



# Impersonal modals in Middle English

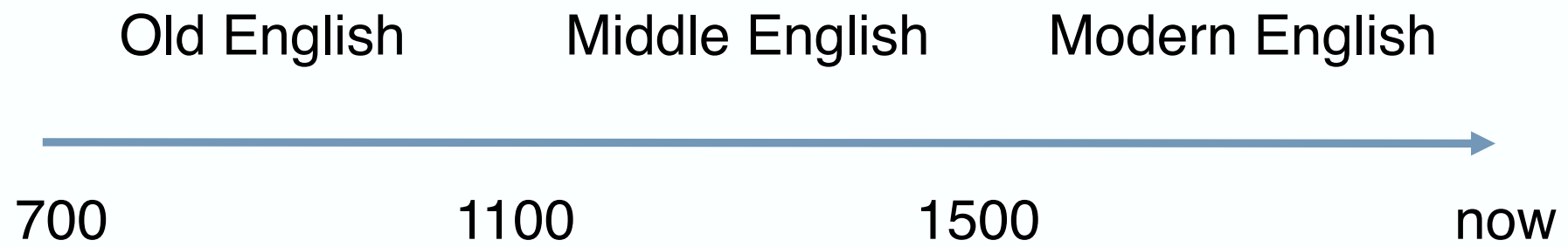
Sune Gregersen

*11th T.W.I.S.T. Student Conference for Linguistics*

Universiteit Leiden, 21 Apr 2017

‘The lady doth protest too much methinks’

*Hamlet*, III.ii.211



# Plan for today

1. Old English impersonals
2. The demise of the impersonal
3. The case of *ought*
4. Future work





# Old English impersonals



# Case in Old English

	‘the fish’	3SG.MASC.PRON
NOM	<i>se fisc</i>	<i>he</i>
ACC	<i>þone fisc</i>	<i>hine</i>
GEN	<i>þæs fisce</i>	<i>his</i>
DAT	<i>þam fisce</i>	<i>him</i>

# Old English clause types (1)

## **Intransitive clause**

NOM VERB

# Old English clause types (1)

## Intransitive clause

NOM VERB

## Transitive clause

NOM VERB {ACC, GEN, DAT}

NOM VERB COMPCl



# Old English clause types (2)

## **‘Impersonal’ clause**

DAT VERB

DAT VERB {ACC, GEN, NOM}

DAT VERB COMPCl

# *ofhreowan* ‘pity’

## (1) Old English, 9th/10th c.

*him ofhreow þæs mannes*  
him.DAT pitied.3SG the.GEN man.GEN  
‘he pitied the man’

DOE Corpus: *ÆCHom* I, 13, 4

# *mætan* ‘dream’

## (2) Old English, 11th c.

*Æfter twam gearum faraone mætte þæt*  
after two.DAT years.DAT pharao.DAT dreamt.3SG COMP

*he stode be anre ea*  
he.NOM stood.3SG.SBJ by a.DAT river

‘After two years Pharao dreamt that he was standing by a river’

DOE Corpus: Gen (Ker), 106



# Semantic fields

## **Elmer (1981)**

RUE

PLEASE

BEHOVE

HAPPEN

SEEM

# Semantic fields

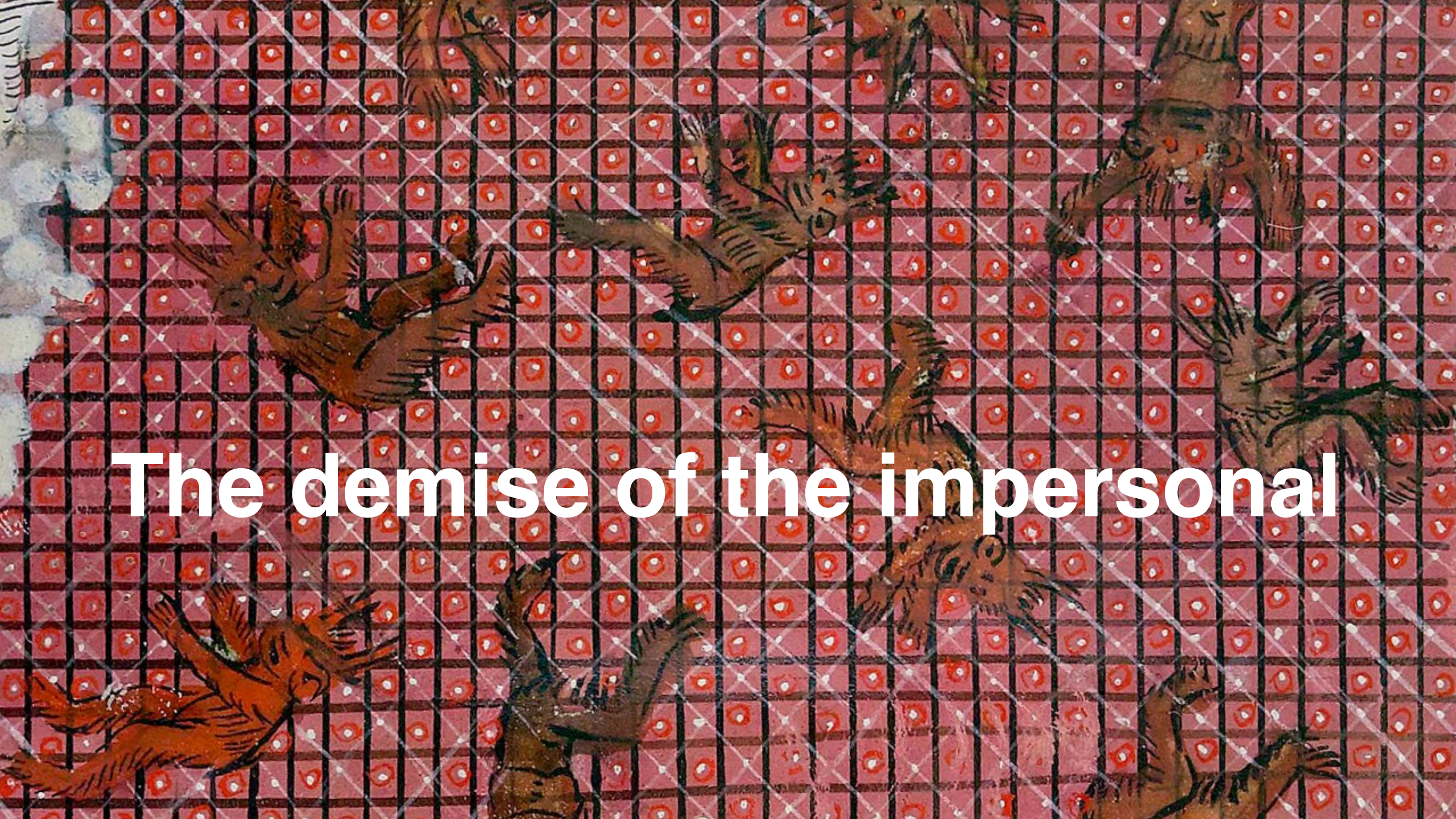
## **Elmer (1981)**

RUE  
PLEASE  
BEHOVE  
HAPPEN  
SEEM

## **Möhlig-Falke (2012)**

PHYSICAL SENSATION  
EMOTION  
COGNITION  
EXISTENTIAL EXPERIENCE  
MOTION  
OWNERSHIP/APPROPRIATENESS  
(NON)AVAILABILITY  
BENEFACTION





**The demise of the impersonal**



**Anglistische Forschungen**

Herausgegeben von Dr. Johannes Hoops

Professor an der Universität Heidelberg

~~~~~ Heft 14 ~~~~~

**The Transition  
from the Impersonal to the  
Personal Construction  
in Middle English**

by

**W. van der Gaaf**



**Heidelberg**

Carl Winter's Universitätsbuchhandlung

1904

# Work on impersonals

Van der Gaaf (1904)

# Work on impersonals

Van der Gaaf (1904)

Jespersen (1927)



# Work on impersonals

Van der Gaaf (1904)

Jespersen (1927)

Elmer (1981)

Fischer & van der Leek (1983; 1987)

Anderson (1986)

Allen (1995; 1997)

Möhlig-Falke (2012)

Miura (2015)

# *like* with DAT

## (3) Old English, 10th c.?

|            |             |           |             |            |                |
|------------|-------------|-----------|-------------|------------|----------------|
| <i>Ðam</i> | <i>wife</i> | <i>þa</i> | <i>word</i> | <i>wel</i> | <i>licodon</i> |
| the.DAT    | woman.DAT   | those.NOM | words.NOM   | well       | pleased.3PL    |

‘Those words pleased the woman very much’

DOE Corpus: Beo, 174

# *like* with caseless noun

## **(4) Middle English, 13th/14th c.**

*Ille liked ðanne balaac / Euerilc word ðe prest balaam spac.*

‘And every word that Balaam the priest spoke displeased Balak’

MED: a1325(c1250) *Gen.& Ex.*(Corp-C 444) 4029

# *like* with NOM

## **(5) Middle English, late 14th c.**

*He made me lopen þat þat i most lyked.*

‘He made me loathe that which I liked the most’

MED: c1390 ?Hilton *Qui Habitat* (Vrn) 8/7

# However: *like* with DAT until 1500

## (6) Middle English, 15th c.

*He doth all that hym lyketh.*

‘He does everything that he likes’

MED: a1500(?c1450) *Merlin* (Cmb Ff.3.11) 1



# Subject-like behaviour

## (7) Modern Icelandic

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

‘She choked on her steak’

Cole et al. (1980: 724), quoted from Anderson (1977)

# Subject-like behaviour

## (8) Old Georgian

|               |                    |              |
|---------------|--------------------|--------------|
| <i>me</i>     | <i>m-i-qvar-an</i> | <i>isini</i> |
| 1SG.DAT       | 1SG-APPL-love-PL   | 3PL.NOM      |
| 'I love them' |                    |              |

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

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*mat*            *Ø-u-qvar-t*            *is*  
3PL.DAT    3-APPL-love-PL    3SG.NOM

‘They love him/her/it’

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# Non-canonical agreement in Chaucer?

## (10) Middle English, 14th c.

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

‘And [she] explained to them in a gracious manner how they ought to have great repentance’

Chaucer, *Tale of Melibee* (ed. Blake, l. 1731)

Innsbruck Corpus: MELBLA, Hengwrt MS

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# Loss of impersonals

## 1. Loss of the verb

*me listeth, me meteth*

## 2. Addition of formal subject

*me seemeth > it seems (to me)*

## 3. Dative experiencer > nominative subject

*me liketh > I like*

## 4. Use of passive

*me shameth > I am ashamed*



**A** young man callyd Melibens. myghty & ryche. bigat  
vpon his wyf. callyd was Prudens. a doughter.  
whiche callyd was Sophie. & than vpon a day  
by fel. for his sport. he went in to ye felde hym to play.  
& his wyf & his doughter he hatte last. w<sup>th</sup> in his hono<sup>r</sup>. of whi-  
che. ye dorys were fast. & shyte. & than thre of his olde foos  
hath hit. espyed. & setten ladders to ye wallys of his hono<sup>r</sup>. &  
by wyndowes ben entred. and beetyh his wyf. & woundyd his  
doughter. w<sup>th</sup>. v. mortal woundis. in fyue sondry places. y<sup>e</sup> is to sayn  
in her throte. in her arme. in her nose. & in her mouth.  
& last her for dede. & went away. & than Melibens retu-  
ned was in to his hono<sup>r</sup>. & sawe al this mystrye. he lyk a ma-  
mad. rentyng his clothe. gan wepe & crye. & Prudens his  
wyf. as ferforth as she dorst. bysought hym of his wepyng. w<sup>th</sup> reson.  
to stynt. bot not forthy. he gan to crye. en ye lenger yemore.  
& his noble wyf. Prudens remembryd her vpon ye sentence  
of the noble wyf. & than she gan to crye. & wepe.

# The case of ought



# Sources of new impersonals

|                                 | <i>n</i> | Examples                     |
|---------------------------------|----------|------------------------------|
| Old English (inherited)         | 31       | <i>gladen, ofdreden</i>      |
| Middle English (new formations) | 9        | <i>happenen, misteren</i>    |
| Old Norse                       | 7        | <i>irken, semen</i>          |
| Norman French                   | 16       | <i>chauncen, merveillien</i> |

Source: Möhlig-Falke (2012: 15)



# Impersonal necessity verbs

## Old English

DAT *gedafenian*

DAT *gebyrian*

DAT *gerisan*

## Middle English

(DAT *bir*)

DAT *behove*

DAT *must*

DAT *ought*

DAT *tharf*

# Impersonal *must*

## (11) Middle English, 15th c.

*him must be vp be tyme to goo on huntyng*

‘he must be up in time to go hunting’

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

# Impersonal *ought*

**(12) Middle English, 15th c.**

*Me awghte to knowe þe Kynge: he es my kyddde lorde*

‘I ought to know the king; he is my noble lord’

CMEPV: *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, l. 3509 (Thornton MS.)

‘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)



# **Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Middle English, 2nd edn.**





## CorpusSearch 2: a tool for linguistic research

CorpusSearch 2 is a Java program that supports research in corpus linguistics. It is useful both for the construction of syntactically annotated (parsed) corpora and for searching them. Running CorpusSearch on an appropriately annotated corpus a user can automatically:

- find and count lexical and syntactic configurations of any complexity
- correct systematic errors
- code the linguistic features of corpus sentences for later statistical analysis

# CorpusSearch 2

Both the input and output files of CorpusSearch are ordinary text files, with syntactic annotations in the **Penn-Treebank format**.

CorpusSearch 2 runs under any Java-supported operating system, including Linux, Macintosh, Unix and Windows. It requires Java 2, version 1.3 or later. In addition to being downloadable from this site, CorpusSearch is distributed with the **Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpora of Historical English**.

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### **(13) Middle English, c. 1400**

*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*)

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**(14) Middle English, early 15th c.**

*Right wel aughte vs for to loue & worscipe to drede & serue such a lord*

‘We really ought to love and worship, fear and worship such a lord’

PPCME2: CMMANDEV, 2.24 (CMEPV: *Mandeville’s Travels*)

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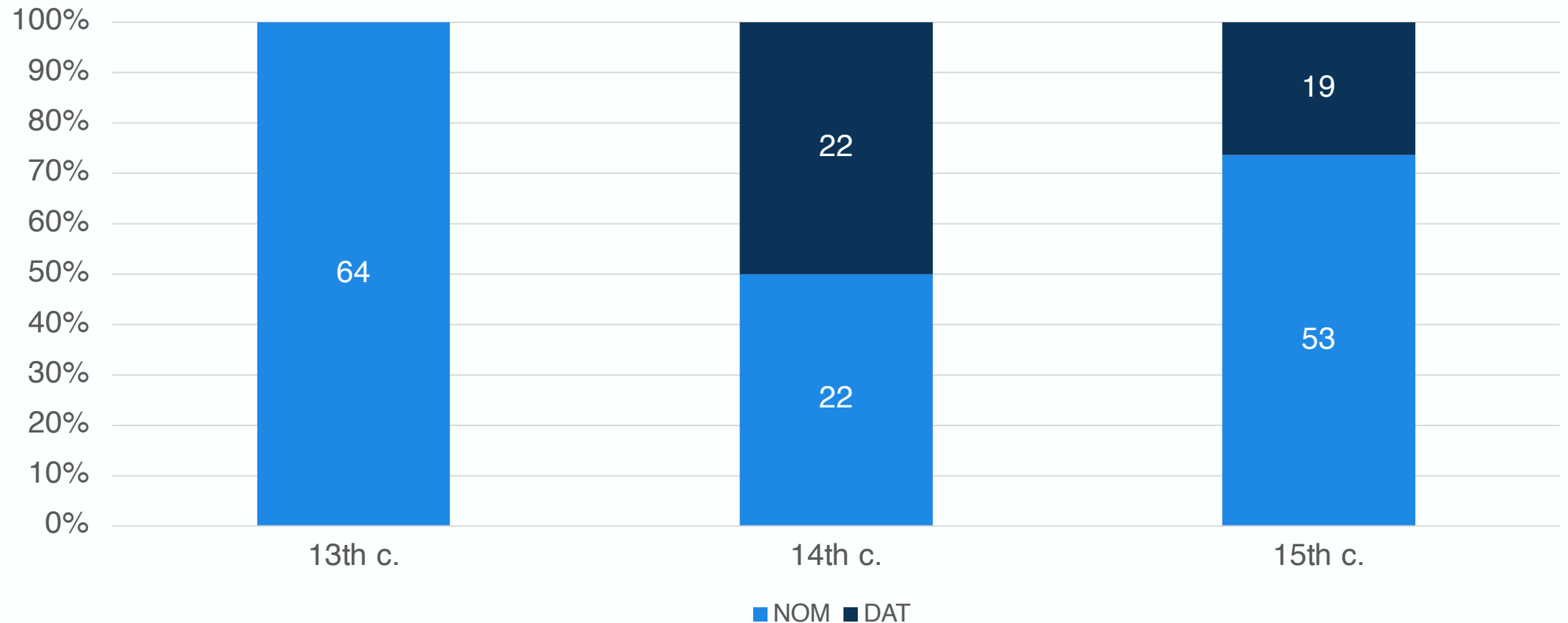
PPCME2: CMMANDEV, 2.24 (CMEPV: *Mandeville’s Travels*)

# PPCME2 – case per century

|              | Wordcount | [NOM <i>ought</i> ] | [DAT <i>ought</i> ] | % DAT |
|--------------|-----------|---------------------|---------------------|-------|
| 13th century | 199,149   | 64                  | 0                   | 0%    |
| 14th century | 378,517   | 22                  | 22                  | 50%   |
| 15th century | 527,986   | 53                  | 19                  | 26.4% |



# [DAT *ought*] per century



# PPCME2 – 14th century

| Text     | [NOM <i>ought</i> ] | [DAT <i>ought</i> ] |
|----------|---------------------|---------------------|
| CMAELR3  | 2                   |                     |
| CMBRUT3  | 1                   | 3                   |
| CMCTMELI | 6                   | 8                   |
| CMCTPARS | 3                   | 11                  |
| CMPURVEY | 10                  |                     |

# PPCME2 – 15th century

| Text     | [NOM <i>ought</i> ] | [DAT <i>ought</i> ] | Text     | [NOM <i>ought</i> ] | [DAT <i>ought</i> ] |
|----------|---------------------|---------------------|----------|---------------------|---------------------|
| CMAELR4  | 2                   |                     | CMMALORY | 16                  | 1                   |
| CMBENRUL | 15                  |                     | CMMANDEV | 2                   | 1                   |
| CMBOETH  | 2                   |                     | CMMIRK   | 1                   |                     |
| CMEDTHOR | 2                   | 4                   | CMREYNAR | 3                   |                     |
| CMGAYTRY |                     | 9                   | CMROLLEP | 1                   | 1                   |
| CMJULNOR | 1                   |                     | CMROLLTR | 2                   | 3                   |
| CMKEMPE  | 4                   | 1                   | CMROYAL  | 1                   |                     |

# Summing up

1. Non-nominative subject marking ('impersonals') a cross-linguistically common phenomenon

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# Summing up

1. Non-nominative subject marking ('impersonals') a cross-linguistically common phenomenon
2. Loss of impersonals in Middle English a drawn-out process with 'bumps in the road'
3. The pattern *me ought* etc. develops in the 14th century
4. Unexplained in-text variation





Future work



# In-text variation

## (15) Middle English, 14th c.

- a. *I moste trette of a trew towchande pise nedes*  
‘I must necessarily negotiate a truth concerning this’  
CMEPV: *Alliterative Morte Arthure* (Thornton MS.), l. 263
- b. *Vs moste with some fresche mette refresche oure pople*  
‘We must revitalise our people with some fresh food’  
ibid., l. 2491

# Analogy in necessity verbs?

## Old English

DAT *gedafenian*

DAT *gebyrian*

DAT *gerisan*

## Middle English

(DAT *bir*)

DAT *behove*

DAT *must*

DAT *ought*

DAT *tharf*

# Old Norse ‘impersonals’

## (16) Old Norse (Iceland, 13th c.)

*vilja mundu goðin at þenna ás*  
want would.3PL gods.DEF COMP this.M.ACC ás (type of god)

*þyrfti eigi at nefna*  
was.necessary.SBJ not to mention

‘the gods would wish that it was not necessary to mention this ás’

*Gylfaginning* 28, Codex Regius (GKS 2365 4º)

# References (1)

## Data sources

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## Illustrations

Slide 1: BnF, Latin 1429, fol. 8r (16th c.)

Slide 5: BnF, Latin 8878, fol. 139v (11th c.)

Slide 14: BnF, Français 316, fol. 23v (14th c.)

Slide 31: Huntington Library, HM 144, fol. 81r (15th c.)

Slide 51: BL, Royal 18 E III, fol. 24r (12th c.)

Slide 58: BnF, Français 616, fol. 24v (15th c.)



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Thank you!