

A Quantitative Study of Word Order of "Quasi-Impersonal" Constructions in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*

— with Special Reference to the order of "dative" pronoun and verb —

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in forme of spech is chaunge
Withinne a thousand yeer, and wordes tho
That hadden pris, now wonder nyce and straunge
Us thinketh hem,

— Geoffrey Chaucer —

Abstract

Recent studies on the impersonal construction have been slanted toward theoretical bases¹, yet there is still a need for more concrete research, especially into the word order of impersonals. This paper seeks to fill that need by making a quantitative description of the word order of "quasi-impersonal" constructions in *Troilus and Criseyde* (henceforth *TC*) written by Geoffrey Chaucer in the late 14th century².

1. Introduction

The transition of impersonal to personal constructions is comprehensively discussed by the seminal work of W. van der Gaaf(1904). He gives several causes for it. He cites one of the most important among them as the loss of case endings and the supplementary fixation of word order in the course of the history of English(1904, pp.2-3). Regrettably, as Toshio Nakao notes, "... there are no systematic studies on the word order of impersonal constructions, which give us a very important clue to the explication of the transition of impersonal to personal construction."(Translation mine)(1972, p.300). This paper aims at making a statistic approach to word order of the quasi-impersonals in *TC*.

The quasi-impersonal constructions under discussion here are only those with objective pronoun, or what van der Gaaf calls "type A"³. Furthermore, the impersonal constructions consisting of "ben" and an adjective and those with nexus as inanimate objects are excluded from this study to gain a clearer result.

The verbs treated in this study are as follows: 'ailen,' 'athinken,' 'availen,' 'bihoven,' 'deliten,' 'fallen,' 'forthinken,' 'gainen,' 'greven,' 'lakken,' 'listen,' 'longen,' 'meten,' 'neden,' 'ouen,' 'remembren,' 'rewen,' 'semen,' 'sitten,' 'smerten,' 'suffisen,' 'thar,' 'thinken,' 'tjden.'

The word order of quasi-impersonals will be probed by classifying them into: 1) one-place and two-place predicates and 2) those in independent and dependent clauses. As for dependent clauses, a further classification will be made on their function into nominal, adjectival, and adverbial clauses. Also, the two-place predicates with "it" as grammatical subject(i.e. *it*-type) should be separately treated from those

without “*it*” (i.e. non-*it*-type) because these examples show a different word order pattern.

2. Word order of one-place predicates

The examples of one-place impersonals total 70; of those, the number in independent clauses amounts to four, while those in dependent clauses amount to 66. The word order both in independent and dependent clauses is shown in Table 1.

As is evident from Table 1, the common order both in independent and dependent clauses is D-V, which accounts for 91.4%⁴. This predominance comes from the great number of examples in dependent adverbial clauses in which the word order is less free. In addition, of these 60 examples of adverbial clauses, 33 examples (more than the half!) form what Masui calls “rime clause” (1964, pp. 180–90) in which the verb is invariably placed in rime: “If the like, The beste is that thow telle me al thi wo;” (:syke) (TC 1.829–30); “Whi, frend,” quod he, “now do right as the leste.” (:beste) (TC 1.1029). And in five more examples, their impersonal verbs occur in rime without forming rime clauses: “But whoso axed hym wherof hym smerte,” (:herte) (TC 5.1224).

As for the uncommon order V-D in independent clause, the sentence begins with an adverb: “Now foule falle hire for thi wo that care!” (TC 4.462). This also seems to be a stereotyped expression (cf. Norman Davis et al., 1979, p. 53: *falle*n).

The five examples of the uncommon order V-D in dependent clauses occur in the form, with “as” and “thinken,” of parenthetical adverbial clause: “Hire herte slough, as thoughte hym, for destresse.” (TC 4.364) (Of course, there are two examples of this type of clause in D-V order (cf. TC 3.263 and 4.1675)).

3. Word order of two-place predicates

3.1. Non-*it* examples in independent clause

The common order except for non-*it*-type is D-V-O: “And yet m’athenketh that this avant m’aster-te!” (TC 1.1050); “But hym byhoveth somtyme han a payne That serveth Love, if that he wol have joye.” (TC 4.1305).

As for the 12 examples of V-D-O order, six examples occur in interrogative sentences: “How liketh yow the lettre that ye woot?” (TC 2.1196). The corresponding order V-S-O is the norm for the interrogative sentence in non-impersonal sentences in Middle English. One sentence is led by an adverbial phrase: “For with ful yvel wille list hym to leve That loveth wel, in swich cas, though greve.” (TC 5.1637–8).

As for the six examples of O-D-V order, three examples have their verbs in rime: “Do what yow liste” (:wiste) (TC 2.1183). In two other examples, the inanimate object is topicalized: “Th’eschaunge of prisoners and al this nede Hem liketh wel,” (TC 4.146–7).

Among the six examples of O-V-D order, five examples have their “dative” pronoun in rime: “For thi purpos this may liken the, And the right nought;” (:thre) (TC 2.45–6). Two examples of these five examples are interrogative sentences led by *wh*-word: “What aileth yow to be thus wery soone,” (TC 2.211).

As regards the one example of D-O-V order, it is really led by an auxiliary verb with the verb in rime: “But myghte me so faire a grace falle,” (:alle & :calle) (TC 5.172).

3.2. Non-*it* examples in dependent clause

The common order in this type is D-O-V: “Right as the semeth best is for to done.” (TC 5.301); “For which hym thoughte he felte his herte blede;” (TC 1.502). However, this order accounts for just 47.4%, which seems apparently low. This comes from the rather frequent occurrence of the examples of O-D-V order. Now let’s look at them.

As for the uncommon order O-D-V which accounts for 36.8% in this type, except for one example with to-infinitive as inanimate object, all other examples have noun, pronoun or relative pronoun as object. The examples with noun or pronoun as object total nine (two examples occur in nominal clauses and seven examples in adverbial clauses), while those with relative pronouns amount to 18 (six examples occur in adjectival clauses while 12 examples in noun clauses); "...swich penaunce As liketh the, ..." (TC 2.529-30) Of the latter, ten examples have their verb in rime, among which six nominal clauses form rime clause with 'listen': "He wolde lat hem graunte what hem leste," (:beste) (TC 4.171). The O-D-V order with relative pronouns as inanimate objects just corresponds to O-S-V order in non-impersonal sentences.

Among four examples of O-V-D order, three examples in adjectival clauses have relative pronouns as their inanimate objects. Of these, two examples have their "dative" pronoun in rime: "If I dide aught that myghten liken the, It is me lief;" (:me) (TC 5.1737-8).

As for the three examples of V-D-O order, two examples are concessive clauses led by "al" in which the inversion is the rule in non-impersonal sentences. So this order is considered to be the inversion of the common order D-V-O of impersonal sentences. The example is as follows: "...thow beset were on swich oon that sholde Know al this wo, al lakked hir pitee" (TC 1.521-2). One more example is inverted by an adverb, which more often than not causes inversion in Middle English: "And after that hir lokyng gan she lighte, That nevere thoughte hym seen so good a syghte." (TC 1.293-4).

3.3. *It*-type

Unlike the order of non-*it*-types, the common order of *it*-type is *it*-V-D(-O): "It sit hire naught to ben celestial As yet, ..." (TC 1.984-5). The examples with real object reveal the natural order. On the other hand, those without real object in dependent clauses seem to be a device to put the "dative" object in rime (all the examples are so): "But now or nevere, if that it like yow, I may hire have right soone, douteles." (:now) (TC 4.101-2). Even the examples of the order *it*-D-V, three out of four examples have the verb in rime, which is considered to be due to the requirement of meter: "...the more it me deliteth." (:biteth) (TC 3.1652).

It-type impersonals without real object seem to have been employed for meter or rime by Chaucer⁵.

3.4. Summary of the order of two-place impersonals

Though the percentage of the uncommon orders is apparently high, this seems to come from grammatical requirements and from deliberate change of word order. One of the causes is the consideration for rime; among 60 examples of the uncommon orders, the examples with the verb or "dative" pronoun in rime amount to 25 (41.7%) ("dative" pronoun: 7 examples; verb: 18 examples). Chaucer also took advantage of the form of the inanimate object; among 65 examples of uncommon orders, 39 examples (60% of uncommon orders) have (relative) pronouns or nouns as inanimate objects (incidentally, these 21 examples have the verb or "dative" pronoun in rime).

But in the case of the uncommon orders in dependent clauses, the cause is due to the frequent occurrence of nominal and adjectival relative clauses in which a relative pronoun serves as the inanimate object. This is, of course, grammatical requirement.

4. Relative order of the "dative" pronoun and the verb

The relative order of the "dative" pronoun and the verb is shown in Table 4. From the table, D-V is predominant in non-*it*-type (85%), while in *it*-type V-D is normal. Totally, D-V order accounts for 79.9%.

5. Conclusion

While in one-place impersonals the common order is D-V, in two-place impersonals D-V-O order is the common one. However, this is less clear for the high percentage of the occurrences of the uncommon orders, which are due to the frequent occurrence of examples with relative pronouns as inanimate objects and the deliberate use of language by Chaucer who took advantage of the form of the inanimate object. Moreover, it is important to note the subject-like behavior of "dative" pronouns, for example, in concessive sentences led by "al" and in sentences with relative pronouns as inanimate objects.

The order of the "dative" pronoun and the verb is predominantly D-V, which represents 79.9% in the present corpus. This figure is very close to the data gained by Andrew MacLeish who investigated the order of subject and verb; that is, the S-V order in Book V of *TC* represents 79.6% (1969, p. 159). This correspondence in ratio of D-V and S-V order reveals that "dative" pronoun in impersonal constructions occupied the same position as the subject of normal non-impersonal sentences in *TC*⁶.

In conclusion, the impersonal construction in *TC* shows that it had set in itself a bud for change. The present result quantitatively confirms van der Gaaf's statement (1904, p. 3) that:

"If we remember that in Middle English the order of words gradually became fixed, so that in late M.E. we generally find the verb after the subject, and consider this fact in connection with the circumstance that very often the complement of the so-called impersonal verb retained this place before the verb, we see that this endless objective might easily be taken for a nominative."

Notes

- 1) For the summary of recent studies on impersonals, see David Denison (1993, pp. 61-102).
- 2) All the quotations from Chaucer are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer* ed. by L.D. Benson, 3rd ed. (O.U.P., 1988). Throughout this paper, references follow the style that is suggested by the editors of the *Bulletin of Mukogawa Women's University*.
- 3) "Type A. The verb governs a dative or an accusative, as methinks..." (van der Gaaf, 1904, p. 40).
- 4) In the following discussion, D, O, V and S respectively stand for the "dative" pronoun, the inanimate object, the verb, and the subject of non-impersonal normal sentences.
- 5) This point may be unclear in this context. For a clearer perspective, see my paper "The Word Order of the "Quasi-Impersonals" in the *Canterbury Tales*" (forthcoming).
- 6) Though the result as to the relative position of "dative" pronoun was obtained in this study, the behavior of "dative" pronoun is still to be studied. This was impossible in the present corpus. For its clearer subject-like behavior, see my paper "The Word Order of the "Quasi-Impersonals" in the *Canterbury Tales*" (forthcoming).

Primary Source

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(Tani)

Table 1. The word order of one-place impersonals

	In Cl	Dep Cl			Total
		Adj Cl	Adv Cl		
D-V	3	1	67	68	71 (92.2%)
V-D	1	0	5	5	6 (7.8%)
	4	1	72	73	77

※'In Cl' and 'Dep Cl' stand for independent clause and dependent clause respectively.

Table 2. The word order of two-place non-*it* impersonals

	In Cl	Dep Cl				Total
		Adv	Adj	N		
D-V-O	33	24	7	6	37	70 (56.5%)
D-O-V	1	0	1	0	1	2 (1.6%)
O-D-V	6	2	6	14	22	28 (22.6%)
O-V-D	6	1	3	0	4	10 (8.1%)
V-D-O	11	3	0	0	3	14 (11.3%)
	57	30	17	20	67	124

Table 3. The word order of *it*-type

	In Cl	Dep Cl=Adv Cl	Total
<i>it</i> -D-V	2	2	4(22.2%)
<i>it</i> -V-D	1	3	4(22.2%)
<i>it</i> -V-D-O	7	3	10(55.6%)
	10	8	18

Table 4. The order of the “dative” pronoun and the impersonal verb

		In Cl	Dep Cl				Total
			Adv	Adj	N		
<i>nit</i>	D-V	43	94	18	20	132	175(85%)
	V-D	19	9	3		12	31(15%)
		62	103	21	20	144	206
<i>it</i>	D-V	2	2				4(22.2%)
	V-D	8	6				14(77.8%)
		10	8				18

※‘*nit*’ and ‘*it*’ respectively stand for non-*it* and *it*-type.