AN EXPLANATION FOR
THE LOSS OF THE MIDDLE ENGLISH IMPERSONAL CONSTRUCTIONS

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1. Introduction

One of the most striking features of Middle English as compared with Modern English is that it manifests a number of verbs denoting psychological phenomena which are lexically designed to occur in constructions without an overt grammatical subject.

The English language today is 'subject-dominant' or 'subject-prominent' and does not tolerate these so called 'subjectless' or 'impersonal' constructions. In the present study, we hope to provide an explanation for the demise of the impersonal constructions featuring impersonal verbs denoting psychological phenomena.

2. Impersonal Verbs & the Impersonal Constructions

There are seven impersonal verbs which claim our attention.

liken 'to please'; *listen* 'to wish'; *longen* 'to yearn';
rewen 'to repent'; *ofthinken* 'to regret'; *shamen* 'to shame';
gramen 'to anger':

The impersonal constructions can be characterized by three traits. Firstly, as mentioned above, they lack an overt grammatical subject, that is to say, a nominative NP. Secondly, since there is no subject which triggers verb inflection in person and number, the verb is fixed in the 3rd person singular.

And thirdly, there is always an oblique NP which is invariably 'experiencer.' The impersonal verbs which denote mental or emotional experiences may be characterized by the indispensability of experiencer-NP.

As for the semantic distinction of the impersonal construction, Noriko McCawley(1976) points out that the experiencer-NP in the Impersonal-Type construction is expressed in the oblique case because it is "the human who is

unvolitionally involved in the situation." Fischer and van der
Leek(1983) likewise suggest that the impersonal construction
signals the low degree of 'transitivity' of the experiencer-NP.
'Transitivity' is roughly defined by Hopper and Thompson(1980)
as "the effectiveness or intensity with which the action is
transferred from one participant to another."

3. Five Types of the Constructions with the Impersonal Verbs
3.1 Impersonal-Type Constructions
We have in mind following sentences as the typical impersonal
constructions. They are quoted from the Caligula (c. 1205) and
Otho (c. 1255) texts of Layamon's *Brut*, and the *Canterbury Tales*
(c. 1387) by Geoffrey Chaucer, which are our main corpus in
this study. The abbreviations 'C,' 'O,' and 'CT' refer to 'the
Caligula text,' 'the Otho text,' and 'the *Canterbury Tales*,'
respectively.

LIKEN and him likede ſwiþe wel. (O, i, 433, 13)

REWEN me reweth soore of hende Nicholas. (CT, A.Mil 3462)

These typical subjectless or impersonal constructions in
which each of the impersonal verbs accompanies only one oblique
experiencer-NP and no nominative NP will be labelled *Impersonal-
Type* constructions. Impersonal-Type sentences may take a
prepositional phrase, an additional oblique NP, *that*-clause, a
sentential complement, or (*to-*)infinitive. These behavioural
characteristics of the impersonal verbs, however, vary with the
individual verbs. Therefore, in this paper, we leave them out
of consideration.

Even if the impersonal construction lacks a subject
syntactically, the experiencer-NP in oblique case can be
regarded as a pseudo-subject in that it has some semantic and
syntactic properties which have traditionally been attributed to
'subject.' The experiencer-NP never fails to appear with the
impersonal verbs denoting psychological phenomena, and usually
occupies the position just before the verb. In order to avoid

confusion in the discussion, the term 'subject' is preserved to denote marked nominative case NP's exclusively.

3.2   Four Types of Constructions with a Subject

The occurrence in this Impersonal-Type constructions marks the impersonal verbs off from other 'personal' verbs.   But this syntactic behaviour is not obligatory.   In fact, most of the impersonal verbs are used with an overt grammatical subject as well.   In explaining how the Impersonal-Type constructions were eliminated from the English syntax, the three major types of constructions with a subject featuring impersonal verbs must be distinguished according to the elements which occupy the subject position.   They are (1) It-Type, (2) Nom-NP-Type, and (3) Personal-Type.   Nom-NP-Type and Personal-Type constructions are termed 'cause-subject' and 'experiencer-subject' respectively by Fischer and van der Leek.   In addition to this, with the impersonal verbs denoting psychological phenomena, we propose to divide (3) Personal-Type into two sub-types, namely, (3a) Personal-Intransitive-Type and (3b) Personal-Transitive-Type. These two types of constructions with the experiencer-NP subject are often put together with each other in many studies of the impersonal verbs.

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

Impersonal-Type

experiencer-NP(O) + V

It-Type

It + experiencer-NP(O) + V

Nom-NP-Type

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

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

These construction types will now be discussed in some detail.

(1) *It*-Type

Dummy-*(h)it* could often serve as formal subject of the impersonal verbs in Middle and Old English, especially in the case of the verbs denoting environmental situations about weather, such as *rinen* 'to rain,' and *scinen* 'to shine.' This may be the most adequate syntactic device to fill in an empty subject slot of the Impersonal-Type construction.

    LIKEN   and hit likede him ful wel. (C, iii, 189, 10)
            for wel hit likeþ; alle mine beornes. (O, i, 210, 5-6)
            It liketh thee,... (CT, E.Cl 312)
    LISTEN ʒif hit luſte wole; Brutus mi louerd. (O, i, 39, 22-3)
    REWEN ... hit wule þe reouwen. (C, ii, 248, 8)
            ... hit wole þe reuwe.   (O, ii, 248, 8)
            God woot, it reweth me; .... (CT, B.NP 4287)
    OFTHINKEN þat eft hit him of-þincheð. (C, i, 143, 4)
                þat eft hit him a-þincheþ. (O, i, 143, 4)

(2) Nom-NP-Type

In what we call 'Nom-NP-Type' constructions, a nominative noun phrase other than the experiencer-NP serves as a subject, while the experiencer-NP remains in the accusative or dative case.

    LIKEN   for him likede tidende; (C, ii, 571, 5)
            Al this sentence me liketh every deel. (CT, D.WB 162)
    SHAMEN ..., heere may I nat dwelle,
        And shamen al my kyndrede in this place, (CT, F.Fkl 1564-5)

(3) Personal-Type

In 'Personal-Type' constructions, the experiencer-NP is taken as a subject of a verb and appears in the nominative case. The difference between Impersonal-Type and Personal-Type sentences is the case assignment of the experiencer-NP, the former in oblique and the latter in nominative.

    Let us now look at the following examples containing the

Modern English verb *like* 'to like.'

① Do as you like.

② I like this doll.

Both of the two instances above are Personal-Type in which the experiencer-NP serves as subject, the former sentence being intransitive and the latter transitive. We consider this distinction between one-place and two-place predicates to be necessary in order to explain what has happened to the impersonal constructions in the course of time. So we shall classify constructions like ① as Personal-Intransitive-Type, and ② as Personal-Transitive-Type.

In Personal-Transitive-Type, the verb takes a nominative experiencer-NP as subject, and another additional NP which is usually 'cause' as object. This additional NP in oblique case does not appear in Personal-Intransitive-Type constructions.

① Personal-Intransitive-Type

LISTEN   God liste to shewe his wonderful myracle (CT, B.ML 477)

LONGEN   Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages.(CT, A.Prol 12)

REWEN   '..., and thou shalt nat rewe.'   (CT, A.Mil 3530)

OFTHINKEN   þar after þou miht aþenche.   (O, i, 374, 17)

SHAMEN   þar fore he ofte ſamede.   (O, ii, 151, 8)

   Cf. þær fore him ofte ſcomede.   (C, ii, 151, 8)

② Personal-Transitive-Type.

LISTEN   ʒif ʒe hit luſten wlle;

   Brutuſ mi lauard.   (C, i, 39, 22-3)

What follows is the survey chart for the impersonal verbs representing their syntactic occurrences in the Caligula and Otho texts of Layamaon's *Brut*, and the *Canterbury Tales*. The mark '?' refers to the ambiguous sentences.   (See *Appendix*.)

LIKEN	Impersonal	It	Nom-NP	Personal-I	P-T
Caligula	x	x	x		?
Otho	x	x	x		?
Chaucer	x	x	x	?	?

	1	2	3	4	5
LISTEN					
Caligula	x				x
Otho	x	x			
Chaucer	x			x	
LONGEN					
Caligula	x				
Otho	x			x	
Chaucer	x			x	
REWEN					
Caligula		x			
Otho		x			
Chaucer	x	x		x	
OFTHINKEN					
Caligula	x	x	?		?
Otho	?	x	?	x	
Chaucer	x				
SHAMEN					
Caligula	x				
Otho	x			x	
Chaucer	x		x		
GRAMEN					
Caligula	x				
Otho	x			?	

4. Previous Theories on the Loss of the Impersonal Constructions
The complete disappearance of the Impersonal-Type constructions during the course of time and the dominancy of the Personal-Type sentences has intrigued much attention and interest of linguists. In this section, we will discuss the traditional accounts of van der Gaaf and Jespersen.
4.1 Van der Gaaf's Explanation
In his detailed descriptive accounts, van der Gaaf(1904) attributes the loss of the impersonal constructions to the levelling of inflectional endings and to the gradual

establishment of fixed subject-verb-object word order during
the Middle English period. And he goes on to state several
kinds of constructions in which the case markings of
experiencer-NP's are ambiguous between nominative and oblique.
These sentences, van der Gaaf claims, caused confusion, which
led to the 'reanalysis' or 'reinterpretation' of dative
experiencer-NP as nominative subject. As for the beginning
date for the 'reinterpretation' of experiencer-NP's from object
to subject, van der Gaaf states that it was in the 14th century.
However, we have found in our corpus, much earlier instances
than his. The impersonal verbs like *listen* , and *longen* had
Personal-Type constructions already in the 13th century.
　　LISTEN ʒif ʒe hit luʃten wlle;
　　　　　　Brutuʃ mi lauard.   (C, i, 39, 22-3)
The nominative personal pronoun *ʒe* is annexed, and this is
undoubtedly an example of experiencer-NP serving as subject.
　　LONGEN   for ich langẏ ʃo ʃwiþe;
　　　　　　after Gorloẏs his wifue. (O, ii, 370, 5-6)
This example dates earlier than the quotation found in van der
Gaaf's work. His earliest Personal-Type of *longen* is cited
from *Cursor Mundi*(c. 1320).
4.2 Jespersen's Explanation
Jespersen(1927) likewise insists upon the experiencer-NP
'reinterpretation' and adduces three causes. Two of them are
pointed out by van der Gaaf as well: the levelling of the
inflection systems and the ambiguous sentences. The other is
"the greater interest taken in person than in things, which
caused the name of the person to be placed before the verb."
This cause, together with the fixation of the SVO word order,
might have facilitated the reinterpretation.
　　By developing Personal-Type constructions, some of the
impersonal verbs changed their meanings from causative 'to
please, to give pleasure to' to receptive 'to like, to receive
pleasure from.' Jespersen accounts for the shift in meaning of

the impersonal verb *liken* with the following hypothetical
stages:

   (a) þam cynge licodon peran
   (b) the king likeden peares
   (c) the king like pears
   (d) he liked pears

Here (a) is the Nom—NP—Type construction. The NP *peran* is
undoubtedly subject, with the verb form in the plural. The
experiencer—NP *þam cynge* is clearly in the dative case serving
as object. It has an OVS word order. In (b), the case marking
of the experiencer—NP becomes ambiguous. But, since the verb is
in the plural form, the experiencer—NP *the king* is still object.
In (a) and (b), the verb *liken* has the causative meaning 'to
please.' In (c), when the levelling of verbal inflections
occurs, confusion arises. Both *the king* and *pears* can be
regarded as the candidates for subjecthood morphologically.
Jespersen claims that, with the rigidification of the basic word
order SVO which requires a subject before a verb, the former
the king was reanalysed as subject. So, in (d), the
signification of the verb *liken* changes into receptive 'to like.
We can find a similar analysis in Lightfoot(1981) as well.

   Jespersen's analysis is based on the premises that the
impersonal verb *liken* usually had (1) the rigid word order OVS
in Nom—NP—Type sentences, and (2) experiencer—NP which was an
un-inflected noun, both of which are contradicted by Fischer
and van der Leek(1983) and C.L.Allen(1986) with figures to back
up her criticism. In addition, the direct shift from the Nom—
NP—Type use to the Personal—Transitive—Type use is too
unwarrantable to accept. This analysis attempted by Jespersen
involves two kinds of reinterpretation which are caused by the
morphological neutralization of the case distinctions. One is
from object to subject experiencer—NP, and the other is from
subject to object cause—NP. The swopping of positions of
subject and object like this is unlikely to take place at once.

5. Our Explanation for the Loss of the ME Impersonal Constructions

In explaining the demise of the Impersonal Constructions, both van der Gaaf and Jespersen are satisfied with the indication that some of the impersonal verbs in Middle English started to replace its oblique experiencer-NP with nominative experiencer-NP subject unfailingly in the later period. But the question remains why they did not utilize their personal constructions, such as *It*-type and Nom-NP-Type, both of which are well attested in Middle and Old English along with the Impersonal-Type constructions. As far as the impersonal verbs denoting external situations such as *limpen, befallen* and *bihoven* are concerned, the loss of the impersonal constructions simply means the decrease in the Impersonal-Type construction use. These verbs could have subject from the OE period. They simply abandoned the Impersonal-Type constructions in favour of the *It*-Type and Nom-NP-Type constructions. But, with the impersonal verbs denoting psychological phenomena, the loss of the impersonal constructions cannot be attributed to the increasing use of these *It*-Type and Nom-NP-Type constructions. Some of these verbs such as *rewen, ofthinken* and *liken* were employed in the *It*-Type and Nom-NP-Type constructions as well and they could have continued to occur in these personal constructions. But they did not. What happened to these verbs is, curiously enough, the prevalence of the Personal-Type sentences, which involves the substitution of nominative for oblique experiencer-NP, over *It*-Type and Nom-NP-Type constructions. The experiencer-NP began to be realized as nominative and to occupy the subject position.

And, with the respect to the reanalysis of the dative experiencer-NP as nominative subject, the previous traditional accounts assume that Impersonal-Type developed into Personal-Intransitive-Type on the one hand, and Nom-NP-Type into Personal-Transitive-Type constructions on the other hand. We have a different point of view in that we believe that it is

only the emergence of the Personal—Intransitive—Type use that was firstly triggered by the case—shift of the experiencer—NP.

We saw from the above charts on the occurrences of the impersonal verbs in each of the construction types that there are more verbs that occur in the Personal—Intransitive—Type constructions, than in the Personal—Transitive—Type. Therefore, we imagine that the reinterpretation of the objective experiencer—NP as subject in some of the verbs denoting psychological phenomena first took place between Impersonal—Type and Personal—I—Type sentences.

We will give two ambiguous sentences in which Impersonal—Type and Personal—I—Type cannot be distiguishable from each other:

LIKEN   God liketh nat that 'Raby' men us calle,(CT,D.Sum 2187)
GRAMEN þar fore he ofte famede;

            and his heorte gramede.   (O, ii, 151, 7—8)

As we have already seen, the Jespersen's explanation of the impersonal verb *liken* is defective. He presumes that the Nom—NP—Type constructions developed into the Personal—Transitive—Type constructions as an outcome of the shift in the experiencer—NP case marking. We believe, in opposition to Jespersen, that the Impersonal—Type use of the verb *liken* caused the shift in signification of the verb and the occurrence of the Personal—Transitive—Type use. Firstly, the Impersonal—Type construction turned into Personal—Intransitive—Type, perhaps in the early Middle English or even in Old English period. Then, this Personal—I—Type use exerted influence on the meaning of the Nom—NP—Type construction, finally forcing it to change into the Personal—Transitive—Type construction.

5.2 Why the Experiencer—NP Subjects?

So one question remains unsolved: why the impersonal verbs denoting psychological phenomena did not utilize *(h)it* as subject. One of the possible solutions is presented by case grammarians. They suggest that the following hierarchy for promotion to subject exists:

AGENT > EXPERIENCER > INSTRUMENT > OBJECT > SOURCE > GOAL
This hierarchy reflects a preference for human over non-humans.
The experiencer-NP is, therefore, a more suitable candidate for
subjecthood than $(h)it$ to which no case role is assigned.

5.3   The Occurrence of Personal-Intransitive-Type
Many imperonal verbs denoting psychological phenomena developed
Personal-Type constructions.   It involves not only the shift in
the case assignment of experiencer-NP but also the change in
meaning.   Among the Impersonal-Type, It-Type, and Nom-NP-Type
uses, there is no difference in meaning of the verb.   In this
circumstance, the impersonal verb has the causative meaning
with the experiencer-NP as object.   On the contrary, in the
Personal-Types constructions, both Personal-I-Type and
Personal-T-Type, the experiencer-NP serves as subject and the
verb must have the receptive meaning.

And our account of the impersonal verbs assume that the
occurrence of Personal-Intransitive-Type was dated before
Personal-Transitive Type Constructions and the Personal-I-Type
and the Nom-NP-Type constructions existed at the same time.

However, this co-existence of the two meanings is not so
surprising as it seems, as far as the Personal-Intransitive-Type
and Nom-NP-Type are involved.   Let us now see the following
example of Modern English verb $move$:

a) I moved the stone.   (=causative)
b) The stone moved.   (=receptive)

The verb $move$ has the causative meaning in the transitive
sentence and the receptive meaning in the intransitive sentence.

So the impersonal verb such as $liken$ can have both the
causative meaning in the two-argument Nom-NP-Type sentence and
the receptive meaning in the one-argument Personal-Intransitive-
Type sentence.   Therefore, the shift from the Impersonal-Type to
the Personal-Intransitive-Type was, we believe, carried out
smoothly.   As for the Personal-Transitive-Type, some impersonal
verbs which could occur in the two-place constructions, namely,

the Nom—NP-Type verbs did develop this type and some did not.

6. Conclusion

We suggest in this article that in the study of the Personal—
Type constructions with the impersonal verbs denoting
psychological phenomena, the distinction between the Personal—
Intransitive-Type and the Personal-Transitive-Type is very
important. Though our explanation for the disappearance of the
Impersonal-Type constructions is tentative, we believe that the
reanalysis of the experiencer—NP case markings occurred between
the Impersonal-Type and the Personal-Intransitive-Type
constructions in the first place. And the case shift may be
accounted for in terms of the subject selection hierarchy.

One of the verbs that developed the Personal-Transitive-Type
construction is *liken*. Since this impersonal verb quite
frequently employed the Nom—NP-Type use, the shift in meaning
of the verb seems so radical. Jespersen attempts to explain
the direct change from the Nom—NP-Type to the Personal—
Transitive-Type construction, which proves to be defective. We
believe that, like other impersonal verbs denoting
psychological phenomena, the impersonal verb *liken* developed the
Personal-Intransitive-Type sentence in the first place. And
since the verb was often used in the Nom—NP-Type with two
arguments, the meaning of the Personal-I-Type had effect on the
constructions with two NP's. Then finally, we suggest that the
Personal-Transitive-Type use of *liken* emerges, which in the
later period prevails against the Nom—NP-Type.

The development of the impersonal verb *liken* is illustrated
below:

1) In early Middle English

        Impersonal-Type   Personal-Intransitive-Type
   ┌────experiencer—NP + V   experiencer—NP + V
   │   OBLIQUE   NOMINATIVE
   │
   │

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  └─────────⇒       with one more argument added
                           Nom—NP—Type
                   cause—NP   +   experiencer—NP  + V
                   ‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾       ‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾
                   NOMINATIVE      OBLIQUE
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2) In Modern English
   Impersonal—Type   Personal—Intransitive—Type ═╗
     obsolete   experiencer—NP + V   ║
                  ‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾   ║
                    NOMINATIVE   ║

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                with one more argument added
                   Personal—Transitive—Type        ⇐═══╝
                experiencer—NP  + V  +   cause—NP
                ‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾            ‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾
                NOMINATIVE                OBJECTIVE
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Appendix: (The references of the Caligula *and* Otho *manuscripts of Layamon's* Brut *are to volume, page, and half-line in Madden's edition of 1847. As for the* Canterbury Tales (CT), *we shall make references to F. N. Robinson's second edition and Tatlock and Kennedy's concordance. The abbreviations of the tales are those used in the concordance.)*

1. LIKEN

Impersonal—Type

   al him wel likede;   (Caligula & Otho, ii, 173, 6)

   Whan it was doon, hym liked wonder well. (CT, A. Kn 2092)

It—Type

   hit þe likede wel;   (Caligula, i, 373, 2)

   for wel hit likeþ; alle mine beornes. (Otho, i, 210, 5—6)

   It liketh thee,...   (CT, E. Cl 312)

Nom—NP—Type

   we him þa þet likieð.   (Caligula, iii, 64, 4)

   for him likede þe tẏdinge;   (Otho, ii, 571, 5)

   Al this sentence me liketh every deel.   (CT, D. WB 162)

2. LISTEN

Impersonal—Type

   þa kinge luſte ſlepe;   (Caligula, iii, 214, 10)

ne lufte 3am hider fare.   (Otho, iii, 153, 3)

But of that storie list me nat to write.   (CT, A.Kn 1201)

It-Type

3if hit lufte wole;   Brutus mi louerd. (Otho, i, 39, 22-3)

Personal-Intransitive-Type

And if that he noght may, par aventure,

Or ellis list no swich dispence endure,   (CT, B.Sh 1205-6)

Personal-Transitive-Type

3if 3e hit luften wlle;

Brutuſ mi lauard.   (Caligula, i, 39, 22-3)

3. LONGEN

Impersonal-Type

swiðe þe longeð;   after laðe ſpelle. (Caligula, ii, 238, 7-8)

so ſwiþe me langeþ;   (Otho, ii, 361, 20)

..., so soore longeth me   (CT, E.Mch 2332)

Personal-Intransitive-Type

for ich langẏ ſo ſwiþe; after Gorloẏs his wifue.

(Otho, ii, 370, 5)

Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages. (CT, A.Prol 12)

4. REWEN

Impersonal-Type

Me reweth soore of hende Nicholas.   (CT, E.Mch 1782)

It-Type

3et hit mai þe ruwe.   (Otho, ii, 185, 5)

no ſcal hit eou reouwe nauere.   (Caligula, iii, 293, 15)

God woot, it reweth me;....   (CT, B.NP 4287)

Personal-Intransitive-Type

Whoso it useth, soore shal he rewe!—   (CT, G.CY 729)

5. OFTHINKEN

Impersonal-Type

ah ſare uſ of-þuncheð;   (Caligula, ii, 143, 10)

M'athynketh that I shal reherce it heere. (CT, A.Mil 3170)
It-Type
  hit of-þuhte him ful fore;   (Caligula, iii, 264, 9)
  þat eft hit him aþincheþ.   (Otho, i, 143, 4)
Personal-Intransitive-Type
  þar after þou miht aþenche.   (Otho, i, 374, 17)

6. SHAMEN
Impersonal-Type
  & him fwiðe fcomede;   (Caligula, i, 207, 1)
  fol fore ous may famie;   (Otho, ii, 637, 21)
  To asken help thee shameth in thyn herte; (CT, B.ML 101)
Nom-NP-Type
  Or elles he shal shame hire atte leeste. (CT, F.Fkl 1164)
Personal-Intransitive-Type
  þar fore he ofte famede;   (Otho, ii, 151, 8)

7. GRAMEN
Impersonal-Type
  fære him gromede.   (Caligula, i, 196, 9)
  fore him gramede.   (Otho, i, 196, 9)

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