

Impersonal Constructions

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Impersonal Constructions – A Brief Introduction

This thematic issue is devoted to impersonal constructions across a number of languages. It consists of four contributions:

- (1) Åke Viberg: *Swedish Impersonal Constructions from a Crosslinguistic Perspective. An Exploratory Corpus-based Study*
- (2) Serge Axenov: *Argument Structure and Impersonality in Avar*
- (3) Carina Jahani, Serge Axenov, Behrooz Barjasteh Delforooz, and Maryam Nourzaei: *Impersonal Constructions in Balochi*
- (4) Guiti Shokri: *Impersonal Constructions in Mazandarani*

The articles are the result of a number of joint seminars at the Department of Linguistics and Philology in Uppsala between the research units of Linguistics, Iranian languages, and Turkic languages with the aim of making crosslinguistic comparisons based on the great variety of languages that are studied at the department. The general aim of the seminars has been to make detailed corpus-based studies from the perspective of functional typology and corpus-based contrastive analysis. In addition to impersonal constructions, verbal semantic fields such as mental verbs and verbs of verbal communication have been discussed at the seminars.

The term ‘impersonal’ has been interpreted in several different ways. In a recent survey, Siewierska (2008) makes a distinction between a subject-centred approach based on formal grammatical criteria and an agent-centred approach based on functional criteria related to agent defocusing of various types. Among formal criteria, deviations in person agreement has played a prominent role, as has non-canonical case marking (e.g. dative subjects instead of subjects in nominative or ergative case, depending on the language type). With respect to functional criteria, it is possible to make a distinction between agentive and referential impersonality. Agentive impersonality refers to the cases where an agent is completely missing, as in clauses with weather verbs (*It is snowing*) or where the agentivity of the subject is low. Referential impersonality refers to the cases where the reference of the subject is general (‘generic’) (e.g. *You can see the lake from the balcony*), or vague (e.g. *They have changed the timetable again*), where the referent is identifiable but the speaker does not know the exact identity of the referent or regards it as irrelevant.

The article by *Viberg* serves as a general introduction to various approaches to impersonal constructions and demonstrates how these can be applied to the study of Swedish from a crosslinguistic perspective. In a corpus-based contrastive study, Swedish is compared to a number of languages which genetically and/or areally are rather closely related to Swedish: German, English, French, and Finnish. The analysis is carried out in two steps. The first step follows a subject-centred approach and is based on formal criteria. All occurrences of the third person neuter pronoun *det* ‘it’ without clear reference and of the pronoun ‘*man*’ ‘one’ have been coded as imper-

sonal. In the second step, these examples are analysed from a functional perspective primarily based on the distinction between agentive and referential agentivity. Basically, *man* appears as an impersonal subject with general ('all of mankind') or vague reference, whereas *det* appears as a formal subject (or placeholder) in agentless sentences or sentences with low agentivity. The role of information structure is also taken into consideration by including presentatives and clefts. Finnish in several cases turns out to use impersonal constructions belonging to a different type than Swedish, but despite a general structural congruence in most cases between the other languages and Swedish, there are important usage-based differences even when congruent structures are available.

The next contribution, by *Axenov*, deals with Avar, a language that is of a radically different type from the European languages discussed in the previous article. Avar is a Northeast Caucasian language with ergative structure. Its most striking feature is the lability of the verb. Most verbs can be used both transitively and intransitively without any morphological marker on the verb. *Axenov* presents a brief sketch of referential and agentive impersonal constructions against the background of argument structure in general.

The two subsequent articles focus on impersonal constructions with low referentiality. *Jahani et al.* look at referential impersonals in Balochi, an Iranian language. The study is based on four subcorpora which represent several spoken and one written genre. Three main constructions with a non-specific human agent were found: 3PL and 2SG with an active verb, and one construction with a passive verb. In oral narratives, 3PL was used with vague reference excluding speaker and hearer, whereas 2SG was used with general ('generic') reference. In written narrative texts, the passive, which is rather rare in oral texts, was the preferred strategy to refer to a vague human agent. The corpus also included oral procedural texts (dealing, e.g., with weaving, cooking, or farming). In these texts, 2SG and 3PL were used interchangeably allowing the 3PL construction to include speaker and hearer, which is unexpected for this type of construction which crosslinguistically tends to be referentially more restricted than the 2SG. In addition to the three main constructions, the verb in 3SG could also be used with vague reference. This was used only in narrative texts in one of the subcorpora and was restricted to the verb 'say' used in the third person singular present tense, but it played a rather central role in these texts as a marker that the narrator did not have first-hand information.

Shokri deals with referential impersonals in Mazandarani, an Iranian language spoken in northern Iran. The study is based on oral narratives, stories, and ethnographic texts. This makes it possible to present a number of situated examples with rich contextual information. In narrations about village life past and present, speakers often start out in the first person when speaking about their private life but switch to third person plural when they speak about their culture and customs. The third person plural can also be used to speak about topics that are taboo. Similar to what has generally been found, the 3PL must be used if the speaker wants to exclude the speaker and hearer from reference, and the 2SG must be used if the speaker wants to focus on the inclusion of speaker and hearer, but there is also a grey zone in the middle where both constructions are possible.

The studies in this thematic issue comprise an example of the corpus-based approach to language comparison that has characterized the joint seminars mentioned above. Corpus-based studies make it possible not only to compare usage patterns across languages even when they basically use congruent structures to express a certain function, but also to compare contrasting ways to realize a function across different genres within a language.

Reference

Siewierska, Anna. 2008. Introduction: Impersonalization from a subject-centred vs. agent-centred perspective. *Transactions of the Philological Society*. Vol. 106:2, 115–137.