On Impersonal Constructions: Implications of Celtic Verbal Inflections

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A thesis submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Linguistics in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences.

Chapel Hill
2014

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ABSTRACT

Jessica G. Slavic: On Impersonal Constructions: Implications of Breton Verbal Inflection
(Under the direction of Randall Hendrick)

Celtic languages, specifically Irish and Breton, possess a verbal inflection known as “autonomous” or “impersonal.” This thesis defines impersonalization as a phenomenon that de-emphasizes the logical subject of a verb. Common forms of impersonalization under this definition include generic pronouns, passivization, and passive with expletive subject constructions. I hold that impersonal verbal inflections should be recognized as a comparable strategy for impersonalization. I recognize the inherent similarity that impersonal verbal inflections bear to passivization in this respect, but I maintain that impersonalization is a distinct syntactic category. All forms of impersonalization should be viewed as members of one broad category possessing heterogeneous syntactic strategies, which are unique and valid methods of de-emphasizing the logical subject. I show that there can be further variation within each strategy, and I give particular attention to the variation in theta role placement in Celtic impersonal forms. This thesis aims to establish the Celtic impersonal inflections as a form of impersonalization comparable to passivization or generic pronouns, and to provide a detailed description of these verbal inflections.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank the linguistics faculty at UNC for their guidance during my Master’s work. I thank in particular Randall Hendrick, who advised my thesis, for his invaluable insight and feedback during the development of this paper. I also am grateful for David Mora-Marín and Jennifer Smith for serving on my thesis committee and for coaching me through sundry other projects. Many thanks are due to Paul Roberge for his advice and support along the way. I also thank Patrick O’Neill for helping me understand Modern Irish, and Marie Klaiber for helping me with German. I am grateful to my friends and colleagues in the linguistics department for their feedback and camaraderie.

To my mother: linguists have yet to find a word sufficient to express my thanks to you, for teaching me to love words and all things good, true, and beautiful. Inexpressible gratitude belongs to my family and friends for their support and encouragement. SDG.
3.3 Irish: no theta role in subject position ................................................................. 24

3.3.1 Questioning Stenson’s null pro theory .............................................................. 26

3.3.2 The 2 categories proposal ................................................................................. 27

3.3.3 Ambiguity regarding thematicity ................................................................... 28

3.3.4 The Irish autonomous inflection parallels the German impersonal passive ......................................................................................................................... 29

3.4 Breton: theta role in subject position ................................................................. 31

3.4.1 Null subject with theta role ............................................................................. 31

3.4.2 The impersonal inflection and German man .................................................... 33

3.5 Impersonal Unaccusatives .................................................................................. 34

3.6 Theta role distinctions ....................................................................................... 37

3.7 Diachronic development of impersonals ............................................................ 39

Chapter 4: Conclusion ............................................................................................. 40

REFERENCES .......................................................................................................... 42
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 – Irish Impersonal and German es.................................................................30

Table 2 – German and Celtic Impersonals.................................................................32
# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>first person</td>
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0. Introduction

In this thesis I offer a descriptive overview of the impersonal inflection found in the Celtic languages, Irish and Breton. I argue that the impersonal inflection is distinct from forms of passivization, and that it is a unique strategy of impersonalization. In order to situate the Celtic impersonal inflections in the broader framework of impersonalization, I propose an analysis of cross-linguistic impersonals that comprises four basic strategies for impersonalization. This analysis claims that impersonalization is a broad category defined by syntactic de-emphasis of the logical subject, and it rejects theories that define impersonalization as a morphosyntactic category with a homogeneous syntactic strategy for this de-emphasis. After establishing the Celtic impersonal forms as a strategy for impersonalization, I review the theoretical implications of this classification, which show that impersonalization is closely connected to how thematic roles are mapped onto syntactic positions. Building on this evidence, I then suggest that impersonal and passive inflections are synchronically distinct, though they may be closely related diachronically.

In this discussion of impersonalization I refer interchangeably to the agent or logical subject of a verb, which refers to the semantic argument structure of the verb. For example, the verb *eats* in “the man eats pancakes” possesses an agent role (*the man*) and a patient role (*pancakes*) in its argument structure. In the syntactic structure of the verb, there is a subject position (specifier of VP) onto which the verb can project an agent role, and an

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1 I will use the term autonomous interchangeably with impersonal, as grammars of Celtic languages often use this terminology.
object position onto which the verb can project a patient role. Even though a verb in a given
glanguage may select a certain role (which I will follow common practice and call a *theta role*
when the semantic content of the role is not crucial) in its argument structure, I assume
that it will not necessarily project that role onto the corresponding position in the
syntactic structure. In saying this, I depart from the Theta Criterion of Chomsky (1981).\(^2\)
I assume clause structure is organized with *T* (tense) as the head, which requires a
structural subject, or “specifier” (Sportiche, et al. 2014).\(^3\) If a verb does not assign a theta
role to the subject position, this structural subject position will therefore be required to be
occupied by an expletive. If a verb does assign a theta role to the subject position, it will be
occupied by a full nominal phrase or a pronominal. I will refer to these thematic
pronominals and expletives as either null or overt depending on whether they are
phonetically realized.

This thesis follows the following organization. In Chapter 1 I provide an overview of
impersonalization cross-linguistically, and then I describe the impersonal verbal inflections
found in Irish and Breton. In Chapter 2 I discuss a number of theories that attempt to
characterize impersonalization. In this chapter I particularly focus on how morphologically
driven theories over-emphasize the relationship between passivization and
impersonalization. In Chapter 3 I analyze the Celtic impersonal forms using a battery of
tests designed to highlight the theta role dynamics of impersonal forms. I show how my

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\(^2\) The Theta Criterion states that for each theta role selected in a verb’s lexical entry, there
is a unique nominal phrase that is assigned that theta role and conversely.

\(^3\) This is the Extended Projection Principle (EPP) requirement or “fixed subject
requirement” which has been the focus of much recent syntactic work (c.f. Sportiche et al
2014).
analysis of impersonalization accounts for the behavior of the impersonal forms in these tests.
1. Impersonalization and Celtic Languages

1.1 Impersonalization

Impersonalization is frequently invoked when a semantic process seems to de-emphasize or somehow remove the logical agent of an event denoted by a verb (Blevins 2003). Such constructions are frequently thought to possess a functional motivation, allowing a speaker not to express the logical agent for communicative reasons, or to denote something about the generality of an event (e.g. Givon 1985).

There are a number of grammatical constructions grouped under the informal notion of “impersonalization.” In English, we have a wide variety of impersonal constructions that obscure the identity of the agent:

(1) Generic pronoun:
One buys groceries at the store.

(2) Plural pronoun:
They serve pancakes at IHOP.

(3) Expletive:
It looks like rain.

(4) Passivization:
Dogs are walked every morning. (recurring action with unspecified agent)

In each of these scenarios a non-referential pronoun (e.g. 1) or expletive occupies the subject position (e.g. 2 and 3), or a passive construction is used with the agent unexpressed (e.g. 4). Impersonal constructions like these are not limited to English. (5) and
(6) illustrate non-referential generic pronouns and (7) illustrates passive morphology with no overt subject in German, French, and Latin respectively. (8) and (9) exemplify passivization with an optionally overt expletive subject.

(5) Generic pronoun (German)
\[ \text{man} \text{ raucht} \]
\[ \text{ARB.3.SG smoke.3.SG.} \]
‘someone smokes’

(6) Generic pronoun (French)
\[ \text{on mange le pan} \]
\[ \text{ARB.3.SG eat.3.SG.PR. the bread} \]
‘someone eats the bread’

(7) Passivization (Latin)
\[ \text{amatur} \]
\[ \text{love.3.SG.PR.PASS} \]
‘he is loved’

(8) Passivization (German)
\[ \text{In der Küche wurde geraucht} \]
\[ \text{in the kitchen become.3.SG.PAST smoked} \]
‘there was smoking in the kitchen’/’people were smoking in the kitchen’

(9) Expletive and passivization (German)
\[ \text{Es wurde geraucht} \]
\[ \text{EXPL become.3.SG.PAST smoked} \]
‘there was smoking’

These constructions are commonly found cross-linguistically and figure prominently in discussions about impersonalization. However, verbal inflection as a strategy of impersonalization has not been well studied or understood.

The Celtic languages Breton and Irish can contribute to our understanding of impersonalization through a better understanding of their impersonal inflections. Sentences (10.a-b) offer examples of the impersonal inflection in Breton. By contrast, example (10.c) shows how the personal form inflected for first person singular functions. The impersonal inflection does not permit an overt subject, as illustrated by (10.d).
(10) Breton (from Hewitt 2002):^{4}

a. Impersonal
Neuse e tebrer krampouzh
so PART eat.IMPS pancakes
‘so one eats pancakes’

b. Impersonal
Alîes e prezeger diw wej d’ar sul en ilis-se
often PART preach.IMPS two times on the Sunday in the church that
‘Sermons are often preached twice on Sundays in that church’

c. Personal form
Neuse e tebran krampouzh
so PART eat.PR.1.SG pancakes
‘I eat pancakes’

d. No overt subject with impersonal inflection
*Neuse e tebrer Yann krampouzh
so PART eat.IMPS Yann pancakes
‘so Yann eats pancakes’

(11.a-b) show the impersonal inflection in Irish. As in Breton, the impersonal inflection must be translated with a generic pronoun or passivization in English. For contrast the personal form inflected for third personal plural past is given in (10.c), working with the third person plural pronoun siad. In (10.d), however, an overt subject is prohibited from occurring with the impersonal inflection.

(11) Irish (from Stenson 1989, 380-1):

a. Impersonal
Buaileadh Ciarraisa gcluife deireanac
beat.PA.IMPS Kerry in the game last
‘One beat Kerry in the last game/Kerry was beaten in the last game.’

b. Impersonal
Tugadh an tarbh don fheilmeara
give.PA.IMPS the bull to the farmer
‘someone gave the bull to the farmer/the bull was given to the farmer’

^{4} Literary Welsh features a corresponding inflection that is not considered in this thesis because it does not appear colloquially and does not lend itself to analysis by the syntactic tests used below.
c. Personal form
Bhuail siad Ciárraí aríst
*beat.3.PL.PA they Kerry again
‘they beat Kerry again’

d. No overt subject with impersonal inflection
Buaileadh Ciárраí Gaillimh
*beat.PA.IMPS Kerry.ACC Galway.NOM

The question now is whether these inflections form a single syntactic strategy of impersonalization, or whether they are syntactically heterogeneous. I also ask whether the resulting impersonals are distinct from the other patterns of impersonalization surveyed in (5)-(9) above.

1.1.1 Cross-linguistic impersonal verbal inflections

While most of this thesis is devoted to an analysis of the Celtic impersonal inflection, this inflection is neither linguistically isolated nor unique to Celtic. Polish, for instance, features an impersonal inflection that functions similar to the Celtic inflection. Creissls (2008, 11-12) (taken from Kibort 2003) proffers the following examples of the impersonal –no/-to inflection found in Polish:

(12)
Zakończywszy posiłek rozpoczęto dyskusję
finish.GER meal.SG begin.IMPERS discussion.SG.ACC
‘Having finished the meal, they began the discussion’

(13)
Oglądano swoje zbory
look at.IMPERS POSS.REFL.PL.ACC collection.PL.ACC
‘One looked at one’s collection’

The Polish impersonal is described with some detail in Blevins (2003) and Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002).
Furthermore, impersonalization in all forms is not unique to Indo-European languages. Creissls (2008, 10) also offers examples of an impersonal passive form found in Tswana, an African language. This form illustrated in (14) is similar to the impersonal passive with expletive found in German, and the passive found in Latin:

(14)
Gó-bù-il-w-è  
speak-PRF-PASS-FIN
‘People have spoken’ – impersonal passive, lit. ‘There has been spoken’

1.1.2 Icelandic: The historical connection between passive and impersonal morphology

Relevant, though not central to this paper, is the historical development of the impersonal inflection. It is thought that the impersonal inflection in Celtic arises historically from the passive inflection (Lewis et al. 1989). Recent work on a change in progress in Icelandic passive inflection suggests that this trajectory may be a common route. Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir (2002, 98) argue that the morphology of the traditional passive in Icelandic is currently undergoing a reanalysis by young speakers of Icelandic to be interpreted as active. There appears to be no syntactic movement of object to subject position, and an overt expletive appears in subject position in conjunction with the passive verbal morphology.

(15) Nominative passive:
Stúlkan var lamin í klessu.  
the.girl-NOM was hit.F.SG.NOM in a.mess
The girl was badly beaten.

(16) Oblique passive:
a.
Henni var hrint í skólanum.  
she.DAT was pushed-neut.sg in the.school
‘she was pushed at school’
b. Kænnarans var saknað.
_The teacher_.GEN was _missed-neut.sg_
‘the teacher was missed’

(15) Impersonal passive:
iðað var dansað í kringum jólatréð.
_EXPL was danced.NEUT.SG around the.Christmas.tree_
‘people danced around the Christmas tree’

(17) The Innovative Construction (New Passive/Impersonal)
iðað var lamið stúlkuna í klessu.
_EXPL was hit.NEUT.SG. _the.girl.F.SG.ACC in a mess_
‘the girl was badly beaten’

These examples appear to show that Icelandic is in a transition stage developing a syntactically distinct class of verbs devoted to the impersonal interpretation. While it retains the traditional passive and impersonal passive constructions, this new ‘passive’ construction seems to pattern distinctly with impersonal constructions in other languages. The phenomenon in Icelandic is germane to the analysis of Celtic impersonal inflections because it suggests that a viable analysis will need to isolate some similarity between the passive inflection and the impersonal inflection to make this historical transition a natural one.

1.2 Background on Breton language

Breton belongs to the Celtic family of Indo-European languages, exhibiting SVO, OVS and VSO order. The language has a range of inflectional morphology with verbal affixes that mark person and number. The morphology and syntax of the verbal affix also marks the arguments of the verb, among which is the impersonal subject. Most agree that the neutral order of Breton is VSO, although SVO is also possible. Breton also has a V-2 constraint,
which forces some constituents to appear to the left of the finite verb, frequently obscuring the underlying VSO word-order (Shafer 1995).5

The Breton verbal system includes present, future, preterite, imperfect, present conditional and past conditional (Hewitt 2002, 2):

![Regular verbs table]

According to Hewitt (2002, 1) Breton has available an apersonal conjugation, an impersonal form in –r and –d, and impersonal constructions (for existentials, meteorological phenomena, indirect impersonal verbs, and impersonal compound passives). In this thesis, I focus on what Hewitt calls the impersonal form in –r and –d, According to the grammar of Hardie (1948, 118), “all fully conjugated verbs, with the important exception of am euz ['have'], have an impersonal form corresponding to each tense,” and “there is no pronoun corresponding to the impersonal form” (Hewitt 2002, 20).

The impersonal inflection takes the form of –r ending in the present and future tenses, and –d ending in the imperfect, past and conditional forms of the verb. Breton

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5Breton typically places the impersonal inflection on a form of ‘do’ with an infinitive for the lexical verb in the first position of the sentence. According to Hewitt (2002), this is to accommodate the VSO restriction with the infinitive in first position, and the inflected form of ‘do’ in second position to satisfy the V-2 constraint. For this reason, the impersonal inflection occurs infrequently directly on the lexical verb. If an adverb or other element from the sentence occurs in first position, the ‘do’ is unnecessary and the lexical verb receives the inflection in second position.
verbs with the impersonal ending are commonly rendered as passives in English
translations, but the impersonal inflection appears in contrastive distribution with passive
constructions in Breton, and for that reason requires a distinct analysis (Hardie 1948).

1.3 Background on Irish language

Irish is a VSO language, though unlike Breton, it is not subject to the V-2 constraint.
Fronting and clefting are the most common variations in word order (Ó Siadhail 1989,
205). Adverbial particles, subjects and objects are often fronted, whereas object
pronominals are generally post-posed. The pronominal cannot occur earlier in the sentence
(McCloskey 2007, Ó Siadhail 1989).

Verbs are inflected for tense, mood, and personal or impersonal forms (Ó Siadhail
1989). Synthetically inflected verbs generally cannot co-occur with a separate noun phrase
subject, whereas analytic verbs are not inflected for person, and therefore function with an
independent noun phrase (Ó Siadhail 1989, 182). For the impersonal inflection, verbs are
inflected for tense and mood and there is no personal inflection or attendant agent phrase.

The Irish construction making use of the impersonal inflection is known as the
*Briathar Saor* or the *autonomous form* in other syntactic descriptions. This form is used “(a)
when the agent is unknown, and (b) when it is not necessary or desirable to name the
agent” (Christian Brothers 1977, 120). The inflection appears to be lexical and unrestricted:
“all verbs in Irish, except the copula, have an autonomous form in all moods and tenses”
(Christian Brothers 1977, 120). Irish verbs with the autonomous inflection can be formed
as in the following example of the verb *cúir* (‘put, send, bury’):
1.4 Impersonals in Irish and Breton

In this analysis of impersonalization I claim that passivization, expletives with passives, generic pronouns, and impersonal verbal inflections are the four syntactic strategies available cross-linguistically to generate impersonal constructions, with impersonalization defined as the de-emphasis of the logical subject. This thesis proposes that the Breton and Irish impersonal inflections should be recognized as a unique strategy distinct from passivization and the generic pronouns, and as grammatical strategies for de-emphasizing the logical subject. This proposal recognizes impersonalization as a unified functional category built from a variety of heterogeneous syntactic strategies. It rejects the notion that impersonalization is a fundamentally homogeneous syntactic or morphological process.

More specifically I contend that: i) the impersonal structures in Irish and Breton are distinct from passivization at the syntactic level (i.e. impersonalization is not the result of subject or object movement); ii) the subject position is not deleted or suppressed in the sense understood by Lexical Functional Grammar (LFG) and Relational Grammar (RG); and iii) the morphology of impersonal verbs in Breton and Irish is lexically distinct from passive morphology.

In making these three contentions, I agree in part with the position taken by McCloskey (2007) and Stenson (1989) insofar as they analyze the Irish impersonal as
synchronously distinct from passivization. However, I disagree with their claim that the Irish impersonal subject is a thematic pronominal. Instead, I hold that the Irish impersonal verbal inflection is assigned the subject theta role, which means the subject position (specifier of TP) is filled by a null expletive. In contrast, the Breton inflection allows the theta role to be projected onto the subject position, producing a null thematic pronominal which co-occurs with the impersonal verbal inflection. This variation in how theta roles are projected onto syntactic positions models an important difference between Irish and Breton impersonal verbal inflections. The Celtic impersonal inflections share characteristics of various forms of impersonalization in other languages, which lends this inflection cross-linguistic relevance. The Breton impersonal subject patterns with the German man, while the Irish impersonal subject patterns with the German es wird construction. In this sense, I argue that the impersonal inflections found in Celtic languages are not a synchronically unified class, but rather have syntactic functions distributed in a similar fashion to the other strategies of impersonalization sketched in the introduction.
2. A few theories of impersonals

2.1.1 Theory of object raising: Relational Grammar

Relational Grammar (RG) holds that passivization is the promotion of a logical object to subject position in conjunction with the demotion of the subject to an oblique relation. Demotion of a subject in this sense was hypothesized to occur only as the result of promotion of the direct object. For this reason, RG treats impersonals that do not appear to promote a direct object to the subject role as necessarily requiring the promotion of a dummy object, in some languages null, and in others overt. The third person singular es of German is a well-known example of an expletive (or dummy) subject (Baker 1989, Blevins 2003, Haider 1990, Hewitt 2002, Legendre 1990, Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002). In the case of passivized intransitive verbs, which have no logical object, impersonal passives are formed when a dummy object is advanced to subject position (Timberlake 1982). See (9) and (10) for illustrations of this type of construction.

In the next sections I dispute the RG analysis of impersonals in more detail, highlighting its important claim that impersonals are a sub-type of passivization.
2.1.2 Impersonals according to Perlmutter and Postal

In Perlmutter and Postal’s (1984) influential account of impersonalization, the concept of *impersonal* is not considered independent of passivization. It is assumed that impersonals are inherently a subclass of passivized constructions. In this analysis, passivization promotes an object to subject position (Perlmutter & Postal 1977). When no thematic nominal occupies subject position, passivization is employed to advance a dummy object to fill that position (Perlmutter & Postal 1977, 1983b). Impersonals and passives appear similar structurally due to a missing or de-emphasized subject in both constructions. Since impersonals and passives do not have a logical subject, and since a dummy often appears in subject position, impersonalization is considered a sub-class of passivization. The Final 1 Law of (Perlmutter & Postal 1983b) strongly informs their analysis of impersonal passives:

Impersonal Passives of *personal Passive clauses* cannot be well-formed in any language.⁶

It is therefore suggested that impersonal passives in languages like German cannot accommodate an agent by-phase. In this way, impersonalization is characterized as a form of passivization, and is therefore subject to the conditions conducive to passivization.

The dialog between the theories of Comrie (1977) and Perlmutter & Postal (1984) never steps outside the context of passivization. Whereas Comrie (1977) argues for spontaneous demotion of the subject, Perlmutter & Postal (1984) argue for the promotion of a dummy object. A critic of this analysis notes that some languages exist, such as Irish,

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⁶ *Personal clauses* contrast to impersonal clauses here: that is, the logical subject is present in personal clauses.
which allow impersonal passives to occur independent of the syntactic and morphological structure of basic passives (Keenan 1985, 348). He does not provide an explanation for the existence of such languages, though, or how they can be analyzed.

The discussion of dummy advancement has significant implications on theories of unaccusativity, which plays an important though ancillary role in the analysis of impersonalization. On the topic of unaccusative impersonals, Perlmutter & Postal (1984, 144) claim the following:

The advancement analysis combines with the Unaccusative Hypothesis and the 1AEX to predict that impersonal Passives of initially unaccusative clauses can be well-formed in no language.7

This prediction is falsified by the existence of languages that do allow impersonalization of unaccusatives, such as Irish, Breton, and Icelandic. This calls for a refinement of our understanding of impersonalization to accommodate language that permit impersonalization on unaccusative verbs.

In addition to needing a model that includes impersonal unaccusatives, Perlmutter and Postal’s commitment to passivization also fails to offer a model for interpreting other modes of impersonalization. By confining the discussion of impersonals solely to passive verb structures, the model for interpreting impersonals is obliged entirely to omit other constructions that de-emphasize the agent, such as the generic subjects like German man and French on. Because they cannot theorize forms of impersonalization such as the generic subject, their model is unable to see that the Celtic impersonal inflections could have multiple syntactic strategies for demoting the logical subject.

7 The 1-Advancement Exclusiveness Law (1AEX) prohibits more than one advancement to level 1 in the Relational Grammar model. If a direct object or a dummy object has been advanced, an additional advance would be impossible.
2.2 Theory of subject demotion: Blevins (2003)

Blevins (2003) suggests that impersonalization is not passivization per se, but that it is a distinct form of subject demotion or suppression independent of emphasizing the logical object by placing it in subject position. He maintains that, “whereas passivization detransitivizes a verb by deleting its logical subject, impersonalization preserves transitivity, and merely inhibits the syntactic realization of a surface subject” (2003, 475). Blevins marshals evidence to support this claim from a wide range of impersonal forms from Finnish, Balto-Finnic, Lithuanian, Estonian, Polish, and Celtic languages. He argues that impersonalization should be considered distinct from processes of passivization, contrary to RG theories of impersonalization. In Blevins’ view, impersonalization retains the underlying argument structure of the transitive verb, whereas passivization entails a structural reordering. Impersonals and passives result in similar surface structure through very different means: the impersonals “suppress” surface representation of an existing structural argument, but passives “delete” an argument at the structural level and therefore have none at the surface level.

Because he considers impersonalization a process of suppressing surface representation of a structural subject, Blevins makes the important observation that unaccusative verbs (verbs with no logical subject) can be impersonalized since they have no subject to suppress, whereas these verbs cannot be passivized for the same reason. For example, the Irish verb *mhead* (‘increase’) is unaccusative and has an impersonal form (Stenson 1989, 386).
I believe Blevins’ (2003) intuition here can be pushed further, as his analysis contains a limitation, which may be unnecessary. His theory locates the point of distinction between passivization and impersonalization at the interface of the syntactic and phonetic levels, whereas I claim the distinction is at the syntactic level. Part of the limitation of Blevins’ theory is that it keeps the analysis focused on the similarities at the surface structure. It does not generalize to account for impersonals that select overt subjects (e.g. 1-6). If impersonalization is truly an effort not to specify the agent of an event denoted by a verbal predicate, then impersonal pronominals and expletives should be given equal consideration in discussions of impersonalization. As I will show momentarily, impersonal constructions with overt subjects pattern with impersonals with null subjects, regardless of passivization and impersonal verbal inflections. Blevins (2003) offers a model that steps beyond the RG commitment to passivization, but falls short of encompassing the broad variety of impersonalization strategies represented by passivization, generic pronouns, and verbal inflections.

2.3 Acknowledgement that impersonal verbs are not passives

McCloskey (2007) provides examples demonstrating that the Irish impersonal form is distinct from passive syntactic processes and that the autonomous inflection is distinct
from passive morphology. McCloskey (2007, 827) shows that the internal argument of an autonomous form is realized in the accusative case and never the nominative, implying that the impersonal form does not permit object-to-subject raising:

(20) Cuirfear é sa reilig áitiúl
bury.FUT.AUT him.ACC in-the graveyard local
‘he will be buried in the local graveyard’

(21) *Cuirfear sé sa reilig áitiúl
bury.FUT.AUT he.NOM in-the graveyard local
‘he will be buried in the local graveyard’

Irish also permits postposition of direct objects, but bars subjects from this option. Verbs with the impersonal form only permit arguments to take the direct object postposition:

(22) Cuirfear sa reilig áitiúl amárach é
bury.FUT.AUT in-the graveyard local tomorrow him.ACC
‘he will be buried in the local graveyard tomorrow’

(23) Cuirfear é sa reilig áitiúl
bury.FUT.AUT him.ACC in-the local graveyard
‘he will be buried in the local graveyard

Furthermore, the impersonal form allows the argument to be a resumptive pronoun, which is a distribution not permitted to subjects:

(24) fear gur bualadh le camán é.ACC
man Comp.PAST strike.PAST.AUT with hurley-stick him
‘a man that he was struck with a hurley-stick’

(25) *fear gur bhuaíl sé le camán mé
man Comp.PAST struck.3.SG he.NOM with hurley-stick me
‘a man that (he) struck me with a hurley-stick’
McCloskey’s conclusion, which I share, is that the impersonal inflection in Irish has nothing
to do with object-to-subject raising, and is therefore unassociated with passivization.

Likewise in Breton, there is persuasive evidence from Hewitt (2002) that the
impersonal inflection is distinct from passivization. The passive morphology is distinct
from the impersonal verbal inflection:

(26) Passive (Hewitt 2002, 27)
debred e vez krampouzh
eat.PASS PART be.HAB pancakes
‘pancakes are eaten’

(27) Impersonal form Hewitt 2002, 19)
dibriñ a rer krampouzh
eat.INF PART do.IMPS pancakes
‘one eats pancakes’

Moreover, the impersonal form is not subject to restrictions on passivization. In particular,
intransitives can have the impersonal inflection but may not co-occur with passive
morphology (Hewitt 2002, 16).

While I concur with McCloskey’s (2007) assessment that the impersonal inflection is
not passivization – and Stenson’s (1989) work, which he builds on – I disagree with his
diagnosis of what the impersonal form actually is. In part, I follow a different mode of
analysis. Whereas McCloskey (2007) and Stenson (1989) analyze the verbal inflections by
asking what fills the subject position, I instead track the placement of the theta roles
projected from verbs’ lexical entries.
3. Description of impersonal inflections

3.1 Structural and Thematic Diagnostics

The framework in this paper for analyzing the Celtic impersonal subjects relies on the Extended Projection Principle (EPP) introduced in Chomsky (1981) and a feature of all his subsequent work:

“[EPP] is the structural requirement that certain configurations... must have subject positions” (quoted in Lasnik 2003, 1).

In accord with Lasnik’s (2003) summary of EPP, I will operate on the assumption that the functional head of a clause has a specifier. That is, I assume that the subject position is present in the syntactic structure, though a theta role is not necessarily projected onto that position.

Several tests are typically employed to determine whether an impersonal inflection co-occurs with a nominal bearing a theta role in this subject position.

1) Does the inflection support reflexive pronouns?

According to Chomsky (1986), reflexive pronouns must have an antecedent in an argument position. An argument position is defined in such a way as to pick out the specifier or complement position of a lexical category or of T (as opposed to C). If the impersonal form does not permit reflexive pronouns, we can attribute this failure to the absence of an antecedent in subject position (i.e. specifier to T). In my analysis, I refine the
function of this test to target not only the existence of the subject position in the syntactic structure (i.e. the presence of Spec of TP), but more specifically the location of the theta role projected by the verb. My analysis permits a theta role to be projected by the verb, but I allow for the occasion that the verbal inflection takes the theta role, and not only the subject position (understood as the specifier of T). In this scenario, a theta role may be assigned to a syntactic constituent but be unable to license a reflexive, since it is not projected onto the subject position.

2) Does the inflection support agent-oriented adverbs?

This test is derived from Jackendoff’s (1972) work on agent-oriented adverbs, which requires that the agent theta role be present to support such adverbs. Specifically in my analysis, this test provides evidence for the presence or absence of a theta role projected onto the syntactic structure. It does not test the constituency of the syntactic structure or which syntactic constituent is assigned the agent theta role. If a theta role is present anywhere in the structure, I expect that the structure should support agent-oriented adverbs. Conversely, agent-oriented adverbs should be prohibited when an agent theta role has not been assigned to any constituent of the syntactic structure.

3) Does the inflection co-occur with an agent by-phrase?

The agent by-phrase test probes for the presence of a logical subject in a de-emphasized adjunct by-phrase. If overt thematic subjects were possible in Breton and Irish impersonals, we might expect them to be able to appear in a de-emphasized agent by-phrase, parallel to the behavior of passive sentences. However, we observe below that overt subjects are prohibited in subject position (i.e. specifier of T) in both Irish and Breton impersonals. Since overt subjects are unavailable in this construction, an agent by-phrase should likewise be ungrammatical. Why are such subjects unavailable in Breton and Irish
impersonals? In Breton, I argue that there is a null generic thematic pronominal in subject position. Irish, on the other hand, has a null expletive occupying its subject position, and the verbal inflection receives the theta role. Neither generic pronouns nor expletives occur in agent by-phrases cross-linguistically. Examples from English show that expletives and generic pronouns cannot be passivized:

(28) One should eat more vegetables.
(29) *More vegetables should be eaten by one.
(30) It surprised her that apples are sweet.
(31) *She was surprised by it that apples are sweet.

3.2 Findings

My investigation of the behavior of Celtic impersonal inflections shows that neither Breton nor Irish permits an overt subject and neither permits an agent by-phrase. Breton and Irish share the ability of agent-oriented adverbs to co-occur with their impersonal inflections. It appears that there is no categorical restriction on impersonalization of unaccusatives in either language. While some putative unaccusative verbs resist impersonal forms, this appears to be lexically idiosyncratic in both languages. The main point of distinction between Breton and Irish is that Breton impersonals support reflexives, whereas Irish impersonals do not. This is a significant difference between the languages, as it points to a fine distinction in how verbs assign theta roles in impersonal constructions. I hypothesize that the Irish inflection absorbs any theta role projected by the verb, and that its syntactic subject position (specifier of TP) satisfies the EPP requirement. Breton on the other hand projects a verb's theta role directly onto the subject position (specifier of TP).
This models why impersonal inflections in both languages permit agent-oriented adverbs, though only Breton can support reflexive pronouns.

3.3 Irish: no theta role in subject position

Irish does not permit an overt subject with the impersonal inflection, as evidenced in (32) and (33). The impersonal subject is therefore obligatorily null.

(32) Irish impersonal
*Buailleadh Gaillimh Ciarrai
beat.PA.IMPS Galway Kerry

(33)
*Tiocfar na fir abhaile
come-FUT-IMPS the men home

If the autonomous inflection in Irish projects a theta role onto the subject position, we would expect it to support reflexive pronouns. We find, however, that the Irish impersonal inflection cannot occur with reflexive pronouns (from Stenson 1989, 384).

(34)
*Gortaídh é féin.
hurt.PA.IMPS himself
'someone hurts himself'

(35)
*Maráodh a chéile.
kill.PA.IMPS each other
'people kill each other'

(36)
*Táthar anseo agus feicim iad.
'be-PR-IMPS here and see-PR-1SG them'
'someone is here and I see them (that person)'

8 I have confirmed Stenson’s examples here through personal consultation with a native speaker of Irish.
If the autonomous inflection carries a theta role, we would expect it to permit an agent by-
phrase. The inflection cannot occur with an agent phrase, though it can with an instrument
phrase (Stenson 1989, 382). The distinction between agent and instrument phrases
correlates with the distinction between human agency and an instrument (perhaps used by
another agent). A rock, for instance, could not volitionally strike Jean, whereas another
person could volitionally hit Jean by means of a rock. A rock could never strike Jean by
means of a person. The agent restriction is illustrated by (37):

(37)
*Buaileadh le Jean é.
hit.PA.IMPS with/by Jean him
‘he was hit by Jean/someone hit him by Jean’

The Irish impersonal form permits agent-oriented adverbs. The presence of these adverbs
entails the presence of thematic content somewhere in the construction. We can rule out
the projection of a theta role onto the specifier of TP, since reflexive pronouns are not
supported by this construction. Instead the Irish inflection itself must carry the theta role if
the verb has one to project.

(38) “willingly” (Stenson 1989, 391)
Dúradar le Fianna Fáil go nglacfaí go toilteanach le ainm Shéamas Ó Chonghaile ...
Say.PA.3PL to Fiana Fáil that accept.COND.IMPS adv. will with name Shéamas Ô Chonghaile ...
Conghail.GEN
‘They told Fianna Fáil that they would willingly accept the name of Shéamas Ô Chonghaile...’

(39) “with desire” (Stenson 1989, 392)
Bhí fios maith acu nach le fonn maslú a glaodh ina ndiaidh be.PA knowledge good at.3PL that not with desire insult.VN REL call.PA.IMPS after them
‘they knew well that it was not from a wish to insult that one called after them’
3.3.1 Questioning Stenson’s null pro theory

Much of the discourse on the Irish impersonal subject assumes that the autonomous inflection projects a theta role onto subject position, causing its subject to be understood as a phonologically null thematic pronominal. Stenson (1989) and McCloskey (2007) are exponents of this general view. My claim that the subject of the impersonal construction is a phonologically null expletive in Irish contrasts with this view, denying that the subject has a theta role assigned to it.

According to Stenson, “autonomous morphology is... compatible with verbs of any argument structure” in Irish (1989, 380). She develops a complex argument showing that the Irish autonomous inflection is not a form of passivization, in that it does not show evidence of object to subject movement and it can occur on intransitive verbs. Her analysis divides verbs with the autonomous inflection into two sub groups: those that have a null thematic PRO subject, and a second class lacking a thematic PRO subject. Stenson focuses on the former group because it presented challenges to the theory of PRO offered in Chomsky (1981), and devotes less attention to the sub-class lacking a thematic PRO. Presumably this later class has a non-thematic null expletive in Stenson’s analysis, if the EPP is to be maintained. In contrast to Stenson (1989), I claim that we can simplify the characterization of the Irish impersonal form into one class if the autonomous verbal inflection uniformly co-occurs with a null expletive subject.
3.3.2 The 2 categories proposal

The main argument offered for a sub-class of impersonal verbs that take a null thematic PRO subject is built on the ability of the impersonal inflection to co-occur with agent by-phrases. The fact that the impersonal inflection can co-occur with an agent by-phrase suggests that the inflection is compatible with a theta role in specifier position. Agent by-phrases are possible when the autonomous inflection is on a copula with a passive participle predicate as in example (40) or (41) (Stenson 1989, 393):

(40)
Beifear scanraithe ag taibhsí
be.FUT.IMPS frightened by ghosts
‘one will be frightened by ghosts’

This argument is unconvincing since the copular forms hosting the impersonal inflection in these examples do not select agent theta roles. Instead the agent ghosts is licensed by the theta role projected by the passive adjective frightened. Since a copula cannot support a theta role, the impersonal inflection on the copula cannot be interpreted as licensing the agent phrase, and we cannot infer from such examples that the specifier of TP must be assigned a theta role.

To corroborate her claim that the subject of impersonal verbs is thematic, Stenson appeals to the behavior of idiomatic weather expressions. These verbs have phonologically overt non-thematic expletive subjects, as illustrated in (41). These verbs are unable to host the impersonal inflection as shown in (42) (c.f. Stenson 1989, 389):

(41)
Chuir sé sneachta
put.PA it snow
‘it snowed’
Similar examples can be built on epistemic constructions involving phrases such as “it is true that...”. These weather and epistemic expressions do not provide the strong corroborating evidence that Stenson seeks. The difficulty is that there are examples of verbs without an agentive subject taking the autonomous inflection, namely the unaccusative verbs (c.f. Stenson 1989, 381-382). The inability of the weather verbs to co-occur with the impersonal inflection is more likely an idiomatic characteristic rather than a property that follows necessarily from their lack of a thematic subject.

3.3.3 Ambiguity regarding thematicity

Although Stenson views the inability of the impersonal inflection to co-occur with non-thematic weather verbs as corroboration for her claim that the subject of impersonals are thematic, she is forced to recognize another sub-class of impersonals that do not have thematic subjects. Some variant of my null expletive analysis is in fact necessary for her account of this sub-class of impersonals. This seemingly contradictory account of nonthematic expressions leads to another problem regarding the ambiguous references to the thematic presence and absence in this paper. On the one hand, Stenson (1989) firmly rejects a categorical absence of subject position in autonomous constructions, stating that “to claim that there is no [NP, S] in impersonal constructions is to claim that such verbs are not predicated of any argument... but this seems clearly wrong” (Stenson 1989, 384). In spite of this reluctance to admit the absence of a thematic subject, her paper resorts to this argument when explaining the verbs that do not fit the hypothesis that the impersonal co-
occurs with a thematic PRO subject. Two categories of verbs are singled out as
idiosyncratic exceptions to the PRO analysis, although they all permit the autonomous
inflection: unaccusative verbs and other verbs for which “no null agent or experiencer can
plausibly be identified with subject position” (387). To account for these, Stenson suggests
that, “reserving a subjectless structure for just these types may provide the differentiation
necessary” (388). This results in a conflicting account of whether Irish impersonals have
thematic subjects, which requires two logically distinct sub-classes of impersonals.

3.3.4 The Irish autonomous inflection parallels the German impersonal passive

Both to relate my analysis of the autonomous inflection in Irish to the broader scope
of impersonalization, and to respond to theories that hypothesize a null thematic subject in
some Irish impersonals, I add one more argument in favor of a null expletive subject. If we
compare the Irish null expletive with overt impersonal expletive subjects in German, we
find that they behave remarkably similarly. The German impersonal expletive occurs in the
impersonal passive construction. This construction is composed of passive syntax and
morphology with the third person, singular, neuter expletive es in subject position.

(43)
Es wird gegessen
EXPL become.3.SG.PR eaten
‘there is eating’/’people eat’

(44)
es wird getötet
EXPL become.3SG.PR killed
‘there is killing going on’

Like the Irish autonomous construction, the German impersonal passive does not permit
reflexives:
The impersonal passive does not permit agent by-phrases:

(46)
*es wird Selbstmord von Studenten begangen
EXPL become.3.SG.PR suicide by students committed
'Suicide is committed by students'

(47)
*es wird von Studenten geraucht
it.3.SG.NEUT.NOM become.3.SG.PR by students smoked
'there was smoking by students'

However, unlike the Irish autonomous inflection, the German impersonal passive does not permit agent-oriented adverbs:

(48)
*Es wird freiwillig getötet
EXPL become.3.SG.PR intentionally killed
'there is killing intentionally'

From this evidence we can conclude that the impersonal passive in German does not project a theta role onto the subject position (specifier of TP) occupied by the expletive.9

This expletive subject is phonetically realized, though it can be null in certain contexts, as seen in (50):

(49)
in der Kuche wird es get
in the kitchen become.3.SG.PR EXPL smoked
'there is smoking in the kitchen'10

9 My Irish speaker consultant also corroborates Stenson’s claim that agent-oriented adverbs are permissible in Irish impersonals. My analysis is unable to explain why in a principled fashion the impersonal inflection can support this type of adverb in contrast to German. This difference would have to be represented by ad hoc syntactic features in the lexicons of the respective languages.

10 smoking in the sense of “to smoke a cigarette”
When we compare the Irish impersonal inflection with the German impersonal passive, we find that they share a very similar distribution, differing only in the distribution of the adverbs:

Table 1. Irish Impersonal and German es

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>German es</th>
<th>Irish autonomous inflection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflexive</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agent-oriented adverb</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agent phrase</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.4 Breton: theta role in subject position

3.4.1 Null subject with theta role

Now that the Irish impersonal classification has been refined, I analyze the Breton impersonal construction in comparison to Irish. Breton, like Irish, relies on a verbal inflection to signal impersonalization. Examples (52-4) show that the Breton impersonal form does not permit an overt subject.\(^{11}\)

\(^{11}\) Steve Hewitt (pc), 2014:
The impersonal inflection can occur on the verb in certain contexts:
Directly on prezeg in the affirmative is only possible with some element occupying first slot so that tense is not matrix-clause-initial:

*Alîes e prezeger diw wej d’ar sul en ilis-se* [often aff one.preaches two times on’the Sunday in.the church-that] “Sermons are often given twice on Sundays in that church” Fr “on prêche…..”

*Dibriñ a rer krampouch* [eat.inf aff one.does pancakes] “One eats pancakes” or
(51) (Hewitt 2002, 17)
prezeg a raffer dissul
*prezeg a raffer dissul gant an Tad Erwan Lagadeg
preach.INF PART do.FUT.IMPS Sunday
preach.INF PART do.FUT.IMPS Sunday with the Father Erwan Lagadeg
‘one/somebody will preach on Sunday’

The impersonal inflection can occur with reflexive pronouns:¹²

(53)
‘N-om laxer ked gant ar labour eno
REF kill.IMPS not with the work there
‘They don’t [one doesn’t] kill themselves [oneself] with work there’

The impersonal inflection can occur with agent-oriented adverbs: ¹³

(54)
Dibriñ a rer krampouzh a-volontez-vad
eat.inf PART do.IMPS pancakes willingly
‘people/someone eats pancakes willingly/pancakes are eaten willingly’

3.4.2 The impersonal inflection and German man

The characterization of the Breton impersonal subject as a null pronominal bearing a theta role is strengthened by its similarity to the German generic pronoun man, which is

Neuse e tebrer krampouzh [so aff one.eats pancakes] “So one eats pancakes”

The sole reason for the inf+do construction in the first example is to ensure that the tense-bearing element is not initial; it has nothing to do with the fact that the tense-person marker in this instance is the impersonal FORM.

¹² According to email correspondence with Steve Hewitt, 2014.

¹³ Many of the examples provided by Stenson (1989) are questionable as to whether they are truly agent-oriented. My speaker consultant also corroborates Stenson’s claim that agent-oriented adverbs are permissible. I am unable to explain why the impersonal subject, if in fact an expletive, can support this type of adverb.
commonly used to create impersonal statements. German *man* is considered an arbitrary pronoun, in that it is “essentially like a general indefinite referring to persons” (Krifka et al 1995 cited in McCloskey 2007). As such, it necessarily has a theta role. I provide evidence below that German *man* functions as a fully thematic, though non-referential, overt subject.

The German generic pronoun supports a reflexive:

(55)

\[
\text{man totet sich}
\]

_pro kill.3SG.PR self_

‘someone kills him/herself’

The generic pronoun does not co-occur with an agent by-phrase:

(56)

*\text{man raucht von Studenten}*

_pro smoke.3SG.PR by students_

German generic pronoun permits agent-oriented adverbs:

(57)

\[
\text{man isst Brot freiwillig}
\]

_pro eat.3SG.PR bread willingly_

someone eats bread willingly

We can then add the information about the German generic pronoun and Breton impersonal forms to the comparison of impersonals in Table 1.

Table 2. German and Celtic Impersonals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>German es</th>
<th>Irish autonomous inflection</th>
<th>German <em>man</em></th>
<th>Breton autonomous inflection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflexive</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agent-oriented adverb</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agent phrase</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The German expletive and the Irish autonomous pattern together, while the German generic pronoun and Breton impersonal form their own group. Interestingly, all of the impersonals prohibit an overt agent phrase. This follows from the communicative function of impersonal forms, which is to de-emphasize the subject.
3.5 Impersonal Unaccusatives

I noted earlier that unaccusatives have been a subject of interest in the discussion of impersonalization. Unaccusative verbs tend to resist passivization cross-linguistically, as they are already agentless intransitive verbs. Since impersonal verbs are similar to passivization in that they de-emphasize the logical subject of the verb, it is generally assumed that unaccusative verbs should likewise resist impersonalization. Perlmutter and Postal’s work on impersonals and the unaccusative hypothesis made the bold statement that impersonal unaccusatives are impossible. Permutter and Postal’s conjecture is incompatible with the ability of the impersonal inflection to appear on at least some unaccusative verbs in Irish. It would be expected that unaccusatives accept the Irish impersonal inflection because no theta role is projected to the subject position in the impersonal constructions. Conversely, we expect that unaccusatives in Breton should resist the inflection because a theta role is projected onto the subject position. However, a number of unaccusative predicates in Breton are able to host the impersonal inflection. The apparent unpredictability of impersonals and unaccusatives is not a defect of my analysis of impersonals, but reflects a deeper problem in the proper analysis of unaccusatives (cf. Dowty 1990). Recent work on an impersonal form developing in Icelandic suggests that our classes of verbs that develop impersonal forms do not correspond closely to current notions of unaccusative verbs as a syntactic class.

The Irish impersonal inflection can occur on unaccusatives. Translation into English does not quite capture the distinction between (59), in which window is the syntactic subject of the verb, and (60), in which window is the object with no subject expressed at
any level (from Stenson 1989, 385-7). The Irish autonomous inflection is well represented on unaccusative verbs, as evidenced in (58-62).

(58)
Bhris an fhuinneog
break.PA the window
‘the window broke’

(59)
Bhriseadh an fhuinneog
break.PA.IMPS the window
‘the window broke’/’the window was broken’

(60)
Mhéadaíodh ar mo misneach.
increase.PA.IMPS on my courage
‘my courage increased’

(61)
Báthadh naonúr iascairí
sink.PA.IMPS nine fishermen
‘nine fishermen drowned’

(62)
Cailleadh a hathair
lose.PA.IMPS her father
‘her father died’

Based on the evidence that the Breton impersonal inflection co-occurs with a logical subject that is given a generic semantic value, we would expect that unaccusatives would resist the impersonal inflection. However, the available evidence suggests that the impersonal inflection can be applied to unaccusative verbs in Breton (Hewitt 2002, 20).

Quoting King (1993). I have only one example of an impersonal unaccusative, taken from McCloskey (2007):

(63)
mond a raffer?
go.INF PART do.FUT.IMPS
‘shall we go?’

The impersonal unaccusative is not limited to Celtic languages and their verbal
inflections. The German impersonal passive construction also seems to permit a number of unaccusatives in the construction:

(64)
es  wird    gegangen
EXPL become.3.SG.PR  gone
‘there is going’/’people go’

(65)
es  wird    angekommen
EXPL become.3.SG.PR  arrived
‘there is arriving’/’people arrive’

The situation in Irish and Breton impersonal unaccusatives mirrors the developing impersonal passive in Icelandic, which shows substantial variation in the acceptability of impersonal unaccusatives. According to Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir’s (2002, 127) recent study, “the innovating construction is indeed beginning to extend its usage to non-agentive verbs which do not form passives in the standard language. The range of acceptability rates for individual verbs is extremely wide.” Until unaccusative verbs are better understood, I remain unable to make a categorical statement about what to expect for impersonal unaccusatives. I do, however, argue that in light of the impersonal unaccusatives evidenced above, any theoretical model of impersonalization ought to allow for the possibility of impersonal unaccusatives.

3.6 Theta role distinctions

The evidence above illustrates that the Breton impersonal inflection functions with a null thematic pronoun, while the Irish impersonal inflection functions with a null expletive in subject position. The matter of unaccusatives does not help us understand impersonalization better per se, although impersonalization may shed light on the problem
of unaccusativity. The main contribution of this final section toward a theory of impersonal forms is the distinction between the theta role placement in Irish and Breton. To conclude this section of the analysis I propose a syntactic explanation for the difference in distribution between the Breton and Irish impersonal forms.

Since the Breton impersonal form selects a thematic pronoun in subject position, the verb projects the theta role directly onto the specifier of TP. This is illustrated by (66):

(66) Breton impersonal form
Neuse tebrer  krampouzh
so  eat.IMPS  pancakes
‘so one eats pancakes’

Because the theta role is present on the DP, it can support reflexive pronouns bound by the pro inside the VP.

On the other hand, the Irish impersonal form projects the theta role onto the verbal inflection, and not onto the specifier of TP. There is therefore a null expletive in subject
position. For this reason we see the inflection supporting agent-oriented adverbs, but not reflexive pronouns.\textsuperscript{14}

\textbf{(67) Irish impersonal form}

\textit{Buaileadh Ciaraissa}

\textit{beat.IMPS Kerry}

‘someone beat Kerry’

My analysis of Irish dovetails with claims by Baker et al. (1989, 241) that “passive morphemes are arguments.” The distribution of the Irish impersonal form is in the same spirit as Baker’s claim for passives that the “subject theta role is realized in Infl, instead of one in the subject position” (Baker et al. 1989, 221).

\textsuperscript{14}The restriction against reflexive pronouns is important, as it shows that that reflexive pronouns are not licensed merely by the presence of a theta role, but more precisely where the theta role is located in the structure. Although a theta role may be present in the argument structure of the verb, it appears unable to bind unless it is projected onto a specifier position.
3.7 Diachronic development of impersonals

The impersonal inflections found in Breton and Irish are not an isolated phenomenon unique to Celtic languages. At the outset of this thesis I cited Tswana and Icelandic as examples of the diversity of languages that feature such constructions. Icelandic is also an important example for demonstrating a diachronic connection between passivization and impersonalization. The Icelandic passive construction is currently undergoing a syntactic reanalysis to develop a construction devoted to the impersonal interpretation (Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002). The morphology of this construction still looks like the passive inflection, but the syntactic behavior of the construction patterns with the impersonal inflections and constructions already documented in other languages. While I maintain that passivization and impersonalization are distinct synchronic processes, the evidence found in Icelandic may shed light on exactly how passivization can feed impersonalization diachronically.15 This is particularly useful since the impersonal verbal inflection in Irish developed from a passive construction in Old Irish.

15 Polinsky (2002) may contribute to a theoretical explanation for why impersonalization seems to develop out of passivization. This follows if impersonals involved covert DP movement at Logical Form, as opposed to passivization which employed overt DP movement, and if covert movements were more economical as is often claimed in minimalist theories. This possibility is beyond the scope of the present paper, and I leave it for further exploration.
4. Conclusion

In this thesis I have proposed a theoretical framework for impersonalization that properly accounts for the full range of variation of impersonal forms attested cross-linguistically. Impersonalization is a phenomenon that de-emphasizes the logical subject of a verb. Strategies that accomplish this de-emphasis include passivization (i.e. object to subject promotion), generic pronouns (i.e. non-referential thematic pronouns), and the passive with expletive construction featured in German (i.e. passive morphology with a dummy in subject position – no object raising). On these grounds I argue that, contrary to the tenets of Relational Grammar, the strategies for impersonalization form a heterogeneous class, and are not a subset of passivization. The impersonal verbal inflections found in Celtic languages support this claim, as the inflections share characteristics of the other strategies but remain syntactically distinct from passivization.

I have also shown that there is variation within the strategy of impersonalization in the Celtic verbal inflection. The Irish inflection absorbs the theta role projected by the verb, and therefore functions with a null expletive in subject position. In contrast, the verb with the Breton impersonal inflection projects a theta role onto the specifier of TP, which puts a null thematic pronominal in subject position. This distinction between Irish and Breton is most salient in the Irish form’s inability to support reflexive pronouns. The variation within Celtic impersonal forms corresponds to impersonal constructions in other languages: the
Irish verbal inflection patterns with the German passive expletive construction, while the Breton impersonal inflection patterns with the German generic pronoun *man*.

The relationship between passivization and impersonalization can be summarized as fundamentally related because both functionally de-emphasize logical subjects. Passive morphology is correlated with impersonal forms diachronically, which accounts for the similarities visible synchronically. The current emergence of an impersonal construction from the passive morphology of Icelandic is a striking example of passive morphology being used to de-emphasize a subject in order to construct an impersonal statement. Because passive verbal inflections absorb the theta role – akin to the absorption by the Irish inflection – they are perhaps particularly suited to generating impersonal inflections. However, the process of de-emphasizing the logical subject is not a process accomplished exclusively by passivization, so we cannot equate impersonalization with passivization – these processes are similar, but they must considered distinct synchronically. In my analysis I have proposed a theoretical framework that brings passivization and impersonal verbal inflections, along with generic pronouns, into one functional class in which logical subjects undergo de-emphasis. Within this class we find a small number of heterogeneous syntactic strategies. These strategies differ in what syntactic position logical subjects are mapped onto: subject position (specifier of TP) or an inflectional head of phrase.
REFERENCES


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