

Emergence of impersonal constructions in Ancient Greek: The role of split alignment

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Impersonal constructions are a widespread phenomenon across the languages of the world, which only recently has been studied also from a diachronic point of view (Malchukov & Siewierska 2011). Our focus is on a particular type of impersonal construction found in Ancient Greek (Cuzzolin 2006, Dahl 2014) with experiential meaning, having in its argument structure a non-Nominative-coded argument and a noun clause (e.g. οὐδενὸς εἰσῆει μοι φθονεῖν Demosth., 23.188 “I am not jealous of anything”). We investigate the path of emergence of such impersonal constructions throughout diachrony, from Homeric to Classical Greek, with the aim of showing how the split alignment (Tsunoda 1981, Cotticelli & Dahl 2022), involving neuter nouns and pronouns, promotes their formation.

The overall approach is based on the Role and Reference Grammar (Van Valin & LaPolla 1997).

We consider a sample of 16 verbs which only have a personal construction in Homeric Greek and acquire an impersonal construction later in Classical Greek: we collect every 3rd person singular occurrence of each verb in Homeric Greek (Iliad and Odyssey) and in Classical Greek (in a corpus including Herodotus, Thucydides, Plato and Aristophanes), and we classify each occurrence according to semantic and morphosyntactic criteria.

We then outline the path of loss of subject properties (Keenan 1976, Falk 2006, Seržant & Kulikov 2013, Dahl 2023) leading to the impersonal construction: when a neuter noun occurs as the first argument of a prototypical transitive construction, on the syntactic level, it instantiates a shift from accusative to neuter alignment, leading, first, to the neutralization of the morphological distinction between Nominative and Accusative, second, to the loss of agreement with the verb in the category of number; on the semantic level, the first argument loses the [+human] and the [+agentive] traits. Then, when neuter personal pronouns occur as the first argument, referentiality to an entity can be lost if the pronoun refers to an event. The construction is thus open to allow a noun clause to occur in the place of the neuter pronoun, with the complete loss of all noun category markers.

The statistic distribution of the occurrences shows that impersonal constructions of these verbs are unattested in Homeric Greek, while they increase significantly in Classical Greek. We can thus verify that there is an increase of the functional weight of impersonal constructions throughout the diachrony of Ancient Greek. Ultimately, the emergence of impersonal constructions is triggered by the instantiation of neuter alignment by neuter nouns, which opens a path of loss of subject properties.

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