

## Hybrid Impersonal Constructions: The Battlefield of Sound and Sense

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One may find it surprising that there still remains something to be said about impersonal expressions despite the plethora of research hitherto carried out in their regard. In reality the notion “impersonal” itself is not straightforward, although we will use this traditional term for expository ease. While the terminological difficulties have indeed been acknowledged in the literature, we are left with some conceptual and historical issues that are worth revisiting. Also there are no dearth of hard nuts to crack before we can come to a fuller understanding of impersonal constructions. A case in point is the following type of expression, which manifests no obvious subject, syntactic or semantic.

swetest him þuncheð ham

Dealing with this expression, which he adduces from *Ancrene Wisse*, Denison (70) marks the verb *punched* as “[3 SG or PL],” suggesting that it is plural if *ham* (“them”) is to be construed as the subject (in which case we get “they seem sweetest to him”) but singular if *him* is to be taken as the subject (whence “he thinks them sweetest”). True, there is a characteristic uncertainty about the subjecthood that is involved here. But Denison has precious little to say about what kind of *system* there is to the verbal morphology, and, to the best of my knowledge, this issue has gone unnoticed in previous studies.

In bringing up such matters, I assume a certain degree of familiarity on the part of the reader with the rudiments of the relevant issues. But there are a couple of points to attend to at the outset as a ground upon which to proceed.

### 1. The Term “Impersonal”

The term was initially intended to refer to verbs that involve no explicit subject or just a “dummy” subject. To take an example from German, *hungern* can occur without a subject as in *Mich hungert* or with a dummy subject as in *Es hungert mich*, both meaning “I am hungry.” But we can call to mind a host of “personal” instances of impersonal verbs. Thus a “weather verb,” used predominantly with a dummy subject (*It was raining/thundering*), often takes a real subject (*He rained kisses on her hand*, *Her eyes rained tears / Somebody was thundering at the door*, *Footsteps thundered down the wooden stairs*),<sup>1)</sup> and the same is true of the German verb just mentioned, with which

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1) More suggestive in this connection is Milton’s “God had yet not rain’d / upon the Earth” (*Paradise Lost* VII, 331-2), his version of Genesis 2.4 (“the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth”) in the King James Bible.

we find *Die Kinder hungerten nach Freiheit* vis-à-vis *Es hungerte den Kindern nach Freiheit* and *Den Kindern hungerte nach Freiheit*, all meaning “The children hungered after freedom.” We will also see later an instance of an Old English verb (*hrēowan* “to rue”) expressing mental affection with a syntactic subject (*Ic hrēowe*) as well as without (*Mē hrēowep*). The crux of the matter, therefore, does not really seem to hinge on whether the subject is impersonal or personal. Consider the verb *liken* of the following passage by Chaucer:

And after soper gonne they to rise,  
 At ese wel, with herte fresshe and glade;  
 And wel was hym that koude best devyse  
 To liken hire, or that hire laughen made...

(*Troilus and Criseyde* III. 610-3)<sup>2</sup>

As one can easily see, the verb means “to please,” thus: “happy was he (Troilus) who could contrive best to please her (Criseyde), or made her laugh.” (Alas, how could he imagine her forswearing herself to him!) Should we, then, call this *liken* a “personal” verb because its subject is personal? Compare it with the *lykede* of this passage, again, by Chaucer:

For after Venus hadde he swich fayrnesse  
 That no man myghte be half so fayr, I guesse;  
 And wel a lord he semede for to be.  
 And, for he was a straunger, somewhat she  
 Lykede hym the bet.... (*The Legend of Good Women* 1072-6)

In these lines from “The Legend of Dido,” the queen of Carthage is speaking

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2) Here and throughout, quotations from Chaucer’s works are from *The Riverside Chaucer*.

of the Trojan, Aeneas (Chaucer's Eneas), to the effect that "she somewhat liked him the better because he was a stranger, on top of his fair and noble mien." (And *she* never knew this time that *he* was to be forsworn to her!) It would not make any sense to think of Dido as "pleasing" Aeneas for those reasons.

Now, a failure to distinguish between the two instances of *like*—that is, calling them indiscriminately "personal" on grounds of the "personal" subject—would be missing the point. The point is: while the *To liken hire* of the first passage is not "personal" in the current lingo, neither does it seem right to call it "impersonal" since the subject involved is personal anyway. It is tangential to our topic, then, whether the subject is impersonal or personal. The key factor seems to be whether the subject "gives an impression" or "receives an impression," in the parlance of Jespersen.<sup>3</sup>) Or, alternatively, we may distinguish, with Fischer and van der Leek, between a "cause-subject" and an "experiencer-subject." Along these lines, the subject of *To liken hire*, Aeneas, is a "cause-subject" that "gives an impression," whereas the *she* of *she lykede hym*, namely Dido, is "experiencer-subject" that "receives an impression."

Likewise, when Hamlet says *This likes me well* as he draws a foil at the start of his dual with Laertes, his statement can be called "impersonal" not because of the foil being impersonal but because of its being the "cause-subject" that "gives an impression." That is, the foil "pleased" him, and *he* took it to his liking. Ditto for Othello's response to Iago at the latter's request to call in the revellers on the "night of revels" (*Othello* 2.3.47): *I'll do't, but it dislikes me*. That is, the act of calling in the revellers "displeased"

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3) Comparing the Old English impersonal expressions like *Pam cyngre licodon peran* ("Pears pleased [was pleasing to] the king") with their modern ("personal") counterparts, *The king liked pears*, Jespersen observed that in the first case the subject (*peran*) "gives an impression" while in the latter the subject (*the king*) "receives an impression."

him, and *he* disliked it.

While, therefore, we continue to use the traditional term “impersonal” for expressional simplicity, we have to allow that it is a misnomer in light of terminological rigor. We also add that the difference between impersonal and personal readings is not always clear-cut. Consider the following lines:

And if yow lyketh alle by oon assent  
For to stonden at my juggement.... (*General Prologue* 777-8)

One reading of the relevant part is “if it pleases you all to abide by my judgment.” A “personal” reading of *lyketh*, however, gives us “if you all like to abide by my judgment.” One might immediately object to the second reading on the basis of the verb form which supposedly is out of accord with the plural *yow*, which in turn, not being nominative, appears to be a poor choice as the subject. But such an objection is tantamount to clinging to grammatical fine points to lose sight of what was really going on in the language. We will see later that in Middle English an impersonal verb occurred—or tended to occur—in the third-person singular no matter what the subject may be. For now, note that the difference between the impersonal and personal senses of a verb was probably becoming obscure, and even meaningless. For, this tendency—the tendency toward “personal” use of impersonal verbs—strikes me as ultimately relevant to the curious fact that *yow*, historically dative, eventually established itself as the “subject form.” When the above passage was at the tip of the author’s quill, very likely its personal sense was already firmly in his mind. Viewed from this perspective, the verb in question behaves as if it were at once impersonal *and* personal, not impersonal *or* personal.

This observation bears its import throughout our discussion, especially in regard of the “double dative construction.” But the idea is already relevant to the following expression, adopted from Allen (391-2) with my renderings.

Gode ne *līcode* *nā* heora *gelēaflēast* . . . ac *āsende* him to fȳr of heofonum

*Literal trans.:* “Their faithlessness was not at all pleasing to God but sent fire to them from heaven”

*PDE reading:* “God did not at all like their faithlessness but [*viz.* and] sent fire to them from heaven”

The literal translation, which takes *heora gelēaflēast* (“their faithlessness”) as the subject of *līcode*, falsely construes this subject as being coreferential with the unexpressed subject of *āsende*. The nonsense results from concluding *līcode* to be steadfastly impersonal on grounds of the morphology of the nominative *heora gelēaflēast* and the dative *Gode*. If we look over the morphological details and see the dative pseudo-subject *Gode* of *līcode* as its genuine subject, the desired reading, indicated under PDE (present-day English), obtains right away. But this means that *līcode*, while an impersonal verb in the first conjunct of the passage, is to be taken as “personal” in the whole body of the passage.

## 2. Case Shifting toward Subjecthood

The OE example we have just seen suggests that the transition from the impersonal to personal construction was already an on-going process even before case distinctions began to be lost. That is, the process was not really “diachronic” in the sense initially formulated by Jespersen (III 208-12, 352-5, VII 24-9) and referred to as an established fact by later researchers like

Lightfoot (229-39). The state of affairs in Old English is schematized below on the basis of the attested occurrence of the verb *hreowan*, the etymon of today's *to rue*.<sup>4)</sup>

Mē hrēowep þære dæde.      Type I: subjectless

“(Lit.) (it) makes me rue because of the deed.”

Mē hrēowep sēo dæd.      Type II: cause-subject

“(Lit.) The deed makes me rue.”

Ic hrēowe þære dæde.      Type III: experiencer-subject

“(Lit.) I rue because of the deed”

Putting aside some difficulties of translation, and suspending discussion of the genitive *þære dæde*, notice first that the sentence of Type I is “subjectless” in that neither of the two nominal expressions involved—the two “arguments” in technical jargon—is nominative. In the absence of a syntactic subject that can trigger the subject-verb agreement, the verb assumes, by default, the third-person singular form. We will come back to this in due course. Suffice it for now to notice further that the sentences of Types II and III exhibit processes of case shifting, whereby the genitive *þære dæde* and the dative *mē* of the original subjectless sentence now occur as the nominative *sēo dæd.* and *ic* respectively. A driving force behind this case shifting is the process of reinterpreting an impersonal verb as an ordinary (personal) one. A subjectless impersonal construction, then, is something like an arena of competition where

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4) The examples are based on Elmer (75). Similar data are found in Anderson (170-1), but I adopt Elmer's here as they are much simpler in wording. It should be added that not all impersonal verbs were undergoing this sort of process. The possibility, and the pattern, of variation differed among individual verbs. Elmer (108) observes, for example, that *lician*, while overwhelmingly Type II, only sporadically occurs as Type III, in contrast to *hreowan* under current discussion.

an argument of oblique case that functions as a potential (semantic) subject vies with another such argument for a genuine (syntactic) subjecthood.

In the above translation, *þære dæde* is rendered “because of the deed.” Such a use of genitive, often referred to as “genitive of cause,” was quite productive in OE, not only with impersonal verbs as above but also with ordinary verbs, as illustrated below.

hē þæs frōfre gebād (*Beowulf* 7)<sup>5)</sup>  
 “he experienced consolation from/for that”

sægde him þæs lēanes þanc (*Beowulf* 1809)  
 “(he) said thank(s) to him for that reward”

A difference between the genitive of cause appearing in the previous data and the one just shown is that case shifting toward the subjecthood has nothing to do with the latter, in which the genitive of cause is not an “argument.”

Sometimes, it is not clear whether the genitive involved means “cause” or should be interpreted otherwise. In the following impersonal expressions, cited from Bosworth & Toller (entry 19), the genitive may alternatively be thought of as carrying the force of “reference.”

Hine nānes þinges ne lyste on ðisse worulde  
*Literal trans.*: “(It) did not please him in this word because of [or with respect to] nothing”  
*PDE reading I*: “Nothing pleased him in this world”  
*PDE reading II*: “He liked nothing in this world”

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5) *Beowulf* line numbers refer to Klaeber’s edition of the poem.



þām men ðe hine ne lyst his mētes<sup>6)</sup>

*Literal trans.:* “to the man that (it) does not please him because of [or with respect to] his food”

*PDE reading I:* “to the man whom his food does not please”

*PDE reading II:* “to the man who does not like his food”

Note also that, as the present-day English renderings suggest, the genitive *nanes þinges* and *his metes* compete with the accusative *hine* as a logical (semantic) subject, although the competition is not syntactically consummated in these subjectless expressions.

The “reference” sense is quite apparent in the following lines from *Deor*, which involve ordinary verbs.<sup>7)</sup> The attached notes hope to be self-explanatory:

Þæs oferēode; þisses swā mæg. (7)

*Literal trans.:* “(it) passed over with respect to that; so may (it) with respect to this.”

*PDE reading:* “That has passed over; so may this.”

wýscte geneahhe

þæt þæs cynerīces ofercumen wære. (25-26)

*Literal trans.:* “(He) often wished that (it) would be overcome with respect to that kingdom.”

*PDE reading:* “He often wished that the kingdom would be overcome.”

In the first example, which is the burden of the poem, *Þæs* refers to the misfortune alluded to throughout the poem and *þisses*, to “whatever misfortune is further coming.”

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6) Here *ðe hine* is a “composite relative,” an equivalent of which can also be found in some dialects of present-day English, as in *the author that I read his book*.

7) *Deor* line numbers refer to Pope's edition of the poem.

Expressions like these may sound quite puzzling to the modern ear. At a moment's reflection, however, the OE genitive of reference comes alive in the *of*-phrases of the following sort: *He is blind of one eye, The old man was hard of hearing and slow of speech but quick of apprehension, The goddess was nimble of foot, This student is very strong of purpose, The athlete was wide of shoulder and narrow of hip*, and what have you. Maybe it is of some interest here that, translated into Korean, the *of*-phrase will sound like a "subject."<sup>8)</sup>

While the modern English *of*-phrase can represent the early genitive of reference in this manner, Middle English seems to have opted for a *to*-phrase, at least occasionally, as can be seen in the curious impersonal expressions cited below from *The Owl and the Nightingale*:

Be were icundur to one frogge.... (85)<sup>9)</sup>

*Literal trans.*: "(It) would be more suitable to you with respect to a frog...."

*PDE reading I*: "A frog would be more suitable to you...."

*PDE reading II*: "You would find a frog more suitable...."

Ov nas neuer icunde parto. (114)

*Literal trans.*: "(It) was never natural to you with respect to that."

*PDE reading I*: "That was never natural for you."

*PDE reading II*: "You never found that natural."

Ne lust him nu to none unrede (212)

*Literal trans.*: "Nor (it) delights him now with respect to no bad advice"

*PDE reading I*: "Nor does any bad advice delight him now"

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8) 그는 한 쪽 눈이 안 보인다 / 말씨가 느리다, and so on.

9) Quotations from *The Owl and the Nightingale* are from Stanley's edition of the poem.

*PDE reading II*: “Nor does he care for any bad advice now.”

It is very likely that, when case syncretism was at its height, almost totally blurring the old case distinctions, the earlier genitive of reference, because of its very function of *referring*, ended up with *to*, which sounded quite natural in implementing that function. Anticipating a better account to be advanced of this interesting prepositional expression, we may stress here that either the prepositional argument or the dative argument (pronoun) can be the semantic subject of each of the impersonal verbs, as the alternative renderings suggest.

### 3. Concealed Subject: Clarifying Some Points

Traugott (131f) says that, in Elizabethan English, impersonal expressions are found as one of “Spencer’s conscious archaism” and “almost completely restricted to the idiomatic expressions *methinks* and *me had rather*.” To my mind, this is a little too much of hyperbole. While impersonal expressions appear with less and less frequency down the history of the language, they seem to have continued well into Elizabethan English, as we can infer from Hamlet’s *This likes me well* and Othello’s *it dislikes me* mentioned early on. Consider also the verb *think* used in the following way:

Doth it not, thinkst thee, stand me now upon—? (*Hamlet* 5.2.64)

This is a version of the line discussed by Abbott, who mentions at one point (139) that “[f]or reasons of euphony [. . .] the ponderous *thou* is often ungrammatically replaced by *thee*,” adding that “[t]his is particularly the case in questions and requests, where, the pronoun being especially unemphatic,

*thou* is especially objectionable.” It is far from clear, however, exactly what kind of euphony is being meant here: why, in particular, *thou* would be more ponderous or emphatic than *thee* in such a case.<sup>10)</sup> True, pronominal forms were often confused in earlier stages of English. (They still are.) Thus, when in *The Merchant of Venice* Antonio tells Bassanio that “all debts are cleared between you and I,” his nominative *I* is at variance with what today’s grammar would designate after a preposition. Another case in point is the *ye* at the end of the following passage:

The double sorwe of Troilus to tellen,  
That was the kyng of Priamus sone of Troye,  
In lovyng, how his adventures fellen  
Fro wo to wele, and after out of joie,  
My purpos is, er that I parte fro ye. (*Troilus and Criseyde* I. 1-5)

Here again the nominative *ye* is not what is expected after a proposition (*fro*). But the reason is transparent: the poet’s “rhyme royal” contended against case morphology. That is, euphony was indeed at issue here. As for Antonio’s *between you and I*, most probably the author was being true to life in placing a colloquialism in the mouth of his dramatis persona—a colloquialism that is still on the go in today’s English as in Jessica Simpson’s song “Between You and I.”<sup>11)</sup> When it comes to *thinkst thee*, however, it is by no means clear why

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10) According to Kökeritz, by the way, the pronunciation of the Elizabethan *thou* was not today’s [ðau] but [ðəu], in which the Great Vowel Shift was incomplete.

11) The New York Times internet “Opinion” column (October 2, 2009) introduces a commentator who refers to Antonio’s diction as the author’s “slip of the quill.” According to him, “Shakespeare . . . was writing along rapidly, maybe at the end of the day when he was tired.” To me, this is a wrong way of looking at the matter. Perhaps he never knew that “Shakespeare, in such constructions, almost

*thou* would be “especially objectionable” there. In fact, Abbott himself notes at another point (142) that “there is, perhaps, confusion between *thinks it thee?* . . . and *thinkest thou?*,” suggesting a hybrid construction in which *thou* was substituted for by *thee*, leaving behind its inflection.

But Abbott sounds best when he mentions in passing that “very likely *thinkst* is an abbreviation of *thinks it*.” It is under this last account that the real nature of *thinkst thee* begins to come to light. Specifically, we can think of it as a misrepresentation of *thinks’t thee*, where *thinks’t* is the result of the same process that abbreviates, say, *do it* to *do’t* as in Othello’s *I’ll do’t* cited earlier. That is, what we have here is an impersonal expression, *thinks it thee*, in which *it* is a kind of dummy subject. If this is on the right track, *thinks’t thee* is not due to “confusion between *thinks it thee* and *thinkest thou*” the way Abbott sees it; it simply demonstrates a construction where the subject is concealed in the verb ending.

I may add that of the four Shakespeare editions I checked for the expression at issue,<sup>12)</sup> only one (*Kittredge*) has *thinks’t thee*, thus closely following the impersonal sense of the verb. Another one (*Oxford*) comes up with *think’st thee*, a hybrid form in the sense mentioned above, the apostrophe supposedly syncopeing the stem vowel *e*. The other two (*Riverside* and *Bevington*) dispense with the cumbersome inflection altogether and settle for *think thee*, effacing the derivational information, but thereby getting around the near cacophony

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invariably used the objective case of the pronoun” (*Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage*, 1989, p.182).

12) *The Kittredge-Players Edition of the Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (New York: Grolier, 1936), *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), *Shakespeare: Four Tragedies* (D. Bevington, ed. New York: Bantam Books, 1980) and *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (Oxford UP, 1988).

accompanying the meticulous inflectional ending we have so far discussed.

Let us now compare the following two versions of a line from *Richard III* (3.1.63) which Abbott also discusses:

- (a) Where it thinkst best unto your royal self.
- (b) Where it thinks best unto your royal self.

Curiously, Abbott assumes the authenticity of (a) when (b), in which *it thinks* easily reads as “it seems,” sounds far more straightforward. His idea is that “perhaps this [*it thinkst*] is the true reading, there being a confusion between *it thinks* and *thinkest thou*.” Two Shakespeare editions I looked up (*Riverside* and *Oxford*) have *it seems*, while another edition (*Kittredge*) stands its ground with *it think’st best*, in the vein of Abbott’s *it thinkst* (again aside from the apostrophe for the syncopation).

If (a) is really the authentic version, there does seem to be some confusion involved. But it should be noted first that, historically, the final *-t* of the second-person singular was not a part of the original ending but resulted from the frequent use of the OE *þu* as an enclitic (Algeo and Pyles 112). That is, the unstressed pronoun, following a verb, was spoken as if it were a part of the verb. With *þyncan*, the etymon of *think*, the process can be summarized as follows: *þynces þu* becomes *þyncesþu*, then dissimilates to *þyncestu*, and later weakens to *þynceste* and further to *þyncest*, which in turn optionally syncopates to *þyncst*.<sup>13)</sup> Historically, then, an expression like *þyncest þu* or *þu þyncest* is already a hybrid construction, in that the subject is doubly present,

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13) Here the process of dissimilation changes the second member of the consecutive fricatives into a stop for ease of pronunciation, a process that also accounts for, say, *nosþyrel* → *nostril*. In *þyncst*, palatalization of *c* is undone before the consonant ending.

once covertly within the ending *-est* and once overtly.

The process just mentioned repeated itself in the history of English. Thus when in *The Knight's Tale* Palamon angrily retorts to Arcita's claim as the rightful lover of Emelye by asking *Whether seistow this in earnest or in pley?* ("Are you saying this in earnest or in play?"), his *seistow* is a contraction of *seist thou*, and along with this contracted form, Middle English had still weaker *seiste* and *seist* (cf. Millward 169-70). Viewed this way, *it thinkst* of version (a) may be just another instance of the confused use of the verb ending, not to mention "a confusion between *it thinks* and *thinkst thou*."

But there is another way of looking at the matter. Recall from the earlier discussion that we may consider *thinkst* to be a contraction of *thinks it*—that is, *thinks't*, with a concealed subject. Under this reading, the confusion involved in *it thinks't* is that of failing to recognize the "double subject." But then, one wonders once again: why bother with all this complication when the version in (b) makes perfect sense without ado at all. Unless and until some evidence comes to light as to which one was really the great bard's original choice, we have reasons to opt for this latter version as the authentic one, *pace* Abbott.

#### 4. Double Dative Construction

Middle English is characterized by the advent of a curious type of construction in which two dative pronouns compete as the potential subject with equal forces, neither gaining the upper hand of the other. Consider the following passage, focusing on the underlined part:

Ye knowe ek that in forme of speche is chaunge  
 Withinne a thousand yeer, and wordes tho  
 That hadden pris, now wonder nyce and straunge  
Us thinketh hem... (*Troilus and Criseyde* II. 22-5)

We can easily see that *hem* (“them”) refers to *wordes tho / That hadden pris* (“words that then were well esteemed”). But is it the logical subject of *thinketh*? Or, are we to take *Us* as such? Under one interpretation the underlined expression reads “They seem to us strikingly foolish and strange”; under the other, “We think them strikingly foolish and strange.” This of course amounts to asking whether the verb is impersonal or personal. But we may also say that the verb is behaving here as if it were impersonal *and* personal at the same time. The statement made at the outset to this effect in regard of the verb *like* bears its fullest import with the double dative construction.

This does not put paid to the whole matter, though. We are yet to account for the verb form, which is supposedly in the third person singular and thus is not compatible with either of the pronouns, *Us* and *hem*. It was already mentioned that, in the absence of a nominative subject, the verb occurs, by default, in the third-person singular. But that statement was made in regard of impersonal constructions, whereas, here, we are dealing with a *personal* (as well as impersonal) construction, in the sense just noted.

It might be tempting to suggest a possibility of *thinketh* being plural right in that form. Such an assumption seems to have been at work when Denison came up with his “[3 SG or PL]” for the *punched* of *swetest him punched ham* the way it was mentioned at the outset of this paper.<sup>14)</sup> Perhaps he was

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14) *Punched* of this phrase (from *Ancrene Wisse*) is the Southern dialect equivalent of Chaucer’s *thinketh*.



alluding to Mitchell's study (9-11), where a host of Old English examples display plural subjects accompanied by verbs in *-eð* rather than *-að* (or *-að* rather than *-iað*). Mitchell pointed out that as the Old English present indicative plural ending *-að* became *-eð*, the distinction between plural and third person singular was being obliterated. Or, perhaps one had in mind Visser's observation (71f) that the confusion in the verbal endings was originally a feature of Northern English but gradually spread to the south so that until Chaucer's time the English language had altogether three alternative plural endings, *-eth*, *-e(n)*, and *-es*.

There are reasons to believe, however, that Chaucer's *thinketh*—and for that matter, the *puncheð* that Denison speaks of—is *not* to be construed as plural. To begin with, Brunner (70-1) has observed that Chaucer himself has mostly *-e(n)* for his plural ending and that where the subject is a pronoun, especially post-positd, the plural ending is *-e* or uninflected. But evidence against the plural reading can actually be found in another line of *Ancrene Wisse* which Denison cites:

As ofte as ich am ischriuen, eauer me þuncheð me unshriuen.

The relevant part can be rendered either "I always seem to myself unshriuen" or "I always think myself unshriuen." On either reading, both of the pronouns involved are first-person singular, and it would be absurd to call the verb (*þuncheð*) plural.

The following lines from *the Clerk's Tale* provide more crucial evidence against the plural reading:

"For certes, lord, so wel us lyketh yow

And al youre werk, and evere han doon... (106-7)

As usual, alternative readings are possible for the relevant part: “you and your work please us so well, and always have (done)” and “we like you and all your work, and always have (done).” Notably, the impersonal verb ends in *-eth* even when its correlated “regular” verb is in the plural (*han*), in congruence with the plural subject. In the final analysis, then, an impersonal verb occurs in the third-person singular, whether or not it has a syntactic subject and, if it has one, whether it is first-person, second-person, third-person, singular, or plural—in short, no matter what the subject may be. Examples are legion in this direction, besides the one given above. Another one is this, again from Chaucer’s *Clerk’s Tale*:

“How liketh thee my wyf and hire beautee?” (1031)

Here again the verb is singular, with its compound subject, *my wyf and hire beautee*. The “inverted order” of the verb and its subject is irrelevant here because the categorical singular form occurs in any order whatsoever, as we can see from the other examples discussed so far.<sup>15)</sup>

In Old English, by contrast, the subject-verb agreement was obligatory, as the following lines from *Beowulf* clearly demonstrate:

Dām wīfe þā word wēl līcodon (639)

Mē þīn mōdsefa / līcað leng swā wēl (1853-4)

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15) In an inverted order, a singular verb was often combined with a plural subject: e.g., *gefeahrt Æbered cyning and Ælfred* (Visser 73, Mitchell 637). Mitchell & Robinson (44) also points out that in Old English, before a first and second personal pronoun, the plural endings can be reduced to *-e*: e.g., *we singap* but *singe we*.

In the first example, the subject (*þā word* “those words”) is plural and its verb (*līcodon*) is accordingly plural. In the second one, the singular subject (*þīn mōdsefa* “your spirit”) called for a singular verb (*līcað*).

Why such a contrast between the OE and the ME verbal morphology? To my mind, the anomaly shown on the part of Middle English is closely intertwined with the confusing status of the impersonal construction, coupled with the collapse of case distinctions. Just imagine what form of a verb you would conceive when you are undecided what to take as its subject. In such a situation, you would commit yourself to a verb form that is “neutral” as to the number and person of whatever is going to be the subject. The third-person singular would suggest itself. That is, as the impersonal verbs were more and more indeterminate between their impersonal and personal forces, and case morphology was of no avail as a working principle, the speaker would habitually resort to the third-person singular ending as a “default” form. And this default morphology would gradually develop into a “frozen” practice with impersonal verbs, *even when* the presence of a syntactic subject was clearly felt.

Uncertainty about the status of impersonal verbs was already a mark of Old English, too, as we can infer from the examples given earlier with the verb *hreowan*. But in Old English, case morphology was very soundly at work, and insofar as the subject was identified by virtue of being nominative, the rule of subject-verb agreement was mandatory, whether the verb be impersonal or not. When there was no syntactic subject to govern the verbal concord, then of course the verb had no choice but to take on the third-person singular form, by default. Acutely relevant in this connection is Allen’s observation (381-2) that examples of “two dative pronouns in one sentence” began to appear over the period of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.<sup>16)</sup> For, case syncretism was near completion by that time.

### 5. Concluding with a Conjecture

The double dative construction we discussed above typically reflects a period of time when impersonal verbs were in constant flux of change toward “personal” usage—when impersonal and personal forces of the verbs were equally strong and case morphology had already lost power as a possible controller. It would be absurd, however, to suggest that because there were no fixed rules of grammar to settle the matter, there was not so much concern as now with what were conceived to be “proper” choices of verbal forms. All languages at all periods are equipped with some standards by which to understand current practice in parsing a given expression. All languages, in short, are in principle consistent within themselves. And that is why Chaucer’s *wonder nyce and straunge us thinketh hem* sounds all the more “strange,” if not really “foolish.”

I would like to conclude by hazarding a conjecture on this particular double dative expression from a different perspective as far as it does not affect the main points made in the course of discussion. Let us first have the relevant stanza bear repetition in full below:

Ye knowe ek that in forme of speche is change  
 Withinne a thousand yeer, and wordes tho  
 That hadden pris, now wonder nyce and straunge  
 Us thinketh hem, and yet thei spake hem so,  
 And spedde as wel in love as men now do;  
 Ek for to wynnyn love in sondry ages,  
 In sondry londes, sondry ben usages. (*Troilus and Criseyde* II. 22-28)

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16) According to her, examples with *think* appeared much earlier than those with *like*.

The gist is: though some expressions that were well esteemed in the past may now sound foolish and strange due to some changes in speech habits, people used to speak that way and thereby succeeded even in winning love no matter when and where. But the statement can be turned on its head so that the focus is placed on the *though*-clause of the above statement: some expressions that were in popular use may later look foolish and strange due to changes in speech habits.

Now, would it stand to reason to assume that, in remarking linguistic change leading to strangeness, and even foolishness, of some verbal forms, the poet was unaware of the strangeness of his own verbal choice? “A poet is, before anything else, a person who is passionately in love with language,” to borrow the words from W. H. Auden. That the author of the tragic love poem was instinctively sensitive and attentive to the changes and chances his native tongue was undergoing becomes clear once again toward the end of the story, where he voices his heart’s desire that his “little book”—*litel myn tragedye*—be not mistreated in any manner amidst the “diversity” and “default” of his tongue, English:

And for ther is so gret diversite  
 In Englissh and in writyng of oure tonge,  
 So prey I God that non myswrite the,  
 Ne the mysmetre for defaute of tonge;  
 And red wherso thow be, or elles songe,  
 That thow be understonde, God I biseche!

(*Troilus and Criseyde* V. 1793-8)

To be sure, “loose style” hardly seemed to bother the poet, who would go for freedom of expression and beauty of sound to the detriment of grammatical

regularities. His poetry often manifests constructions that would now be frowned upon, such as abrupt change of tenses, use (or lack) of pronouns with vague or missing antecedents, anacoluthic shift of constructions, and so on. But the double dative construction we are discussing now does not seem to be just another case of “loose style.” Neither does brevity by way of metrical regularity seem to be at issue here. The poet must have *intended* something over and above mere freedom of expression.

Recall at this juncture that the double dative construction in general first showed up over the period of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, partly overlapping the poet’s times. My conjecture is that he was deliberately utilizing the expression *wonder nyce and straunge us thinketh hem* to make his own diction sound that way—“foolish and strange”—thereby vividly delineating what changes were indeed going on in his native tongue. He was, in other words, making his speech *resemble* what it was commenting on.

Mimetic ingenuity of this kind is quite familiar in verbal artistry. A well-known example is the following, from Alexander Pope’s *An Essay on Criticism*:

While expletives their feeble aid do join;  
And ten low words oft creep in one dull line. (2. 346-7)

The first line contains a sample of “expletives” in itself, namely *do*. The second line is itself composed of “ten low words,” perfectly simulating what that line is all about. Another case in point is the following:

A needless Alexandrine ends the song,  
That, like a wounded snake, drags its slow length along. (2. 356-7)

The second line is in itself a specimen of what the first line purports to criticize (“needless Alexandrine”). So, quite often, a poetic expression is in form what it is about in content.

Actually, the point can be carried out of the context of poetic diction. Commenting on the prescriptive norm that condemns a sentence ending in a preposition, Sir Winston Churchill is said to have come up with *This is the sort of English up with which I will not put* (Potter 102)—meaning, of course, “This is the sort of English with which I will not put up” or “This is the sort of English I will not put up with.” Note that the deictic “this” of the made-up sentence refers back to the very sentence in which the deictic is embedded, again mimicking, in a satirical way, what the intolerably artificial expression purports to demonstrate.

It does not seem entirely outrageous, then, to suppose that the hybrid expression under current discussion actually satirizes the poet’s own speech habits that were fated to echo such strange changes as the confounded use of impersonal and personal constructions was bringing about in its wake. Self-satire, or self-mockery, is quite Chaucerian indeed. When the poet was describing the “tuft of hair” that stood on top of the Miller’s nose (*General Prologue* 554-5), maybe he was at the same time mocking his own pettiness of fussing over such trifles. In the *Prologue to Sir Thopas*, he is quite willing to make fun of himself, commenting on his portly waist, his *popet*-like frame, his *elvyssh* (“muddle-headed”) countenance, and his helpless shyness and reticence, although, as Baugh (346-7) points out, his parody of himself need not be taken literally down to the last detail because it may be a sort of tactful preambuling to make short the story of *Sir Thopas*, which he meant to be a parody of Middle English metrical romance. He, as a character of his own tale, can barely summon a tale to mind, but when he does, the result is *rym dogerel*

of *verray lewednesse*—so much so that Harry Bailly (the Host of the pilgrimage to Canterbury) finally cuts in, quipping: *thy drasty ryming is nat worth a torrd* (“your foul rhyming is not worth a turd (dung)”). He was, after all, not in the least “shy” of being the subject of his own satire or parody.

By no means is this to say that whenever such a hybrid construction is found in the poet’s works, there is to be detected some kind of “intention.” Similar constructions appear elsewhere without any satirical innuendo. In such cases, perhaps he used them unwittingly: as we have already seen, such constructions seem to have been in popular use in his days anyway, as well in prose as in poetry. The point I have been driving at is that, when he deemed it relevant and pertinent, the poet never shrank from a satirical rendering of his own idea that was to end up looking strange, and even foolish, like a defeated straggler in the battlefield of sound and sense.

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## Hybrid Impersonal Constructions: The Battlefield of Sound and Sense

Abstract

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Throughout its history the English language has seen a series of convulsions among impersonal verbs whereby some of them fell out of the word hoard while others survived either by recasting themselves into ordinary (personal) verbs or by taking on the form of stock phrases. The process of transition from an impersonal to a personal verb often involved a situation in which a potential pseudo-subject (or logical subject) in an oblique case promotes to the status of genuine (nominative) subject, demoting what was previously the syntactic subject to an oblique case. Sometimes, however, the process of reshuffling got checked by the strong tension between the impersonal and the personal forces of the verb that are tightly pitted against each other, neither winning over the other. While the contest was pending in that fashion and the grammar of the language has not yet arrived so far in development as to settle the matter, arbitrary compromises are effected between the contenders, often eventuating in peculiar constructions. Our discussion centers around a group of such peculiar constructions, touching on some points that, despite previous studies, still seem to beg clarification or at least redefinition.

**Key Words**

the concept of “impersonal”, subjecthood and case shifting, the semantics of the genitive, concealed subject, hybrid constructions, double dative constructions, frozen verbal forms, satirical mimesis

논문 투고 일자 : 2009. 11. 30

게재 확정 일자 : 2010. 2. 11