

On the impersonal verbs *listen* and *liken*
in Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*.

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0. It is generally assumed that the timing of the demise of the so-called 'impersonal constructions' is during 14th and 15th century. According to van der Gaaf (1904:142), 'With a few exceptions all type A (i. e. impersonal) verbs began to be used 'personally' in the first half of the 14th century. In the case of most of them the original construction continued to exist beside the new till about 1500.'

In this paper, using Thomas Malory's work for my corpus, I will investigate the use of two impersonal verbs denoting emotional affection, namely, *listen* and *liken* in the late 15th century. *Listen* and *liken* are two synonyms, which have the pedigrees in Old English gloss. The references are to book number, chapter, page and line in the second edition of *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory* by Eugène Vinaver (1967, reprinted in 1971). In collecting the examples, I have consulted *The Concordance to the Works of Sir Thomas Malory* (1974) by Tomomi Kato.

1. In order to delineate the use of the impersonal verbs, it is necessary to classify the constructions in which they occur. The term 'impersonal construction' is often taken to refer to constructions with no explicit nominative subject or with the formal '(h)it.' I propose to distinguish two types of 'impersonal construction,' namely, Impersonal-Type and It-Type.

Impersonal-Type constructions features no grammatical subject at all as in (a), while *It*-Type has the formal subject '(h)it' as in (b). The latter construction perfectly satisfies the grammatical requirement in Modern English that the nominative-NP, that is, subject should exist in a sentence.

- (a) '*Me lyste* nat to tell,' (2, 21, 80, 30)
 (b) ..., *thoughe hit lyst me* to be fedde in kinge Arthures courte,
 (7, 11, 313, 6)

In Impersonal-Type constructions, there is no subject which controls the verb conjugation in person and number and the verb is always fixed in the third person singular form.

The impersonal verbs denoting emotional experiences invariably accompany experiencer-NP's, which are expressed in dative/accusative case in both of the types of sentences above. When a nominative NP other than the the experiencer-NP occupies the subject position of the impersonal verb, I label it a NP-Type construction. Usually, this nominative NP expresses a 'cause' of the mental experience.

- (c) '*sir Cador, this message lykis the.*' (5, 1, 188, 2)

I deserve the term 'personal construction,' that is, Personal-Type, exclusively to constructions featuring a nominative case marked experiencer-NP. The semantic function of the subject of Personal-type constructions is identical with the oblique experiencer-NP in the Impersonal-Type, *It*-Type, or Nom-NP-Type sentences. And we go on to classify this Personal-Type into Personal-Intransitive-Type and Personal-Transitive-Type constructions, the former being without an object and the latter with an object. In Modern English, *list* is usually used intransitively, while *like* is used both intransitively and transitively. Now I will cite instances of the Personal-Intransitive-Type (d) and the Personal-Transitive-Type (e) as follows.

- (d) ..., and he wolde folow thereas *she lyked.* (17, 1, 983, 8)
 (e) '*I lyke bettir the swerde,*' seyde Arthure. (1, 25, 54, 2)

The types of constructions in which impersonal verbs occur may be compactly summarized in the following list.

Impersonal-Type
 experiencer-NP(0) + V

It-Type
It + V + experiencer-NP(O)

Nom-NP-Type
 NP(N) + V + experiencer-NP(O)

Personal-Intransitive-Type or Personal-I-Type
 experiencer-NP(N) + V

Personal-Transitive-Type or Personal-T-Type
 experiencer-NP(N) + V + NP(O)

V ... impersonal verb
 (N) ... nominative case
 (O) ... oblique or objective case

2. The decrease of the impersonal constructions or the emergence of the personal constructions is attributed to the re-interpretation of the oblique experiencer-NP as nominative subject, by such scholars as van der Gaaf, Jespersen, and Visser. This re-interpretation theory presumes that the Personal-I-Type derived from the Impersonal-Type, and The Personal-T-Type either from *It*-Type or Nom-NP-Type constructions. Three causes are pointed out for the confusion in the case-marking of the experiencer-NP: A. the ambiguous sentences in which distinction of the cases cannot be made; B. the levelling of inflectional endings; C. the gradual establishment of fixed subject-verb-object word order.

Among these causes, B and C are the processes through which the English language passed during the Middle English period. Therefore, if there really was the transition from the impersonal to personal constructions, the time of Thomas Malory may be the most confounded stage for the impersonal verbs. In fact, *Le Morte Darthur* is productive of both of the constructions.

In order to substantiate the remark that the levelling of inflectional endings of nouns exerted influence on the re-interpretation of the experiencer-NP of the impersonal verbs, I believe it necessary to see what kind of lexical items appear as the experiencer-NP. According to Jespersen (1927:208), 'The change of construction was brought about by ... the identity in form of the nominative and the oblique case in substantives (adjectives) and some pronouns.' Van der Gaaf (142) likewise states that, 'The declinable pronouns formed a minority, i. e. they were used less

frequently than nouns and uninflected pronouns, and had in the end to conform to the prevailing practice, and to adopt the nominative form in connection with the verbs in question.'

As for the cause C, namely, the gradual establishment of fixed subject-verb-object word order, I can safely assume that Thomas Malory has the SVO word order. Therefore I will see if the experiencer-NP occurring with *listen* and *liken* precedes the verb in non-personal constructions, namely, Impersonal-Type and *It*-Type, and Nom-NP-Type constructions.

3. LISTEN

There are 56 sentences featuring the verb *listen* in Malory. The verb is employed in four types of constructions, that is, Impersonal-Type, *It*-Type, Personal-I-Type and Personal-T-Type.

One sentence is ambiguous between Impersonal-Type and Personal-Type because the experiencer-NP is expressed by a noun.

Than *sir Gareth lyste* well to ete, and full knyghtly he ete his mete and egirly. (7, 32, 354)

Except one example quoted above, all of the experiencer-NP's are declinable personal pronouns.

It-Type is found only in three sentences.

...., thoughe *hit lyst me* to be fedde in kyng Arthures courte, ...
(7, 11, 313, 6)

For and *hit lyste me* to com myselff oute and (20, 11, 1187, 20)
'Sir,' seyde *sir Launcelot*, 'ye ar nat jantyll, for I put a case that my name were *sir Launcelot* and that *hyt lyste me* nat to dyscover my name, (12, 6, 826, 28)

Out of the 18 Impersonal-Type constructions with *listen*, 12 examples contain the first person singular pronoun *me* for the experiencer-NP.

'*Me lyste* nat to tell,' (2, 21, 80, 30)
'I woll do wyth her what *me lyste*,' seyde.... (10, 83, 772, 28)
And whether they were abed other at other maner of disportis, *me lyste* nat thereof make no mencion, (20, 3, 1165, 12)

For the rest, *him* is used in three instances, *them* in two and *hem* in one. 'Sey to thy lorde I take no force but whether as *hym lyste*.

(7, 12, 313, 25)
...., and there all knyghtes, whan they com there, sholde chose whethir *them lyste* to be on the tone party with the knyghtes of the Castell, .. (7, 27, 343, 15)
Therefore lette them fyght whylys *hem lystes*, (5, 11, 237, 18)

The Personal-Intransitive-Type construction is of most frequent occurrence. However, Malory favours the expression *as ye lyste* and this expression is used 12 times in 35 Personal-I-Type sentences.

Ye shall have all thyng ruled *as ye lyste* to have hit.
(19, 5, 1129, 19)
'Do *as ye lyst*,' seyde sir Launcelot. (13, 17, 893, 20)

In contrast with Impersonal-Type sentences, there is not any Personal-I-Type sentence featuring the first person singular pronoun, namely, *I*. And while 30 out of 35 examples of Personal-Type occur with the second person plural *ye*, including 12 instances with *as ye lyste*, Malory never uses its equivalent *you* in Impersonal-Type sentences.

I will cite more Personal-I-Type examples with personal pronoun *ye*.

...; and seke ye hym and *ye lyste*, for... (5, 2, 192, 6)
And therefore, yf *ye lyste* to fyght so,... (4, 27, 177, 31)

Other personal pronouns used in Personal-I-Type are *he* (once), *thou* (twice), and *we* (twice).

So with that cam sir Dynadan, and whan he saw sir Trystram wroth *he lyste* nat to jape, but seyde,.. (9, 28, 516, 2)

Malory has one example of Personal-Transitive-Type featuring *listen*.

... and yf *ye lyste* ony tresoure, take what ye lyst,... (5, 5, 204, 24)

4. LIKEN

Malory has 46 sentences featuring the verb *liken*.

All of the Impersonal-Type and Personal-Intransitive-Type constructions, which has no NP other than the experiencer-NP, are used with conjunctions such as *whan*, *where*, *as*.

There are 9 instances of Impersonal-Type.

..., and all shall be within two ayges to go where *the lykes*.
(5, 2, 189, 2)
And every knyght rode where *hym lyked*. (18, 4, 1051, 7)

The experiencer-NP's in Impersonal-Type sentences are expressed by *hym* (three times), *me* (twice), *the* (twice), *hem* (once) and *us* (once), and they always stand before the verb *liken*.

I now cite an example in which the experiencer-NP is expressed by noun. The distinction cannot be made between Impersonal-Type and Personal-Intransitive-Type.

... for to sayle whan *the kyng* *lyked*. (5, 3, 195, 26)

15 instances of *It*-Type are found featuring the verb *liken*.

And if *hit lyke you* I woll speke with hem, ... (4, 27, 177, 12)
And therefore, madam, and *hit lyke you* that I may have you with me, I shall save you frome all maner adventures daungers. (20, 4, 1168, 28)

To-infinitive occurs with 6 *It*-Type sentences with *liken*. Malory never uses *to*-infinitive after the verb *liken* in other types of constructions, namely, Impersoanl-Type, Nom-Type and Personal-Type.

And sytthyn *hit lyked us* to take a parte with you in youre distres in this realme, ... (20, 17, 1203, 17)
... 'if *hit lyke you* to suffir me to take the way on the lyffte honde lette me, for I shall well preve my strength.' (13, 12, 883, 31)

In *It*-Type constructions, the experiencer-NP is expressed by the second plural pronoun *you* in 10 examples. Other sentences are used with common noun (three times), *hir* (once) and *us* (once).

As is the case with *listen*, if the formal (*h*)*it* occupies the subject positon, that is, before the verb, the experiencer-NP always follows the verb.

There are five sentences with the relative pronouns, *that* and *as*, before the verb, which may be classified as Nom-NP-Type.

I sholde fynde you a damesell of beauté and of goodness that sholde *lyke you* and please you, ... (3, 1, 97, 25)
..., and than every knyght toke the way that *hym lyked* beste. (13, 8, 872, 30)
..., and toke with hem what tresoure that *hem lyked*. (5, 5, 205, 6)
And take renkys of the Rounde Table that *the beste lykys*, (5, 8, 219, 1)
'I woll take with me suche knyghtes as *lykyth me* beste.' (10, 40, 653, 16)

In addition to the examples above, I have found five Nom-NP-Type constructions with *liken*. In three examples, the nominative-NP in the subject position is non-human.

Than sir Launcelot loked upon a whyght courset and *that lyked hym* beste, ... (19, 8, 1136, 31)
The lettyrs of Lucius the Emperoure lykys me well, ... (5, 1, 187, 20)
'sir Cador, *this message lykys the*. (5, 1, 188, 2)

In remaining two instances of Nom-NP-Type, I can determine the type of the construction by the context of the passages.

'How *lykyth you my boy of the kychyn*?' (7, 2, 296, 8)
...: because kyng Marke gaff me the choyse of a gyffte in this courte, and so *this lady lyked me* beste--natwythstondyng she is wedded and

hath a lorde--(8, 18, 402, 26)

As these examples illustrate, in every Nom-NP-Type sentence, the experiencer-NP comes after the verb.

There are four Personal-Intransitive-Type constructions with *liken*.

'And therefore, lordynges, fyght you behovys, other ellys shunte for shame, chose whether *ye lykys*. (5, 7, 213, 30)
...; therefore worke as *ye lykys*. (5, 10, 235, 20)
I lat the wete hit coste the nought, and whether *thou lyke* well othir evyll,... (7, 7, 304, 2)
And so he bade the jantillwoman to ryde, and he wolde folow thereas s *he lyked*. (17, 1, 983, 8)

With the experiencer in nominative personal pronoun and the NP which is non-human, the following three sentences are Personal-Transitive-Type.

'Whethir *lyke ye* better *the swerde othir the scawberde*?'
(1, 25, 54, 1)
'*I lyke* bettir *the swerde*,' seyde Arthure. (1, 25, 54, 2)
'I trow *ye lyke* nat *youre mete*.' (16, 7, 956, 27)

In the three examples quoted below, the verb is used with another 'personal' verb. And with the contextual support, I can safely determine that they are Personal-T-Type sentences.

Than *kyng* Arthure loked on the swerde and *lyked hit* passynge well.
(1, 25, 53, 34)
Than *the kyng* behylde her, and *lyked her* wondirly well.
(10, 73, 743, 30)
The kyng lyked and loved *this lady* wel,... (1, 1, 7, 10)

I will now cite one ambiguous example between Personal-Transitive-Type and Nom-NP-Type.

And whan sir Bors sawe that chyld *he lyked hym* passynge well.
(12, 9, 830, 29)

5. Now I will summarize what I have seen on the use of the two impersonal verbs *listen* and *liken*, in terms of the type of the construction, the word order of the verb and the experiencer-NP, and the lexical items for the experiencer NP.

As regards with the word-order of the verb and the experiencer-NP, sentences with *listen* show some regularity. All of the 56 instances featuring *listen* are affirmative sentences. In Impersonal-Type and Personal-Type constructions, the experiencer-NP always precedes the verb *listen*. Since Malory, in the late Middle English period, has the fixed

word order SVO, this preverbal position of the experiencer-NP is worth noticing. On the contrary, the experiencer-NP occupies the position after the verb in all of the three *It*-Type constructions. In this case, with the formal (*h*)*it*, it is reasonable to assume that the experiencer-NP is syntactically taken as a pure object.

<i>LISTEN</i>	Impersonal	<i>IT</i>	Nom-NP	$\left(\begin{array}{ccc} \text{P-I} & \text{P-T} & ? \\ 34 & 1 & 1 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 \\ 34 & 1 & 1 \end{array} \right)$
experiencer-NP + V	18	0	0	
V + experiencer-NP	0	3	0	
Total	18	3	0	

The following table gives the number of occurrences of the experiencer-NP + V and V + experiencer-NP word orders in each type of constructions with the verb *likén*. Two interrogative sentence, which are Nom-NP-Type and Personal-T-Type, are excluded from the table, together with the two ambiguous examples, one between Impersonal-Type and Personal-I-Type, and the other between Nom-NP-Type and Personal-T-Type.

<i>LIKÉN</i>	Impersonal	<i>IT</i>	Nom-NP	$\left(\begin{array}{cc} \text{P-I} & \text{P-T} \\ 4 & 5 \\ 0 & 0 \\ 4 & 5 \end{array} \right)$
experiencer-NP + V	9	0	3	
V + experiencer-NP	0	15	6	
Total	9	15	9	

As was the case in the impersonal verb *listen*, the most typical position for the experiencer-NP in Impersonal-type sentences is before the verb.

A closer examination of the sentences featuring *listen* reveals a correlation between the person and number of the personal pronoun and the type of the constructions.

<i>LISTEN</i>		Impersonal	<i>IT</i>	Nom-NP	Personal-I	Personal-T
the experiencer-NP						
personal pronouns						
1st sg.	(<i>me</i>)	12	3	0	(<i>I</i>)	0
1st pl.	(<i>us</i>)	0	0	0	(<i>we</i>)	2
2nd sg.	(<i>thee</i>)	0	0	0	(<i>thou</i>)	2
2nd pl.	(<i>you</i>)	0	0	0	(<i>ye</i>)	29
3rd sg.	(<i>hym/her</i>)	3	0	0	(<i>he/she</i>)	1
3rd pl.	(<i>them/hem</i>)	3	0	0	(<i>they</i>)	0
Total		18	3	0	34	1

In Malory, we have two rival constructions of the verb *listen*, that is, Impersonal-Type and Personal-Intransitive-Type. As shown in the table above, the choice of the type of constructions seems to be highly dependent of the lexical item of the experiencer-NP. As regards the kind of the personal pronouns for the experiencer-NP's and the type of the constructions which contain the verb *likén*, unlike the impersonal verb *listen*,

I must admit that no plausible relationship emerges from our survey.

The lexical items of the experiencer-NPs in the sentences featuring *listen* and *liken* are mostly declinable personal pronouns. Nouns are used only once out of 56 examples with *listen*, and seven out of 46 examples with *liken*. Therefore, the demise of the impersonal constructions cannot be attributed to the confusions or the re-interpretation of the case-markings of the experiencer-NP with the impersonal verbs. And the remarks by Jespersen and van der Gaaf that ambiguous sentences constitute the factor which contributed to the emergence of the personal constructions with impersonal verbs must be reconsidered.

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