

Transitivity and impersonals:

Case, transitivity and argument structure

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Syntactic relations, subject/object, are assumed to be a priori by either generative or non-generative approaches. Hence, OE impersonals like (1) are analyzed to be deviant from the norm in that it lacks nominative subject NPs:

(1) him hingrode 'to him hungered= he felt hungry' (ÆCHom 1.166)

The derivation of passives is analyzed to involve functional changes of those relations even if there is no direct derivational relation involved (Chomsky 2005). I claim that there is no such syntactic operation involved. In OE, if the meaning of the predicate does not require an agent, which should be realised as a nominative NP, the clause structure lacks the nominative argument. This is called impersonal constructions.

How is this possible in OE? It is because OE is lexical-thematic, which means that a given language deploys only lexical categories (N, V, A, and P), and their phrasal projections, (NP, VP, AP, and PP), and there were no functional categories such as DP and TP, which could assign case. Only arguments which are required by the meaning of the predicate verb have to be syntactically realised. This means that if an argument which should carry the agentive theta role is not required, that is, there is no agent/actor in the described event, the subject which should appear in the nominative case need not be realised. This is called subject-less constructions. A subject is not necessarily a priori. The requirement that all clauses should have a subject is a later development, due to the emergent TP, or due to the EPP-feature (cf. Chomsky 1995). Under this semantic-based case system, it is not easy for an NP with a Recipient semantic role to carry nominative case. This is why indirect passives like (2) were not allowed and impersonal passives like (3) were used instead, in OE.

(2) He was given presents.

(3) ac him næs getiðod ðære lytlan lisse
But him. DAT not-was granted that small favour.GEN

'But he was not granted that small favour' (ÆCHom. I.23.330.29.)

In short, the passives and impersonals are a construction in which there is no argument position for Agent projected in the structure, i.e. subject. Then, subject-less construction is the norm for passives/impersonals. This will follow automatically if a given language is lexical-thematic. Rather, subject is not required automatically in such a lexical-thematic language. Impersonal/passive constructions are constituted only by arguments which are required by the meaning of the predicate. As a result, subject-less constructions could be used depending on the predicate.

The speaker can choose the syntactic structure which is the most appropriate form to express what he/she wants to convey. If he/she wants to describe the situation from a viewpoint of Patient, he/she selects the passives which have no argument position for agents. Both impersonals and passives are normally constructed in structure such as (4) without any syntactic operations; there is no deviance involved in them.

Hence, I claim the following clause structure for Old English as one possibility:

(4) Old English clause structure [VP Spec [V[V] [NP]]] VP domain only

OE is a lexical-thematic language in which there was one-to-one correspondence between semantics and syntax to some extent. OE had no functional categories. They had only lexical categories like N, V, or A. There is no subject requirement since there is no TP, and hence no EPP-feature. However, the change came. This correspondence began to collapse. Morphology was not enough to convey the intended meaning of a speaker anymore.

In the ME period, we saw the appearance of new constructions such as prepositional passives and indirect passives, which were not attested in OE. The expletive *it* was inserted in the impersonal sentences as subject. This means that the impersonal constructions in the true sense of the word began to disappear. How were these new constructions made possible? Why did the impersonal constructions disappear? What made these constructions possible was the change of a case system; because of the demise of case morphology, most of case-marking was lost and case morphology could not convey the semantic roles of NP arguments. Case morphology, i.e. case endings on verb forms, such as nominative, dative, accusative and genitive marking, could express or imply what semantic role a given NP had. In other words, those case forms could prevent the NP from carrying an unconnected semantic role. However, case morphology deteriorated.

Cases are now assigned syntactically by functional categories; this means that cases can be assigned to thematically unrelated NPs by functional categories. Cases of arguments are separated from their thematic roles and are assigned syntactically by case assigning categories such as T, which has emerged in English. Case can be assigned structurally to a thematically unrelated NP. For example, nominative can be assigned to the subject NP, whatever its thematic role is; Agent, Patient, Experiencer or Theme.

The clause structure of PDE is shown below:

(5) [_{TP} Spec [_T [_T][_{VP} [Spec *v*· [V] [DP]]]]]

Nominative case is always given by a functional T structurally. In PDE, nominative case is always assigned to the external argument by a functional T. A non-thematic subject position is made available. PDE may have non-thematic constituents due to the presence of functional categories such as T. The emergent TP requires the presence of a subject position, i.e. the Specifier of TP, which must always be filled due to the EPP-feature. Then, nominal elements with person/number properties are inserted by Merge. The insertion of expletive *it* is required if there is nothing to occupy the position. Impersonals without nominative NPs, including impersonal passives, are not allowed any more.

Thus, the presence of functional categories has changed the principle of the clause structure formation radically. We have seen that the lexical-thematic system of OE deteriorated and a new case system, i.e. structure-based case system, appeared instead. A correlation between verbs and the morphological case of the arguments which the verbs took deteriorated. Consequently, cases were separated from theta roles. Thanks to this separation, a non-thematic subject position was made available. Syntactic passives were made possible against such a background. That is the reason prepositional passives were made possible.

With the above changes in mind, we turn to the final question of why in PDE there are so many transitive verbs, which lack transitive features. Transitive constructions are definitely the most productive construction in PDE. The interesting thing about PDE is that there are some examples in which no transitive features are observed:

(6) He resembles his father.

(7) This theatre holds 1000 people.

They are formally, i.e., syntactically a transitive but, semantically no transitive features involved. The two sentences are distant from the typical transitive sentence. Nevertheless, they are still syntactically classified as transitive constructions. This proliferation of transitive constructions with no or less transitive features was made possible because cases of arguments are separated from their thematic roles and are assigned syntactically by case assigning categories such as T. In other words, transitivization is a process in which an NP argument with any semantic role can occur as a subject or object. In OE, there were correlations between morphological cases, thematic roles of arguments, and transitivity of predicate verbs. These correlations are no longer observed in PDE. Thanks to this case-system change an NP argument with any semantic role can occur as a subject or object. Therefore, what contributed most to this large-scale transitivization is the change in the principle of constructing an argument structure or rather a clause structure from lexical-thematic to syntax-motivated system. English changed from a lexical-oriented language to a grammatically-oriented one (cf. Gelderen 2004: 252). Transitivisation is an instantiation of grammaticalization in terms of functional category emergence (Osawa 2003, 2010).

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