deep structure (the case for impersonal verbs), the syntactic tradition allowed for non-expression of the subject.

To summarise this section: the long tradition in medieval English of an impersonal verb construction was able to survive well into Late Middle and Early Modern English for a number of reasons. The first of these was their peculiar semantic makeup. Since they lacked an external or 'subject' argument to begin with, there was nothing to force them to express one until the entire system had changed sufficiently to make it obligatory to fill the pre-verbal position with a grammatical subject.

Secondly, the 'semi-rich' verb morphology of Middle English generally provided enough information to read the construction correctly and avoid taking the pre-verbal pronoun for the semantic or grammatical subject of the verb.

Finally, the Germanic 'vertb-second' construction remained active throughout the Middle English period. This contributed to the acceptability of constructions where the pre-verbal position was filled with something other than the grammatical subject.

Conclusion

The steady erosion of the case system and person agreement inflection on the verb led to the imposition of SVO word order and intonation as the sole indicators of sentence structure and, especially as far as we are concerned here, of the association of the pre-verbal position with the grammatical and semantic subject of the verb. This led to the requirement that the subject-slot always be filled, and so to a number of solutions as concerns the old impersonal verb construction.

In some cases (*be, seem, appear*, etc.) we witness the growing use of expletives or of raising constructions, which, according to Allen (1984) began to appear at the same time that the impersonal construction was finally disappearing.

In others (*like, dream, wonder, thirst*, etc.), we see a change in case form and eventually in our perception of the semantic role of the pre-verbal pronouns which used to indicate the indirect or direct object of the impersonal verb but which gradually came to be considered as subjects.

The demise of the impersonal construction is revelatory of a number of sweeping changes in the syntax of English which occurred during the 14th and 15th centuries, a period which Strang calls "... the revolutionary period in which the structure of modern English was established. Much of that characteristic structure has been there since the beginnings of our records, but where change can be detected, it is most fundamental at this time." (Strang 1970: 212)

The tools of generative grammar have enabled us to see how the workings of the case system, the inflection system and the underlying argument structure of verbs combined to produce the system we now know as modern English syntax, an original response, in the history of languages, to the pressures of these simple but powerful forces.

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