

# Variant Readings and the Study of Impersonal Constructions in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

A study of impersonal constructions, whether it is intended as diachronic or synchronic one, inevitably involves consideration of fluctuations between impersonal and personal constructions. This paper surveys these fluctuations by comparing manuscript variations in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*.

## 1. Introduction

A number of studies have been done on "quasi-impersonal expressions, which may take (1) a dative or an accusative of person and/or may occur (2) with a noun clause or an (inflected) infinitive" (Michiko Ogura, 1986, p.16). The seminal work by van der Gaaf is titled *The Transition from the Impersonal to the Personal Construction in Middle English*, which indicates a gradual disuse of the impersonal construction along with the increasing use and later establishment of the personal construction in English (I will not discuss whether or not this phenomenon is personalization of the impersonal construction as van der Gaaf does). Before the dominant use and establishment of the personal construction, there was a certain period, though some scholars claim it to be a very long period, when these two constructions were employed side by side and at rivalry.

As for Chaucer, the impersonal use was predominant as is shown by the ratio of impersonal to personal constructions, 369:72 in the *Canterbury Tales* (henceforth *CT*) and 206:39 in *Troilus and Criseyde* (henceforth *TC*)<sup>2</sup>. Though this ratio shows the predominance of the impersonal construction in Chaucer's language, it is less clear as to how dominant the impersonal construction was in Chaucer's works.

So far the relation and variation of the impersonal and the personal constructions have been apt to be seen from diachronic point of view. This results from the nature of data. The data of the impersonal construction showing such variation mainly come from those covering a period of ages not in an age, which means that the relation between the twin constructions in an age has been considered only in a static way. Such a state may be rectified by another, though indirect, means gained by clues existing intra-text. This is what Barry A. Windeatt did in his paper "The Scribes as Chaucer's Early Critics" (1979). He claims that "The mss provide very widespread evidence for verbal substitution by the scribes, substitutions which reflect their sense of the difficulty and unusualness of the diction in their exemplar" (1979, p. 125). Though we cannot be too careful in interpreting such scribal rewritings as whether or not they are mere mechanical error, these variants provide us an interesting glimpse to some of the uses of the language from a poet's "near-contemporaries." Windeatt also points out that "the mss frequently differ ... over dative verb constructions", with footnote saying "For 'And wold of that hym missed han ben sessed' (III, 445) 10 mss read the easier *he missed*." (1979, p.140).

The present study will examine the variant readings seen in various manuscripts of impersonal verbs, especially whether or not the personal and impersonal constructions differed, and how easily the impersonal construction could be interchanged to its alternative constructions.

## 2. Possibility of variation

Before discussing the variation between the impersonal and personal constructions, the synonymy of these two constructions should be confirmed, without which interchangeability between them is impossible.

Noriko A. McCawley(1976) and Ralph W. V. Elliot(1974) claim the sense difference of the two uses. Elliot compares the impersonal with the personal examples of the verb 'longen' saying that:

the latter denotes straightforward desire, but the former, by making the desire ... the implied subject of the sentence and making the 'real' subject ... the object, connotes an element of helplessness, passive surrender to physical or psychological urges ... (1974, p. 52)

But their argument is less than persuasive because of so few examples.

Now consider a dialogue in *CT* containing the impersonal and the personal constructions:

- (1) "Madame," quod he, "how *thynke ye* herby?" / "How that *me thynketh*?" quod she ... (CT III.2204-5).

In (1) the addressee is repeating the question of the addresser with the two constructions interchanged without any difference in meaning. Consider also the following examples:

- (2) Poverte a spectacle is, *as thynketh me*, / Thurgh which he may his verray freendes see. (CT III.1203-4)
- (3) Thanne is it wysdom, *as it thynketh me*, / To maken vertu of necessitee, (CT I.3041-2)
- (4) ... by cause that they been married, al is good ynough, *as thynketh to hem*. (CT X.905)
- (5) ... ay yet *me list* nat pleye, (TC V.987)
- (6) But though that *I* now telle it the ne *lest*, (TC I.580)

Here the parenthetic expressions with syntactic variation in animate experiencer in (2), (3) and (4) convey the same meaning. Furthermore, (5) and (6) are synonymous and very similar in syntactic condition since both have an infinitival complement and are negative.

Despite what Elliot and McCawley claim, it is safe to say, for the present purpose of surveying the interchangeability of the impersonal and its relevant constructions, that these examples combine to suggest that in Chaucer the impersonal and the personal constructions seem to have been synonymous and interchangeable, which is prerequisite for the variation.

## 3. Variations

Before discussing the variation, the classification of the impersonal and its related constructions should be made. The model employed here is that of van der Gaaf with subclassifications that I have recognized. He classifies "type A" where "The verb governs a dative or an accusative, as *methinks*"; "type B" where "the noun or pronoun connected with the verb may, as far as external evidence goes, be taken either for a nominative or for an objective"; "type C" where "The verb governs a prepositional dative, as *it seems to me*"; "type D" where "The original dative or accusative has become a nominative with the verb for its predicates, as, he did just as *he pleased*"(1904, p.40). However, further classification is necessary for the constructions with *it* as subject. My subclassifications add type A cum *it* and type C cum *it*<sup>3</sup>.

The variations in our corpus are mainly found in the case form of animate experiencer.

It is noteworthy that our corpus has few examples which show the variation in the word order of "dative" pronouns and verbs. This indicates the firmness of the order: the "dative" pronoun is followed

by a verb (cf. Tani, 1995a).

In this paper, only the more important variations will be touched upon.

### 3.1. Variant readings that show variation from type A to type D, and vice versa

The variation that is most relevant to the question of the so-called “transition” of impersonal to personal construction is, indeed, this, i.e. the variation from type A to D. The variant readings in this class in our corpus predict the standard usage in later periods; among variant readings, this kind of variation far outnumbers other kinds: 114 examples out of 155 variant readings of all kinds (cf. Table 1).

The simplest variation from type A to type D involves the mere change of objective to nominative. Such variation seems to have been easy on the part of scribes because the meter is not broken by the change of the case form of animate experiencer which was normally not put in rime. In our corpus, moreover, no variant reading as to animate experiencer was found in the examples with “dative” pronoun in rime. If the variation would mar the verse, no variation occurred; the scribes were very conscious of the versification (this also supports using variants as evidence of the fluctuation in language).

Now consider the following examples:

- (7) *The sholde nevere han tid thus fayr a grace. (TC I.907)*  
     7ou sholde nevere han tid ... (DgS2Cx)
- (8) *And as she slep, anonright tho hire mette / How that ... (TC II.925–926)*  
     ... she mette ... (ADGgH4H5RS2)
- (9) *nohyng to slepe hym leste. (TC IV.1106)*  
     nohyng (to) slepe he leste. (H4R)

In contrast to the above examples which are unclear as to the verb inflection, there are some examples whose verbs are clearly marked as the 3rd person singular:

- (10) *How liketh yow the lettre that ye woot? (TC II.1196)*  
     How like ye ... (H2Ph)
- (11) *I woot yow thynketh straunge ... (TC V.120)*  
     ... ye think hit straunge ... (RCx)  
     ... ye thynketh straunge ... (DH3H4)
- (12) *syn that the thynketh so light / To changen so in love ay to and fro,*  
     ... 7ou thynketh ... (AH4PhR)(TC IV.484–5)  
     ... ye thynketh ... (H3Cx)

The change in case form from objective to nominative in such examples should necessarily involve the deletion of the 3rd person singular ending “-(e)th”<sup>4</sup>. Otherwise ungrammatical forms like “ye thynketh” seen in (12) are produced. In such examples, the change both in case form and verb ending is a rather conscious one, and occurs even though that change results in breaking the meter through the deletion of a syllable as in the variant reading in (10). Examples of this change are fewer than half of those with unclear verb endings. Of 257 examples of type A in our corpus, 65 examples are clear in thier verb endings while 192 others are unclear. Of 65 examples with clear verb endings, 24 examples (36.9%) show the change from type A to type D. On the other hand, of 195 examples with unclear verb endings, 121 examples (63%) have variant readings showing the change from type A to type D.

While many variants show the change from type A to type D, only 3 examples show the change from type D to type A in our corpus (see Table 1):

- (13) *He mette he saugh a bor with tuskes grete, (TC V.1238)*  
     Him mette ... (H2H3H4J)

In summary, though the impersonal construction or type A outnumbers the personal or type D on the surface of the text of Chaucer, what variants tell us is utterly different: the undeniable tendency toward using type D.

### 3.2. Variation concerning *it*-type

As mentioned in my paper(1995b), types containing *it* are quite different from other types. This is especially true of type A cum *it* without real object which is intended to be a stylistic device which allows our poet to put some element in rime and at the same time fulfill the need of his meter<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, the variations involving *it*-types, regardless of direction, are rare. Consider the variation of type A cum *it* to type A:

- (14) ... the more *it me deliteth*. (TC III.1652)  
the more me deliteth. (GgCx)

In this example, *it* works as mere grammatical filler; its deletion has little effect on the meaning, but it collapses the meter.

Consider the variation of type A to type A cum *it*:

- (15) And if *yow liketh* knowen of the fare / Of me, ... (TC V.1366-7)  
... it like you to knowe ... (H3)  
(16) And, if that *yow remembre*, I am Calkas, (TC IV.73)  
... if it yow remembre, ... (H4)

Example (15) is interesting in the addition of *it* and especially in the change of the word order to that of type A cum *it*.

### 3.3. Variation concerning type C

If the object of the prepositional dative is a pronoun, the deletion of the preposition gives rise to type A, but the variation in this direction is rare (see Table 1). The examples showing the variation from type C to type A are:

- (17) When every torment and adversite / ... may *to me* savory *thinke*, (TC I.404-5)  
... every torment and adversity ... may me so savory thinke (F7)  
... every torment and adversity ... may me so goodly thinke (CIH4W)  
(18) This counseil *liked wel to Troilus*, (TC II.1044)  
This counseil liked wel Troilus, (H5JCx)  
(19) Nought *nedeth it to yow* ... / To axe at me ... (TC III.1680-1)  
Nought nedeth it yow ... (Cp)

The examples showing the variation from type A to type C are:

- (20) *Liketh yow* to witen, swete herte, (TC V.1324)  
Lyke hyt to you myn owne swete herte, (R)  
(21) But myght *me* so faire a grace *falle*, (TC II.925)  
... to me ... befalle (S1)

As for the variation from type A cum *it* and type B cum *it* to type C cum *it*, the examples are found only with the verb "sit" (=be fitting):

- (22) *It sattu me* wel bet ay in a cave / To bidde ... (TC II.117-8)  
It sattu to me ... (R)  
(23) For wel *sit it* ... / *A woful wight* to han a dreary feer, / And to a sorwful tale, a sory chere. (TC I.12)  
... sit it ... Vnto a woful wight ... (H2H4H5PhW)

... sit it ... vnto a sorwful tale ... (W)

So this variation may be considered as specific to the verb "sit."

#### 4. Conclusion.

Most of the variant readings in our corpus are not deviant from what was possible in the language. It follows that they can be a witness to what was to be going on in the language, though the scribes were not actually contemporary to Chaucer, but near-contemporary.

In the language of Chaucer, the synonymity between the impersonal and the personal constructions has already been established. As far as the data gained from the text of *TC* is concerned, however, the impersonal constructions exceed all the other constructions in productivity.

Variant readings, however, show a hidden force working on the impersonal construction. In spite of the many possible variations, almost all the changes found in our corpus are restricted to the variants showing the change from type A to type D. As the variant readings in individual manuscripts of *TC* concerning the impersonal construction are not so many, varying from 5 to 50 examples, I do not deny the dominance of the impersonal use in Chaucer's language. Rather I suggest that the seeds of change for the increasing use of the personal construction had already been sown and were beginning to sprout under the static surface of the dominance of the impersonal use. In addition, such cumulative tendency indicates the later dynamic movement toward the use of the personal construction or type D. We have seen that variant readings show what is very near later language usage.

#### Notes

- 1) This is a revised version of a paper originally delivered at the 25th meeting of the Association for the Study of Humanities held at Sonoda Women's University on April 22nd, 1995.

All the quotations are from the *Riverside* edition (1988), and all the variant readings are taken from Windeatt's edition (1984). All the emphases in the quotations from Chaucer are mine, and do not exist. The abbreviations for the manuscripts are those adopted by Windeatt (1984, p. 68-76).

Throughout this paper, I was obliged to use "7" and "3" respectively for letters called "thorn" and "yogh" for the printer's sake.

- 2) The Middle English verb "thinken" is excluded from consideration which merged two separate Old English impersonal and personal verbs. As for the predominance of impersonal constructions in Chaucer, see Willy Elmer (1981, p.151).
- 3) In this paper, the terms type A and type C are used in narrower and wider senses: if used in contrast with type A cum *it* and type C cum *it*, these terms denote the constructions without *it*; if not so, these terms include *it*-types.
- 4) This, indeed, does not apply to 3rd singular animate experiencers like "he" and "she". There is 5 such examples in our corpus like:

Wher *hym was wo* (*TC* IV.1162)

he ... (AH4PhCx)

- 5) See my paper "On the "Quasi-Impersonal" Constructions in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*" (1995b).

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**Table 1.** Number of variants of the impersonal and its related constructions

		Type A		Type B	Type C				Type D
		n	i		CP		CN		
					n	i	n	i	
Type A	n	5	2	4	3				3
	i	5	1			1			
Type B							3		
Type C	CP	n	2		1				
		i		1					
	CN	n						1	
		i			1				
Type D		114							
Refl		2		1					1
Pass			1						
0		5							
it0		2							

\* The abbreviations in the above table stand for the following:

“i” = *it*-type, “n” = non-*it*-type, “CP” = type C with pronoun as the object of prepositional dative, “CN” = type C with nouns as the object of prepositional dative, “Refl” = reflexive construction, “Pass” = passive, “0” = sentence with impersonally usable verb which lacks animate experiencer, and “it0” = *it*-type without animate experiencer.