A Study of Impersonal Verbs in Middle English

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I

Among the grammatical constructions that give difficulty to beginning students of Middle English is the so-called impersonal construction, as in:

(1) thogh him gamed or smerte (Chaucer GenProl 534)
    = 'although to-him pleased or caused pain'
(2) Me reweth soore of hende Nicholas (Ch. MillT 3462: Visser)
    = 'to-me rues sorely of gentle Nicholas'

in which there seem to be no subjects expressed. Sentences like (1)–(2) are not sporadic but of very frequent occurrence. And there are also found sentences with overt subjects which contain the same set of verbs and seem somehow related to subjectless sentences like (1)–(2). Then impersonal and related constructions must be systematically accounted for to secure the understanding of the language of the period.

Most traditional handbooks of Middle English grammar or historical English syntax have a section on the impersonal construction. Concentrating generally on the description of a striking set of historical changes in the 'surface' form of the construction, however, they have not given us a satisfactory characterization of impersonal verbs as a class. Some mentioned the presence or absence of the formal subject *it* and/or forms of the associated (pro) noun (e.g., Curme 1947: 99, van der Gaaf 1904: 40)
Others started with the lexical meaning of the verb, e.g., denoting natural or external events or states or actions of the human mind (Kellner 1892: 205–206). The former approach, however, is not very revealing in itself, because the same verb occurs in different constructions and there seem to be no significant meaning differences associated with differences in form. The latter, on the other hand, does not account for the ways in which various variant forms are produced. What is necessary for a satisfactory account of impersonal verbs is the integration of the syntactic and semantic information.

The purpose of the present paper, then, is to re-examine the semantic and syntactic characteristics of impersonal verbs in fourteenth-century Middle English. In what follows, I will attempt, first, to uncover the underlying common semantic property shared by impersonal verbs (without such shared property, the question of why these verbs manifest the same set of surface form variations would have to be explained simply as accidental), secondly, to set up subclasses within the category of impersonal verbs and, finally, to describe how differences in the surface structure are brought about.

The framework of analysis and description adopted in this study is based on the case grammar theory developed by Charles J. Fillmore in "The Case for Case" (1968a). The possibility of applying the case grammar model to the problem of the impersonal construction is pointed out by Fillmore in (1966: 374, 1968a: 40–41) and pursued by Elizabeth Closs Traugott in A History of English Syntax (1972). Traugott's work, however, attempts to cover the entire period of English syntax and the account of the impersonal construction is inevitably very brief and sketchy. It is hoped that this study will shed some new light on the problem.
In the case model the sentence in its basic structure\textsuperscript{2} is viewed as consisting of a verb and one or more noun phrases, each associated with the verb in a particular case relationship (Fillmore 1968a: 21). These relational cases usually consist of the Agent, the Instrument, the Experiencer, the Patient, etc.\textsuperscript{3} From among the cases associated with a particular verb, one case is selected, in accordance to certain rules, as the subject of a sentence, and another as the object if the verb is transitive. Thus no semantically constant value is associated with the notions ‘subject’ and ‘object’ (Fillmore 1966: 368). They are exclusively surface structure phenomena.

Operating in this general framework, Fillmore (1968b: 389–392) itemizes those facts that a satisfactory description of a verb will have to account for. Those of importance for our purpose are summarized as follows:

1. the basic or central sense of a verb
2. the number and the nature of associated cases
   a. conceptually inherent to the basic sense of the verb
   b. compatible with the verb in a simple sentence
3. details of surface realizations of associated cases
   a. which of the cases need to be expressed and which can be suppressed
   b. which cases can show up as the subject of a sentence, which as direct object
   c. what prepositions go with which noun phrases

The basis for grouping certain verbs together as impersonal is to be found in their essential similarity concerning these points and, at the same time, we should be able to recognize subclasses within the category ‘impersonal’
according to systematic regularities and irregularities operating in con-
structions involving these verbs.

III

The impersonal verb⁴ is an inherently two-place predicate, that is, con-
ceptually associated with two cases, the Experiencer and the Patient. The Experiencer case refers to the animate being (or the personified in-
animate) that passively experiences, and is affected by, a situation indi-
cated by the verb.⁵ The Patient case names some motive or stimulus which served to bring about the situation.⁶

See the following examples:

(3) \( \text{they [= youre weyes] shuln displese yow} \) (Ch. ParsT 140)
\[
\text{Pat Exp}
\]
\( = \text{they [= your ways] shall displease you} \)

(4) \( \text{here preyer avayleth nat to the peple} \) (Ch. ParsT 894)
\[
\text{P E}
\]
\( = \text{their prayer (does not) avail ( ) ( ) the people} \)

(5) \( \text{hym happede, par chaunce, That... pleyynge atte hasard he hem fond} \)
\[
\text{E P}
\]
\( = \text{‘to-him happened, by chance, that... playing at hazard (a game of} \)
\( \text{dice) he them found’} \)

In (3) you ought to experience a state of displeasure because of your ways.
In (4) their prayer does not bring about a favorable situation for the peo-
ple. In (5) he was affected by fortuity. What triggered it is the event indicated in the that-clause. It should be noticed that, whereas the Expe-
riencer is always a simple noun phrase, the Patient may be realized by
either a simple noun phrase or a nominalized embedded sentence.

In (3)–(5) the inherent cases both appear in the surface structure. In
general, however, either the Experiencer or the Patient, but not both, can be suppressed or deleted when referring to a generic or non-specific being or object. (6)–(7) are the examples of the Patient deletion:

(6) althogh hym soore smerte (Ch. GenProl 230)

= ‘although to-him sorely cause pain’

(7) whan be hungred (Langland P. Pl. B XIV 49: Viss.)

= ‘when to-you hungers’

In (6)–(7) he and you are in the states of suffering and of hunger, respectively. The Patient is not given a surface realization because in (6) it is non-specific, something like ‘general circumstances under which he is found,’ and in (7) it is some noun phrase representing a typical noun phrase for the verb, something like ‘the absence of food in your stomach.’

In (8)–(9) the Experiencer is deleted because it is a noun phrase representing a generic unseified person:

(8) it were bettre dwelle in desert than with a womman that is riotous

(Ch. Mel 1087)

= ‘it would-be better (to) dwell in desert than with a woman that is riotous’

(9) ther neden none ensamples of this (Ch. ParsT 927)

= ‘there need no examples of this’

Now, according to their central or basic sense, impersonal verbs are classified into at least three subclasses, in each of which there can be seen some modification of the basic relationship between the Experiencer and the Patient. The first subclass consists of verbs of psychological event like *lyken, plesen, lothen, gamen, repenten,* etc. Verbs involving judgment like *apertenen, availen, suffysen, wanten, neden,* etc. constitute another group. The third subclass consists of such verbs of fortuity as *bifallen, happen (en), bityden, mistyden.*
The character of the Patient as motive or stimulus is perhaps most evident in the first subclass. In most examples containing verbs of this group, the Patient is an abstract noun phrase. See the noun phrase “youre weyes” in (3). Sentences like (10):

(10) me meruailles of my boke (Brunne Chron. Wace 65: Viss.)

= ‘to-me marvels of my book’

appear to contain the Patient realized by a concrete noun phrase. Nevertheless, we could argue in this case also that we have an underlying abstract Patient, that is, ‘the quality (or excellence, etc.) of my book is astonishing to me.’ If a Patient noun phrase is abstract, it is also inanimate and intentionless. An abstract motive does not intentionally bring a given situation into existence.

Problem arises, however, when we have an animate being as Patient, as in:

(11) eek a womman ne myghte nat plese to many folk at oones (Ch. ParsT 923)

= ‘also a woman ( ) could not please (to) many folk at once’

A woman can be an intentional agent of an activity of pleasing people. Then is (11) not an example with an impersonal verb? In fact the sentence (11) is ambiguous. It could mean either that even the personality (or beauty, etc.) of a woman cannot be pleasing to many people at once or that she cannot intentionally make many people pleased at once. In the former interpretation, underlying the apparent animate noun phrase “a womman” is an abstract noun phrase. In the latter interpretation, we have to assume that “a womman” is simultaneously the Patient (the source of pleasure) and the Agent (responsible for giving pleasure to people), thus assuming a double role. Sentences like (12)–(13) with manner expressions:
and he that loveth God, he wol doon diligence to plese God by his
— 'and he that loves God, (he) will do diligence to please God by his
werkes (Ch. ParsT 713)
works'

(13) whan men axen hym how that men sholde plese the peple, and he
— 'when men ask him how ( ) men should please the people, and
answerde, “Do manye goode werkes, and spek fewe jangles.” (ch.
ParsT 650)

he answered, “Do many good works, and speak few idle talks”

seem to support this view, because manner expressions are generally as-
associated with an intentional agent of some action.

Thus verbs in the first subclass are normally associated with an ab-
stract Patient, and when they co-occur with an animate Patient in the
surface structure, it is to be interpreted either as derived from an under-
lying abstract noun phrase or in a Patient-Agent double function.

It is not easy to find a good name for the second subclass of impersonal
verbs. It seems, however, that these verbs do not generally allow the
Patient to be suppressed and express a judgment on the relationship be-
tween the two associated cases. The Experiencer is the reference point
against which the value of the Patient, the starting point of judgment, is
to be weighed. Thus, in the sentence:

(14) For sothe it aperteneth nat to a wys man to make swich a sorne
(Ch. Mel 981)

— 'for sooth (truly) it (does not) appertain ( ) to a wise man to
make such a sorrow'

the verb indicates that the act of making such a sorrow is not suitable
for a wise man. He should not be affected by such an act. In the sen-
tence:
(15) thee is bettre holde thy tonge stille than for to speke  (Ch. Mel 1219)

= 'to-you is better (to) hold your tongue still than ( ) to speak'

we are told that holding your tongue is better for you than speaking, i.e.,
that the former act, and not the latter, should be experienced by you.

In connection with the second subclass, the following sentences are in-
teresting:

(16) it is a woodnesse a man to stryue with a strenger or a moore

= 'it is a madness (for) a man to strive with a stranger or a ( )
myghty man than he is hymself  (Ch. Mel 1481)
mightier man than he is himself'

(17) if it be a foul thyng a man to waste his catel on wommen  (Ch. ParsT 849)

= 'if it be a foul thing (for) a man to waste his property on women'

In (16)–(17) the noun phrase before the infinitive may be taken as the sub-
ject of the infinitive. If this is correct, the more basic structure of (16) is
[it is a woodnesse [a man to stryue...]], where "a man" is part of the
nominalized embedded sentence, rather than [it is a woodnesse a man [to
stryue...]], where "a man" is outside of the embedded sentence. This
analysis, however, can be refuted on several grounds. First of all, there
is one very general characteristic about the construction under discussion:
it always involves nouns denoting ethical judgment which require an ani-
mate noun phrase as a reference point. Aside from this deep structure
semantic consideration, there is supporting evidence in the form of the
surface structure. The animate noun phrase in the relevant construction
can occur with the preposition which indicates the direction toward the
Experiencer, e.g.:
(18) for it is a greet shame to a man to have a povre herte and a riche
   = 'for it is a great shame to a man to have a poor heart and a rich
   purs (Ch. Mel 1604)
   purse'

(19) It is a greet worship to a man to kepen hym fro noyse and styrf
   (Ch. Mel 1485)
   = 'it is a great worship (honorable thing) for a man to keep himself
   from noise and strife'

To is the preposition generally associated with the Experiencer case (Fillmore 1968a: 32). Emmon Bach (1968) has suggested reasons for treating nouns as predicates. Whether or not predicate nominal constructions can be uniformly treated as verbs of the nominal type, it is clear that certain nouns with emotional overtones occur in the same construction as other impersonal verbs of judgment.

In the second group of impersonal verbs, the Patient could be either concrete or abstract. In sentences like "me nedeth a boke" ('a book is necessary for me') or "robes they lakken" ('they lack robes'), it is hard to regard the Patient as derived from an underlying abstract noun phrase. Even if we have an animate Patient, we cannot regard it as in a double role as in the group of psychological event verbs. Thus in:

(20) hym wanted audience (Ch. Mel 1046)
   = 'to-him lacked audience'

audience do not intentionally cause the state of lack. The verb simply
denotes that audience may be advantageous to him but are not there for
him.

In the third subclass of impersonal verbs the Patient is always abstract
and the Experiencer is characteristically the goal toward which the Pa-
tient is directed. In this connection it is interesting to see that fallen
occurs also as a verb of motion which is conceptually associated with a
goal noun phrase and that in Modern English *come*, a typical verb of mo-
tion, occurs in an expression of fortuity, as in "he came upon/ across a
bear in the woods." (cf. Kageyama (1973: 67)). It might be the case that
an Experiencer-Patient relationship in verbs of fortuity and a Source-Goal
relationship in verbs of motion are two manifestations of one and the
same principle. But it is beyond the scope of the present study to go
fully into this question, because verbs of motion do not manifest syntactic
characteristics of impersonal verbs. Therefore I merely point out the
observation and leave the question open.

IV

Now we turn to an account of the ways in which the cases associated
with the impersonal verb are given surface manifestations. I will concen-
trate on those sentences in which both the Experiencer and the Patient
are overtly realized.

As mentioned in II, the notions 'subject' and 'object' are now regarded
as exclusively surface structure phenomena. In Modern English one of
the cases must be selected as the subject of a sentence or, in Fillmore's
term, 'subjectivalized.' In Old English most of the verbs which can have
the Experiencer as the only associated case either rarely or never allow
subjectivalization to occur (Traugott 1972: 81). Therefore the Experiencer
generally remains nonsubjectivalized. Old English sentences like "him
þyrstede" ('to-him thirsted'), "him speow" ('to-him succeeded'), etc. are
without subjects." In the available texts, the Experiencer normally pre-
cedes the verb when subjectivalization does not occur.
Such subjectless sentences continued to occur in fourteenth-century Middle English, as in:

(21) *me remembreth of the day of doom* (Ch. ParsT 159)

   = ‘to-me remembers of the day of judgment’

(22) *hym ne wanteth somwhat of the perceioun of God* (Ch. Mel 1080)

   = ‘to-him (does) not lack somewhat of the perfection of God’

(23) for certes, lord, so wel *us liketh yow* (Ch. CIT 106–107: Viss.)

   = ‘for certainly, lord, so well to-us pleases about-you’

(24) thy children ask of thy persone *thynge* that *hem nedeth* (Ch. Mel 1059)

   = ‘your children ask of your person things that to-them needs’

In (21)–(23) both the Experiencer and the Patient are realized obliquely. *Yow* in (23) is oblique too. The distinction between the nominative *ye* and the objective *you* was not lost until the sixteenth century (Pyles 1964: 202). (24) is interesting because the singular verb from “nedeth” clearly indicates that the noun phrase “thynge” is not subjectivized. It must be also noticed that in all of (21)–(24) the Experiencer noun phrase precedes the verb. Indeed it is this fact that enables us to determine which noun phrase, “us” or “yow”, is the Experiencer in (23).

In the following sentences

(25) *hym shal yvel bityde* (Ch. Mel 1317)

   = ‘to-him shall evil betide’

(26) *hym wanted audience* (= (20))

there are no formal clues to tell us whether or not “yvel” and “audience” are surface subjects. I am inclined to consider they are not, however. In the course of Middle English, the front position became more and more usual for the subject (van der Gaaf 1904: 142) and it seems that if the
Experiencer does occur in this position for stylistic or metrical reasons in a sentence with an overt subject, it must be preceded by a preposition, as in:

(27) to the hit oughte ynogh suffise, that Love so high a grace to yow
      = 'to you it ought enoueg suffice that Love so high a grace to you sent  (Ch. Compl. Venus 65: OED)
      sent'

(28) And eke to me it ys a gret penaunce... To folowe word by word
      = 'and also to me it is a great penance to follow word by word
      the curiosite of Graunson  (Ch. Compl. Venus 79–82)
      the skill of Gronson'

(29) Unto the body anoyeth it [=the synne] grevously  (Ch. ParsT 848)
      = 'to the body annoys it [=the sin] grievously'

The fact that the oblique noun phrase unaccompanied by a preposition precedes the verb in (25)–(26) is perhaps an indication of the fossilized nature of nonsubjectivalized constructions.

Thus impersonal (nonsubjectivalized) sentences, carried over from Old English, continued in currency throughout the fourteenth century. However, the pressure of position (the left-most noun phrase of a sentence is usually the subject) led to another principle halfway advanced toward subjectivalization, that is, supplying a dummy space filler it, whose sole function is to fill the subject slot ('pseudo-subjectivalization' in Traugott's term). Examples are:

(30) It liketh hym at wrastlyyng for to be  (Ch. PF 165)
      = 'it pleases him at wrestling ( ) to be'

(31) it were leveful unto me To be refresshed half so ofte as he  (Ch. WBT Prol 37–38)
      = 'it would-be permissible for me to be refreshed half so often as he'
(32)  it wol nat availlen hym, though he wolde repenten hym  \hspace{1em}  (Ch. ParsT 693)

= 'it will not avail him, though he would repent (himself)'

In (32) the concessive clause achieves the same effect as a \textit{that}-clause. It must be noticed that in these examples the Experiencer noun phrase immediately follows, rather than precedes, the verb. In Modern English sentences, any noun phrase that has not already been assigned to subject position is placed after the verb. Thus (30)–(32) conform to the modern word order. Presumably sentences like "it hym liketh to..." would be ungrammatical in Middle English too. I have not encountered any such instance.

There is a difference from Modern English practice, however. In Modern English, whether or not a post-verbal noun phrase occurs with a preposition depends on the verb. That is, some verbs take on a 'direct object' and are 'transitive', while others require an oblique prepositional phrase and are 'intransitive'. \textit{Await}, for instance, is transitive and \textit{wait} intransitive. However, 'transitive' or 'intransitive' does not play a major role in Middle English verb categorization. The presence or absence of a preposition in a nonsubjectivalized noun phrase is largely optional (cf. Tables 1 and 2 below). In parallel with sentences like (16)–(17), even adjectival verbs, as in (31), may occur without a preposition, e. g.:

(33)  it is not leueful \textit{men} to sette hem to serue God in contemptatyue

= 'it is not premissible (for) men to set themselves to serve God in liif, bot 3if...  \hspace{1em}  (Cl. of Unknowing 57: 7–8)

contemplative life, unless...'

In (30)–(33) the Patient is realized by an infinitive or a clause. It is not clear whether the pseudo-subject \textit{it} is employed when the Patient is not a nominalized embedded sentence but a simple noun phrase. In the sentence
(34) ther bhoveth greet corage agains Accidie (Ch. ParsT 731)

＝'there behoves great courage against sloth'

“ther” is non-locative. Visser mentions the use of non-locative there where it is expected (1963: 52). The sentence

(35) And therfore it suffisith me Her goode herte and her beaute (Ch. Rom 6005–6006: OED)

＝'and therefore it suffices me her good heart and her beauty'

seems to involve pseudo-subjectivalization with a non-sentential Patient.

At any rate, for scarcity of examples we cannot determine whether (34)–(35) are sporadic or examples of a productive pattern.

Conceivably the purely formal subject it is provided by copying and subsequent pro replacement in the sense of Fillmore (Fillmore 1968a: 41). In Modern English the ‘verb’ true occurs with the embedded sentence. A nominalized embedded sentence is copied in the subject position, giving us a structure like the following:

(36) that John loves Mary is true that John loves Mary

This structure undergoes either right copy deletion or left copy pro replacement, ultimately yielding (37) and (38) respectively:

(37) that John loves Mary is true
(38) it is true that John loves Mary

In fourteenth-century Middle English the second method of supplying subjects is the general rule. It is doubtful whether there is any genuine example of the first method in Middle English (Visser 1963: 25–26).

Visser reports the following examples of the pre-posed infinitive:

(39) To penk on hem, forsobe me lobys (Brunne Handl. S. 686: Viss.)

＝'to think of them, truly to-me loathes'

(40) wende me behoves (Gawain & Gr. Kn. 1065: Viss.)

＝'to go to-me behoves'
(41) *leng be behoues* (Gawain & Gr. Kn. 1068: Viss.)

= 'to stay to-you behoves'

(42) *To asken help thee* shameth in thyn herte (Ch. MLT Prol 3: Viss.)

= 'to ask (for) help to-you shames in your heart'

In all of these examples the pronominal Experiencer immediately precedes the verb. If the infinitives are placed in the initial position as a result of subjectivalization, then it is to be expected that the pronouns are realized as surface objects and placed in the normal position, i.e., after the verb. The fact that the pronouns are all in a pre-verbal position perhaps indicates that the infinitives are forwarded by late stylistic word order change, rather than by subjectivalization.

There seems to be no constraint either on nonsubjectivalization or on pseudo-subjectivalization involving *it* if the Patient is realized by a nominalized embedded sentence. In cases where the Patient is realized by a non-sentential noun phrase, nonsubjectivalization can be selected but it is not clear whether pseudo-subjectivalization can. If we choose neither of these two alternatives, we have to resort to subjectivalization and choose between Patient and Experiencer as a candidate for a surface subject. If the Experiencer is chosen, the result is what is traditionally called the 'personal' construction. Thus the account of the transition from the 'impersonal' to the 'personal' construction in most traditional handbooks reveals only a partial picture.

V

It seems that the Patient is not selected as subject when realized by a nominalized embedded sentence (cf. the discussion of subject copying
above, p. 14). The following sentences contain the subjectivalized Patient:

(43) So much anoyeth a venial synne unto a man that is... (Ch. ParsT 384)

= 'so much annoys a venial sin unto a man that is...'

(44) this vengeance liketh me no thing (Ch. Mel 1444)

= 'this vengeance pleases me not at all'

(45) here prayer avayleth nat to the peple (Ch. ParsT 894)

= 'their prayer (does not) avail ( ) ( ) the people'

(46) Ther neden none ensamples of this (Ch. ParsT 297)

= 'there need no examples of this'

In (46) the Experiencer is deleted because it refers to a generic or non-specific person. Although it is difficult to determine whether the initial "ther" is meaningful or not, the plural form of the verb clearly indicates that "none ensamples of this" is selected as subject.

Of the common impersonal verbs listed by Nakao (1972:297–298), those which may select the Patient as subject are shown in Table I.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subclass 1</th>
<th>Subclass 2</th>
<th>Subclass 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>aylen</td>
<td>ac(c)orden (to, unto)</td>
<td>bicom en (to)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anoyen (to, unto)</td>
<td>apertenen (to)</td>
<td>‘come about’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>deliten (unto)</td>
<td>availen (to)</td>
<td>bifallen (to, unto, upon)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>displesen (to)</td>
<td>bifallen (to)</td>
<td>bityden (to, of, unto)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dremen</td>
<td>‘pertain, belong’</td>
<td>fallen (to, unto)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dullen</td>
<td>bhoven (to)</td>
<td>fortunen (to, unto)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>forthinken</td>
<td>bilongen (to, unto)</td>
<td>happen(en)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>greven</td>
<td>fail(l)en (to)</td>
<td>worthen (of, on)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>harmen (to)</td>
<td>fallen (to, for, till)</td>
<td>‘happen, betide’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ben) leef/lever/levest (to)</td>
<td>‘belong, appertain’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lyken (to, unto)</td>
<td>gaynen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>listen</td>
<td>lakken (to)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ben) loth (to)</td>
<td>longen (to, for)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plesen (to, with)</td>
<td>‘pertain’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ben) (im)possible (to)</td>
<td>neden (to)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rewen</td>
<td>semen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shamun</td>
<td>‘befit’</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>smerten</td>
<td>sitten (about, on, to)</td>
<td>‘fit’</td>
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<tr>
<td>wrathen</td>
<td>suffysen (to, for)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lothen</td>
<td>wanten (to)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When the Experiencer is promoted to a surface subject, it does not matter if the Patient is realized by a nominalized sentence. See the following examples:

(47) he that preacheth to hem that listen nat heeren his wordes... (Ch. Mel 1044)

= ‘he that preaches to those that (do not) like ( ) (to) hear his words...’
(48) as upon nynty and nyne rightful men that neden no penitence (Ch. ParsT 700)

= 'as upon ninety-nine rightful men that need no penitence'

(49) and many a mayde of which the name i wante (Ch. PF 287)

= 'and many a maid of which the name (whose name) I lack'

(50) atte laste he shal myshappe and my styde (Ch. Mel 1966)

= 'at last he shall meet with mishap and be unlucky'

The verbs that select the Experiencer as subject are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Impersonal Verbs Which Take Experiencer as Subject

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subclass 1</th>
<th>Subclass 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>deliten (in)</td>
<td>bihoven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>deyuen</td>
<td>fail(l)en (in)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>disdeinen (at, agayn(es), of, on)</td>
<td>naken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?aisplesen</td>
<td>(haven) mester (of, to)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dreen</td>
<td>(haven) nede (of, to, unto)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dremen (of)</td>
<td>neden</td>
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<tr>
<td>dullen (of)</td>
<td>suffysen</td>
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<tr>
<td>forthinken (of)</td>
<td>wanten</td>
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<td>grysen (of)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>?greven (at)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>hungren</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>irken (of, at, with)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>{ (ben) leef / lever (of)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>byken</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>listen</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>longen (for, at, after, to)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ben) loth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lothen</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subclass 3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>fallen (to, in)</td>
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<tr>
<td>happen(en) (on, upon)</td>
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<tr>
<td>misfallen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mishappen(en)</td>
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<tr>
<td>mistyden</td>
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</table>
If we compare Tables 1 and 2, we notice that the verbs in Table 2 are not so evenly distributed among subclasses as those in Table 1. The possibility of the 'personal' (Experiencer) subject seems to be most naturally associated with verbs of psychological event. Nevertheless, the facts that in (48) the plural form of a subclass 2 verb, “neden”, agrees with the plural form “men” and that in (49)–(50), which contain a subclass 2 and a subclass 3 verb respectively, the pronominal noun phrase is subjectivized, clearly indicate that this method of supplying subjects has been established as a general principle in the grammar of fourteenth-century Middle English.

VI

It has been remarked that fourteenth-century Middle English is characterized, perhaps more so than any other historical stage of English, by old and new grammatical characteristics competing with each other for survival (Jacobson 1970: 108). As a result, more than one solution is often found in one sphere of grammar. The impersonal construction is no exception. When the Patient is realized by a nominalized sentence, it cannot be selected as subject but the other three methods of providing subjects are all applicable, as illustrated in (51)–(53):

1. No Subjectivization

(51) lest that...thee bieoveth to weyve thyng that thou hast bigonne

(Ch. Mel 1216)

= 'lest ( ),...to-you behoves to waive things that you have begun'
2. Pseudo-subjectivalization

(52) þefore *it* behoveth him þat he knowe... (Mandev. 80, 24: Viss.)
    = 'therefore it behoves him that he know...'

3. Experiencer as Subject

(53) the servant of God bihoveth nat to chide (Ch. ParsT 630)
    = 'the servant of God (does not) behave ( ) to chide'

Some verbs are used indifferently whether the Patient or the Experiencer is the subject, e.g.:

(54) For *elde, that* in my spirit dulleth me (Ch. Compl. Venus 76: OED)
    = 'for old age, which in my spirit dulls me'

(55) That *ye shul dullen of þe rudenesse Of us sely Troians* (Ch. Troyl. IV 1489–1490: OED)
    = 'that you shall feel dull of the rudeness of us simple Trojans'

In other cases choice has to be made between a simple and a prepositional Experiencer, apparently with no determining factor, as in:

(56) they shuul displese *yow* (= (3))

(57) it displeseth to the juges and the sovereyns (Ch. Mel 1438)
    = 'it displeases ( ) the judges and the sovereigns'

Due to the existence of such alternatives the description of the impersonal verb is necessarily complicated, but this is the reflection of the linguistic reality of fourteenth-century English, which contains both archaisms carried over from Old English and innovations which are to become permanently established in Modern English. Indeed it is precisely this fact that justifies the use of the adjective *middle* to designate the language of the period.
Notes

*1 By impersonal verbs I mean those verbs which may occur in the subjectless impersonal construction; see also n. 4 below.

*2 For the purpose of this study the modality constituent is ignored. The sentence, therefore, is treated as if made up directly of the proposition.

*3 These case labels are after Traugott (1972: 33–36). They are by no means better than those used by Fillmore (the Agentive, the Instrumental, the Dative, the Objective, etc.), which are avoided in this study, however, because they might suggest to the reader that deep cases are essentially the same as surface (inflectional or prepositional) case representations. It is unfortunate that there is disagreement among case grammarians as to how many deep cases should be distinguished and what labels should be given to them.

*4 In this study I have not treated verbs denoting meteorological conditions, such as “it rains”, “it thunders”, etc., which are usually included into impersonal verbs. It is not clear whether such verbs are associated with any case at all. It has been suggested that they have an underlying locative (it = in some place’) (Langendoen 1966; quoted in Fillmore 1968a: 42–43). Whether this analysis is correct or not, it is an open question whether verbs of meteorological conditions and those studied in this paper can be subsumed into one class. Cf. van der Gaaf’s distinction between ‘really impersonal’ and ‘quasi-impersonal’ (1904: 2).

*5 I am following, in this discussion, George Lakoff’s analysis of adjectives as a subset of verbs, which I believe is thoroughly convincing. Therefore the ‘verb’ is to be taken as including both verbs and adjectives.

*6 The Patient is the semantically most neutral case, whose role in the action or state identified by the verb is identified by the semantic interpretation of the verb itself (Fillmore 1968a: 25). The Patient which is associated with a verb of a different class will have a different set of semantic features.

*7 One more instance of the Experiencer deletion is reported by Visser (1963: 20). With the remark that “constructions of this type without personal pronoun are exceptional”, he gives the sentence

Togetteb betweox sculdrm (from Bosw. & T.)
=‘there are spasms between the shoulders’ (The translation is Visser’s.)
We do not have to consider this as exceptional, however. The underlying Experiencer can be assumed in this sentence. *Shoulder* is an inherently relational noun: there must be a specific person or animal that the shoulders belong to. The Experiencer is suppressed because there is an expression of the locative which makes the recovery of the Experiencer possible. Conceivably, the sentence consisting of the predicate only, i.e., "together", would be ungrammatical.

* * * A similar point is made by Robin Lakoff (1968: 38–43) in a different context.

* * * In Old English the case selected as subject is assigned the nominative case and this then determines the number in the verb. With the absence of a subject, then the verb automatically gets the most neutral form, i.e., 'non-speaker, non-hearer, non-plural,' which is the same as the third person singular (Kageyama 1973: 91).

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**Bibliography**


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