

# WHAT IS REALLY MEANT BY *IMPERSONAL*? ON *IMPERSONAL* AND RELATED TERMS\*



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One of the favourite issues in English Historical Linguistics has been that of the traditionally called impersonal verbs and constructions. In the course of time, a variety of labels have been used in the literature to refer to these constructions and/or to the verbs involved in them, namely *impersonal*, *subjectless*, *quasi-impersonal*, *nominativeless*, *experiencer* etc., a state of affairs which has inevitably led to considerable terminological confusion. This paper aims to review the different senses in which such labels have been used since the turn of the century and to reconsider their suitability as self-explanatory terms.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Deciding what the problem is turns out to be a problem itself: there has been little consensus on just what impersonal verbs of Old English are — hence what changes have to be explained — and even on what *impersonal* means as a linguistic term. (Denison 1993, 61)

As David Denison clearly states in this quotation, terminological issues have been a recurrent problem in the extensive literature on *impersonals*, which comprises from Jespersen (1909-49) to Denison (1990, 1993) or Allen (1995). As will become evident in the following discussion, the terminological problem stems from two different although clearly interrelated sources. On the one hand, the traditional term *impersonal* has been variously interpreted — and reinterpreted — in the course of time up to the point that its reference has become ambiguous. On the other, alternative labels, such as *quasi-impersonal*, *subjectless* or *nominative-less* among others, have been proposed in recent years, although the use of such terms, far from solving the problem, has only served to increase the already existing confusion. It is our aim in this paper to review the different senses in which all these labels have been used in the literature and to reconsider their suitability as self-explanatory terms, trying to find a possible way out of the terminological maze.

## 2. IMPERSONAL: ON SO-CALLED IMPERSONAL VERBS AND IMPERSONAL CONSTRUCTIONS

The term *impersonal*, which is said to go back to the Stoics, has been recurrently used in most of the literature on the subject, both in traditional studies (van der Gaaf 1904; Jespersen 1909-49; Wahlén 1925; Visser 1963-73) and in various other approaches (McCawley 1976; Butler 1977; Tripp 1978; Lightfoot 1979; Fischer & van der Leek 1983, 1987; Lagerquist 1985; Anderson 1986, 1988; Ogura 1986, 1990; Denison 1990). Howe-

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\* Research for this study was supported by the Spanish Ministry of Education (DGICYT) grant PB 94-0619. This article is partly based on a paper delivered at the V International Conference of *SELIM* held at León in September 1992 (López-Couso and Méndez-Naya 1992).

ver, most of these scholars adhere to the term with explicit reluctance: many allude to a long tradition of complaints and all agree that the term is misleading and even inadequate. Impersonal is, therefore, used as a label of convenience, for want of a better (Visser 1963-73, 29), since, after all, it is the time-honoured term (Wahlén 1925, 5).

The ambiguous character of this label derives mainly from its polyvalent reference, which ranges from generic to more restrictive uses. In Wahéns words, the term fails to give an adequate idea of what the essential characteristics of the category of expressions in question are, and it admits of being variously interpreted (1925, 5). Thus, it can be applied either to a group of verbs and expressions (*impersonal verbs and expressions*) defined on semantic grounds, as well as to a certain type of construction described from a syntactic viewpoint (*impersonal construction*), in which the so-called impersonal verbs typically occur. Moreover, further complications arise due to a lack of consensus among scholars as to the scope of the semantic and syntactic criteria in question.

Most scholars who define impersonal verbs from a semantic perspective point to the existence of two clearly distinct semantic classes: on the one hand, verbs denoting natural phenomena, such as OE RIGNAN rain, and on the other, verbs which refer to events and activities outside the volitional control of an experiencer (see McCawley 1976, 194), which, if overtly expressed, is coded in the dative or accusative case.<sup>1</sup> The latter group comprises verbs of physical, mental or emotional experience (e.g. OE HYNGRIAN be hungry, OE OFHREOWAN rue) together with verbs denoting needs, obligations and happenstance (OE GELIMPAN happen) (see Denison 1990, 122). However, although it is generally agreed that OE RIGNAN, OE HYNGRIAN, OE OFHREOWAN and OE GELIMPAN all belong to the impersonal category, it is also explicitly admitted that some of them are more impersonal than others. Thus, the most widespread opinion is that only weather verbs are genuine members of the group and, as such, are labelled really impersonal verbs (van der Gaaf (1904, 1)), or impersonals proper (Mustanoja (1960, 433). Similarly, Ogura uses the label *impersonal* (without quotation marks) for what she regards as really impersonal verbs, such as *rignan* (1986, 16; see also 1990, 45 note 1), as opposed to *impersonal* (with quotation marks), a category in which she includes verbs of physical or mental experience.

It is rather striking, however, that in what might be considered one of the most influential papers on the issue, Fischer and van der Leek (1983), weather verbs, the generally accepted prototypical impersonals, are excluded from the category. As can be inferred from the quotation below, according to Fischer and van der Leek, impersonal verbs are essentially two-place predicates involving an experiencer and a source:

the term impersonal verbs refers to a class of verbs which have a common semantic core: they all express a physical or mental/cognitive experience which involves a goal, in this case an animate 'experiencer' and a 'source', i.e., something from which the experience emanates or by which the experience is effected. (1983, 346)

In example (1) below, the animate experiencer is coded by the dative NP *him*, while *hire eawas* conveys the semantic argument of source.

(1) *him gelicade hire þeawas.*<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The fact that the oblique experiencer is generally placed in preverbal position has led Harris and Campbell (1995, 83) to use the alternative label *inversion verbs*.

<sup>2</sup> All our examples, unless otherwise stated, are taken from *The Helsinki Corpus of English Texts* (Rissanen *et al.* 1991). Example (1) has been quoted from Fischer and van der Leek (1983, 347).

Subcategorisation for an experiencer argument is likewise taken by Allen (1995, 20ff) to be an indispensable feature of impersonal verbs. However, given the ambiguity of the term impersonal, she selects the label *experiencer verbs*.<sup>3</sup>

In accordance with Fischer and van der Leeks definition, verbs denoting natural phenomena are excluded not only because they do not express an experience of any sort, but also on account of their argument structure itself: being zero-argument predicates, they involve neither experiencer nor source (cf. also Fischer and van der Leek 1983, 346 fn 8).<sup>4</sup> However, as Denison points out (1990, 119), two-place use is not mandatory with so-called impersonal verbs. Thus, some verbs of physical experience, such as OE *HYNGRIAN*, have the experiencer as their only obligatory argument, (cf. (2) below). By contrast, with verbs denoting happenstance, such as OE *GELIMPAN*, only the source is mandatory, while the experiencer may or may not be expressed, as examples (3a) and (3b) show:

(2) & þa he fæstæ feowertig daga & feowertig næhta æfter þon hine hyngrade. (950-1050, *Rushworth Gospels*, 35)

(3a) þa gelamp him þæt his lif wearð geendod. (950-1050, *The Blicking Homilies*, 113)

(3b) þa gelamp þæt sum fearhryer þæs oþræs ceapes geferscipe oferhogode. (950-1050, *The Blicking Homilies*, 199)

In our opinion, to define impersonal verbs as those belonging to a certain semantic class —though, as seen above, this class is far from being uniform— would not be problematic in itself, had the term impersonal verb not been used in the literature for a different purpose, namely to refer to a group of verbs occurring in a given syntactic construction, the so-called impersonal construction:

Let us define an IMPERSONAL verb as one which can appear in predications which are finite but which, unlike in other such predications in the language, shows no variation in person/number: the verb is always in the form associated with the third person singular ... Associated with this is a further property of all these sentences: they all lack an argument inflected for the nominative. (Anderson 1986, 167-8)

The conflict between the semantic characterisation of impersonal verbs outlined earlier in this section and the syntactic definition of such verbs, as proposed by Anderson in this quotation, leads to contradictory classifications. Such is the case of OE *LICIAN* please and OE *OFHREOWAN* rue, among others.

From a semantic standpoint, *LICIAN* is a verb of experience, taking both experiencer and cause and, therefore, it can be labelled impersonal. In fact, this verb has traditionally been taken as a paradigm to exemplify the transition from impersonal to personal (see Jespersen 1909-49, III. 11.2<sub>1</sub>). However, if occurrence in the impersonal construction is taken as the primary condition for the impersonal status of a given verb, then *LICIAN* cannot be considered as such, since it has never been attested in this pattern (Allen 1986a, 387).

<sup>3</sup> Another essential feature of Allens experiencer verbs is the fact that the experiencer later on acquires nominative marking. Other verbs of experience which do not follow the same historical development and never take nominative subjects, such as OE *CWEMAN* please, are labelled *Dative Object verbs* (1995, 21).

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted, however, that Old English weather verbs could occasionally take an argument surfacing as subject, especially in glosses from Latin, as in *Ða þa se dæg æfnode* (cf. Latin *uparrescente die*) Gr D 75, 2 (BTS s.v. *æfnian*).

As example (4) below illustrates, *LICIAN* always takes an argument inflected for the nominative, and thus does not fit in with Anderson's definition. This clash of semantic and syntactic criteria explains why for Fischer and van der Leek, a verb such as *LICIAN* would be an impersonal verb, while for Anderson it would not.<sup>5</sup>

(4) *ðam wīfe þa word wel licodon.* (950-1050, *Beowulf*, 21)

The case of OE *OFHREOWAN* is slightly different. This verb fulfils both the semantic and the syntactic criteria for impersonals: it is a verb of experience, with both experiencer and cause, and it occurs in the impersonal construction as defined above (see example (5a) below). However, this same verb also can enter personal constructions with either a nominative cause (5b) or a nominative experiencer (5c).<sup>6</sup>

(5a) *Him ofhreow ðæs mannes.* (*ÆCHom* I 8.192.16)<sup>7</sup>

(5b) *Ða ofhreow ðam munece þæs hreoflian mægeleast.* (*ÆCHom* I 23.336.10)

(5c) *Se mæssepreost þæs mannes ofhreow.* (*ÆLS* II 26.262)

To summarise, relying only on semantic criteria to delimit the category of impersonal verbs proves unsatisfactory, as is seen in the case of *LICIAN*; but, on the other hand, attending exclusively to strict syntactic considerations clearly leads to an oversimplification, namely to identify impersonal verbs with those occurring in the impersonal construction ignores the fact that some of these verbs (like *OFHREOWAN*) also subcategorise for nominative NPs and behave, therefore, like ordinary personal verbs.

A terminological and conceptual confusion similar to that concerning the definition of impersonal verbs also pervades the characterisation of the so-called impersonal construction itself. Nevertheless, there seems to be agreement among scholars at least as regards the two basic features of the so-called impersonal construction, namely the presence of a verb in the third person singular and the lack of a nominative argument controlling verb concord. All the following examples would therefore belong in that class:

(6) *Rinð.*

(7) *Hit rinð.*

(8)=(2) & *þa he fæstæ feowertig daga & feowertig næhta æfter þon hine hyngrade.* (950-1050, *Rushworth Gospels*, 35)

(9)= (5a) *Him ofhreow ðæs mannes.* (*ÆCHom* I 8.192.16)

(10) *Hit gelamp ða æt þære mæssan, þæt man rædde þæt godspell, hu þæt wif wearð gehæled.* (950-1050, *LS* I 9, 210).

<sup>5</sup> Fischer and van der Leek do admit that the use of the term impersonal verb (defined on semantic grounds) for verbs that appear in constructions with a subject may be misleading, but that they will continue to refer to the group of verbs in question as impersonal verbs for lack of a better term, with this proviso that the term impersonal construction will be strictly reserved for SUBJECTLESS considerations (1983, 347).

<sup>6</sup> In Allens proposal all three constructions, both personal and impersonal, would fall under the label *experiencer constructions* (1995, 21). Other authors, however, prefer to use more specific terms for each type. Thus, the structure illustrated in (5b) is labelled *Type I* (Elmer 1981, 67); *cause-subject construction* (Fischer and van der Leek 1983, 349ff) and *personal* —with quotation marks— (Ogura 1990, 45 note 1). In turn, the pattern exemplified in (5c) is referred to as *Type II* (Elmer 1981, 71); *experiencer-subject construction* (Fischer and van der Leek 1983, 352ff) and *personal* —without quotation marks— (Ogura 1990, 45 note 1).

<sup>7</sup> Examples (5a), (5b) and (5c) have been taken from Anderson (1986, 170-1).

Such a broad characterisation of the impersonal construction ignores, however, the obvious differences among the above examples, such as the presence or absence of a formal subject *hit*, the number of complements taken by the verb, or the phrasal vs. clausal nature of such complements, differences which are utterly disregarded by authors such as Wahln (1925), Mitchell (1985) and Ogura (1986, 1990). As Mitchell puts it: I propose to adopt what is (I hope) a simple definition: an impersonal construction is one which has only the formal subject *hit* ... or which has no expressed subject and for which no subject other than *hit* can be supplied (1985, 1025).

The presence or absence of the formal subject *hit*, however, is taken by some authors to be sufficient ground to maintain that not all the examples in (6) to (10) fall within the same category. That is the case of Lightfoot (1979) and Anderson (1986, 1988).

Lightfoot (1979, 229) establishes a distinction between what he calls *subjectless impersonals* (illustrated in (6), (8) and (9)) and other types of impersonal constructions (as in (7) and (10) above), since the former have no surface subject at all, not even the formal (*h*)*it*. Within the group of constructions showing the formal (*h*)*it*, Lightfoot further distinguishes between *true impersonals* (with weather verbs, as in (7)) and *quasi-impersonals* (for structures with a clausal complement in postverbal position, as in (10)).

Following the same criterion of the absence/presence of (*h*)*it*, Anderson classifies (6), (8) and (9) as (*true*) *impersonals* (1986, 168) and examples (7) and (10) as belonging to a different construction type, which he terms *quasi-personal impersonal* (1986) or *semi-impersonal* (1988).<sup>8</sup> This means that, for Anderson (1988, 8), Present-day English (PDE) has no impersonal constructions proper, since the presence of *it* is always mandatory. The different connotations of the term *true impersonal* for Lightfoot and Anderson constitute a most obvious example of the terminological chaos to which we would like to draw the readers attention in this paper.

Contrary to Lightfoot and Anderson, we do not consider it appropriate to draw a distinction between (6), (8) and (9), on the one hand, and (7) and (10) on the other, on the basis of the presence or absence of *hit*. We concur with Wahln (1925), Mitchell (1985) and Ogura (1986; 1990) in that both the [+*hit*] and the [-*hit*] constructions are mere structural variants. Using different labels for each of the two sets does not contribute to a better understanding of the issue, but further tangles the terminological maze.

An alternative label for *impersonal construction* as a cover term for the examples in (6)-(10) has been proposed by Bennis (1986), namely *nominative-less*. Bennis rejection of the label impersonal construction as a generic term is motivated by its usual association with constructions in which the verb selects an NP argument which has no nominative case (1986, 282). Such a restrictive definition of impersonal construction is precisely that adopted, among others, by Visser (1963-73, 29-30) and Fischer & van der Leek (1983). The latter view an impersonal construction as that in which the verb takes, at least, one oblique complement. In their own words,

An impersonal construction ... lacks a grammatical subject, while the verb in such constructions shows no verbal contrast, i.e., it is always found in the third person singular. It contains the semantic argument of 'experiencer' in the dative or accusative case; the argument of 'cause', if present, appears in the accusative, the genitive or as a prepositional object. (1983, 347)

<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, according to Anderson, the need for two distinct labels is justified, since using the same term would imply the existence of a [+*hit*] counterpart for every [-*hit*] construction (1988, 9), and this is obviously not always the case.

Thus, in accordance with this characterisation, only examples (2), (3a) and (9) qualify as impersonal constructions, while the remaining examples are excluded by virtue of their lack of an oblique complement expressing either the semantic argument of experiencer or that of cause.

In order to denote a concept identical to that discussed in Visser (1963-73) and Fischer & van der Leek (1983), Elmer (1981, 3) adopts the alternative label *subjectless*.<sup>9</sup> The intrinsic feature of a *subjectless construction*, as understood by Elmer, is, once more, the obligatory presence of an NP in the accusative or dative case, which is taken to be a pseudo-subject. A subject analysis for the oblique NP has also been adopted by Allen (1995). In her own words, 'the Experiencer plays the syntactic role of subject despite being non-nominative in case' (1995, 20).<sup>10</sup> If the experiencer NP is indeed a subject, then to refer to these structures as subjectless is a contradiction in terms, hence Allen's rejection of the label and her preference for the traditional term impersonal.

As seen in the preceding discussion, factors such as the presence or absence of a formal subject *hit* or the number of complements taken by the verb have led scholars to a terminological *cul-de-sac*. Further terminological problems derive from the consideration of structures such as those illustrated in (3) and (10), in which the argument cause is not phrasal but clausal. In such and similar cases, two different functions have been assigned to the clausal argument, those of subject and object. Once again, a question of analysis has terminological implications. As a general rule, scholars who support the subject analysis for the complement clauses in (3) and (10) adopt a distinct label for these structures, namely *quasi-impersonal* (cf. van der Gaaf 1904, 1-2; Wahlén 1925, 109). Mitchell, however, rejects this term (1985, 1025): if the clauses in question are subjects, the construction is, therefore, personal. Authors who defend the object analysis (e.g., Elmer 1981; Fischer and van der Leek 1986), by contrast, do not feel the need to distinguish examples (3) and (10) from structures such as the one in (9), and thus retain the label impersonal for all of them. Only Elmer establishes a distinction between what he calls *Type N* and *Type S subjectless constructions*, thus trying to highlight the difference between related patterns with either phrasal (example (9)) or clausal complements, as in (3) and (10).

### 3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the preceding pages we have reviewed the various uses of the traditional label impersonal and related terms. It has become evident in the course of our discussion that it is not at all clear what is really meant by *impersonal*. This state of affairs derives not only from the plethora of terms used in the literature, but also from the multiplicity of concepts to which they refer. As we have seen, impersonal is employed for either verbs or constructions, which, in their turn, can be defined with recourse to both semantic and syntactic considerations. Furthermore, additional complications arise from the lack of agreement as regards the semantic and syntactic criteria selected to define the class.

In our view, to define an impersonal verb on syntactic grounds as that occurring in the impersonal construction seems tautological. The traditionally-called impersonal verbs should be defined purely on semantic grounds and if this is done, the selected terms should

<sup>9</sup> The term *subjectless* is also occasionally used by McCawley (1976), von Steffens-Montag (1981), Bynon (1987).

<sup>10</sup> See also Allen (1986a, 389; 1986b, 469).

then be self-explanatory. We suggest speaking of *verbs of natural phenomena* and *verbs of experience*. We are of the opinion that the term impersonal should only be applied to a certain type of construction, specifically one characterised by the occurrence of a verb in the third person singular and the lack of a nominative NP argument. As a consequence, we consider it more suitable to speak of personal and impersonal uses of a given verb or of verbs used personally or impersonally, rather than of personal and impersonal verbs. In spite of all its disadvantages, retaining such a trite term as impersonal for the construction is, after all, more practical than adopting alternative labels which may turn out to be less transparent.

The present paper may not have disentangled the impersonal skein completely; however, we hope that it will serve scholars working on impersonals as a kind of Ariadne's thread to find a way out of the terminological labyrinth.

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