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# Impersonal Constructions

*A cross-linguistic perspective*

*Edited by*

Andrej Malchukov

Anna Siewierska

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A cross-linguistic perspective

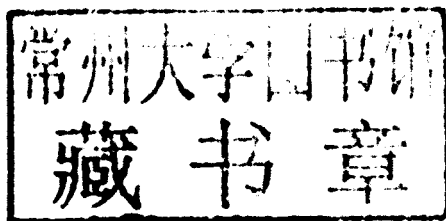
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# Introduction

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## 1. Introductory remarks

While impersonal constructions (such as Latin *Me pudet* lit. ‘me shames’, German *Mich friert* lit. ‘me freezes’, or Russian *Svetaet* ‘It dawns’) have been a regular topic of investigation in Indo-European studies (see, e.g. Seeffranz-Montag 1983; Lambert 1998; Bauer 2000; Barðdal 2004; Siewierska 2008), they have not been the subject of detailed cross-linguistic research (the work of Lehmann et al. 2000 is a notable exception). The lack of cross-linguistic studies of impersonals may be attributed to the difficulties involved in identifying impersonal constructions on a cross-linguistic basis. These difficulties stem from different interpretations of the term impersonal, as well as from the heterogeneity, both semantic (weather verbs, experiential predicates, presentational constructions) and structural (basic impersonals vs. impersonal passives) of impersonal constructions.

The volume is intended to remedy the above situation by bringing together scholars interested in various aspects of the structure of impersonal constructions, viewed broadly as constructions lacking a referential subject, both in individual languages and cross-linguistically. The contributions address different issues in the typology of impersonal constructions across a wide range of languages. Care has been taken to ensure that the selected contributions (some stemming from a *Societas Linguistica Europea* 41 workshop organized by the editors in Forlì in September 2008, others specially invited) are representative of the structural and genealogical diversity across languages in the impersonal domain. Thus, the present volume is unprecedented in bringing a typological perspective to the topic of impersonal constructions. It is expected that it will be of central interest to all scholars and advanced students of linguistics, especially to those working in the field of language typology and comparative syntax.

## 2. Some conceptual considerations

As noted above, the study of impersonal constructions has not been attempted so far in language typology, in spite of the popularity of this topic in Indo-European Studies (starting from classic work in 19th century by Herman Paul, Aleksandr Potebnja,

among others). This has to do with the heterogeneity of the constructions noted above, but also with the lack of consensus concerning the definition of impersonal constructions. As discussed in Siewierska 2008 impersonality has been traditionally viewed from two partially overlapping perspectives, a communicative-functional one which defines impersonalization in terms of agent defocusing/backgrounding, and a more structure based perspective which associates impersonality with the lack of a (referential) subject. The subject-based approach is the narrower of the two in that it conceives of impersonality as involving elements of or operations on argument structure. Under the agent-defocusing approach on the other hand impersonality is conceived of more widely as involving speaker choice with respect to the construal of an event and is regarded as sensitive to the effects of discourse. Under the subject-centred view the constructions which are considered to be impersonal may be grouped into four broad types: (a) those with an argumental subject which is not fully referential, (b) those with a subject which does not display canonical subject properties, (c) those with a subject which is not a verbal argument but merely a place filler manifesting no semantic or referential properties, i.e. an expletive subject, and (d) those with no overt subject at all. From the semantic perspective, the type of constructions involved are those featuring non-referential subjects, those depicting meteorological phenomena, those expressing sensations, emotions, need, potential and other modalities and existential and presentative constructions. The agent-defocusing approach adds to the domain of impersonality constructions in which an argument other than the agent has been selected for subject in preference to the agent such as personal passives (*The manuscript was sold for 100.000 pounds (by an unknown collector)*) and locative subject clauses (e.g. *The garden is swarming with bees*). Note that personal passives, unlike so-called impersonal passives, do possess a subject and one which typically displays the full set of subject properties in a language and as such cannot be seen as impersonal under the subject-centred view. The agent-defocusing approach also identifies as being impersonal constructions which depict events logically involving agents but construed as lacking them such as anticausatives (e.g. *The vase broke*) or action nominalizations (e.g. *the circling of the camp*). Given that the presence of agent-defocusing may be discernible only in a wider discourse-pragmatic context, as is the case with the use of existentials in European Portuguese (Afonso 2008), this approach is more amenable to language-specific, discourse-based investigations than typological studies. It should therefore come as no surprise that most contributions to this volume take the structure based approach as their starting point. Nonetheless several contributions to the volume, most notably the typological study by Malchukov & Ogawa and the descriptive study by Payne, try to combine both approaches to arrive at a new synthesis.

Apart from this major conceptual divide there are more controversial issues around impersonal constructions (and the notion of subject on which these constructions are predicated) which are tied to specific theoretical approaches or models of

grammar. Thus, for example, within the mainstream generative tradition of particular relevance to the subject-based notion of impersonality has been Chomsky's (1981) famous taxonomy of syntactic zeros (pro, PRO, NP-trace; operator-trace) and its subsequent extensions dealing with expletive zero subjects, EPP-violations, non-canonical subjects etc. as reflected most recently in the papers in Svenonius (2002), the work of Mendikoetxea (2008) and especially the analyses presented in Biberaruer et al. (2010). Similar accounts have been developed in other frameworks such as Lexical Functional Grammar (LFG) (Kibort 2008), Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar (HPSG) (Blevins 2003), Optimality Theory (OT) (Grimshaw & Samek-Lodovici 1998), and OT-LFG Bresnan (2001). An original approach to impersonal constructions has been developed by Mel'čuk (e.g. Mel'čuk 1979) embedded in his Meaning-Text Theory. It postulates several zero elements (zero lexemes) including Ø(elements) and Ø (people) to account for the wide variety of impersonal constructions in Slavic (see Zimmerling 2007 for a cross-theoretical discussion). Highly interesting are also the OT approaches to impersonality as they view the emergence of impersonal constructions as the result of the interaction of different violable constraints. Thus, for example, the emergence of a dummy subject in constructions with meteo-verbs which do not license arguments is attributable to the higher ranking of the constraint penalizing subjectless clauses over the constraint requiring faithful encoding of roles/arguments. Such an account can be translated into a functional-typological framework, if the postulated constraints can be shown to have a functional basis. Within the functional-cognitive paradigm the preference has been for the broader functional definition which takes its origin in approaches like that of Keenan's functional decomposition of subjects (see Malchukov & Ogawa for discussion).

The controversies surrounding the notion of zero-element which have played such a dominant role in formal grammatical frameworks have been primarily driven by theoretical assumptions rather than language data (see also remarks in Creissels 2007). In a few cases where the generative approach explicitly addressed typological issues the results have been rather inconclusive disappointing (see Newmeyer's 2005 critical discussion of the pro-drop parameter). Yet there seems to be a renewed interest in explicating the empirical consequences of certain assumptions and in applying them to different languages reflected especially in the work of Holmberg (2005, 2010 and Biberauer et al. (2010). One area which has been intensively explored from this perspective is impersonal passivization, the different instantiations of which present challenges to some basic assumptions of generative grammar, such as Burzio's (1986:178) generalization (see Abraham 2006, this volume et passim for a critical review of the literature on impersonal passives). One reaction, to the empirical challenges has been a proposal to reclassify some of the impersonal passive constructions (those which derive from unergatives and unaccusatives indiscriminately), as impersonals proper (or impersonal active constructions); see (Blevins 2003). While for some languages this reanalysis is

justified, it needs to be recognized that the distinction between the two types is gradient rather than clear cut (cf. also the underspecification analysis of Kibort, this volume).

The existing functional-typological approaches to impersonal constructions are few in number: they either take a very broad function-based definition of impersonalization, or else are focused on some specific varieties of impersonal constructions, as these constitute a more concrete point of departure for function-based typological studies. The impersonal constructions which have received the greatest amount of attention are arguably reference based impersonals (see e.g. Afonso 2007; Langacker 2006; Myhill 1997; Słon 2003) and so-called dative subject or psych-verb constructions (e.g. Barðdal 2004; Divjak & Janda 2008). Given the heterogeneity of the impersonal domain, there is no question that individual subdomains such as the above or meteo-verbs or presentational constructions need to be studied in their own right. However, as shown in Malchukov & Ogawa (this volume), it is also the case that these subvarieties of impersonals are not orthogonal to each other but rather are united by family resemblances spanning several domains, which the authors label A-impersonals, T-impersonals, and R-impersonals. (A-impersonals include varieties of experiential predicates, where a notional subject lacks agentivity; T-impersonals embrace presentational constructions with a notional subject deficient in topicality, and R-impersonals cover constructions with a notional subject deficient in referential properties, with a further subdivision into constructions with a non-referential subject of meteo-verbs as opposed to *man*-impersonals.) Further while the family resemblances among the different domains of impersonals have eluded a characterization in terms of a single general meaning approach or a single proto-type approach, Malchukov & Ogawa show that they can be insightfully captured by a semantic map (see also Payne, this volume, and Bassene & Creissels, this volume, for a similar approach).

Another problematic issue in typology concerns the applicability of the notion of impersonality to languages of different types, in particular to ergative languages (see Lazard 1998; Creissels 2007; Siewierska 2008). Here the general consensus seems to be that even for ergative languages lack of an A-argument rather than of a P-argument should be definitive of impersonality (for the latter the term anti-impersonal has been coined by Lazard). Indeed the opposite assumption would result in impersonal constructions in accusative and ergative languages being functionally incompatible since the semantic domain of “anti-impersonal” constructions is quite different from impersonal ones. Although this question has not been systematically followed up in contributions to the present volume, this discussion is echoed in a number of contributions involving ergative languages, in particular by Moyse-Faurie’s discussion of differential case marking in Oceanic languages, and Verstraete’s discussion of the passive-like behavior of certain ergative constructions in the Australian languages. The issue, is, however, broader and not confined to ergative languages, as it concerns the distribution of subject properties in some constructions in accusative languages

as well, in particular those which display non-canonical subject-marking, but also in other cases labeled “covert impersonal constructions” by Creissels. In the present volume the question of the distribution of subject properties is explicitly addressed by Gast & Haas who discuss the distribution of subject properties between an expletive and postverbal NP in presentational structures and also in the contribution by Salo who considers the issue in relation to a variety of meteo-constructions in Uralic.

One recent trend in the study of impersonal constructions is the renewed interest in the diachronic paths leading to or from impersonal constructions. This has been a popular topic in Indo-European studies (Seefrantz-Montag 1983; Bauer 2000; Koch 2000), but has recently been also extended to other languages. In particular a number of the contributions to Donohue & Wichmann 2008 show that impersonal (or rather ‘transimpersonal’ constructions with a transitive verb taking an indefinite A argument) have played an important role in the rise of split intransitive patterns (see Malchukov 2008; cf. Mithun 2008; Holton 2008). Earlier a path from transimpersonal active to impersonal passive has been equally well documented (by Greenberg 1959; Shibatani 1985 and others), even though not all of the examples cited are upon closer inspection entirely unproblematic (see Siewierska 2010 for a typological approach). Yet another grammaticalization path, from locative inversion constructions via locative subject constructions to existential impersonals has been recently proposed by Croft (forthcoming). In the present volume, the contributions by Payne on Maa, Bugaeva on Ainu and to some extent also by Siewierska deal with the impersonal to passive path, the contributions by Vajda et al. on Ket and Miyaoka on Yupik deal with the impersonal to intransitive path, and the contribution by Gast & Haas touches upon the locative to existential developments.

The above diachronic analyses point to an interesting perspective on impersonals as transitional structures or an intermediate stage of a more basic diachronic change be it from transitive to intransitive, or from active to passive or participant to event-centered construction etc. To the best of our knowledge, such a view of the whole domain of impersonality, as opposed to specific types of impersonal constructions, has not been explicitly advanced before. Yet it provides one potential answer to the heterogeneity of the constructions within the domain of impersonality, on the one hand, and the functional, structural and semantic connections that can be forged among them, on the other. We contend that this transient view of the impersonal domain deserves further consideration.

### 3. Contributions to this volume

Given that the domain of impersonal constructions is highly complex and heterogeneous, the contributions to this volume address a wide variety of topics pertinent to

impersonal constructions. They also differ in empirical focus, perspective, theoretical orientation and range of languages considered. This diversity poses obvious problems for the structuring of the volume, as contributions can be classified and cross-classified along different dimensions.

We opted for a volume structure which opens with general theoretical and typological studies (chapters by Malchukov & Ogawa, Siewierska, Abraham, Gast & Haas), which is then followed by diachronic studies (chapters by Cennamo, Giacalone Ramat & Sansò, and Kulikov), and continues with a sample of case studies of impersonal constructions in individual languages (or language groups). The latter chapters are roughly ordered on geographical grounds, starting with African and Afro-Asiatic languages (Payne on Maa, Bassene & Creissels on Joola-Banjali; Mettouchi & Tosco on Afro-Asiatic in general and Berman on Modern Hebrew), European or Eurasian (Kibort on Polish, Salo on Uralic, Vajda et al. on Ket), continued by American Indian languages (Miayoka on Yupik, Drapeau on Innu), and then followed by the chapters from East-Asia (Bugaeva on Ainu, Yi & Siewierska on Mandarin) and finally the Pacific and Australia (Moyse-Faurie on Oceanic languages, and Verstraete on Australian Pama-Nyungan languages).

But even this division is somewhat arbitrary, given that many chapters offer an areal outlook (e.g. Moyse-Faurie on Oceanic languages, or Salo on Uralic), and many others make important general (theoretical) points. Further while those in the diachronic part of the volume mostly address Indo-European languages with a better documented history, diachronic issues also feature in other papers, most notably the previously mentioned papers in part three dealing with the reanalysis of transimpersonal constructions as well as the papers by Gast & Haas' and Siewierska in part one.

Berman's chapter on Modern Hebrew has a strong corpus orientation. Although many of the diachronic studies (by Giacalone Ramat & Sansò on Italian, Cennamo on Late Latin, and Kulikov on Vedic) of Indo-European languages with documented histories also make ample use of corpus data, Berman's contribution is unique within the context of this volume in that it combines the corpus perspective with data from language acquisition (see also Berman 2005 for further discussion).

More importantly, individual contributions focus on different functional varieties of impersonal constructions. If we adopt the general distinction between R-impersonals, T-impersonals and A-impersonals (as characterized earlier), the contributions to the volume may be grouped as follows:

- Contributions which address the whole broad domain of impersonals: Malchukov & Ogawa, Moyse-Faurie, Bassene & Creissels, and Drapeau;
- Contributions on R impersonals of the meteo-type: Mettouchi & Tosco, Salo;
- Contributions on indefinite subject constructions: Siewierska, Yi & Siewierska, Giacalone Ramat & Sansò, partially also Berman;

- Contributions focusing on T-impersonals, namely subvarieties of presentational structures: Gast & Haas, Bassene & Creissels;
- Two types of contributions addressing A-impersonals, those mainly involving experiential predicates: Verstraete and partially Cennamo; and those centered on transimpersonal constructions at later stages of reanalysis: Miyaoka, Bugaeva and Vajda et al.

Another divide is between basic vs. derived impersonals including impersonal passives. The latter constitute the primary focus of the contributions by Abraham and Kibort, but they are also considered in the papers by Payne and Bugaeva, in which transimpersonal constructions are identified as the likely sources of impersonal passive structures. This also suggests that the basic vs. derived division is gradient rather than clear-cut (as also manifested in the controversial status – impersonal passive or active impersonal – of some constructions in Slavic, Baltic and Uralic languages; cf. Blevins 2003; and also Kibort, this volume).

More information on how the individual contributions relate to each other and fit into the overall structure of the volume can be gathered from the brief presentations of the contents of each chapter provided below.

The first part of the volume **Impersonal constructions: typological and theoretical aspects**, opens with a paper by Andrej Malchukov & Akio Ogawa “Towards a typology of impersonal constructions: a semantic map approach”. The authors argue that in order to capture selective similarities and affinities between different varieties of impersonals it is necessary to combine a function-based and a structure-based approach to impersonality. Building on the work of Keenan (1976), they propose to distinguish R-impersonals (with a notional subject lacking in referential properties), A-impersonals (with a notional subject lacking agentivity), and T-impersonals (with a notional subject lacking in topicality). Their investigation of the most common strategies of encoding these functional varieties culminates in a proposal of a semantic map of the impersonal domain which is designed to restrict the existing polyfunctionality within the domain of impersonality.

Many of the papers in subsequent chapters zoom in on particular subvarieties of impersonal constructions. Anna Siewierska in her contribution “Overlap and complementarity in reference impersonals: *man*-constructions vs. third person plural impersonals in the languages of Europe” maps out the distribution of the two types of R-impersonals and considers to what extent the patterns found can be related to an important typological parameter within the European context, namely the formal realization of pronominal subjects. She shows that while the association between non-pro-drop and the presence of MAN-IMPS (man-impersonals) in a language posited by Holmberg (2005, 2010) in the main holds, the presence of 3PL-IMPS (third person plural impersonals) in a language is not dependent on the pro-drop parameter.



Nonetheless, the relative range of uses of both *MAN-IMPS* and *3PL-IMPS* is argued to correlate with the realization of pronominal subjects; *MAN-IMPS* are shown to exhibit a wider range of referential uses (not only quasi-generic and existential but even specific) in non-pro-drop languages than in pro-drop ones, and *3PL IMPS* in pro-drop languages than in non-pro-drop ones. However, the actual frequency of use of the two types of impersonals within languages is seen to be heavily dependent on the range of alternative R-impersonalizing strategies available. Only in very few languages does either emerge as the favored forms of R-impersonalizing.

The next chapter by Werner Abraham “Impersonal passivization between unaccusativity and unergativity” addresses the challenge posed by motion verbs to the definition of unaccusativity. The problem arises under impersonal passivization, as motion verbs may, on the one hand, undergo impersonal passivization, but, on the other hand, may emerge as ergative verbs/unaccusatives in directional use. In-depth semantic analysis of the aspectual properties of these predicates reveals that motion verbs are split unaccusatives: unergatives in the present, ergatives in the preterit participle. The chapter also contains an interesting discussion relating the availability of impersonal passives to a distinction between be-perfects and have-perfects, which can be equally traced to and explained by the aspectual properties of these constructions.

The final chapter in part one by Volker Gast and Florian Haas describes the distribution of subject properties in formulaic presentationals of Germanic and Romance. After introducing the formal and functional types of presentational structures in different varieties of Germanic and Romance, the paper argues for a connection between the availability and syntactic properties of dummies and the word order patterns found inthetic sentences in these languages. The authors relate differences in subject properties to word order constraints observed inthetic sentences in two group of languages. They show that only languages which allow verb-initial order inthetic sentences (‘thetic-V1 languages’) tend to use expletives in their existential formulas, and that the expletives tend to attract subject properties. This paper constitutes a bridge to the following chapters as it adopts a diachronic-typological approach.

**The second part of the volume** includes three chapters dealing with diachronic studies of impersonal constructions in Indo-European. It opens with Michela Cennamo’s paper on “Impersonal constructions and accusative subjects in Late Latin”, which examines the role played by impersonal constructions in the rise of the accusative-subject construction in Late Latin. The author argues that impersonal constructions with accusative arguments are likely to have played an important role in the use of the accusative in intransitive S function and the changes in morphological alignment thus manifested. She thus relates the establishment of the ‘extended accusative’ (Plank 1985) pattern in Latin to the ‘transimpersonal’ scenario of the rise of split-intransitive systems, as discussed in the typological literature.



The next chapter by Anna Giacalone Ramat & Andrea Sansò “From passive to impersonal. An Italian case study and its implications” continues the discussion of the historical developments of impersonals in Romance. The authors show that the emergence of the impersonal *si*-construction in Italian is due to reanalysis of *si* as a marker of generic human agency. On the basis of a large corpus of literary and non-literary documents, they document the initial stage of this process, namely the extension of the *si*-construction to intransitive verbs, and the emergence of the non-agreeing pattern with transitive verbs.

The paper by Leonid Kulikov “Passive to anticausative through impersonalization: The case of Vedic and Indo-European verbs of perception and speech”, also deals with the mechanisms of semantic change involving passives and their impersonal uses. It is argued that the rise of anticausative usages with these groups of verbs involves a stage of ‘impersonalization’. The focus of this chapter as well as the previous one is on the mechanisms of linguistic change, but this paper is different insofar as it adopts a function-based rather than structure-based definition of impersonality. The chapter ends with a brief discussion of the relationships between ‘agentless’, ‘impersonalized’ and ‘impersonal’ passives.

Part three of the volume is entitled **Cross-linguistic variation in impersonal constructions: case studies**. It begins with a paper by Doris L. Payne on impersonal construction in Maa. This construction has figured in the literature (since Greenberg’s 1959 seminal study) as a prime example of impersonal to passive reanalysis. Yet the author concludes that the construction is still rather impersonal and reanalysis to personal passive if underway is not complete. This paper makes also one important methodological point arguing that the study of impersonals should take into account both structure and function. The author uses a “hybrid” definition of impersonal constructions, which first identifies an unspecified agent, but then explores the range of functions that this constructional form has. This approach yields a “family” of constructions which have some conceptual or historical core, and lines up with semantic map approach as advocated by Malchukov and Ogawa.

Alain Christian Bassene & Denis Creissels provide a comprehensive account of different varieties of impersonal constructions in Jóola-Banjál (an Atlantic language spoken in Senegal). They document several constructions, not mentioned in previous works on Jóola languages, which include a non-canonical subject. This paper puts forward a formal classification of these constructions and a description of their functions, emphasizing the contribution of this West African language to the general typology of impersonality. The article can serve also as an introduction to different dimensions of or connections between impersonal constructions, related to semantic classes (meteo-verbs), discourse functions (presentational focus structures), word order restrictions (postverbal word order), and also more complex phenomena (related to raising and extraposed structures).