

Impersonal Constructions in Mazandarani

Guiti Shokri
Uppsala University

Abstract

The aim of this article is to investigate impersonal constructions in the Sari and Ziyarat dialects of Mazandarani, a language spoken in the north of Iran. The language data used in this study are oral narratives, stories, and ethnographic texts.

Kitagawa (1990), Blevins (2003), and Siewierska (2008) are among those general linguists who have paid attention to this type of construction in recent years. Siewierska (2008: 3) defines impersonal constructions as “subjectless constructions, constructions featuring only a pleonastic subject, and constructions which lack a specified agent.” This study concentrates on the latter type, specifically on the use of 3PL and 2SG constructions to denote a non-specified agent.

Sometimes 3PL impersonal constructions are in the past tense, where there is a separation in time from the moment of speech, but some examples are in the present tense, which means that there is no time separation. In most examples, the addressee is excluded, but this is mainly due to the situation in which the corpus was gathered. In some of the examples it is obvious that the speaker wants to create a mental distance between him/her and the verb action. The construction is also used when talking about a taboo, perhaps to avoid the embarrassment of having to identify with the verbal action. In other examples, the 3PL construction lends more generality, and therefore more importance, to the verbal action. It can also exclude both the speaker and the addressee from the group of possible agents. The 2SG construction is used both in a similar way to the 3PL construction to talk about customs in a specific context in the past or present, thus excluding the addressee from the referential framework in this specific context, but probably not in all contexts. But this construction is also used to include both the speaker and the addressee as potential agents.

The general conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that the 3PL construction is less inclusive than the 2SG. If the speaker wants to mark an exclusive interpretation (-speaker, -addressee) the only possible construction is the 3PL, and if the speaker wants to focus on the inclusive interpretation (+speaker, +addressee) the only possible construction is 2SG, but there is also a grey zone where both constructions are possible.

Introduction

This article deals with impersonal constructions in Sari and Ziyarat dialects of Mazandarani. The language data used in this study are oral narratives, stories, and ethnographic texts.¹ Mazandarani is spoken in the north of Iran, south of the Caspian Sea and belongs to the northwest Iranian languages. It is thus closely related to Gilaki, Balochi,² and Kurdish.

There is extensive discussion about impersonal constructions among linguists.

¹ The text corpus emanates from two projects on which Carina Jahani and I have worked together; one project on Mazandarani, Sari dialect (here abbreviated S), and another project, supported by the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project with the cooperation of Dr Hossein Barani from Gorgan University, on the dialect of Mazandarani spoken by the Galesh of Ziyarat (here abbreviated Z), a village south of Gorgan. After Z, I use letters referring to the names of my informants.

² For impersonal constructions in Balochi, see Jahani (in the present volume).

Kitagawa (1990), Blevins (2003),³ and Siewierska (2008) are among those who have paid attention to this type of construction in recent years. Their studies are interesting from a typological perspective. According to Siewierska (2008: 3) “the term impersonal is used in the literature to denote subjectless constructions, constructions featuring only a pleonastic subject, and constructions which lack a specified agent.” Blevins (2006: 237) takes a morphological approach and finds that some languages have “a distinctive type of impersonal construction occupying the communicative niche associated with passive constructions. This construction is obligatorily subjectless and usually receives an ‘active indefinite’ interpretation, in which the subject is construed as referring to an unspecified human subject, or to people in general.”

Impersonal subjects have different grammatical codings in different languages. One common construction described by Siewierska (2008) is the 3PL impersonal structure. Another common construction, not treated by Siewierska, is the 2SG construction found in, e.g., English.

Siewierska (2008: 23) concludes that “the referential range of the 3PL is the most restricted. 3PL impersonal constructions denote third person referents among which the speaker and/or addressee are hardly ever included.” Also Kitagawa and Lehrer (1990: 740, quoting Huddleston 1984: 288) argue that “[t]he personal pronouns are typically deictic and referential, especially in the 1st and 2nd person. That is, the 1st person forms refer to the speaker/writer, while the 2nd person refers to the addressee or a group including at least one addressee but not the speaker/writer.” They also distinguish between referential, impersonal and vague uses of pronouns, where “[r]eferential uses identify specific individuals”, “[a]n ‘impersonal’ use of a pronoun applies to anyone and/or everyone”, and “/a/ ‘vague’ use applies to specific individuals, but they are not identified, or identifiable, by the speaker” (Kitagawa and Lehrer 1990: 742). Siewierska (2008: 9) uses the term impersonal for what Kitagawa and Lehrer call specific, and generic for what they describe as impersonal.

There are different constructions to denote an impersonal subject in Mazandarani. In this article I limit my study to the 3PL and 2SG impersonal construction. I focus on two dialects, for which there are corpuses available, the Sari dialect and the Ziyarat dialect, and my aim is to show how 3PL and 2SG constructions function as impersonal structures in my corpus. I want to study how and where 3PL and 2SG impersonal constructions include or exclude the speaker and the addressee; in other words the referential framework in these constructions will be discussed and compared with Siewierska’s conclusions. Each example will be discussed separately. The aim is thus to investigate whether Siewierska’s conclusions about the referential properties of the 3PL construction are also applicable to my study and what referential properties can be applied to the 2SG construction.

³ It is worth noting that Blevins’s article is not directly connected to mine. However, his descriptions about differences between passive and impersonal construction specially on pages 486–487, 409, 507–508, where he characterizes impersonal construction and how they differ from passives, made many things clear to me while I was writing this article.

3rd person plural impersonal constructions

Our data contain many narrations about culture, customs, and ceremonies, as well as about village life in the past and present, cooking, weaving, etc. It is interesting to note that when the linguistic informants are speaking about their private life, their autobiography, and children, they often start out in the first person (either SG or PL depending on context), but when they speak about their culture, customs, and ceremonies, e.g. taboos in the society, and about cooking, curing diseases, or weaving and other handicrafts, they seemingly distance themselves from the situation by using the 3PL construction.

- Ex. 1 *ruznāmenegār gut-en dige*
 journalist tell.PST-3PL other
 (He) was called a journalist, you know. (ZA)

This is said by a woman describing the profession of a fellow villager. Here it seems that the speaker does not include herself in the referential frame of this construction. By using the 3PL she somehow indicates that this is a word she was not familiar with from the beginning. It may have been said by others, and she then learned it from them. Now, as is shown in the interview, she can use it herself. The addition of the word *dige* seems to indicate that the speaker thinks that the addressee is familiar with the word and would use it herself. The addressee, however, is not expected to know about this specific man, and therefore appears to be outside the referential frame of this example.

- Ex. 2. *vaxtike ejle=je dar=bi-yum-en*
 when bridal.suite=from out=PREV-come.PST-3PL
masan mard=re mard berd-e hammum
 for.example man=ACC man bring.PST-3SG bath
 When they came out of the bridal chamber, you know, the man was taken to the bath by a man. (ZA)

The speaker here narrates a popular custom in which she herself has also taken part at her own wedding. Here, however, she is referring to this custom with some distance and keeps using 3PL even though she is part of the referential framework. In this way she can speak more neutrally about a taboo subject, namely the customs surrounding the wedding night. The addressee, an outsider, is not part of the referential frame here.

- Ex. 3. *un me-br-e am=un kārḫāne pāstorize*
 DEM IMP-carry.PRS-3SG EMPH=DEM factory pasteurization
me-go-n čiši me-go-n
 IMP-tell.PRS-3PL what IMP-tell.PRS-3PL
unjā me-br-en unje me-ruš-en
 there IMP-take.PRS-3PL there IMP-sell.PRS-3PL
 He takes (the milk) to the factory, it is called “pasteurization factory” or whatever it is called. They take it there (and) there they sell it. (ZAB)

There are two instances of the use of the 3PL in this example. By using the 3PL in the second part of the first sentence, the speaker wants to say he does not know if his usage of the word *pāstorize* is correct or not. He thus distances himself from this modern concept to a certain degree but at the same time he uses the word. Thus, he includes himself in the referential framework of this 3PL construction, but at the same time stresses that he is not a natural part of the framework. Again, the addressee may be expected to use the word *pāstorize*, but at the same time she is totally outside the referential framework of this example. The second sentence is an impersonal way of presenting what the milkmen do, and since neither the speaker nor the addressee is a milkman, they are not part of the referential framework of this sentence.

- Ex. 4. *yek seri=re zamin e-dā-n a jangal*
 one group=DAT land PREV-give.PST-3PL from forest
ke birun ārd-en
 CLM out bring.PST-3PL
 When the herdsmen were driven out of the forest, some of them were given land. (ZAB)

Here the 3PL construction is used by the speaker to refer to the government, which neither he nor the addressee is a part of.

- Ex. 5. *gut-en bis ādem me-xā inje*
 tell.PST-3PL twenty person IMP-want.PRS here
da-bu hār-š-en ke in ārus
 PREV-be.PRS.3SG PREV-look.PRS-3PL CLM DEM bride
če kār hā-kerd-e čiši ābe=e
 what work PREV-do.PST-3SG what become.PST.3SG=COP.PRS.3SG
 People said that twenty persons must be there (and) see what this bride had done, what had happened. (ZN)

Here the narrator speaks about customs in her village in the past. People used to say that the wedding night and what happened that night in the house of the groom must be supervised by twenty people related to the bride. It seems that the speaker wants to mark a distance both mentally and in time to this old custom, or she may want to address a taboo with this impersonal construction. There is a feeling that she wants to exclude herself somehow from having said this herself. The addressee is an outsider and does not belong to the referential framework of this impersonal construction.

- Ex. 6. *doxtar-ā=e de hame=re davat me-kon-en*
 girl-PL=EZ village all=ACC invite IMP-do.PRS-3PL
 All the village girls are invited. (ZR)

The narrator speaks about wedding customs in her village, of which she is also a part. In fact, she had just recently arranged a wedding and invited all the village girls and must therefore be regarded as part of the referential framework in this example.

It is possible that she uses the 3PL construction to show that this is not something only she would do, but that it is an important custom which everybody follows. The addressee is outside the referential framework of this example.

- Ex. 7. *dige da-ne-m-gerd-ān-en* *ba-ver-en*
 other PREV-NEG-IMP-return.PRS-CAUS-3PL PREV-take.PRS-3PL
piyar=eš xāne
 father=PC.3SG house
 Then they don't take (her) back to her father's house any more. (ZR)

- Ex. 8. *ārus=e me-br-en hammum*
 bride=ACC IMP-take.PRS-3PL bath
 They take the bride to the bath. (ZN)

- Ex. 9. *in jur rasm-ā dāšt-an*
 this kind custom-PL have.PST-3PL
 They had this kind of customs. (ZN)

- Ex. 10. *nardebān=e m-ešt-en inje ābkaš-ā*
 ladder=ACC IMP-put.PST-3PL here strainer-PL
de-m-čind-an=o berenj-ā=re de-m-rit-en
 PREV-IMP-set.PST-3PL=and rice-PL=ACC PREV-IMP-pour.PST-3PL
del=eš dige un vax de-m-rit-en
 inside=PC.3SG other DEM time PREV-IMP-pour.PST-3PL
del=e deq
 inside=EZ pot
 They put a ladder here, they put out strainers, and they poured the rice in them (lit. it), you know. Then they poured (it, i.e. the rice) in the pot. (ZN)

Again, in these examples, the narrators use the 3PL to describe wedding customs, of which all the villagers and also they themselves are a part. Two of the examples are in the past (ex. 9–10), where there can thus be a separation in time from the moment of speech, but two are in the present (ex. 7–8), which means that there is no time separation. Actually, even if the sentence about rice cooking is in the past, the addressee observed during her travels that rice is still cooked in the same way today. Again, the addressee is an outsider, and therefore not part of the referential framework.

- Ex. 11. *gān-nene mardī ba-merd-e*
 say.PRS-3PL man PREV-die.PST-3SG
 The man is said to have died. (S)

The person who said this uses the 3PL construction to indicate that she does not have first-hand information about the death. She has heard about it from someone else. Thus she is not part of the referential framework of the 3PL construction. De-

pending on the context, it may or may not be known to the speaker whether the addressee has first-hand information about the death but the possibility cannot be excluded. In a context where the addressee has asked about the death, it is clear that he/she has no information, but in another context, the speaker may ask an addressee for confirmation. Thus, here the speaker is not part of the referential framework but the addressee may be part of it.

Ex. 12. *dar-e da-vend mere vind-ene*
 door-ACC PREV-close.PRS I.ACC see.PRS-3PL
 Close the door, people are seeing (can see) me. (S)

In this example, the speaker and the addressee are excluded from the discourse. The two of them see each other, but that is not relevant in the context. The 3PL construction here refers to others, who are not supposed to be able to see the speaker.

2nd person plural impersonal constructions

In this section examples of the 2SG impersonal construction will be discussed.

Ex. 13. *e har liāz-i ba-gu-i bā mard-ā*
 from every aspect-IND PREV-say.PRS-2SG with husband-PL
sāzeš dāšt-en
 adaptation have.PST-3PL

They cooperated with their husbands in all areas (of life) that one could think of. (ZR)

Here the referential frame of the verb *bagui* ‘you.SG say’ is very wide and includes any possible referent, including the speaker and the addressee. The addressee is particularly in focus here.

Ex. 14. *ba-gu-i sevā hā-kārd=bu-n*
 PREV-say.PRS-2SG separate PREV-do.PST=COP.PRS-3PL
ārus ba-še=bu xāne dige
 bride PREV-go.PST=COP.PR.3SG house other
ne-m-bie
 NEG-IMP-become.PST.3SG

If you assume that the new bride would become independent (and) go somewhere else (to live), that would never happen. (ZN)

Like in the previous example, the referential frame of the verb *bagui* ‘you.SG say’ is very wide and includes any possible referent, including the speaker and the addressee, with a special focus on the addressee. Note also the other impersonal construction in the 3PL in this sentence, which here refers to a more specific group of people, namely those living in the village in former times.

Ex. 15. *unmal inje=jem xāss-e piyāde vače=re*
 then here=from want.PST-3SG on.foot child=ACC
kul ha-yr-i be-r-i šar
 shoulder PREV-take.PRS-2SG PREV-go.PRS-2SG town

Then, from here, you had to take the child and go on foot to the town. (ZA)

This sentence refers to the difficult communications in past times, and the troubles a parent, including the speaker, had to go through when the child needed to visit a doctor in town. Thus, the speaker is here included in the referential properties of the 2SG, but since the addressee is an outsider, this situation would not apply to her.

Ex. 16. *xā sax be ādem=e dige*
 ok difficult be.PST.3SG man=DAT other
masan berd-i šar yārd-i
 for example take.PST-2SG town bring.PST-2SG

It was difficult for people, you know. You took (the child) to the town (and) brought (it back). (ZA)

In the first sentence the noun *ādem* ‘man’ is used in the impersonal construction; in the second sentence it is the 2SG, which here, like in the previous example, refers to anyone who had a sick child, including the speaker, but not the addressee (see above).

Ex. 17. *alān kār ne-dār-e tere alān*
 now work NEG-have.PRS-3SG you.2SG.DAT now
mi-ā māšin pall=et=ben me-hel-i
 IMP-come.PRS.3SG car step=PC.2SG=under IMP-put.PRS-2SG
me-r-i
 IMP-go.PRS-2SG

Now it is easy for you, the car comes to your doorstep, you put (the child in it) and go. (ZA)

This example is uttered in the same context as the two previous examples, and the impersonal construction definitely includes the speaker and anyone else who would need to take someone from the village to town. Again, since the addressee does not live in the village, she is somehow excluded from the whole discourse.

Ex. 18. *masan xās-e sāat=e yāzda*
 for example should.PST-3SG clock=EZ eleven
be-r-i gwerḡān
 PREV-go.PRS-2SG Gorgan

For example, you had to go to Gorgan at 11 o'clock. (ZA)

The context is the same as the previous examples and, again, the speaker, but not the addressee, is part of the referential framework of this construction.

- Ex. 19. *are ande unvax āzād bi-ye xu=re*
 yes so.much then free be.PST-3SG boar=ACC
ba-di=bu-i palang=re
 PREV-see.PST=COP.PRS-2SG leopard=ACC
ba-di=bu-i... esā koje m-ell-an
 PREV-see.PST=COP.PRS-2SG now where IMP-allow.PRS-3PL
mohitezist age tefang=et sedā ba-kord-e
 environment if gun=PC.2SG sound PREV-do.PST-3SG
m-iā-d denbāl=et
 IMP-come.PRS-3SG after=PC.2SG

Yes, then it was free; if you saw a boar, if you saw a leopard...⁴ Now they don't allow this. If your gun makes a sound, the (representative of the) Environment(al Agency) will come after you. (ZN)

Here the informant uses the 2SG form about a situation in the past that has changed in the present, which happened and happens to everybody in the village including the speaker herself, since she later in the text says that she has shot a lot of animals. The 3PL form *mellan* 'they allow', however, excludes the speaker, since it refers to an activity in which the speaker is not involved, i.e. to forbid hunting. The addressee is, as already noted, an outsider.

- Ex. 20. *māye ba-zen-i lur dāšt-e=bu*
 leaven PREV-hit.PRS-2SG kind.of.cheese have.PST-PP=COP.PRS.3SG
 If you use leaven, you can get *lur* (a kind of cheese). (ZAB)

In this sentence, the informant is describing how to make cheese. Here the 2SG refers to anyone who would like to make cheese, despite the fact that this is the local way of making cheese in this particular village. Everybody from the village and from outside who would like to try could make cheese this way. Therefore, this construction, which definitely includes the speaker, can also include the addressee.

- Ex. 21. *čiz=e garm ke bo-xor-i sargijā*
 something=EZ warm CLM PREV-eat.PRS-2SG dizziness
me-ger-i
 IMP-take.PRS-2SG
 If you eat something fiery you will get dizzy. (ZA)

Again, this statement with the 2SG impersonal construction applies without limitations and includes the speaker and the addressee.

⁴ The informant does not finish her sentence, but it is clear that she is implying that in former times the villagers were free to shoot animals, whereas nowadays the Environmental Agency will not allow them to do so.

- Ex. 22. *peyyambar nemāz va-xez-i nemāz=et=e*
 prophet prayer PREV-get.up.PRS-2SG prayer=PC.2SG=ACC
be-xān age vače=t yakvax mariz be
 PREV-read.PRS if child=PC.2SG sometimes sick be.PST.3SG
hanu tārik be xās-e be-r-i maslan
 yet dark be.PST.3SG must.PRS-3SG PREV-go.PRS-2SG for.example
 (You had to) get up for the prophet's prayer, do your prayer, if your child was sick, (and) it still was dark, you (still) had to go. (ZA)

Here the 2SG construction is of a more limited nature, including the speaker but not the addressee, who is an outsider. It also applies to a specific context in the past; i.e. it is not relevant without any limitations.

- Ex. 23. *ha yaxte ke yām-i hanti bi ke*
 yes when CLM come.PST-2SG such be.PST.2SG CLM
kufte=o dige ba-tefte dige helāk=e zār
 exhausted=and yet PREV-hot yet dead=and deplorable
bi dige
 be.PST.2SG yet

When you came back you were exhausted, all hot, you were dead (tired) and in a deplorable state. (ZA)

Again, the 2SG construction is of a more limited nature, including the speaker but not the addressee, who is an outsider. It applies to a specific context in the past, and here it is of particular relevance that the speaker herself has experienced this state.

Conclusion

The goal of this article is to demonstrate how the 3PL and 2SG constructions are used in impersonal constructions in two dialects of Mazandarani; Sari and Ziyarat.

In most of the sentences with 3PL construction, the verbs are transitive, but also intransitive verbs appear. Sometimes 3PL impersonal constructions are in the past tense, where there is a separation in time from the moment of speech, but some examples are in the present tense, which means that there is no time separation. In most examples, the addressee is excluded, but this is mainly due to the situation in which the corpus was gathered. The addressee is not from the village, and is therefore not part of the cultural setting of these ethnographic texts. In ex. 11, the addressee could be part of the referential framework. The speaker, on the other hand, is normally part of the referential framework of the 3PL constructions, contrary to Siewierska's conclusions (Siewierska 2008: 23). In some of the examples, however, it is obvious that the speaker wants to create a mental distance between himself /herself and the verbal action (ex. 1, 3). The construction is also used when talking about a taboo, perhaps to avoid the embarrassment of having to identify with the verbal action (ex. 2, 5). In other examples, the 3PL construction lends more generality, and

therefore more importance, to the verbal action (ex. 6–10). Ex. 4 stands out as definitely excluding both the speaker and the addressee from the group of potential agents (see also ex. 19).

The 2SG construction is used both in a similar way to the 3PL construction to talk about customs in the specific village context in the past (ex. 15, 18, 19, 23) or in the present (ex. 16, 17, 22), thus excluding the addressee from the referential framework in this specific context, but probably not in all contexts. This construction is also used to include both the speaker and the addressee as potential agents (ex. 13, 14, 20, 21). Thus, Kitagawa and Lehrer's (1990: 740, quoting Huddleston 1984: 288) argument that "the 2nd person refers to the addressee or a group including at least one addressee but not the speaker/writer" does not apply to impersonal constructions.

It is thus clear that the 3PL construction is less inclusive than the 2SG. If the speaker wants to mark an exclusive interpretation (-speaker, -addressee) the only possible construction is the 3PL, and if the speaker wants to focus on the inclusive interpretation (+speaker, +addressee) the only possible construction is 2SG, but there is also a grey zone where both constructions are possible. This conclusion is very similar to the conclusion drawn by Jahani for the related language Balochi, and makes it clear that adequate descriptions of impersonal constructions in a number of languages are indeed needed to refine the general linguistic analysis of these constructions from a typological perspective.

Abbreviations:

-	separates a morpheme
=	separates a clitic
1	first person
2	second person
3	third person
ACC	accusative
CLM	clause linkage marker
COP	copula
DEM	demonstrative
DAT	dative
DEF	definite
EMPH	emphatic particle
EZ	ezāfe
IND	indefinite
IMP	imperfect
NEG	negative
NP	proper noun
PC	personal clitic
PL	plural
PP	past participle
PREV	preverb
PRS	present
PST	past
SG	singular

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