Impersonal modals in Middle English

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0 BACKGROUND

My PhD is part of a project on the history of the English and Dutch modals, and today I am going to talk about a phenomenon in Middle English which we may call 'impersonal modals'. An example is given in (1)

(1) *him must be vp be tyme to goo on huntyng*
'he must be up in time to go hunting'

c1460 *Ipom*.(3) (Lngl 257) 345/14

My plan for today is as follows: First I will briefly describe the range of impersonal constructions in OE, before moving on to the development and eventual demise of the impersonal at the end of the ME period. Then I will focus more specifically on the development of impersonal modals in ME and zoom in on *ought*, and present and discuss some preliminary results from the PPCME2. Finally, I will mention some open questions and things that I am planning to look at.

1 OLD ENGLISH IMPERSONALS

Old English had a number of different clause types. An intransitive clause typically had a NOM subject, while a typical transitive clause had a NOM subject and an ACC object or a complement clause. Objects could also be GEN or DAT depending on the verb.

Intransitive:	NOM VERB
Transitive:	NOM VERB {ACC, DAT, GEN}
	NOM VERB COMPCL

However, there was also a different pattern, traditionally called the impersonal construction, where the first or only argument of the verb is in the DAT (or ACC), and the second argument is in one of the other cases, or a complement clause.

Impersonal: {DAT, ACC} VERB

{DAT, ACC} VERB {GEN, ACC}
{DAT, ACC} VERB {INF, COMPCL}

Let us begin with a few uncontroversial examples. In (2) the person experiencing pity is in the DAT, and the 'cause' or 'source' of the pity in the GEN. In (3) the person who experiences the dream is in the DAT, and the dream itself expressed by a complement clause.

(2) *him* *ofhreow* *þæs* *mannes*
him.DAT pitied.3S the.GEN man.GEN
'he pitied the man'

DOE Corpus: ÆCHom I, 13, 4

(3) *Æfter twam gearum faraone mætte þæt he stode be anre ea.*
after two.DAT years.DAT pharao.DAT dreamt.3S that he stood.3S.SBJV by a.DAT river
'After two years Pharao dreamt that he was standing by a river'

DOE Corpus: Gen (Ker), 106

The traditional definitition is that the verb in such clauses is in the 'default' 3rd person singular form because there is nothing it can agree with. This idea is as old as the grammatical tradition in the Anglo-Saxon world. Writing on Latin, Ælfric states that 'Some verbs are called IMPERSONALS, which are without person. They have the third person and are defective':

> Sume word synd gecwedene INPERSONALIA, þæt synd butan hade. hi habbað þone ðriddan had and synd ateorigenlice
>
> *Ælfric's Grammar* (Zupitza 1880: 206)

There has been some debate in the literature about whether clauses with a DAT or ACC experiencer and a NOM argument should be included under the umbrella 'impersonal'. They were by Van der Gaaf (1904) and Jespersen (1927), whose analyses of the demise of the construction depend on it.

(4) *Ðam wife þa word wel licodon*
the.DAT woman.DAT those.NOM words.NOM well pleased.3P
'Those words pleased the woman very much'

DOE Corpus: Beo, 174

However, they differ from the other types in that the verb need not be in the 3SG. On the other hand, they also share some properties, and many of the same verbs are attested with either a NOM or an ACC argument. What one can do is subsume all these constructions under the umbrella of 'non-canonical case marking', which despite its name is a very common phenomenon cross-linguistically. What appears from cross-linguistic evidence is also that it tends to be the same types of verbs which take experiencer arguments in non-canonical cases. For OE, a number of classifications have been suggested. Elmer (1981) distinguishes five semantic fields:

1. RUE (*hreowan* etc.)
2. PLEASE (*lician* etc.)
3. BEHOVE (*behofian* etc.)
4. HAPPEN (*gelimpan* etc.)
5. SEEM (*þyncan*)

However, some OE verbs do not seem to fit comfortably in any of his five categories, e.g. *mætan* 'dream'. Möhrig-Falke (2012) instead distinguishes eight different semantic categories:

1. PHYSICAL SENSATION (*acan, þyrstan* etc.)
2. EMOTION (*hreowan, lician* etc.)
3. COGNITION (*mætan, þyncean* etc.)
4. EXISTENTIAL EXPERIENCE (*gelimpan, getimian* etc.)
5. MOTION (*genealæcan, gehagian* etc.)
6. OWNERSHIP AND APPROPRIATENESS (*becoman, gebyrian* etc.)
7. (NON)AVAILABILITY (*behofian, geneah* etc.)
8. BENEFACTION (*deah, framian* etc.)

The common denominator is that the DAT/ACC argument is not an active subject who willfully participates in the state of affairs, but rather passively experiences some situation, emotion, or sensory impression, i.e. it has few of the properties characteristic of 'basic subjects' in the sense of Keenan (1976), e.g. control of co-reference, control of agreement, topicality, agentivity; or is low on the transitivity scale suggested by Hopper & Thompson (1980), e.g. the activity is lower on scales like kinesis, aspect, volitionality, agency, affectedness of O, etc.

2 THE DEMISE OF THE IMPERSONAL

No matter how we term constructions like those in (2)–(4), they obviously does not exist anymore in PDE, and a lot has been written about how and why it disappeared. The first longer study of the

demise of the impersonal, as far as I know, is Van der Gaaf (1904), but it is also famously discussed by Jespersen (1927: 208ff) with the invented example *þam cyninge licodon peran*. Van der Gaaf's and Jespersen's hypothesis was that the loss of the impersonal was a result of the loss of case distinctions in the nominal system; after the distinction between nominative and oblique (i.e. dative and accusative) was lost in nouns and adjectives (cf. 5), the impersonal verbs were reanalysed as transitive or intransitive verbs (cf. 6).

(5) *Ille liked ðanne balaac / Euerilc word ðe prest balaam spac.*
'And every word that Balaam the priest spoke displeased Balak'
a1325(c1250) *Gen.& Ex*.(Corp-C 444) 4029

(6) *He made me loþen þat þat i most lyked.*
'He made me loathe that which I liked the most'
c1390 ?Hilton *Qui Habitat* (Vrn) 8/7

However, the situation is actually more complex, as shown by scholars who have later worked on the development of the impersonal (e.g. Butler 1977; Fischer & van der Leek 1983, 1987; Allen 1995, 1997; Möhlig-Falke 2012; Miura 2015): The impersonal lived on in pronouns for about two centuries *after* the case system was lost in nouns and adjectives, and different verbs lost the construction at different times. In the late 15th century we can still find examples like (7):

(7) *He doth all that hym lyketh.*
'He does everything that he likes'
a1500(?c1450) *Merlin* (Cmb Ff.3.11) 1

In addition, there were at least four different pathways of the erstwhile impersonal verbs, not just one. Firstly, some verbs disappeared from the language altogether (e.g. *meten*). Secondly, the formal subject *it* was introduced in some cases and the experiencer became optional (*me semeth* > *it seems* (*to me*)). Thirdly, in some cases the experiencer became a canonical nominative subject (*me liketh* > *I like*). And lastly, some impersonals were reinterpreted as passives (*me shameth* > *I am ashamed*).

It is also known from cross-linguistic evidence that non-nominative experiencers tend to acquire more and more prototypical subject properties over time – even in languages that do not show any

reduction in the case system. The order appears to always be behavioral properties, i.e. syntax, followed by coding properties, i.e. morphology (cf. Cole et al. 1980). So there does not necessarily have to be a direct causal link between the development of more subject-like properties and the reduction of the case system. There are several intermediate steps between prototypically object-like behaviour and prototypically subject-like behaviour; Cole et al. (1980) discuss examples from a number of languages, and argue that impersonal constructions in different Germanic languages occupy different places on this scale. From the available Gothic evidence, the authors conclude that dative experiences did not behave like subjects at all in this language: for instance, the verb *galeikan* 'please', occurs with deletion of the nominative argument, not the dative, as in (8):

(8) Gothic, 6th c.?

ƕaiwa	*skuluþ*	*gaggan*	*jah*	*galeikan*	*guda*
how	should.2PL	walk	and	please	God.DAT

'how ye ought to walk and to please God' (KJV)

1 Thess 4:1, Codex Ambrosianus B (wulfila.be; Cole et al. 1980: 721)

According to Eythórsson & Barðdal (2005), however, Cole et al. (1980) misinterpret the Gothic evidence, which does in fact point towards some subject-like properties of dative experiencers. One thing that everybody agrees on is that in Modern Icelandic, dative experiencers show a large number of subject-like properties. For instance, they take a reflexive pronoun rather than a possessive pronoun, something which is otherwise only the case for nominative subjects. So in (9), the dative experiencer of the verb *svelgjast* 'choke' has to be referred to with the reflexive pronoun *sinni* rather than the possessive *hennar*:

(9) Modern Icelandic

Henni	*svelgdist*	*á*	*steikinni*	{*sinni* / **hennar*}
she.DAT	choked.3S	on	steak.DEF.DAT	{REFL / *POSS.3S.FEM}

'She choked on her steak'

Cole et al. (1980: 724)

A very interesting development is seen in the history of Georgian, which also has a number of dative experiencer constructions, e.g. with the verb *love*. In earlier Georgian, the verb always showed subject agreement with the nominative argument, so with what is the direct object in the English translation (and object agreement with the subject in the translation). However, in

contemporary colloquial Georgian, the dative argument has acquired more subject properties, including control of number agreement. So in (10) the verb is plural because the nominative argument is plural, whereas in (11) it is plural because the dative argument is plural:

(10) Earlier Georgian

me *m-i-qvar-an* *isini*

I.DAT 1SG-APPL-love-PL 3PL.NOM

'I love them'

Cole et al. (1980: 739), cited from Tschenkeli (1958: 454)

(11) Modern Georgian

mat *Ø-u-qvar-t* *is*

3PL.DAT 3-APPL-love-PL 3SG.NOM

'They love her/him/it'

Cole et al. (1980: 740), cited from Tschenkeli (1958: 459)

This kind of agreement with a non-nominative argument did not develop in English, but there are in fact a number of attestations in ME where the oblique *hem* is followed by a verb in the plural, as *ailen* in (12) and *oghten* in (13):

(12) *Sum men þat han suche likynge wondren what hem ailen*

'Some men that have such pleasure wonder what ails them'

a1450(a1401) *Chastising GC* (Bod 505) 103, 15

(ed. Bazire & Colledge 1957, quoted in Butler 1977: 159)

(13) *And seyde to hem in a goodly manere how that hem oghten haue greet repentance*

'And [she] explained to them graciously how they ought to have great repentance'

ICMEP: MELBLA, l. 1731 (ed. Blake 1980, Hengwrt MS)

As Allen (1995: 263f) points out, we cannot know with absolute certainty if these are mere scribal errors, but the fact that the same pattern is found in more than one MS suggests that this type of agreement was a possible variant for some language users at the time. It is attested in a number of different contemporary sources, cf. Visser (1963–73: 31), Butler (1977), and Harris & Campbell (1995: 85). However, it disappears from the written record as suddenly as it turned up, and around

the end of the ME period the impersonal construction in general starts to decline. In Modern English only a number of highly frequent fixed expressions survived, such as *methinks* in Shakespeare and his contemporaries (cf. Dutch *medunkt*).

3 IMPERSONAL MODALS AND THE CASE OF *OUGHT*

But there is another 'bump in the road' in the development of the impersonal, namely the productivity of the construction and the increase in the number of impersonal verbs in ME. According to the most recent longer study on the history of the English impersonal, about 63 new impersonal verbs are recorded in ME, both 'native' and borrowed ones (Möhlig-Falke 2012: 15):

31	inherited from OE	e.g. *gladen, ofdreden*
9	coined in ME	e.g. *happenen, misteren*
7	Old Norse borrowings	e.g. *irken, semen*
16	Norman French borrowings	e.g. *chauncen, merveillien*

The productivity of the pattern is usually explained with reference to analogy in the literature, and this was in fact already suggested by Van der Gaaf (1904). Van der Gaaf also noted that a number of verbs expressing necessity started to occur with dative experiencers in ME, and discusses the impersonal attestations of some, but not all, of these. Möhlig-Falke (2012) also mentions this class of impersonals but does not discuss it in detail.

The group of impersonal necessity verbs in OE (Elmer's BEHOVE class) included *gedafenian, gebyrian,* and *gerisan*.[1] During the ME period, the following necessity verbs, all of which could be regarded as more or less central members of the category of modals, are first attested in impersonal uses: *must, ought, tharf*, *neden*, *misteren*. In (14) is an example with *must*, in (15) one with *ought*.

(14) *him must be vp be tyme to goo on huntyng*
'he must be up in time to go hunting'

c1460 *Ipom*.(3) (Lngl 257) 345/14

(15) *Me awghte to knowe þe Kynge: he es my kydde lorde*
'I ought to know the king; he is my noble lord'

CMEPV: *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, l. 3509

[1] As discussed by Allen (1997), the verb *behofian* is actually not attested impersonally in OE (despite the name of Elmer's BEHOVE category), but only starts to occur in EME manuscripts. In later ME the reduced form *bus/bos* is attested in some texts.

Van der Gaaf finds only very few examples of *must* with the impersonal pattern and regards these simply as errors because of the 'confused' state of the language at the time:

> The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries may, with regard to English syntax, be called a period of confusion [...] the language was in an unsettled state [...] mistakes were occasionally made (Van der Gaaf 1904: 143)

For a modern linguist, of course, this attitude does not seem acceptable; what in Van der Gaaf's time was regarded as mistakes we would now call variation, and instead of writing it off as noise or confusion, we would want to try to explain it – why does the variation occur in these verbs and not others; can we narrow down in which texts and dialects the new variants primarily occurred; and when we find variation within a particular text or dialect, is there a semantic difference between the variants? This is what I am planning to look at for the modal verbs that developed impersonal uses in ME. I will use the remainder of my presentation to present some preliminary results on the development of *ought*, from the *Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Middle English* (PPCME2). The corpus was searched with the program CorpusSearch2. This is still very much work in progress, so any ideas and feedback are more than welcome.

Ought was originally the past tense of OE *agan* (which survives as PDE *owe*, cf. Dutch *eigen*). The original meaning of the verb was 'own, possess'. However, the meanings 'owe' and 'ought' are attested already in OE (DOE, s.v. *āgan*).[2] In OE and early ME *ought* is invariably attested with a nominative experiencer, but during the ME period oblique experiencers start to occur. From Möhlig-Falke's table (2012: 210) it appears that she has found impersonal *ought* attested from the late 14th century to the late 15th century in the MED and OED. I did a search in the PPCME2 and also found that most examples are attested in the late 14th century. In (16) and (17) are two examples of the pattern from the late 14th and early 15th century, respectively:

(16) *and þe Britons were cristen: wel auȝt him þan ham forto helpe, so as þai weren of on law*
'and the Britons were Christians; so he ought to help them, since they were of the same law [faith]'

PPCME2: CMBRUT3, 942.839 (CMEPV: The Brut)

[2] A similar pathway from expressing indebtedness to being a modal auxiliary is assumed for *shall*, cf. also Latin *debere*.

(17) *Right wel aughte vs for to loue & worscipe to drede & serue such a lord*
'We really ought to love and worship, fear and serve such a lord'
PPCME2: CMMANDEV, 2.24 (CMEPV: Mandeville's Travels)

It should be remembered, though, that there are very few texts in the corpus from the early 14th century, so the change is probably not as abrupt as it looks in the PPCME2.

	Wordcount	NOM + *ought*	OBL + *ought*	% OBL
13th c.	199,149	64	0	**0%**
14th c.	378,517	22	22	**50%**
15th c.	527,986	51	21	**29,2%**

The corpus only contains prose texts from the early 14th century, which are very scarce. But quite a number of verse texts survive from this period, so I am planning to also look at those and see whether there was a gradual increase in impersonals during the course of the century. This may also teach us more about where the form occurred, and whether it was equally frequent in all dialect areas. The PPCME2 is too small to say anything about dialectal distribution; the impersonal construction with *ought* is found in East Midland, West Midland, and Northern texts in the corpus. The fact that it is not found in any Southern texts may just be due to the fact that there are very few texts from this area in the corpus.

The examples in the corpus are distributed across the text files as follows. Only instances where the case of the experiencer can be identified unambiguously have been counted, i.e. only personal pronouns.

13th century	NOM	OBL
CMANCRIW	16	
CMHALI	2	
CMJULIA	1	
CMKATHE	1	
CMLAMB1	4	
CMLAMBX1	8	
CMMARGA	1	
CMSAWLES	2	
CMTRINIT	16	
CMVICES1	13	

15th century	NOM	OBL
CMAELR4	2	
CMBENRUL	15	
CMBOETH	2	
CMEDTHOR	2	4
CMGAYTRY		9
CMJULNOR	1	
CMKEMPE	4	1
CMMALORY	17	
CMMANDEV	2	1
CMMIRK	1	

14th century	NOM	OBL
CMAELR3	2	
CMBRUT3	1	3
CMCTMELI	6	8
CMCTPARS	3	11
CMPURVEY	10	
CMREYNAR	3	
CMROLLEP	1	1
CMROLLTR	2	3
CMROYAL	1	

As evident from these tables, the impersonal pattern, when it occurs, generally occurs together with the originial, 'personal' pattern with the experiencer in the nominative. The only exception to this generalisation is the sermon by the Yorkshire monk John Gaytryge (CMGAYTRY), found in the 15th-century Thornton MS. A closer look at the use of impersonals in this text may reveal if this reflects a general fondness of impersonal constructions.

In all other texts where impersonal *ought* is found, it cooccurs with the personal variant. In some cases, the variation within a text is perhaps to be attributed to different scribes having had different preferences, but since the in-text variation is so prevalent, it is likely that for some language users both patterns were possible and were preferred in different contexts. So one might want to look at the use within individual texts. I have tried to see if I could find any functional difference between the impersonal and personal patterns in two Chaucer texts in the corpus (CMCTMELI and CMCTPARS) and in some of the Northern texts (CMEDTHOR, CMROLLEP, CMROLLTR), but so far have not been able to discern any pattern.

4 QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

I am planning to continue this investigation of *ought* with a bigger corpus, which will hopefully answer at least some of the questions mentioned above. Allen (1995: 250, fn. 30) points out that the impersonal seems to be especially frequent in *as*-clauses (*as hem ought* etc.). A bigger corpus may reveal if this is indeed the case. I am also planning to look at the semantics and the distribution of nominative vs. oblique experiencers in all the impersonal modals, so also at least *must*, *tharf* and *need* in addition to *ought*.

It is a well-known problem in historical linguistics that a lot of the surviving texts are written in verse, so that metre, rhyme and alliteration may influence on the language of the text. However, this does not really seem to be a problem in this case – the forms under investigation (*I/me*, *we/us*, *they/them*, etc.) are all monosyllabic and in most instances unstressed, so the choice between them

did not have any influence metre or alliteration (since generally only stressed syllables alliterate). Hence, the in-text variation seen in (15) is not due to the formal requirements of the text genre:

(18a) *I moste trette of a trew towchande þise nedes*
'I must necessarily negotiate a truth concerning this'
CMEPV: *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, l. 263

(18b) *Vs moste with some fresche mette refresche oure pople*
'We must revitalise our people with some fresh food'
CMEPV: *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, l. 2491

Further, it will be interesting to consider the role of analogy in the development of impersonal modals. While it seems like a probable explanation, one might wonder exactly what the basis of the analogy is. As already mentioned, there are impersonal necessity verbs in OE (such as *gebyrian* and *gedafenian*), but at least the ancestor verbs of *ought* and *must* were more common than these verbs, so one might wonder if the analogical 'pressure' was strong enough.

Finally, I would like to consider the possible role of Old Norse in all of this. The OED (s.v. *dare*, v.[1]) suggests that Old Norse influence may have played a role in the development of *dare* and *tharf* in ME, specifically the confusion between the two verbs. Maybe Old Norse also played a part in the development of impersonal *þarf*, since the cognate verb in Old Norse could also be used 'impersonally', with the meaning 'be necessary' rather than 'need', as in (16):

(19) Old Norse (Iceland, 13th c.)

vilja	*mundu*	*goðin*	*at*	*þenna*	*ás*	*þyrfti*	*eigi*	*at*	*nefna*
want	would.3PL	gods.DEF	that	this.M.ACC	god	was.necessary.SBJ	not	to	mention

'the gods would wish that it was not necessary to mention this *ás* [god]'
Gylfaginning 28, Codex Regius (GKS 2365 4º)[3]

[3] Online source: https://notendur.hi.is//~eybjorn/gg/index.html [accessed 13 Apr 2017].

DATA SOURCES

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