

***Us thinketh hem wonder nyce and straunge:  
where form and meaning collide***

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Change is a constant property of language. Every language keeps turning into something different with the lapse of time. Geoffrey Chaucer remarks on this at one point of his love poem *Troilus and Criseyde* (2.22-5):

- (1) Ye knowe ek that in forme of speche is chaunge  
    Withinne a thousand yeer, and wordes tho  
    That hadden pris, now wonder nyce and straunge  
    Us thinketh hem

The passage can be roughly rendered thus: “You also know that in the forms of speech is change within a thousand years, and words that then were well esteemed seem to us amazingly foolish and strange.”<sup>1)</sup>

Actually this passage already displays an expression that sounds

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- 1) The technical points considered in this study often make Modern English translation not only difficult but inappropriate or even misleading. In such cases we will leave the examples untranslated, while most of them will be given interlinear glosses.

“amazingly strange,” if not “foolish,” to modern ears. Consider the second conjunct of the passage, namely the sentence that begins after the *and* of the second line. The sentence begins with what appears to be the subject, namely *wordes tho / That hadden pris*, but before the verb (*thinketh*) is reached something else is substituted, so that the supposed subject is ‘left in the air,’ so to speak. Visser refers to this sort of dangling subject as the “anacoluthic subject” (1970:I, 60f), commenting (in the words of the 18th century grammarian Anselm Bayly) that “[w]hen two or more nouns come before the verb, or follow it, suspending the sense too long, it is then elegant, because emphatic and effecting perspicuity, to add the pronoun, or to complete the sense with one noun, and repeat the pronoun with the other nouns after the verb” (op.cit.:56).

One may say that in today’s syntactic theory, dangling subject of this type can be explained away as a subcase of ‘left dislocation.’ But in our case the crux of the matter concerns the pronoun that commutes with the dangling subject, namely *hem*. For, this ‘resumptive pronoun’ (as it is technically called) is not in the expected nominative form. Suppose, for that matter, that *wordes tho...*, being in apposition with the oblique *hem*, is really the object—i.e. ‘dangling object’—and not the subject of the sentence. A query that arises this time is: what then is the subject of the verb *thinketh*? Notice that *Us* is not in the nominative either. The situation gets more complicated by the fact that the verb takes the 3rd-person singular ending when both *Us* and *hem* are plural, no matter which of these two may turn out to be the subject.

What we see here is a curious type of ‘impersonal’ construction, and, as far as I am aware, the issues involved have not received any

detailed attention in previous studies on English historical syntax, apart from fragmentary comments. For expository ease, let us have the relevant part of the passage rearranged as (2), recapitulating the problems in (3):

(2) Us        thinketh    hem        wonder    nyce    and    straunge  
      us[OLB] seems[3 SG] them[OBL] amazingly foolish        strange

- (3) a. Which of the two pronouns is the subject? Or, why is it that neither of them is nominative if one of them is supposed to be the subject?  
      b. No matter which may be the subject, why is the verb in the singular when both of the pronouns refer to plural entities?

There may be different reactions to a situation like this. One is to assume that the poet was flouting the conventions of grammar in order to achieve a particular effect he has in mind. At a moment's reflection, however, this cannot be a right way of looking at things. Chaucer lived before the period when English grammar was codified by the grammarians or taught in school: it is very unlikely therefore that he had any formal constraint to be 'flouted' in the first place.

Another reaction may be that 'loose' constructions did not bother the poet, who would go for freedom of expression and beauty of sound to the detriment of grammatical accuracy. There is an element of truth to such a view. Chaucer's poetry did in fact occasionally manifest constructions that would now be frowned upon—such as abrupt change of tense, use of pronouns with vague or missing antecedent, anacoluthic shift of constructions, and asyndetic (paratactic) juxtaposition of sentence elements. It seems very often the case in Chaucer's poetry that brevity by way of metrical regularity was preferred to syntactic correctness.

The informal, conversational style he employed may also be an explanation.

But the fact is that we should deal with the problems of (3) independently of poetic considerations, because, as we will see, expressions like (2) are not unique to poetic style. So, one might be tempted to say that, in the freewheeling usage of those earlier days, there was not so much concern as now with what are conceived to be 'proper' choices of case forms. According to Wyld (1936:330ff), the old distinction between the nominative and the objective pronouns was often lost before the schoolmaster's attitude toward case forms became conspicuous during the later years of the seventeenth century.

It would be absurd, however, to argue that because there were no fixed rules of grammar in the poet's time, just anything was permissible. All languages at all periods are equipped with some standards by which one may understand current practice in indicating the relationship between the various parts of the sentence, though not all develop so quickly a formal codified conventions which are used as a method of accepting certain utterances as correct and others as marks of ill-breeding. All languages, in short, are in principle consistent within themselves.

As for Wyld's observation just cited, he also notes that some writers did systematically make the distinction between the nominative and the objective pronouns even before the rise of the schoolmaster's attitude toward language. From this point of view, it would be simply a mistake to say that there was no conscious appreciation of case morphology in Chaucer's time. My purpose in this article is to demonstrate what 'system' there is to the constructions of type (2). To set up a ground upon which to proceed, let us look first into the





analogous constructions that “one gets the impression that the idiom was regarded as quite regular at the time” (Visser 1970:I,71).

From this point of view, the *thinketh* of (2) could also be a plural form—in congruence with the plural subject (whether it is *Us* or *hem*)—and if this indeed were the case, the question of (3b) would evaporate. In reality, though, there are reasons to believe that the verb in question—and, for that matter, *puncheð* of (5) as well—is *not* plural. The confusion in the verbal endings mentioned above was originally a feature of Northern English, which in the course of time gradually spread to the south, not only in popular and colloquial diction but also occasionally in the literary language (cf. Abbott 1966:235; Visser 1970:I,72). It should be noted, however, that the Midland dialects—in which our paradigm examples, (2) and (5), are written—substituted the ending *-en* of the plural subjunctive for the plural *-eth* (or *-eð*), thereby achieving a formal distinction in number at the expense of one in mood (Brunner 1963:71). Alongside the characteristically Midland *-en*, the plural ending *-es* (a development of the Old English *-as*) was also in use.<sup>3</sup> So until Chaucer’s time the English language had altogether three alternative plural endings, *-eth*, *-e(n)*, and *-es*. But as Brunner (*ibid.*) points out, Chaucer himself has mostly *-e(n)*.<sup>4</sup> In Shakespeare’s time, the use of the singular verbal ending for the plural “would in all probability not have been tolerated but for the fact that *-s* was still recognized as a provincial [= northern] plural inflection” (Abbott 1966:240).

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3) Campbell (1959:302) observes that in the Northumbrian dialect of Old English, *-as* was somewhat more frequent as the present indicative plural ending.

4) He also points out that where the subject is a pronoun, especially post-posed, the plural ending is *-e* or uninflected (1963:70)

It is true that *-eth* (or *-s* in Shakespeare's time) *was* still one of the three alternative plural endings. So the possibility of construing the verbal form in (2) and (5) as plural is not completely excluded. But consider in this regard the following example, again from Denison (1993:70):

- (6) As ofte as ich am ischriuen: eauer me þuncheð me  
           I shriuen ever me[OBL] seems[3 SG] me[OBL]  
           unschriuen  
           unshriuen  
           ('However often I confess myself, I still seem to myself (to be) unconfessed')

Here, both of the pronouns related with *þuncheð* are 1st-person singular. No matter which of the two pronouns is to be regarded as the subject, therefore, it would be absurd to call the verb plural. That is, the query of (3b) still remains.

One may say that sometimes confusion on the part of the author or an error on the part of a scribe may be responsible. There *is* some kind of confusion involved here, as we will see eventually. But at the present moment, it is important to see that there is more to the problems than can simply be attributed to 'confusion.' Of particular interest in this connection is the following expression:

- (7) For certes, lord, so wel us lyketh yow  
           certainly us[OBL] pleases[3 SG] you[OBL]  
           And al youre werk, and evere han doon (*Clerk's Tale* 106-7)  
           work always have[PL] done

There is no obvious way, pre-theoretically, of deciding whether the



subject of *lyketh* is *us* or *yow and al youre werk*, and no matter which may be the subject, the singular form of the verb remains a conundrum. But this amounts to repeating the questions of (3). What makes (7) doubly problematic is the fact that the two verb, *lyketh* and *han*, which supposedly share the subject, do not agree in number.

Commenting on the *us lyketh* of (7), Baugh (1963:422) says that it means “it pleases us.” We are left, however, with the question of how to parse the grammatical function of *yow and al youre werk*. This is a question that carries us to the issues involved in the so-called impersonal constructions.

## 2. ‘Impersonal verbs’ and ‘impersonal constructions’

It has been pointed out by many scholars that ‘impersonal’ is not a straightforward notion; we use the term, admitting that it is a misnomer. A general picture of the difficulties involved should be presented before we can make sense of the issues we are bringing up here.

The term ‘impersonal’ was initially intended to refer to a construction that has no explicit subject or just a ‘dummy’ subject. To take an example from Modern German, the verb *hungern* can occur without a subject as in *mich hungert*, or with a dummy subject as in *es hungert mich*, both meaning ‘I am hungry.’ Here the verb is being used impersonally as if, in Visser’s words (1970:I,412), “a certain indefinable and indeterminate something hungers him (= makes him feel hungry).”

But matters are not that simple. To begin with, examples abound in which impersonal verbs are used personally. As Ogura (1986:13) has

pointed out, weather verbs of Old English, predominantly used impersonally (e.g. *hit rinde* ‘it rained’), occasionally take a personal subject (*he rinde* ‘he let the rain fall’), and some verbs which express mental affection are used impersonally (*me scimiað* ‘I am ashamed’) as well as personally (*ic sceamige* ‘I am ashamed’). There are also conflicting opinions about the term ‘subjectless.’ Consider, for example:

- (8) Geat            unigmetes    wel, / ... restan lyste (*Beowulf* 1792-3)  
       Geat[ACC] exceedingly            to-rest pleased

Literally rendered, the sentence means ‘To rest pleased the Geat exceedingly well’ or ‘(It) pleased the Geat exceedingly well to rest.’ Is *lyste*, then, subjectless? Or is the infinitive *restan* its subject?

This is a question with which van der Gaaf’s pioneer study on impersonal constructions (1904) started out. His idea was that verbs of this category, though generally or originally personal verbs, can have logical subject expressed in the form of an infinitive and thus are “quasi-impersonal.”<sup>5)</sup> As Visser (1970-2:1,26; II,950) points out, however, it is a moot question whether the infinitive functions as an object or a subject. Ogura (1986:14) would argue that the infinitive in question is the logical *object*, the logical subject being the non-nominative NP *Geat*. According to her (*op.cit.*:15), Mitchell in his 1959 dissertation used the term “quasi-impersonal” while discussing “different degrees of impersonality.” But ultimately he dismisses such a term, noting that if a construction like (8) were to be dubbed

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5) Van der Gaaf distinguishes “quasi-impersonal” verbs from ‘really impersonal verbs which “express natural phenomena, *as it thunders, it rains, it is freezing,* and can have no other subject than it” (1904:2).

“quasi-impersonal,” examples like (9) might just as well be classed as quasi-impersonal (1985:427f).

- (9) a. Ðam wife            þa        word            wel licodon (*Beowulf* 639)  
          the lady[DAT] those words[NOM]    pleased[3 PL]  
      b. Me            þin modsefa /    licað            leng swa wel (*Beowulf* 1853-4)  
          me[DAT] your spirit[NOM] pleases[3 SG] longer so

To him such a classification is pointless. He regards examples like (9) as illustrating a ‘personal’ construction in that they have a nominative NP controlling the verb concord.<sup>6)</sup>

Given that expressions like (9) are ‘personal’ *qua* construction, what can we say of the verbs themselves? It seems to me inappropriate to call them ‘personal.’ Following the definition suggested by Fischer & van der Leek (1983:346f) that an impersonal verb is one that can, but need not always, occur in an impersonal construction, we may regard the verbs at issue as impersonal. We may say, that is, that in (9) the ‘impersonal’ verb *like* is being used ‘personally.’

This does not put paid to the terminological issues, however. For, consider the following situation:

- (10) Me thynketh it acordaunt to resoun  
      To telle yow al the condicioun (*General Prologue* 37-8)  
      (‘(lit.) To me it seems according to reason  
      To tell you all the condition’)

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6) As for the question of whether the infinitive in such examples as (8) can be described as the subject, Mitchell states that it depends on “whether the verb ... in question is found with the nominative of a thing (as opposed to the nominative of a person) as subject,” but that is a question is “often impossible to answer” (*op.cit.*644).

- (11) For thanne th'Apostle seith that I am free  
 To wedde, a Goddes half, where it lyketh me (*Wife of Bath's Tale*  
 49-50)  
 (('lit.) For then the apostle says that I am free  
 To wed, in God's name, where[ever] it pleases me')
- (12) I took no kepe, so that he liked me (*Wife of Bath's Tale* 625)  
 (('lit.) I didn't care as long as he pleased me [he was pleasing to me]')

In (10) the provisional subject *it* is only a 'dummy subject'; so the sentence is to be defined as 'impersonal' along the traditional lines mentioned at the outset. But what about (11) and (12)? Can we say that the pronominal subject *it* in (11) is also 'dummy'? It seems unreasonable to do so. To my mind, the *it* of (11) is no more dummy than the *he* of (12). But then, a theory that will define expressions like (10) as impersonal and ones like (11) and (12) as personal strikes me as missing the point.

The 'point,' to my mind, is where the verbs under consideration stand in the transitional stages that convert what was formerly an object to a subject (cf. Jespersen 1961:III 208-12,352-5; VII 24-9)—a process that can be summarized into the following much-cited schema (cf. Lightfoot 1979:229-39):

- (13) a. þam cyng licodon peran  
 (('Lit.) Pears pleased [was pleasing to] the king')
- b. the king likeden peares  
 (('Lit.) Pears pleased the king')
- c. the king liked pears  
 ('Pears pleased the king' or 'the king liked pears')
- d. he liked pears

In the first stage, (a), the subject is *peran*. We know this from two facts: *þam cyngre* is dative, and the verb in the plural agrees with the plural *peran*. In the next stage, (b), *king* has lost its dative marking, but the verbal concord indicates that *peares* is still the subject. In stage (c) either of the NPs could be the subject as far as formal marking is concerned. But total case syncretism and the drastic reduction of verbal endings, which was well under way by the twelfth century, brought about grammatical reanalysis in its wake, fortifying the feeling that the first NP was the subject.<sup>7)</sup> Stage (d) shows that the grammatical reanalysis is now complete.

While (13) may be subject to criticism from a more meticulous point of view,<sup>8)</sup> its key points are strong enough: verbs of this category began by meaning “give an impression,” as in (13a), and came to mean “receive an impression,” as in (13d), to use Jespersen’s expression. This sketchy idea is further elaborated in the work of Fischer & van der Leek (1983), who employ the notions “cause-subject” and “experiencer-subject” corresponding to Jespersen’s “give an impression” and “receive an impression.” Since they also speak of “subjectless” constructions, they actually have three surface patterns for

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7) I use the expression ‘fortifying’ here because, as many investigators have pointed out (e.g. Mitchell 1964:59; Bean 1983:115), speakers of OE already had the feeling that the subject came first. OE was only a ‘half-inflected.’ language (compared to older Indo-European languages) and there was often no distinction in form between nominative and accusative. So, when verbal inflection is of no help either, word-order was the only means of determining grammatical relations.

8) Allen (1986:396f), for one, observes that there is no evidence that the stage of (13b) actually existed with the verb *like*. But there is a gap on the part of Allen’s data, too. At one point (1986:401), she claims that after Shakespeare’s time *like* came to be used only in the fashion of (12d). As Denison (1993:91) points out, however, the verb was still being used in the sense of ‘please’ as late as the 1660s at least: e.g. *But the houses did not like us* (Pepys, *Diary* II 114.14).

impersonal verbs. The three patterns—which they call Types (i), (ii) and (iii)—can be handily outlined in terms of the following examples which Elmer (1981:76) presented somewhat earlier on the basis of the attested occurrence of the Old English verb *hreowan* (captions and glosses mine):<sup>9)</sup>

- (14) a. Type (i): subjectless  
 me hreoweþ þære dæde  
 me[DAT] is-pity the deed[GEN]
- b. Type (ii): cause-subject  
 me hreoweþ seo dæd  
 me[DAT] is-pity the deed[NOM]
- c. Type (iii): experiencer-subject  
 ic hreowe þære dæde  
 I[NOM] rue the deed[GEN]

Notice that in (a) and (c) what amounts to the ‘cause’ occurs in the form of genitive: so (a) and (c) roughly means, respectively, ‘There is pity to me because of the deed’ and ‘I pity because of the deed.’ These genitive expressions may be looked upon as a subcase of the so-called ‘genitive of cause’ that was in common use in Old English, although in these examples the genitive case may be said to be ‘inherently marked’ by the verb, while ‘genitive of cause’ can occur freely.<sup>10)</sup>

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9) It is very hard to give an appropriate gloss for the impersonal sense of the verb *hreowan* in (14a,b). Perhaps ‘make rue’ is a better candidate than ‘is-pity.’ I chose the latter, however, in consideration of inflectional form of the ‘experiencer,’ *me*, which is dative and not accusative. Similar examples are found in Anderson (1986:170f). I adopt Elmer’s examples here as they are much simpler in wording.

10) Given below are examples of free occurrence of ‘genitive of cause’:

i) he þæs frofre gebad (*Beowulf* 7)

That variances like (14) are already found in the Old English data (also cf. Anderson 1986:170f) suggests that the transition from the impersonal to the personal constructions is not really ‘historical’–or ‘diachronic.’ The transition may as well be a ‘synchronic’ phenomenon that worked through each stage of the language’s history, although the process of conversion may vary among individual verbs. Elmer (1981:108) observes that the Old English *lician* ‘like,’ while overwhelmingly Type (ii), does occur in Type (iii)–albeit sporadically, in contrast to *hreowan* ‘rue’ illustrated in (14).<sup>11)</sup> By the 16th century, he further notes, one can be “more confident about the personal [= Type (iii)] interpretation of ambiguous constructions such as ... *Our Saviour lyked to slepe*.”

According to Traugott (1972:131f), in the later sixteenth century Type (ii) patterns are found as one of “Spenser’s conscious archaisms” and, with authors like Shakespeare, they are “almost completely restricted to the idiomatic expression *methinks* and *me had rather*.” She probably would have thought twice had she heard one say that even in Shakespeare’s time “the impersonal and personal uses of *think* were often confused” Abbott (1966:210). The following examples are from Abbott (*ibid.*):<sup>12)</sup>

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‘he experienced consolation *because of that*’

ii) *sægde him þæs leanes þanc* (*Beowulf* 1809)

‘(he) said thank(s) to him *for that reward*’

11) According to Denison (1993:92), Type (iii) instances of *lician* is limited to the Latinate syntax of glosses. Thus in the following example, *on ðe ic well licade* is a direct translation of Latin *in te complacui*:

þu eart sunu min leof on ðe ic wel licade

you are son my beloved in you I well liked

‘you are my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased’

12) The form *thinkst thee of* (15b) invites a special attention. Abbott mentions at

- (15) a. Where it thinkst best unto your royal self (*Richard III* 3.1.63)  
 b. Doth it not, thinkst thee, stand me now upon? (*Hamlet* 5.2.63)

It was mentioned above (fn.8) that the Type (ii) sense of *like* was still in use as late as 1660's, but vis-à-vis (15) let me add the following examples from Shakespeare can be added:

- (16) a. This [*sc.* This foil] likes me well (*Hamlet* 5.2.247)  
 b. it [*sc.* calling in the revellers] dislikes me (*Othello* 2.3.47).

Visser (1970:I,35) was right to the point when he stressed, contra van der Gaaf, that it is not right to say that “in the 16th century works the old [i.e. impersonal] construction only appears sporadically.”

The point, then, is that the transition schematized in (14) should be looked upon as a synchronic, as well as diachronic, phenomenon. The

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one point (*op.cit.*:139) that “[f]or reasons of euphony ... the ponderous *thou* is often ungrammatically replaced by *thee*” and that “[t]his is particularly the case in questions and requests, where, the pronoun being especially unemphatic, *thou* is especially objectionable.” This would mean that *thinkst* is an elided form of *thinkest*. At another point (p.142), however, he notes that “*thee* is probably the dative ... or, at all events, there is, perhaps, confusion between *thinks it thee?* i.e. *does it seem to thee?* and *thinkest thou?*,” adding that “very likely *thinkst* is an abbreviation of *thinks it*.” Under this account, *thinkst thee* is a misrepresentation of *thinks't thee*. To my mind, this latter interpretation, based on the “give an impression” (i.e. Type (ii)) sense of the verb, is a better choice.

Let me mention here incidentally that of the four Shakespeare editions which I checked for the expression in question, only one (*The Kittredge-Players Edition of the Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. New York: Grolier, 1936) closely follows the impersonal sense of the verb—whence *thinks't thee* (‘does it seem to thee’). Another one (*The Oxford Shakespeare*, 1988) opts for *think'st thee*, a form in the vein of Abbott's first version of interpretation noted above. The other two (*The Riverside Shakespeare*, 1974; *Shakespeare: Four Tragedies*. D. Bevington (ed.). New York: Bantam Books, 1980) dispense with the cumbersome inflection altogether, opting for *think thee*.



same observation holds for (13). That is, the grammatical reanalysis outlined by (13) is not necessarily an ‘historical’ process ranging from Old English over Middle English to Modern English.

As regards (13), however, there is yet another caveat to file. Does this variation illustrate transition from ‘impersonal’ to ‘personal,’ as is usually assumed? It is important to note that all the examples in (13) are to be defined as ‘personal constructions,’ in that each of them contains a non-dummy nominative NP controlling verb concord. But one feels that something is wrong with such a definition. To see the point more clearly, consider the different uses of the verb *like* in the following examples:

- (17) I took no kepe, so that he liked me (= (12))  
    (‘I didn’t care as long as he pleased me [he was pleasing to me]’)
- (18) And, for he was a straunger, somewhat she  
    Lykede hym the bet (*Legend of Good Women* 1075–6)  
    (‘And because he was a stranger, she somewhat  
    Liked him the better’)

Are we to call both of these expressions ‘personal’? Such an indiscriminate appellation strikes one as missing an important point of distinction in verbal usage that many scholars wanted to capture. To repeat Jespersen’s expression, (17) manifests the sense of “give an impression” whereas (18) intends “receive an impression.” Or, to use Fischer & van der Leek’s terminology, (17) exhibits the “cause–subject” pattern (= Type (ii)), and (18) the “experiencer–subject” pattern (= Type (iii)). The same difference obtains between (13a) and (13b) on the one hand and (13d) on the other. If the terms ‘impersonal’ and ‘personal’

are to be retained, it seems to me more appropriate to reserve the first epithet for examples like (17) and (13a,b), while designating the latter only for those like (18) and (13d). In any case, the impersonal verb *like* used in such expressions as (17) and (13a,b) hardly looks like a full-fledged ‘personal’ verb. Here we see an additional situation in which terminological elaboration is in need.

In concluding this section, we have another issue to consider with respect to (14). For a proper understanding of this issue it is essential to bear in mind that in (14a) the impersonal verb *hreowan* takes two objects: the indirect object in the dative (*me*) and the object in the genitive (*þære dæde*). Visser (1970:I,606) refers to the dative object as “a kind of recipient” and the genitive object as the “causative object” that “denotes a thing or a circumstance which occasions the action or with which the action has concernment” (for this latter definition, also cf. his § 370). Visser’s idea is akin to that of Fischer & van der Leek, who would define the dative and genitive objects as “experiencer” and “cause,” as we have already seen.

Now, a view that is wide spread in the literature is that the oblique experiencer (or recipient) NP can be considered as some kind of ‘subject.’ For Elmer (1981:8) it is a “pseudo-subject”; for Fisher & van der Leek (1983:348f) and Ogura (1986:14), it is a “logical subject” (also cf. Lightfoot 1979,1981). The significance of such observations stands out with an example like the following, which Allen (1986: 391–4) discusses as a phenomenon of coordinate subject deletion:<sup>13)</sup>

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13) Perhaps it should be mentioned that the preposition *to* in the second line is not related to the following *fyr* but the preceding *him*. OE prepositions were often ‘postposed’ in this way.

- (19) ac Gode ne licode na heora geleafleast,  
but God[DAT] not pleased never their faithlessness[NOM]  
... ac asende him to fyr of heofonum  
but sent them to fire from heavens  
(‘but God did not at all like their faithfulness ... but sent fire to them  
from heaven.’)

Here the unexpressed subject of *asende* ‘sent’ is to be coreferential with the experiencer argument of *licode* ‘pleased,’ namely *Gode*. In other words, the dative *Gode* must be construed as the ‘logical subject’ of *licode*.

This explication raises a query in its wake. It seems quite natural that if the dative *me* of (14a) is the logical subject, it can alternatively occur as a nominative experiencer–subject as in (14c), because subject is normally expressed in the nominative. But why would there be a variant like (14b)? Why, that is, would the genitive *þære dæde* of (14a), which is the logical *object*, alternatively appear in a nominative cause–subject?

Actually the answer is simple. What (14) demonstrates is that syntax works differently from semantics. Such being the case, the semantic (or ‘logical’) relations of (14a) can appear differently in terms of syntactic relations, resulting in a Type (iii) construction like (14c) or, alternatively, a Type (ii) construction like (14b).

It should be noted at the same time, however, that the syntax of Type (ii) competed persistently with the semantics of “logical subject” in the history of English. The Shakespearean expressions cited in (15) and (16) give us some sense of the situation (also cf. fn.8). The following Chaucerian examples also merit attention:

- (20) a. If that it like unto youre wommanhede (*TC* 3, 1302)  
 (('Lit.) If it be pleasing to your womanhood')
- b. To don al that may lyke unto youre herte, (*TC* 5, 133)  
 (('Lit.) To do all that may be pleasing to your heart')
- c. To Troilus right wonder wel with alle  
 Gan for to like hire mevyng and hire chere, (*TC* 1. 288-9)  
 (('Lit.) Her motion and her facial expression began to be pleasing to Troilus amazingly well withal.')

As indicated by the underline, the 'experiencer' arguments of an impersonal verb (in this case *like*), which in Old English would take the form of dative NPs, sometimes appear as prepositional phrases in Middle English, where case morphology is no more at work (except with pronouns). What the data in (20) show in conjunction with an example like (19) is that neither in Old English nor in Middle English was the psychology of "logical subject/object" delineated above so strong as to overwhelm the "give an impression" (= Type (ii)) sense of impersonal verbs.

The above discussion does not pretend to have exhausted the problems and issues inherent in impersonal constructions. Delving into this area any further would lead us far afield of the main topic of the present study. We had space here only to chart some data and their implications that seem to me relevant more or less directly to our topic.

### 3. Mixed constructions due to confusion

Risking repetition, let us have the following three points highlighted. First, the process of change manifested like (13) and (14) is not really

diachronic but rather synchronic. Second, examples like (17) and (18) demonstrate that even from a synchronic perspective impersonal verbs vacillated between “give an impression” and “receive an impression” senses, giving rise to the “cause–subject” construction, Type (ii), and the “experience–subject” construction, Type (iii), respectively. Third, the syntax of “cause–subject” (manifested as Type (ii)) and the semantics of “logical subject” (anticipating Type (iii)) were in persistent competition.

In illustrating these points, which are in effect intimately related, I have tried, for expository simplicity, to confine my examples to the verb *like*. At this juncture some examples seem to be in order which involve the impersonal verb *think*. For our immediate purpose, those instances that correspond to (17) and (18) will suffice.<sup>14)</sup>

- (21) If love be good, from whennes cometh my woo?  
If it be wikke, a wonder thynketh me,  
Whenne every torment and adversite  
That cometh of hym, may to me savory thinke, (*TC* 1, 402–5)  
(‘If love is good, where does my woe come from?  
If it is bad, (it) seems to me a wonder,  
When [= That] every torment and adversity  
That comes from it may seem pleasant to me’)

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14) One might say that the *thynketh/thinke* of (21) and the *think/thenkyng* of (22) are two different verbs, which inherit the OE *þyncan* ‘seem’ and *þencan* ‘think’ respectively. As a matter of fact, however, such a distinction is hardly systematic in Chaucerian spelling (or, for that matter, ME spelling as a whole), which often represented the two verbs in the same way, especially in the preterite, *tho(u)ghte*. So it may be justifiably said that in Chaucer’s time the two verbs were often confused. But if one will insist that examples like (22) do not illustrate impersonal constructions and thus are not relevant to our discussion, then it should be said that the rudiments of our argument hold good apart from (22).

- (22) This Pandarus, tho desirous to serve  
 His fulle frend, than seyde in this manere:  
 “Farewell, and thenk I wol thi thank deserve! / [...]”  
 And went his way, thenkyng on this matere, (TC 1, 1058–62)  
 (“This Pandarus, still desirous to serve  
 His good friend, then said in this manner:  
 “Farewell, and think I will deserve your thank! [...]”  
 And went his way, thinking on this matter’)

(21) illustrates the Type (ii) pattern, and (22) the Type (iii) pattern. In each of them the verb *think* occurs twice. In (21), both instances of the verb denote “give an impression.” The ‘cause–subject’ of *thynketh* in the second line is the clause that begins in the third line, *Whenne ... savory thinke*; that of *thinke* at the end is *every torment ... of hym*. Notice incidentally that the ‘experiencer’ NP of this second instance of the verb appears as a prepositional phrase (*to me*), as we saw was the case with the verb *like* in (20). In (22), on the other hand, both instances of the verb have the sense of “receive an impression,” whether or not they are actually impersonal verbs (cf. fn.13 above).

That the pattern of Type (ii) alternated almost freely with that of Type (iii) even within a single period of time<sup>15</sup>—Chaucer’s time in this case—suggests that there must have been a considerable degree of confusion going on in the mind of the speaker as to these two patterns. And this confusion, let me argue here, accounts for the curious type of construction that motivated the present study. Consider (2), repeated below:

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15) ‘Almost freely,’ because not all impersonal verbs occurred personally. Burnley (1983) points out that of the 25 impersonal verbs found in Chaucer’s works, seven do not manifest personal use: *behove(n)*, *happe(n)*, *bifalle(n)*, *lakke(n)*, *nede(n)*, *tyde(n)*, and *betyde(n)*—verbs of HAPPEN and NEED.

(2) *Us thinketh hem wonder nyce and straunge*

To begin with, *Us* and *hem* correspond to (Fischer & van der Leek's) Experiencer and Cause respectively. But *thinketh*, as an impersonal verb, denotes (Jespersen's) "give an impression." This is why *Us*, as the "recipient of the action" (as Visser puts it), is in the oblique form. But then the speaker would in the mind construe the initial pronoun as the "logical subject" (à la Ogura) and thus express the Cause (*here hem*) in the oblique form, taking it for the "logical object." This way a verb meaning "give an impression" is converted into one denoting "receive an impression."

The rationale behind all this is that (2) is a 'mixed' construction in which syntactic parsing and semantic interpretation collide and compete, confusing the speaker. It is a construction that falls halfway between Type (ii) and Type (iii). The same explanation will apply toward the expressions cited in (5)–(7), repeated here in simplified forms:

(5) & swetest him ꝑunched ham

(6) ... me ꝑunched me unschriuen

(7) ... so wel us lyketh yow

And al youre werk, and evere han doon

This takes care of the question posed in (3a). But what about the lack of verbal concord, the problem of (3b)? I think that this disagreement is closely intertwined with the confusing status of the impersonal construction. Just imagine what form of verb the speaker is to use when he is uncertain about what is the subject of the verb. In

such a case, the speaker would resort to some form of verb that is ‘neutral’ as to the number and person of whatever is going to be the subject. The 3rd-person singular is that neutral form. That is, as the impersonal verbs becomes more and more indeterminate between Types (ii) and (iii), the speaker *habitually* takes the 3rd-person singular ending as the ‘default’ form, so to speak.

The example in (7) is particularly interesting in this respect: it demonstrates how the default 3-person singular becomes a ‘frozen’ form. (7) can be rendered as either ‘You and all your work please us so well and always have (done)’ or ‘We like you and all your work so well and always have (done)’ depending on whether we take the “give an impression” sense of the impersonal verb or its “receive an impression” sense.<sup>16)</sup> Under either reading, however, the impersonal verb (*lyketh*) takes the singular form even when the other (‘regular’) verb (*han*) used in the same sentence is in the plural in congruence with the plural subject.

The notion of the 3rd-person singular as a ‘frozen’ form stands out more clearly in an example such as (4), repeated below:

(4) How liketh thee my wyf and hire beautee?

Here the problem of (3a) is blurred by the absence of case morphology on the part of the compound NP *my wyf and hire beautee*. While, that is, we may treat (4) as indeterminate between Types (ii) and (iii) the way the above examples are,<sup>17)</sup> the Type (ii) reading will tend to

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16) That is, the (unexpressed) subject of *han* must be coreferential with that of *lyketh*. In this respect, (7) is a striking analog of the Old English example given in (19).



prevail. This is so because the compound NP will more likely be parsed as nominative, and thus the grammatical subject, by the very fact that, not being pronominal, it lacks case inflection, and that it cooccurs with the oblique pronoun *thee*, which can easily be taken as the ‘dative object.’ But the verb accompanying the plural subject is nonetheless in the 3rd-person singular.

Notice, however, that even under the Type (iii) reading of (4), in which case *thee* will be construed as the logical subject, the notion of ‘the 3rd-person singular as a frozen form’ will still obtain, because of the failure of agreement in person. At any rate, the idea that the frozen singular form originates from the uncertainty about the subjecthood shares a spirit with Schrader’s observation cited (via Mitchell) at the outset of Section 1 to the effect that the speaker may commit himself to a singular verb before deciding on the actual grammatical subject. Our account differs from Schrader’s only in that it does not hinge on the notion of ‘inverted order’ of the subject following its verb—a notion criticized by Visser as we have seen.

Consider in this connection how the Old English examples cited in (9) compare with the Middle English expression (4):

- (9) a. Ðam wife            þa    word                    wel licodon  
           the    lady[DAT] those words[NOM, PL] pleased[3 PL]  
       b. Me            þin    modsefa            /    licað            leng swa wel  
           me[DAT] your spirit[NOM, SG]    pleases[3 SG]

As we can clearly see, the verb in each example agrees with the

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17) That is (4) may be thought of as meaning either ‘How do my wife and her beauty please you?’ (Type (ii)) or ‘How do you like my wife and her beauty?’ (Type (iii)).

nominative NP, which is identified as the grammatical subject. What data like (9) demonstrate is that in Old English in which grammatical relations can be parsed on the basis of case morphology,<sup>18)</sup> verbal concord was mandatory even though the verb is impersonal. To the best of my knowledge, there is no Middle English example that corresponds to (4) while differing from it in that verbal concord is manifested in accordance with the plural subject. One can work through all the pages of Chaucer's works without finding such an example. Allen's observation (cited in fn.8) that the stage of (13b) did not exist with the verb *like* seems to be of particular relevance here. More acutely relevant perhaps is her observation that, with *thinken*, examples of "two pronouns in the dative case in one sentence" (such as in (2), (5) and (6)) first appear in the thirteenth-century while similar examples with *like* (such as in (4) and (7)) begin to appear only in the fourteenth-century (Allen 1986:381f). Such facts, coupled with the contrast between (4) and (9), attest one again to the functional relation between the singular form of verb and the uncertainty about subjecthood.

Before concluding our discussion, however, a couple of things beg clarification. First, consider the following OE examples:

- (23) a. me            hreoweþ þære dæde (=14a)  
          me[DAT]            the deed[GEN]
- b. nanne mon            þæs            ne            tweoð  
          no            man[ACC] that[GEN] not    doubts[3 SG]  
          þæt se sie strong on his mægene (Fischer & van der Leek 1983:348)

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18) In this context I use the expression 'can be' (rather than 'are'), taking into consideration the fact, mentioned earlier, that already in Old English, word order also played the role of parser to a certain degree.

that he is strong in might

At first blush these expressions seem to be akin to those mentioned in (2) and (5)–(7). Here too, that is, the impersonal verbs take the 3rd-person singular ending and both of the pronouns related to each of the verbs are oblique in case. Do these examples, then, also correspond to ‘mixed constructions’ in the sense we intended so far? If so, we cannot say, as Allen does, that examples like (2) and (5)–(7) first appeared in Middle English period, and therefore our argument will have to be duly modified. A closer scrutiny, however, reveals that the Old English examples are not instances of mixed constructions.

True, in each example the initial NP–dative *me* of (23a) and the accusative *nanne mon* of (23b)–may be considered the ‘logical subject.’ But this is not the reason for the second NP to take an oblique (genitive) case–form. That is, the genitive form of the second NP is not due to the kind of ‘confusion’ that we discussed with the Middle English examples. It is simply an instance of ‘genitive of cause’ (cf. fn. 10).<sup>19)</sup> Despite the superficial similarities, therefore, there is a nontrivial difference between (23) on the one hand and (2) and (5)–(7) on the other. As far as syntactic parsing and semantic computation did also compete in Old English, it is quite surprising why Old English would not manifest expressions corresponding to (2) and (5)–(7). I leave this issue open for a future study.

Another point to note concerns an example such as follows, taken from Denison (1993:72):

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19) We might alternatively say that the verb *hreoƿeþ* and *tweoð* inherently mark the genitive case on the ‘logical object’ (while they inherently take the ‘logical subject’ in the dative or the accusative, as the case may be).

- (24) *Hi me reweð swa swiðe ðat ic reste ne mai habben.*  
 they me rue so much that I reest not may have  
 ('They [*sc.* souls] make me rue so badly that I cannot have rest.')

There are two possible ways to react to an expression like this. The first is simply to treat it as yet another piece of evidence for the notion of 'the 3rd-person singular as a frozen form.' For, while *Hi* is in the nominative and thus can easily be parsed as the grammatical subject, the impersonal verb is in the singular (*reweð*), regardless of the plural subject. Under an alternative view, an expression like (24) poses a question to the notion of 'frozen form' itself. Recall that this notion is motivated by what we have described as 'uncertainty about the subjecthood.' (24), however, does not involve such uncertainty: *Hi*, being nominative, can easily be identified as the grammatical subject. This means that we have to explain the verbal ending *-eth* in some other way.

It was mentioned in Section 1 that the process of merging whereby the Old English plural ending *-að* became *-eð* continued well into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, leveling the distinction between plural and 3rd-person singular. Also mentioned was that the confusion in the verbal endings was originally a feature of Northern English, which in the course of time gradually spread to the south. The verbal ending *-eth* shown in (24), then, may be a dialectal characteristic. The vocabulary and the spelling system reflected in the expression (which is from *Vices and Virtues* as Denison reports) suggest that it is not written in a Midland dialect.

Sometimes, therefore, it is not clear whether the 3rd-person singular is a 'frozen' form in the sense intended in the present study, or just a

record of the historical process that merged the plural ending and the 3-person singular ending. Which of these two applies toward the *-eth* of (24) I should leave, again, to further examination.

#### **4. Concluding remarks with a conjecture**

It is well known since van der Gaaf (1904) that the transition from the impersonal to the personal construction in Middle English is an instance of case shifting, that is, a type of reanalysis interpreting the Old English dative/accusative pseudo-subject (or 'logical subject') as a nominative subject. The main causes for this reanalysis, it is also widely known, are the Middle English loss of case distinctions and the gradual establishment of subject-verb-object word order. One point the present study tried to make clear in this connection is that the transition in question was already an on-going (i.e. 'synchronic') process even before extensive case syncretism took place, as can be seen from examples like (14), and continued until quite long after the total case syncretism, as examples like (15) and (16) suggest. This is to say that the change from impersonal to personal is not necessarily a 'diachronic' process ranging from Old English over Middle English to Modern English.

Another point this study called attention to concerns a terminological issue. According to the broad syntactic definition used in the literature, an impersonal construction has no nominative NP (apart from 'dummy subject') that controls verb concord. When an impersonal verb is used in a construction which *does* have such an NP, therefore, it is said that the verb is being used 'personally': that is, the construction is automatically defined as a 'personal construction.' As we have seen,

however, it does not stand to reason to class Type (ii) expressions like (17) and Type (iii) expressions like (18) indiscriminately under the category of ‘personal construction’ simply because they manifest a nominative NP controlling verb concord. Such an appellation, let me stress again, is what strips terms like ‘impersonal’ and ‘personal’ of their intended meanings. I argued that if the terms are to be retained, constructions of Type (ii) should be considered to be as much *impersonal* as those of Type (i). As far as I know, this idea has not been duly brought under discussion before.

As for the curious type of expressions with which we started out—namely those in (2) and (5)–(7)—they turned out to be ‘mixed constructions’ that result from confounding the impersonal and the personal constructions, or more precisely, the Type (ii) and Type (iii) patterns of impersonal verbs. So, in *Us thinketh hem wonder nyce and straunge*, for example, the pronoun in the initial position, while syntactically the ‘recipient’ of the verb, is construed semantically as the subject, making the second pronoun, which would otherwise be the subject of the verb, occur in the oblique form as if it is the object. The paradox, then, is that the verb is at once impersonal *and* personal, suggesting that “a speaker has not yet arrived so far in development as to trace his own actions and feelings to his own agency” (Abbott 1966:208). Such a confusion may be a natural phenomenon when an impersonal verb meaning ‘give an impression’ is converted into one denoting ‘receive an impression,’ anticipating the full establishment of the ‘personal’ construction.

Recall that (2), our topic example, is an adaptation of a passage from Chaucer’s *Troilus and Chryseide*, namely (1). I would like to conclude by hazarding a conjecture, as far as it does not affect the

main points made in any direct way, on what kind of effect the poet might have purported in employing such a mixed construction in the passage.

It should be remembered that the passage speaks of the “change in the form of speech” which may give rise to expressions that are “amazingly foolish and strange.” Would it then be reasonable to assume that the poet was not conscious of the ‘strange’ nature of the diction he was using in his passage? “A poet is, before anything else, a person who is passionately in love with language,” as W. H. Auden said. Chaucer, being a poet, must have been instinctively sensitive to the subtle changes and variations his native tongue was undergoing. It does not seem quite right to say, as we did at the beginning, that the loose style like (2) “did not bother the poet.” He must have *intended* something with the loose style. My assertion is that he was deliberately employing an expression which could make his own speech sound “strange,” if not “foolish,” thereby vividly delineating what changes were indeed going on in the language. From this point of view, *Us thinketh hem, etc.* is a kind of device to make his speech *resemble* what it was commenting on.

Mimetic ingenuity of this kind is in fact well known in verbal artistry. The following is a famous example from Alexander Pope’s *An Essay on Criticism* (2, 346–7):

While expletives their feeble aid do join;  
And ten low words oft creep in one dull line:

In the first line an example of “expletives” is provided right in the body of that line, namely by *do*. The second line is itself composed of

“ten low words,” perfectly miming what the line describes. Or, consider the following lines (356–7):

A needless Alexandrine ends the song,  
That, like a wounded snake, drags its slow length along.

We can see that the second line is in itself an example of what the first line purports to criticize (“needless Alexandrine”). So, quite often, a poetic expression is in form what it is about in content.

Actually, the point can be illustrated outside the context of poetic expressions. Commenting on the prescriptive norm that condemns a sentence ending in a preposition, Sir Winston Churchill is said to have come up with this sentence: *This is the sort of English up with which I will not put* (Potter 1976:102)—meaning, of course, ‘This is the sort of English with which I will not put up’ or ‘This is the sort of English I will not put up with.’ Notice that the deictic *This* of the made-up sentence refers to the very sentence that contains it. The intolerably artificial expression was meant to exemplify, in a satirical way, a sort of English that would result from the ridiculous prescriptivism in question.

If the suggestion here made is valid, it does not preclude the possibility that the ‘mixed construction’ used in (1) was in effect satirizing the poet’s own speech that was fated to reflect such changes and chances as the confounded use of impersonal and personal constructions was bringing about in its wake. Self-satire, or self-parody, are very Chaucerian indeed. Thus in the short Prologue to *Sir Thopas’ Tale* (which is itself short by the way), the poet is quite willing to make fun of himself, touching on his helpless shyness



coupled with his portly waist, his poppet-like frame, and his “elvysse” (i. e. abstracted, peevish) countenance (although Baugh (1963:347) points out that his self-parody here need not be taken literally down to the last detail: that it may be a sort of tactful preambing to make short the story of Sir Thopas, which he meant to be a parody of Middle English metrical romance). When he was describing the “tuft of hair” that stood on top of the Miller’s nose (*General Prologue* 554–5), maybe the poet was at the same time ridiculing his own pettiness of fussing over such details. He was, after all, never ‘shy’ of being the subject of his own satire or parody.

Lest this account conveys the impression that whenever ‘mixed constructions’ are found in Chaucer’s works there is to be detected some kind of ‘intention,’ let me add immediately that examples like (4) and (7), also from Chaucer’s works, are free of any satirical implication. More generally, it should be repeated, such constructions were in use for some time during the Middle English period, in prose as well as in poetry. The point of the above appendix is that a passage like (1) is where an intention of some kind *can* arguably be perceived.

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[Abstract]

This paper deals with a class of Middle English impersonal constructions that involve verbs of two-place argument structure. As is generally understood, the term 'impersonal' is notoriously murky, and after all those researches that have been performed in this area, quite a few issues still remain controversial. The issues we center around in the present study concern the following two. In the type of impersonal constructions we consider, the two arguments—Cause and Experiencer—are both expressed in oblique case, posing the problem of determining which of them functions as the grammatical subject. The issue, however, is not how an argument in oblique case can be taken as the subject: it is well known that the so called 'dative subject Experiencer' already occurred in Old English. The real issue is why *both* of the arguments are syntactically realized as nonnominative. The other issue concerns the 3rd-person singular form of the verb. Here again, the crux of the problem may be blurred by the fact that impersonal construction is often defined as one in which the verb has 3rd-person singular form with no apparent nominative NP controlling verb concord. But this definition is more nebulous than clear because the notion 'subjectless' is itself highly controversial. Thus, for an expression like *me thinketh that-S*, it may well be that the verb *thinketh* ('seems') is 3rd-person singular *because* the *that*-clause is the subject. What should be explained of the *data brought up here is why the impersonal verb is 3rd-person singular when neither of the NPs associated with it is 3rd person or singular. I argue that we can account for our paradigm examples by looking upon them as 'mixed construction' in which semantic interpretation conflicts with syntactic parsing as a result of case syncretism and gradual establishment of SVO word order. This amounts to saying that the peculiarities of the construction originate with the confused use of impersonal verbs between the sense of 'give an impression' and that of 'receive and impression.'*