

THE CASE OF THE “IMPERSONAL” CONSTRUCTION IN OLD ENGLISH¹

HANNA PISHWA

0. Introduction

This paper investigates the “impersonal” construction of type *him* (dative) *scamede* ‘He was ashamed’ in Old English (hence OE), in which the preverbal argument appears in the dative or accusative case, and the verb in the third person singular. This structure has been a frequent object of research because of the syntactically unclear status of the preverbal argument. While the focus has mostly been on morphological and syntactic causes of the loss of this structure in Middle English (hence ME) (Allen 1995, Fischer – Van der Leek 1983, Seeffranz-Montag 1983), this paper demonstrates that the impersonal construction disappeared not only for syntactic and morphological reasons but also because it was a relatively isolated phenomenon in the linguistic system of OE. To illustrate this, we will examine “impersonal” mental verbs out of a psychological and semantic perspective. The results are investigated in terms of case grammars and syntactic categories in order to explain the deviating surface structure, in which the experiencer appears in the preverbal position and carries an oblique case. Finally, the system is compared with modern Finnish, which exhibits a similar structure. Differences between the OE and the Finnish system reveal why the “impersonal” construction disappeared in English, but is still an essential part of the Finnish system. Thus, our discussion will not be restricted to form and function, we will also consider the extent and the stability of the relevant categories, as these properties play an important role in the restructuring of linguistic systems and their survival.

In language change, the size and the stability of a category are influenced by two opposite cognitive processes, specification and generalization. The principle is: the more generalized a category is, the

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larger it is, because differences are levelled, and the reverse. As language itself is generalized in comparison with mental structures, we are dealing with degrees of generality: among linguistic structures, grammatical structures are more generalized (e.g. Lehmann 1995, Heine et al. 1991, Traugott 1989) than lexical items, which still carry relatively rich information. Generalization has a further effect: the more a structure is generalized, the larger its distance is to the mental level and the more abstract it is (Pishwa 1998). The degree of generalization can differ among single grammatical categories in one language on the one hand, and in distinct languages on the other. Language change influences categories in one and the same language to different degrees: Old English was more specified in certain dimensions than Modern English, in which for instance the highly generalized subject category does not require any particular semantic features from its “members”, while OE was very selective in this respect.

1. The ‘impersonal’ construction in Old English

1.1. Clause structure of Old English

The oblique construction was part of a highly flexible system in OE. The rich morphosyntax symbolized not only syntactic, but also semantic and pragmatic functions; in Modern English (hence ModE), the few case forms are a purely syntactic coding device, as in *It's me*, where the accusative form is caused by the postverbal position. In OE, flexibility was also maintained by variable word order, which allowed topicalizations (frontings). Variation in word order was also caused by the weight of elements: less weighty elements, such as pronouns, tended to appear in the preverbal position, independently of their syntactic status; even verbs could appear in this position if they carried a light semantic weight (Allen 1995). From the perspective of cognitive processing, OE was economic in that items demanding less attention were mentioned first, while new and heavier information followed. Freedom of word order was lost with the establishment of the SVO word order, and case inflections on nouns disappeared during the late OE and early ME period. However, the losses were substituted by new syntactic structures, such as raisings to the subject position and passivization of indirect objects and prepositional phrases.

Subject was an optional element in OE clauses, though most clauses did exhibit a preverbal element, the syntactic status of which was not always clear. It carried several pragmatic and semantic functions, and could appear in oblique cases; the regular subject carried the nominative

case. The nominative subject covered only semantically prototypical cases and excluded experiencers of certain kind. During the ME period, subject became obligatory and always appeared in the nominative case; however, several oblique constructions with pronouns were still in use to the end of the ME period. The scope of subject was expanded to comprise even less prototypical subject properties, such as different kinds of experiencers and zero valences by means of dummy subjects (*It's raining, There is ...*). Thus, the subject categories of OE and Modern English differ in their extent. Its topicality has remained in Modern English (DuBois 1987) in that it expresses “what is being talked about” (Givón 1995), or it can be considered the “starting point” (Chafe 1994). On the whole, descriptions of OE (e.g. Traugott 1992) suggest that it exhibited a larger number of smaller grammatical categories than Modern English, which has fewer, but larger categories. Furthermore, it seems that several rules were optional. Grammatical categories thus reflected the underlying conceptual structure more closely than those of Modern English in that they were semantic and pragmatic and less syntactic.

1.2. The “impersonal” construction

Subjectless clauses (example 1) and clauses with the so called “impersonal” (examples 2-4) construction were possible in OE in addition to regular clauses with subject (example 5).

- (1) Raineth.
It's raining.
- (2) him ofhreow thæs mannes
him-DAT caused-pity the-GEN man-GEN
He felt sorry for the man.
(Ælc. Th.I.p.192.16)
- (3) alle wordes him ... greueth
all words-NOM him-DAT caused-sorrow (3. sing.)
He was sorry for all the words.
(A 142,27)
- (4) Hine nanes thinges ne lyste.
Him-ACC no thing-GEN not-pleased.
Nothing pleased him.
(AE: Alfred, Boethius)
- (5) Hi luueden God.
They loved God.

In example (1), the subject is missing: verbs expressing statements about weather conditions formed genuine subjectless constructions, while mental verbs appeared with an oblique case, either dative (2, 3), or accusative (4), and the cause or source was expressed by means of the genitive (2, 4). This means that this construction lacks a formal grammatical subject, and the verb is inflected in the most neutral person category, the third person singular, independently of the number of experiencers. Verbs expressing physical states, such as *me hungreth* ('I'm hungry'), and possession are further examples of the "impersonal" construction.² These have a common origin according to Seeffranz-Montag (1983: 78), who argues that the roots of the 'impersonal' construction (except the weather verbs) lie in constructions like *(there is) a grief-of-me*, *(there is) thought-mine*, which is similar to the possessive construction in some languages (e.g. Finnish or Latin).

It is important to note that not all mental verbs appeared in this construction; some formed regular subject-verb structures (see López-Couso 1997, Allen 1995), as example (5) illustrates. Even verbs involved in oblique constructions did not form a homogeneous group as regards coding of arguments, but varied so that it is sometimes difficult to find a pattern (Denison 1993, Allen 1995). Some verbs followed two or even three different patterns, for instance *sceamian* 'cause/feel shame' could take a dative or a nominative experiencer:

(6) Him scamede.

(7) He scamede.

Some verbs, such as *lystan*, appeared with an accusative experiencer. The source of the experience also varied between the genitive, a prepositional phrase, and the nominative.

According to these descriptions, the variation found in this construction appears to lack systematicity. Allen's explanation (1995) is that the system may have been perfect at an earlier stage but that some verbs may have changed for certain reasons and become idiosyncratic. Anderson (1986) interprets the different case frames within the same verb class as a reflection of different theta roles; however, he does not provide an exact account of the experiencer. In general, very few researchers are concerned with true case roles (Fischer et al. 1987). Elmer (1981: 28-29)

2 An almost complete list if the verbs can be found in van der Gaaf (1904).

rejects such an approach because “an issue until now unresolved by case grammar concerns the link between the semantic level of cases and the level of surface syntax”. McCawley (1976, see Allen 1995) investigates this structure out of a semantic and a psychological perspective: she explains that verbs with an oblique experiencer refer to events that are outside of the experiencer’s control or volition. There is wide agreement on the fact that the “impersonal” construction represents certain “unselfcontrollable”, subjective, thus highly personal, experiences. However, this analysis does not explain the difference between nominative and oblique experiencers. McCawley blames increasing “egocentric thinking” for the loss of this construction, since a nominative subject attributes the experiencer more agentive features.

McCawley’s ideas will be expanded here: the impersonal construction can be viewed from a semantic and psychological perspective with more success, since case theories, which will be presented below, do not provide enough semantic properties for the differentiation of experiencers; they serve to clarify the relation between underlying semantic and surface structure. The features can best be understood if verbs with an oblique argument are contrasted with verbs with a nominative subject.

A comparison of *lufian* with a nominative subject and *lician* with a dative argument, we can assume the following: while love tends to be analysable and eventually controllable long-term feeling, liking is rather an immediate and unanalysed feeling for the experiencer and cannot therefore be controlled; what is more important is that in “liking” the properties of the object, i.e. the source of the feeling, are of more importance than in “loving”, in which the feeling of the experiencer is the salient part. Confirmation for this assumption can be found in many languages, in which the preverbal argument appears in the dative (German and Latin) or in the partitive (Finnish) with “like”; in these languages, the verb “love” appears with a nominative subject. A further notable characteristic of verbs with an oblique experiencer is that most of them refer to a negative experience, which is more salient than a positive experience. To these verbs belong *grisan*, ‘fear’, *hreowsian* ‘trauern’, *yfelian* ‘suffer’, *tweogan* ‘doubt’; salient experiences give the sentient the feeling of total impact, so that the experiencer hardly processes them consciously and analytically and cannot control them (Joseph 1992, Bolles 1988).

Further insight into properties of verbs with an oblique experiencer is provided by verbs that take both an oblique and a nominative construction, for instance *hreowan* ‘regret’. The two structures reflect the

degree of active participation by the experiencer referred to by the verb: there is immediate and unanalysed regret, which does not demand any active participation from the experiencer, who is overwhelmed by the feeling; there is also thoroughly analysed and reflected regret of the cognizant. Verbs of perception take a nominative subject in OE, since we participate in a perception more actively than in an emotional sensation (Legewie – Ehlers 1992) in that we activate the short-term memory, compare the perception with previous experiences and knowledge; we are also able to block a perception if we wish to do so.

Passive participation of the oblique experiencer also implies the feeling of directionality so that Elmer (1981: 29) calls the experiencer in this case a “recipient”: the experiencer feels something being directed towards him/herself from outside. Therefore, verbs of ‘happening’ also took a dative; *occur* and *seem* are still constructed with a prepositional phrase; *happen* partly.

These analyses find support in the memory model of Bolles (1988), in which the first stage of the memory represents a merely receptive emotional stage, with no active processing. The second stage, the “factual memory”, is characterized by more differentiation in that facts are sorted there. At the highest stage, analysis and problem solving take place. At the lowest stage we find “impersonal” verbs, which refer to events that occur to us and lack activity, while a higher degree of processing provides us with a feeling of agentivity. This model also explains variation between dative and nominative coding within single verbs: the variant with the dative case implies less processing than that with the nominative.

Explanations concerning the demise of this construction have mostly been placed on syntactic changes, such as syntactic subject properties, change of word order, and loss of morphology. Fischer and van der Leek (1983) as well as Anderson (1986) classify these verbs in terms of the theta theory, which provides their structure with semantic information, although it does not differentiate the experiencer enough to explain variation within this category. Some researchers (e.g. Seeffranz-Montag 1982) regard it as a pseudosubject or precursor of a subject with several subject properties, only lacking the morphological form. Allen (1995: 51) considers the oblique experiencer to exhibit a grammatically double nature: it can behave like a subject and like an object.

In the following, we will examine the experiencer in terms of case theories and then its role in sentence.

2. Experiencer

Assumptions about conceptual and semantic (lexical) properties of the two verb arguments of interest, agent and patient, as well as their candidacy for syntactic roles are offered in case theories, which were initiated by Fillmore (1968, 1977). Case theories or case grammars are concerned with underlying semantic roles of verb arguments, which depend on the semantics of the verb. As they attempt to explain and predict how these roles are mapped onto syntactic categories, they are assumed to reveal the interface of semantics and syntax. This is helpful for making findings about the OE system.

Case theories offer a diversity of aspects and perspectives and therefore also numerous problems; there are as many case theories as there are researchers, and all differ from each other in some respect, as they focus on different aspects. Dowty (1991: 561) explains this state as follows: "... the difficulty we have had in reaching agreement on just what a theory of thematic roles should look like is analogous to that of the blind men examining the elephant, each touching a different part of its body."

The level assumed for semantic roles varies: most of the theories regard the lexical-semantic level as the deep level. Although this level does not reflect the cognitive structure entirely, as it is already generalized, it is appropriate for the examination of the interface of semantics and syntax. This has led to the formulation of valence theories (Allerton 1982) and other lexical classifications made in terms of the cases the verb takes. Some approaches start at higher levels, close to the syntactic level. Among these we find Schlesinger's case theory (1995), according to which even a typical patient can be an agent, as it is the ideal semantic representation of the subject. Accordingly, he considers the subject of *The plumber fell from the roof* (Schlesinger 1995: 35) to be an agent. Approaches describing case roles at levels close to the surface are inadequate for our purpose because they do not reflect the processing involved in activity referred to by the mental verbs. The most fruitful level is the conceptual level offered in cognitive approaches, as described below.

A second problem is the analysability and the number of semantic roles. In Fillmore's case theory they were unanalysable wholes in similarity with 'figure' in the gestalt theory, which is more than the sum of its parts. Such a procedure is inflexible, since every deviating role has to be labelled separately; hybrid and overlapping roles are not allowed. The biggest problem of such approaches is the number of case roles, which increases with accuracy. Therefore, the definition of semantic roles

is more realistic by means of features, though an exhaustive analysis cannot be made. In such an approach, an addition or deletion of features turns verb arguments into better or less good members or possibly creates new semantic roles. This is what we find in Dowty's (1981) model, which contains two prototypes. In the cognitive models of Langacker (1991) and Croft (1991), semantic roles are part of cognitive structures or schemas and do not exhibit strictly defined features. Although these models do not differentiate experiencers of various kinds, they do provide knowledge of the underlying knowledge schemas, which serve as basis for lexical semantics. For an in-depth analysis of further aspects, the theory of transitivity (Hopper – Thompson 1980) presents numerous semantic and pragmatic features of the verb and its arguments.

For Langacker (1991), case roles are not necessarily the object of study; rather, they are parts of cognitive structures or event schemas (cf. DeLancey 1984). Schemas, i.e. events, can be described by means of transmission of energy in terms of a "billiard-ball model", which is simply a chain of actions resulting from the transmission of energy from one object to another, thereby causing certain changes in the latter part of the chain. Croft (1991, 1993), whose approach is similar, calls these "causal chains". The beginning of an action chain is "the head", and the end is "the tail". This model allows flexibility, such that individual parts of the chain can be attributed semantic roles: the head is the agent, "who volitionally carries out physical activity which results in contact with some external object and the transmission of energy to that object" (Langacker 1991: 210). The lowest part of the action chain is the tail, i.e. the patient, "which absorbs the energy transmitted ... and thereby undergoes some change of state" (Langacker 1991: 210); between these two is the instrument, which intermediate energy from agent to patient. Experiencer is a person "engaged in mental activity". The action chain composed of these parts is asymmetric, even in states, as subject is more focused than the rest. This results from pragmatic aspects, figure and ground, which Langacker includes in his approach; subject is always the figure and more active than the rest. This fact can explain the different meanings of for instance "resemble" in various constellations.³

Langacker calls semantic roles "archetypes", which differ from other case roles with regard to the level of description. Archetypes can be

3 This has in reality nothing to do with the semantic roles (see also Dowty 1991); however, Langacker does not separate semantics and pragmatics.³

illustrated by means of two parameters: the degree of participation and the position in the action chain.

Figure 1. Archetypes in Langacker’s cognitive model

	Source domain	Target domain
Active participant	Agent	Experiencer
Passive participant	Instrument	Thema (patient, mover)

Experiencer is defined as “active participant” and “sentient” in the target domain. This indicates a discrepancy in that active participation is usually a feature of an agent. Since the oblique experiencer does not participate actively in the event, this description is not valid for this category. However, hybrid roles are possible in Langacker’s model, though he does not illustrate how they can be created. Thus the oblique argument of the impersonal construction could be placed between “thema” and “experiencer”. The number of case roles is flexible in the cognitive models: the “principle of granularity” (Croft 1993) accounts for various needs, so that the accuracy of description correlates with the number distinguished.

The gap left behind in Langacker’s model can be filled by features in Dowty’s model (1991), which is more flexible in that it describes the two extreme semantic roles, the agent and the patient as “proto roles”, by means of features. The features used “are higher-order generalizations ABOUT lexical meanings... not statements about individual lexical meanings” (1991: 577). Experiencer is a hybrid category for Dowty (1991: 572) as well. The following properties of the proto roles are not assumed to be decompositions of arguments and therefore do not describe them exhaustively.

- Agent proto role:
 - volitional involvement in the event or state
 - sentience (and/or perception)
 - causing an event or change of state in another participant

- Patient proto role:
 - undergoes change of state
 - incremental theme
 - causally affected by another participant

Clearly, the above properties make up “head and tail” in Langacker’s approach, although Dowty’s approach is not based on cognitive principles. The advantage of features lies in their separability, so that their number determines the prototypicality of the argument, for instance only one of the agent properties yields a low degree of agentivity (examples 8-10) (Dowty 1991: 572), example (11) illustrates the proto roles (agent and patient), and (12), proto agent and partial patient:

- (8) John is being polite. (Volition)
- (9) John knows Mary. (Sentience)
- (10) John sees Mary. (Perception)
- (11) John broke the window. (Proto roles)
- (12) John crossed *the driveway*. (Incremental theme)

Experiencer is defined by Dowty as “sentience without volition or causation” (1991: 577). This is an agentive feature. If we add “causally affected by some other participant”, whereby “some other participant” can refer to any source of experience and does not necessarily have to be a person, we get closer to a proper distinction of the oblique experiencer. However, as the mental state is affected as well, we should add “undergoes change of state”. In this case, it exhibits one agentive feature, and two features out of patient proto role.

After having confirmed the assumption that experiencer is a mixed category, we can assess its properties more accurately in terms of transitivity (Hopper – Thompson 1980). Transitivity is a gradual phenomenon brought about by the whole clause and refers to the degree of energy transfer from agent to patient. The degree of transitivity is based on the aktionsart of the verb and certain properties of its arguments, as the following list illustrates (Hopper – Thompson 1980: 252). The properties of the oblique experiencer are added for comparison.

	<u>high transitivity</u>
Participants	2 or more participants, agent (A) and object (O)
Kinesis	action
Aspect	telic
Volitionality	volitional
Agency	A high in potency
Affectedness of O	O totally affected
Individuation of O	O highly individuated

	<u>low transitivity</u>
Participants	1 participant
Kinesis	non-action
Aspect	atelic
Volitionality	non-volitional
Agency	A low in potency
Affectedness of O	O not affected
Individuation of O	O non-individuated
	<u>oblique experiencer</u>
Participants	1 or 2 participants, non-agent, non-object
Kinesis	non-action
Aspect	atelic
Volitionality	non-volitional
Agency	A low in potency
Affectedness of O	O partially affected
Individuation of O	O highly-individuated

The popular example *John broke the window* is highly transitive because it contains all of the features listed above: two participants (*John*, *window*), volitional, telic action, *John* is high in potency, the individuated *window* is totally affected. In contrast, transitivity is low in constructions with mental verbs, since the object is not affected at all (*I like this*). However, the features of mental verbs do not entirely coincide with those of low transitivity, like in *Him nan yfel ne hreowth* ‘He regretted no bad deed’: the oblique experiencer is partially affected by the event or state and is therefore a special case; a decision of whether we are dealing with A or O is therefore not straightforward. However, the direction and the degree of transitivity indicate that we are rather dealing with the goal than with the source, with the relevant property being change of state. This is also confirmed in Dowty’s account.

Other typological studies (Mithun 1991) have found features like “lack of control” and “affectedness” to serve as criteria for patient-like marking of verbs in certain Indian languages, in which some verbs can be marked both for agent and patient properties, depending on the context. These features are compatible with the theory of transitivity.

To conclude: The models presented are based on the assumption that underlying conceptual structures (causal chains) must be considered for the definition of semantic roles. Despite the fact that Dowty and Hopper and Thompson do not explicitly consider this, conceptual structure of events can be recognized in these accounts, and the employment of features makes them more flexible and accurate. Transitivity has parallels

with the transmission of energy: the more efficiently energy is carried over from agent to patient, the higher the degree of transitivity. These approaches show that experiencer is a mixed category, tending rather to patienthood than to agenthood.

The following table shows the most relevant features for the experiencer of three verbs. The first two features derive from our psychological analysis, and the rest refer to transitivity. A positive value is marked by +, and an x indicates that both negative and positive readings are possible:

	<u>sceamian</u> 'be ashamed'	<u>grisan</u> 'fear'	<u>lystan</u> 'feel pleasure'
unconscious processing	x	x	+
unanalysed	x	x	+
non-volitional, unintentional	x	x	+
non-action	x	x	+
lack of control	x	+	+
partial affectedness	+	+	+

Clearly, the experiencer of *sceamian* tends to be the most mixed category: the experience can be consciously processed, analysed, intentional, and controlled as well as the opposite of these, just as *lystan* is. This is probably the reason why *sceamian* was used both with a nominative and with an oblique experiencer in OE. *Grisan* is similar, although fear is mostly less controllable and active than shame. It may imply conscious behavior to avoid something, but this alternative is rare in comparison with shame. Finally, the feeling of pleasure (*lystan*) cannot be created by active participation or control of an event; the experiencer of *lystan* always appeared in the accusative. Dreaming (*mætan*) is also an activity that cannot be steered in any way; therefore, it always appeared with an oblique experiencer; its successor *dremen*, which was introduced as late as ME, was also constructed this way.

In this section, we have settled criteria to distinguish experiencer from agent and oblique experiencer from nominative experiencer and found that varying behavior of verbs implies distinct contents.

3. Subject

We turn now to discuss the realization of the underlying semantic properties at the surface. Since the syntactic category of subject can vary from one linguistic system to another, as is visible in OE and in Modern English, there is no exact definition for it. Subject is not even a universal

phenomenon: In ergative languages the subject of an intransitive verb and the object of a transitive verb form a single category through identical marking (the absolutive), while the subject of a transitive verb is coded differently (the ergative) (Van Valin – La Polla 1997).

Independently of the uncertain status of subject, Keenan (1976) provides a number of subject properties which are shared by typologically different languages. He argues that “the subjecthood of an NP (in a sentence) is a matter of degree” (cf. Langacker 1991 and DeLancey 1984). Therefore, we will consider its prototypical properties out of three perspectives, semantic, pragmatic, and syntactic, in order to be able to explain the subjectivization of the oblique experiencer.

The degree of prototypicality of grammatical roles is based on their semantic roles: the prototypical subject is an agent, and the prototypical object, a patient. Apart from this, predictability is not high concerning the mapping of semantic roles onto surface. In Langacker’s model, archetypes are mapped onto syntactic categories of subject and object in their order in the causal chain, so that if the whole event chain is present, the agent is the subject, and the patient, the object. But as there is no one-to-one relation, the subject can represent any of the roles following agent in English. There is, however, one restriction: subject has to be the one highest up in the energy stream. Thus, if there is an agent, the patient cannot be the subject without a specific agent marking. According to Langacker, object cannot be defined properly.

Croft (1991, 1993) provides an analysis of mental verbs and the mapping of their arguments to syntactic categories. The semantic bidirectionality of these verbs is claimed to explain the wide syntactic variation among subjects of mental verbs typologically and within one language. In a mental experience, the experiencer pays attention to the stimulus, and the stimulus causes a mental state with the experiencer, so that we get experiencer subject verbs (*I like this*) and stimulus subject verbs (*This pleases me*). According to Croft, stimulus subject verbs are given an inchoative reading, which is never the case with the experiencer subject verbs.⁴ The case of the stimulus subject and the experiencer object is interpreted by Dowty in terms of patient properties: “the inchoative interpretation entails a proto-patient property in the Experiencer that is not present in the stative--undergoing a (definite)

4 This does not explain all mental verbs, such as ‘realize’, which is an experiencer subject with an inchoative meaning.

change of state. Hence though the two arguments are still equal in Agent properties, they are unequal in that one is a better 'Patient', so it must be the direct object..." (Dowty 1991: 580).

Dowty (1991) provides a general "argument selection principle" to account for the mapping of semantic roles at the surface. This principle is similar to that of Langacker: the member with the greatest number of agent-properties (= highest up in the chain) will be the subject, and accordingly, the argument with the greatest number of patient-properties (= lowest down in the chain) will be the object. The subjectivization hierarchy is: Agent > Experiencer > Patient > Others. Whenever two arguments have an equal number of agent- and patient-properties, either can be lexicalized as subject. However, DeLancey (1984) has shown that subjects tend to carry a property of active causation, and elements with "inactive cause" appear in other positions, as in *Hunger killed him*, in which "hunger" is not enough of a cause (active) to be considered to be an agent and to take the subject position; therefore, *He died of hunger* is more natural. This contradicts the claim made by Croft and Dowty, namely that stimulus and experiencer are equally good subject candidates. Animateness has also been suggested to be a prototypical subject feature, but it is probably not an important factor on its own and must be combined with others, as Allen (1995) also notes.

In English, subject coincides mostly with the topic of the sentence, which is not necessarily the case in all languages (Shibatani 1991). As the notion of "topic" is bound with so many interpretations, I define it as a unit expressing what is being talked about or as "a starting point to which other information is added" (Chafe 1994: 92). Topic contains textually or contextually given information implying a cognitively active state (Chafe 1994; Givón 1995; Prince 1981, 1992). Therefore, subjects are mostly definite and continuous; the more continuous they are, the "less" they exhibit coding material at the surface. Givón has shown that personal pronouns and zero subjects are maintained longer as topics (i.e. in short term memory) than nouns with more substance. A topical subject is, of course, textually important as well; less important referents cannot be definite according to the "light subject constraint" (Chafe 1994), as they are not continuous. This constraint is caused by our limited short-term memory and the famous "bottle neck", which restricts the quantity of material to be processed. A "heavy subject" is a referent that is new and important, which means that it needs a large amount of processing energy. According to Chafe, such subjects do not occur in conversational language. As an experiencer is almost always a human being, and in most cases the speaker or a person referred to by the speaker, it tends to be a

more continuous topic than the stimulus, and is therefore a better, i.e. topical, subject.

According to DuBois (1987), definiteness of subjects is biased according to the ergative pattern: intransitive subjects and objects introduce new units into discourse and tend to be indefinite. The reason for this is our limited cognitive capacity; processing would become too heavy if the subject of a transitive verb carried new information, which usually appears in the verb phrase (cf. Van Valin – LaPolla 1997). Intransitive verbs with an indefinite subject are frequently “staging structures” of the type *There is X*.

The syntactic independence of subject of predicate is an additional subject property. Syntactically, subject is independent and powerful in several respects: it controls verb agreement and coreference (deletions, pronominalization, reflexive pronouns). These properties correspond to those of an agent, which is the source of activity and therefore independent of patient and other arguments. However, experiencer is dependent on the verb, which does not agree with the oblique experiencer. Subject is also the most natural target of “advancement” transformations (Keenan 1976) such as passivizations and raisings. These enable topicalizations of various elements, previously (OE) enabled by free word order. Subject position is leftmost in languages with SVO and corresponds to the placement of agent in an action chain.

We can conclude that subject properties can be explained in terms of semantic, pragmatic, and syntactic aspects. The prototypical subject is agentive and topical to a high degree. With a decrease of these features, prototypicality decreases as well. This may cause a different coding of peripheral and dual members in certain linguistic systems, such as the oblique experiencer in OE. However, the oblique experiencer, despite its deviant coding, behaved in a subject-like way in coreference and in coordinate clauses. This kind of subject is not independent of the verb and does not cause verb agreement. Its topicality may be the reason for its preverbal position. Thus, we can conclude that the coding of verb arguments was iconic in OE: the prototypical subject was encoded with the nominative, the simplest case, and the least prototypical subject, with an oblique case. The iconic coding was possible because of the small size of the subject category in OE. This confirms the assumption that OE reflected the conceptual structure more closely than does ModE.

4. The oblique experiencer and its demise

We have found that the oblique experiencer in OE was a borderline case between agent and patient on the one hand and between subject and object on the other, semantically like patient and syntactically like subject, yet lacking formal properties of subject (nominative and verb agreement). The reason for this discrepancy is the topicality and active participation of experiencer in comparison with the cause of the experience⁵, which is mostly a circumstance. In the following, we will compare these findings with a similar structure in Finnish, a non-Indoeuropean language. By the same token, the comparison of OE and Finnish is used to explain the demise of the OE construction.

Finnish is well-known for a large number of cases that substitute for prepositions, for instance the adessive for 'on' in *pöydällä* ('table+on'). However, cases in Finnish mark more than relations realized by prepositions in other languages: the degree of transitivity with regard to affectedness and definiteness are distinguished by means of cases as well. The very same nominal codings serve as aspectual markers, since partial affectedness implies non-termination and functions like the English progressive (imperfective). While the nominative is the regular case for the subject, oblique experiencers are coded with the partitive case, and object, with the genitive. Examples (13-16) illustrate Finnish inflections:

- (13) Minä kirjoitin kirjeen.
I wrote letter+ACC
'I wrote a letter'
- (14) Minä kirjoitin kirjettä.
I wrote letter+PART
'I was writing a letter'
- (15) Minä häpeän.
I+NOM am ashamed.
- (16) Minua hävettää.
I+PART am ashamed.

5 A detailed investigation could yield that everything is reversed in mental experiences, so that such verbs behave according to the ergative pattern.

In (13), the subject is in the nominative case, and the object in the accusative, which means that the writing of the letter is terminated, while the object in (14) is in the partitive and not effected, implying that writing is still going on. In (15) and (16), the aspect is irrelevant, as states ('be ashamed') do not exhibit any boundary. Instead, the nominative gives a more agentive reading to the experiencer that the subject refers to, such that it is consciously and intentionally participating in the event. In contrast, the partitive marks affectedness and lack of agentive features in similarity to the oblique case in OE. Even here we find iconic coding: the prototypical argument carries less linguistic material, while the peripheral subject carries an oblique coding. Further verbs with variation coding are *säälistää* in Finnish and *hreowan* 'feel pity' in OE, *pelätä* (Finnish) and *grisan* 'be afraid' (OE). The parallel membership of verb categories between the languages is surprising.

The two languages are also similar in regard with the coding of the verb. It appears in the third person singular, the least marked and, therefore, a default category. It does not agree with the subject, as the oblique experiencer is already provided with a coding. Even the preverbal position is similar in both languages.

However, the differences are remarkable. The large difference is the function of the oblique cases: in OE, the dative was restricted to a small group of subjects and, of course, to non-objects, while it is an essential part of subject and object coding in Finnish as it marks partial affectedness and imperfectivity. Even definiteness is covered by it in certain contexts; Finnish does not exhibit articles, so the nominative and accusative tend to symbolize definiteness, and partitive, indefiniteness. The deeply rooted system explains its survival in Finnish, while the peripheral function and lack of systemboundedness of this construction are reasons for its loss in English beside syntactic and morphological changes. In OE the oblique case served as a marker for a poorly defined borderline group of arguments, which represented peripheral features of both agent and patient.

A further difference between the two languages concerns the syntactic properties of the oblique experiencer. While it behaved like a subject in coordinate structures in OE, it cannot be coordinated with nominative subjects in Finnish. In Finnish, we do not find it in a postverbal position, which was possible in OE. This confirms the assumption made by Cole et al. (1980) that behavioral subject properties are acquired historically before its coding properties: OE exhibited behavioral properties of subject first and then coding properties, while Finnish has not followed this path.

A further indication for lack of systematicity in the OE system was that the dative was not an object coding, although it coded certain experiencers. This means that the oblique experiencer was partly felt to be a patient, however, without exhibiting its grammatical coding. An additional criterion was certainly the small number of verbs that appeared with this construction, as many, if not most, mental verbs were used with a nominative subject. To these belong all verbs of perception, which imply a certain degree of active participation.

These facts led to a weakening and loss of the oblique experiencer in favor of a nominative subject. Thus, the demise of the OE impersonal construction is not only due to syntactic and morphological change, it was also caused by its weak role within the whole linguistic system. Also the fact that the “impersonal” verbs lost the oblique experiencer at different points of time can be taken as a strong argument for the relevance of their semantic content in OE.

A strong motivation for the loss of the oblique experiencer was, of course, the strong ongoing syntactisization process in English so that cases came to mark grammatical relations rather than semantic functions (Allen 1995); through this process, linguistic structure was detached from conceptual and semantic structure. This development implied the extension of the subject category to less prototypical subjects. Such a process is probably also partly dependent on the acquisition of the first language by children, who are true icon-makers on the one hand, and generalisers on the other. When the oblique form no longer covered a clear function with a clear boundary to other forms, as shown here, children probably reinterpreted it.

5. Conclusion

It has been demonstrated that OE distinguished peripheral and semantically mixed verb arguments from clearly definable arguments by marking them with an oblique case at the surface in the preverbal position, while the regular subject appeared in the nominative. Our investigation yielded that the oblique experiencer appeared with verbs referring to mental states that the sentient is not able to analyse or control. This state was closer to the conceptual structure than the generalized and strongly syntacticized subject category of Modern English. The change was not only facilitated by the loss of morphology and stabilization of word order, but also by the fact that the semantic features that the oblique form was based on were not shared by any other grammatical phenomenon, as in Finnish, where its stability is based on the notion of

partiality, a feature that brings about aspectual differentiations as well. The unstable situation in OE was reflected in variable constructions of the “impersonal” verbs, which became “personal” at different points of time.

The deviant coding of the preverbal argument was brought about by the principle of iconicity, according to which weighty content is marked by a weighty form and vice versa. Accordingly, less prototypical category is symbolized by more substance in order to attract more attention. Thus one can conclude that the coding of preverbal arguments in Old English was more iconic than in Modern English. However, it was also more complicated because the subject category was split into good and less good members, the border of which was not clear-cut. A further dilemma was that the iconic coding was not part of a bigger grammatical system, so that it was not iconic within the whole system. This paper has shown that these facts should be considered in addition to the syntactic and morphological causes that led to the demise of the impersonal construction.

HANNA PISHWA
 Institut für Linguistik TEL19-2
 TU Berlin
 Ernst-Reuter-Platz 7
 10587 BERLIN
 GERMANY

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