

Impersonal Expressions in the History of English

It is a well-known fact that in some languages (e.g. Polish, Russian, Italian, etc) the expression of a subject in a finite sentence is optional:

Marysia kupiła kwiaty. vs *Kupila kwiaty.*

Some languages (e.g. PdE, OE, ME, MnGerman, etc.) do not allow finite sentences without a phonetically realised subject:

Mary bought some flowers. versus **Bought some flowers.*

In spite of its typological membership OE did occasionally feature non-finite clauses without a subject. Such clauses belong to a clearly defined set to be discussed below.

Old English

Subjectless expressions in Old English are represented by:

- (i) impersonal clauses with Experiencer verbs
- (ii) impersonal passive clauses
- (iii) expressions of natural phenomena
- (iv) clauses with extraposed clausal subjects

(i) **Experiencer verbs** HANDOUT HAS GLOSSES BUT NO PDE TRANSLATIONS!

(1) 2 NPs

a. Him **ofhreow** *dæs mannes*¹
he-DAT pitied-3SG the-GEN man-GEN
'He was sorry for the man.'
Homl. Th. i. 192, 16 (B&T)

b. for *dæm þinge* men **lyst** *ælcas þara gooda* þe hi lyst.
for that thing men-ACC desires-SG each the goods-GEN that they desires-3SG
'For that reason men desire the goods they desire.'
Alfred's Boethius 88; COBOETH<R 34.88.10> (HCET)

(2) 1 NP

a. him **hingrode** and **þyrste**;
him-DAT hungered and thirsted
'He felt hunger and thirst.'
Ælfric's Catholic Homilies (II) 256; COAELHOM<R 256.26> (HCET)

b. Mec **æt heortan** **gehreaw**
me-ACC at heart repented
'I repented at heart.'
Exon. 29b; Th. 91, 18; Cri. 1494: Cd. 221; Th. 288, 2; Sat. 374 (B&T)

(3) NP + PP

a. & ne **sceamige** ænigum men *for his ylde*, ac do swa him þearf is, (...)
and not shame-SUBJ SG any-DAT man-DAT for his age, but do as him needed is
'That no man should be ashamed of his age but act according to his needs.'
Wulfstan's Homilies (O3) 183; COWULF3<R 142> (HCET)

b. þa ongan hine eft **langian** *on his cyþþe*
then began him-ACC again long after his family
'Then he began to miss his family'

¹ For your convenience I use the following conventions here: Experiencer, *Theme*, **verb**.

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The Blickling Homilies 113; COBLICK <R 108> (*HCET*)

- (4) NP + CP
- a. Hine ne lyst his willan wyrcean
 him-ACC not desires-3SG his will to-do
 ‘He does not desire to perform his will’
 Blickl. Homl. 51, 16 (*B&T*)
- b. þa forhtode he & **tweonode** him hweðer hit swa wære, swa him þuhte.
 then became-frightened he and doubted him-DAT whether it so was as him seemed
 ‘Then he became afraid and he began to doubt if it was as it seemed to him.’
 An Old English Vision of Leofric, Earl of Mercia, 186; COLEOFRI<R 80> (*HCET*)

Type	Experiencer	Theme	Verb
impersonal	DAT/ACC	GEN/CP/PP/Ø	3SG

(ii) *The impersonal passive*

- (5)
- a. him byð forgyfen
 him-DAT is forgiven
 ‘He will be forgiven’
 O. E. Gospels, Mt. 12, 32 (*Visser* 1963-73:§1930)
- b. Him nolde Alexander ðæs **getidian**
 him-DAT not-wanted Alexander that-GEN to-grant
 ‘Alexander would not grant him that’
 Ors. 3, 9; Bos. 65, 7 (*B&T*)
- c. ða nolde Seon, se cyningc, nateshwon him **tidian**
 then not-wanted Sihon the king by no means them-DAT to-grant
þæt Israhel ferde forð ofer his gemæru,
 that Israel go-PRET.SUBJ forth over his boundaries
 ‘Then Sihon did not want to allow Israel to pass across his territory’
 The Old Testament XXI, 21 (*HCET:COOTEST*<R 21.23>)

(iii) *Expressions of natural phenomena*

- (6)
- a. & **hit rinde** ða ofer eorðan feowertig daga & feowertig nihta on an
 and it rained then over earth forty days and forty nights on end
 ‘And it rained continually for forty days and forty nights.’
 The Old Testament, Genesis XII 1; COOTEST<R 7.12> (*HCET*)
- b. **Rinþ.**
 rains
 ‘It rains.’
 Ælfc. Gr. 22; Som. 24, 6 (*B&T*)

(iv) *Extraposed clausal subjects*

- (7)
- a. *Cidan* on swefnum ceapes eacan getacnaþ
 to-chide in dreams business-GEN increase means

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- 'To chide in dreams betokens increase of trade'
Leechdoms (Cockayne) iii, 208 (*Visser* 1963-73:§989)
- b. ... hwilum bið god wærlice to midanne his hieremona scylda
sometimes is good circumspectly to-conceal his subjects' crimes
'It is sometimes good to circumspectly conceal the crimes of one's subjects'
CP 151. 8 (*Mitchell* 1985:§1488)
- c. **Hit** is earfoðe eall to geseccanne þæt se beðencan sceal, ðe scire healt.
it is hard all to tell that he to-consider needs PT shire holds
'It is hard to tell everything that the one who is in charge of a shire needs to consider'
Laws (Late)(Gerefa) 455 (*HCET:COLAW4*<R 18>)

Middle English

(i) *Experiencer verbs*

This type of impersonal clauses existed in English up to ab. 1550:

c1205 Lay. 30253 (*OED*) þam kinge luste slepe.

a1300 K. Horn 918 (*OED*) Nu 3e reste One while, ef 3ou leste.

c1400 Destr. Troy Prol. 20 (*OED*) He..has lykyng to lerne þat hym list after.

a1553 Udall *Royster D.* iii. ii. (Arb.) 43 (*OED*) Let hym come when hym lust.

(ii) *Impersonal passive*

The impersonal passive survived in English up to about **1200**.

(iii) *Expressions of natural phenomena*

The nominative element (*h*)*it* became obligatory about **1400**.

(iv) *Extraposed clausal subjects*

The use of (*h*)*it* was optional up to about **1400?**