Prominence Theory : An Approach to the Impersonal-to-Personal Shift in OE and ME

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1. Introduction

This paper attempts to account for the mechanism of the impersonal-to-personal shift in English under the framework of prominence theory (Grimshaw 1990). Beginning with a brief illustration by Jespersen (1927) more than a century ago, the history of impersonal constructions in Old English (OE) and Middle English (ME) has been of great interest to researchers. They are particularly concerned with the fact that almost all the 'impersonal' constructions in OE and ME either disappeared from the language or changed to 'personal' constructions by the Modern English (ModE) period. Traditionally, the causes of such loss and shift have been considered to be the rigidification of SVO order and the loss of nominal and verbal inflections (Lightfoot 1979: 230). If it is true that some of the impersonal constructions are characterized as 'subjectless' and that the transition to personal constructions involves newly assigning nominative cases to non-subject arguments (in most cases they are dative or accusative), then this phenomenon is a typical case of syntactic reanalysis. In fact, a large number of scholars have applied this reanalysis to the study of the transition of impersonal constructions in English.

More recently, however, a view of thematic roles such as experiencer and theme has been a central focus in dealing with this issue (cf. Fischer and Van der Leek 1983, Allen 1986, 1995). It is interesting to note that along with the impersonal-to-personal change the verb *like* underwent a semantic shift from 'cause pleasure to' to 'receive pleasure from' as well (Jespersen 1927: 209). In the view of Grimshaw (1990) the shift from causative to receptive is concerned with aspect. In other words, the shift from impersonal to personal constructions in English can be described as involving no change in the core meaning of the verb itself. Following Katamba's (1993: 261) view that "theta-roles change from verb to verb, or rather from verb sense to verb sense," one may well say that reanalysis involving thematic roles should not have occurred in this particular transition. Given this, I propose that the contrast between 'causative' and 'receptive' is well represented in Grimshaw's aspectual analysis of two distinct classes of psychological verbs (*fear* and *frighten*). If we follow the view that most of the impersonal verbs express personal experiences or mental activity which are characteristics of psychological verbs (cf. McCawley 1976), then it is likely that the approach proposed by Grimshaw can also account for the mechanism of the transition of impersonal to personal constructions that took place in the history of English.

Bearing in mind the key roles that the thematic roles play in the impersonal-to-personal shift in English

the discussions in this paper center on the two questions given below:

(i) What types of thematic roles are assumed to play a central role in the analysis of the arguments of the impersonal constructions in OE and ME?

(ii) How did the transition or loss of these distinct constructions in the late ME or ModE period affect the configuration of the thematic roles of arguments?

The structure of the paper is as follows. In section 2, I illustrate the characteristics of the impersonal construction in OE and ME, adding that only some fossilized forms of impersonal verbs remain in ModE. In section 3, I review previous studies discussing the impersonal-to-personal transition in view of syntactic and thematic re-analysis. In section 4, I introduce the idea of Externalization (Williams 1981), pointing to the validity of applying the theory of argument structure to the study of this issue. In section 5 and 6, I propose that the concept of prominence associated with aspect (Grimshaw 1990), which is originally introduced to account for the contrastive syntactic realizations of *fear* and *frighten,* explains the impersonal-to-personal shift in terms of aspect, particularly paying extra focus to the Cause, the one that ranks highest in aspectual hierarchy.

2. Impersonal constructions in the history of English

In OE there were a noticeable group of verbs called 'impersonal.'

(1) behofian 'require', eglian 'trouble', langian 'long for', tweogan 'seem doubtful', þyrstan 'thirst'

Sentences with an impersonal verb are distinct in the following three respects: (i) impersonal constructions lack a grammatical subject, (ii) impersonal verbs are always in the third person singular and (iii) the 'experiencer' argument is represented by the dative or accusative case and the 'cause' argument', if present, is usually represented by the accusative or the genitive, or rather occasionally, is used as a prepositional object. The cause is most commonly in the genitive case, but occasionally in the accusative case or in a prepositional phrase. The examples given by Anderson (1986: 167-168), some of which I quote below, illustrate these characteristics:

(2) a. Me   hingrode.
        I-dat./acc.   hungered-3rd sg
        'I was hungry.'

b. Him   ðæs   sceamode.
   he-dat.sg/pl.   that-gen.sg.   shame-3rd sg.
   'He was ashamed of that.'

c. Menn   scamaþ   for godan dædan swyðor
   man-dat.sg./acc.pl.   shame-3rd sg.   for   good   deeds   more
   ðnne for misdædan.
   than   for   misdeeds
   'A man is more ashamed of his good deeds than his bad deeds.'

It has been pointed out that there are two additional impersonal constructions in OE, which are structurally different from the subjectless construction illustrated above (Fischer and Van der Leek 1983, Allen 1986). The first one is characterized as involving subject-verb agreement in which the cause appears in the nominative case. The OE verb *lician* belongs to this type of construction, while the experiencer is either in the dative or accusative case. Semantically, the verb is characterized by signifying 'causativeness'.

(3) þu   scealt on æghwylce tid Godes willa wercan, þæt an
    thou   shalt   at   all   time God's will   perform   that one
    þe   is   selost þæt þu (NOM)   Gode (DAT)   licie.
    that is   best   that you   God   please
    'You must always work according to God's will and so that one thing that is
    best, that is to please God.'

                                                     (Fischer and Van der Leek 1983: 351)

The second type of construction is quite different from the other two types in that the experiencer is invariably in the nominative case.

(4) þu   eart sunu min leof, on þe   ic (NOM) wel   licade.
    thou   are   son   my   love   in   whom I   well   had affection
    'Thou art my dear son, whom I liked very much.'

                                                     (Fischer and Van der Leek 1983: 352)

Note that the causative meaning of *lician* shifts to a receptive one. In strict terms, the verbs used in this type of construction should no longer be considered impersonal. As illustrated by the fact that the verb *like* can be used both in cause-subject constructions and experiencer-subject constructions, a large number of impersonal verbs can be characterized as occurring in more than one type of construction.

Impersonal constructions continue to be used in ME. Allen claims that "it is quite clear...that the 'impersonal' constructions were not obsolescent in the thirteenth century" (1995: 226). In fact, some of the OE impersonal verbs did fall into disuse during the course of the ME period. The gap, however, was filled in turn either by virtue of 'impersonalization' of a few OE personal verbs or the incorporation of Old French and Old Norse borrowings into the impersonal class. Examples in (5) illustrate this point.

(5) a.   dremen 'dream' (< OE dreman)

Me   drempte,   ic stod   at a wintre.

'I dreamed that I stood in a winter.'

b.   greven 'grieve' (< OF grever)

Me grevez   þat   þou nelt havve reu þe in þi þougt.

'I grieved that thou will not have troubled thyself in thy thought.'

c.   wanten 'be deficient' (< ON vanta)

Hem þor-of be wante now.

'They are deficient of that now.'

These newly introduced impersonal verbs lend support to Allen's claim that "new verbs, both borrowed and native, entered into all these (impersonal) constructions in EME (i.e. Early Modern English)" (1995: 226, words in parentheses added).

Towards the end of the ME period, however, these distinctive constructions became less frequent and by the mid-sixteenth century had become obsolete (Lightfoot 1979: 229). This is partly because some impersonal verbs simply disappeared from English and partly because others changed to personal verbs. In ModE no impersonal constructions remain except for some archaisms (e.g. *methinks* 'it seems to me') or idiomatic expressions (e.g. *if you please* 'if you like'), both of which date back to OE.

3. Previous studies of the impersonal-to-personal transition in English

Jespersen (1927) provides hypothetical stages in which the verb *like* came to be used as receptive rather than causative in the course of the English history, suggesting that case reanalysis involving subject and dative is responsible for the shift from impersonal to personal. Based on a more detailed discussion of this issue Lightfoot (1979: 230) concludes that the leveling of the case markings and the fixing of SVO are two main factors for the shift (see Matsuzaki 2004: 29; cf. Lightfoot 1981). The so-called syntactic reanalysis has been a central theoretical framework in dealing with the impersonal-to-personal shift in English (cf. Butler 1977,

Lightfoot 1979).

The view of the verb *like* presented in Fischer and Van der Leek (1983) is worth mentioning in that they admit of no syntactic reanalysis approach in explaining why the object experiencer with *like* came to be construed as the subject. In view of the fact that constructions with a nominative experiencer already existed in OE (cf. Allen 1986: 384), Fischer and Van der Leek (1983: 356-7) suggest that many impersonal verbs were simply lost, rather than assuming that they changed to personal verbs. In this view Fischer and Van der Leek propose a single lexical entry for impersonal verbs including *like,* as schematized below by Allen (1986: 385), indicating that the verbs assign case to their arguments 'optionally'.

（6） NP NP ___

$\qquad$ NP: DATIVE; θ-role: experiencer

$\qquad$ NP: GENITIVE; θ-role: cause

While the concept of 'optionality' may require more scrutiny, it is more interesting to note here that θ-roles as well as syntactic cases are a focus of their study.

Fischer and Van der Leek (1987) further examine the argument structures of impersonal constructions in detail, suggesting that reanalyzing impersonal verbs as personal involves a change in the lexical entry from two internal theta-roles to one external and one internal theta-role (This reanalysis theory is called the 'Externalization of the Experiencer' as termed by Williams (1981) and I will return to this point below). Furthermore, Fischer and Van der Leek assert that the case alternations of arguments which can be detected between impersonal and personal constructions are alternations between arguments and non-argument NPs (1987: 102). This suggests that there might be a change in the number of arguments in the process of the alternations between impersonal and personal constructions. In the sections that follow I examine argument structures associated with impersonal verbs, proposing eventually that the impersonal-to-personal shift in English involves a change of aspectual prominence in the arguments of an impersonal verb.

4. Externalization of internal argument

The distinction between external and internal has been crucial to the study of argument structure (Williams 1981; Grimshaw 1990; Spencer 1991). The external argument is a NP which is outside the maximal projection of its predicate and is generally realized as the subject. The internal argument, on the other hand, must be c-commanded by the predicate and it is realized as a non-subject NP (i.e. mainly as the object). Williams (1981: 92) states that there are several parameterized operations on given argument structures, which yield new argument structures. One of the operations is called Externalization, which affects an internal argument and changes it into an external one. Consider the following example provided by Williams (1981: 93).

(7)　E (Th): read (<u>A</u>, Th)　　　readable (A, <u>Th</u>)

This illustrates that with the derivational process from *read* to *readable* the internal 'Theme' is externalized by virtue of the parameter E (Th).

Given the fact that Externalization involves thematic roles such as agent and experiencer I propose the possibility of applying it to the impersonal-to-personal shift in the history of English. Specifically, the subject-less construction observed above apparently undergoes Externalization when it shifts to the experiencer-subject construction. Accordingly, I posit that the process should be schematized as follows:

(8)　E (Exp):　OE　*lician*　　　(Exp)　　　ModE　*like*　　(<u>Exp</u>)
　　　　　　　　　　　　<IMPERSONAL>　　　　　　　　　　<PERSONAL>

The cause-subject construction, on the other hand, undergoes the Externalization of the Experiencer as it demonstrates the interchanging of the cases (i.e. subject and dative) between the Experiencer and the Cause. The problem with Externalization associated with the latter, however, is that the operation would not adequately account for the rationale behind the internalization of the Cause. In the following section I review prominence theory proposed by Grimshaw (1990), suggesting that the concept of aspect may serve to solve the problem.

5.　Prominence theory

Investigating the configuration of internal and external arguments Grimshaw (1990) proposes that an argument structure be constructed depending on a thematic hierarchy as given below.

(9)　(Agent (Experiencer (Goal/Source/Location (Theme))))

Crucially, the hierarchy demonstrates that the highest ranked argument in a sentence (i.e. Agent) is considered the external argument, which in turn is realized as the most syntactically prominent argument, that is the subject. The thematic hierarchy alone, however, does not explain the contradictory syntactic behaviors that the two psychological verbs *frighten* and *fear* demonstrate. Compare (10) and (11).

(10)　Man fears God.
(11)　God frightens man.

The argument structures of (10) and (11) consist of the two arguments: Experiencer and Theme (cf. Belletti and Rizzi 1988: 291). In accordance with the thematic hierarchy the Experiencer *man* is assumed to be real-

ized as the subject in both sentences, which is not the case with (11). Obviously, the verb *frighten* plays a central role in making (11) violate the hierarchy principle. Therefore, the problem that needs to be addressed here is how we can account for the semantic characteristics of *frighten* which allow the Theme to be realized as the subject.

Given the irregular behavior of *frighten,* Grimshaw (1990) points out the limitation of applying thematic reanalysis to the analysis of psychological verbs, suggesting the introduction of an additional semantic analysis in terms of aspect. Along the lines of the thematic hierarchy Grimshaw posits an additional hierarchy, as illustrated below:

⑿   (Cause (other (...)))

Crucially, Grimshaw introduces the concept of prominence, arguing that both hierarchies are determined by the degree of prominence. That is, the higher an argument is ranked the more prominent it is. Most importantly, the prominence relation associated with the aspectual hierarchy takes precedence over the thematic hierarchy. Note that the verb *frighten* is causative since sentence (11) can be paraphrased as follows:

⒀   God caused man to experience fear.

In this view, Theme *God* in (11), viewed as Cause, is most prominent aspectually, and thus is realized as subject, although it is less prominent thematically than the Experiencer *man.* On the other hand, since *fear* is stative, *God* in (10) is a non-cause Theme, which is the thematically least prominent. Instead, the Experiencer *man* is considered more prominent and thus is realized as the subject. In other words, the syntactic configuration of the arguments in sentence (10) is determined based solely on the thematic hierarchy. If we assume that the causative and receptive meanings of *like* in Jespersen's hypothetical model are equivalent to those of the *frighten* and *fear* classes respectively, then the prominence approach illustrated above may well be applied to the study of the causative-to-receptive shift in English.

6. Application of prominence theory to Old and Middle English impersonal constructions

Grimshaw's prominence approach is, as illustrated above, primarily aimed towards psychological verbs (*frighten* and *fear* classes). It seems that the prominence approach bears a strong relevance to OE impersonal constructions since most OE impersonal verbs consist of psychological verbs. For instance, the relationship between the causative *frighten* and the stative *fear* is discernible in the dual meanings of OE *lican* and ME *licien.* In the preceding section we observed that the difference in aspectual prominence determines the realiza-

tions of the subjects in *frighten*-class and *fear*-class constructions. Returning to OE and ME impersonal constructions the change in the realization of the subject from impersonal to personal seems correlated to the semantic shift from causative to receptive. Compare the following schemata as adapted from Grimshaw (1990: 28).

(14) causative OE *lician* / ME *licien*

　　　　　　　(Exp (Theme))

　　　　　　　　2　　1

(15) receptive OE *lician* / ME *licien*

　　　　　　　(Exp (Theme))

　　　　　　　　1　　2　　　(1 = aspectually more prominent; 2 = aspectually less prominent)

The prominence relations in (14) and (15) are identical to those of *frighten* and *fear* both thematically and aspectually. Given this, my claim is that during the period of impersonal-to-personal shift in ME, starting in the early thirteenth century and being completed by the mid-sixteenth century, the speakers might have come to regard the Experiencer of causative *licien* 'to please' as more prominent. I assume that this change of recognition led to aspectual reanalysis, thus establishing a new schema for the causative *licien,* which eventually became identical to the schema for the receptive *licien* in the end.

(16) causative　　OE *lician*　/　ME *licien*

　　　　　　　(Exp (Theme))　　(Exp (Theme)) = (15)

　　　　　　　　2　　1　　　　　1　　2

This reanalyzed schema will account for a few other OE verbs such as *to langian* 'cause/feel longing for' and *to sceamian* 'to cause/feel shame for', which had undergone the same causative-to-receptive change.

7. Conclusion

　　Initially I expected the following two questions concerning the thematic relations of arguments in impersonal constructions in OE and ME to be provided with appropriate answers:

(ii) What types of theta roles are assumed to play a central role in the analysis of the arguments of the impersonal constructions in OE and ME?

(ii) How did the transition or loss of these distinct constructions in the late ME or ModE period affect the configuration of the thematic roles of arguments?

Concerning the first question, we found that the Experiencer and Theme are the essential theta roles associated with impersonal constructions, particularly in dealing with the transition from impersonal to personal throughout the OE and ME periods. Specifically, the semantic shift of the verb *like* from 'cause pleasure to' to 'receive pleasure from' affects the syntactic realizations of each argument; the causative meaning of the verb has to do with the realization of the Theme as the subject, whereas the receptive meaning of the verb has to do with the realization of the Experiencer as the subject.

With regard to the second question I first illustrated three types of impersonal constructions involving different constituents of arguments, suggesting the possibility that the addition or loss of arguments had taken place following the shift from impersonal to personal constructions. After reviewing syntactic and thematic approaches to this issue, I proposed that the impersonal-to-personal shift basically involves the Externalization of the internal arguments. I attempted to adopt Grimshaw's prominence theory specifically to account for the relationship between the semantic shift and the syntactic case reanalysis. In consequence, I concluded that the verb *like* underwent the shift from 'causative' to 'receptive' because a shift in aspectual prominence might have occurred to this type of verb.

Notes

1   In my previous study I argued that the French borrowing *please* played a part in the shift of *like* from an impersonal verb to a personal one (see Matsuzaki 2004).

2   What is more drastic about their alternation theory is that Fischer and Van der Leek (1987) disapprove of assigning any argument status to the NPs with dative or genitive case as well as prepositional phrase. As a concluding remark, Fischer and Van der Leek go as far as to claim that "OE impersonal verbs...do not require theta-role bearing NPs" (1987: 112). Their claim, however, calls for further consideration because it is most unlikely that we will find sentences with no theta-role bearing NPs. Further discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this paper.

3   The concept of hierarchy involving thematic roles is first introduced by Jackendoff (1972). The labels of the thematic roles vary depending on scholars. Foley and Van Valin (1984: 29), for instance, arrange the thematic roles under the polarity between ACTOR and UNDERGOER.

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