On Impersonal Constructions: Implications of Celtic Verbal Inflections

Jessica G. Slavic

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

Approved by:

Randall Hendrick

David Mora-Marín

Jennifer Smith

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.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

1	first person
3	third person
ACC	accusative
ARB	arbitrary pronoun
COND	conditional
DAT	dative
EXPL	expletive
FUT	future
GEN	genitive
GER	gerund
HAB	habitual
IMPS	impersonal
INF	infinitive
NEUT	neuter
NOM	nominative
PA	past tense
PART	particle
PASS	passive
PL	plural
POSS	possessive
PR	present
REFL	reflexive

0. Introduction

In this thesis I offer a descriptive overview of the impersonal inflection found in the Celtic languages, Irish and Breton.[1] 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

---

[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 language 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

---

[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)
man　　　　raucht
ARB.3.SG　　*smoke.3.SG.*
'someone smokes'

(6) Generic pronoun (French)
on　　　　　　mange　　　le pan
ARB.3.SG　　　*eat.3.SG.PR.*　*the bread*
'someone eats the bread'

(7) Passivization (Latin)
amatur
love.3.SG.PR.PASS
'he is loved'

(8) Passivization (German)
In der Küche　wurde　　　　　　　geraucht
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)
Es　　　wurde　　　　　　geraucht
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 Ciarraí aríst
beat.3.PL.PA they Kerry   again
'they beat Kerry again'

d. No overt subject with impersonal inflection
Buaileadh   Ciarraí   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   zbjory
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)
Gǫ́-bù-íl-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.
Kennarans   var saknað.
the.teacher.GEN was missed-neut.sg
'the teacher was missed'

(15) Impersonal passive:
iP að   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)
iPað 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
(1, 2, 3 singular and plural, and the "impersonal" form)

present			future			preterite	
-an	-omp		-in	-ffomp	L -imp	-is/-jon	-jomp
-ez	-et	L -it/-oc'h	-i	-ffet	L -ot/-oc'h	-jout	-joc'h
-	-ont		-o	-ffont	L -int	-as	-jont
	-er			-ffer (L –or)		-jod (MBr -at)	

imperfect		conditional 1, potential		conditional 2, hypothetical	
-enn	-emp	-ffenn	-ffemp	-jenn	-jemp
-es	-ec'h	-ffes	-ffec'h	-jes	-jec'h
-e	-ent	-ffe	-ffent	-je	-jent
	-ed		-ffed		-jed

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

---

[5]Breton 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 *cuir* ('put, send, bury'):

11

cuir-tear	Present Tense
cuir-eadh	Past Tense
cuir-fear	Future Tense
chuir-fi	Conditional Mood
chuir-ti	Past Habitual

(from McCloskey 2007, 825)

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

12

synchronically 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-phrase. 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,

---

[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).

(18)
Mhéadaigh   ar   mo mhisneach
increase.PA on   my   courage
'My courage increased'

(19)
Mhéadaíodh   ar   mo mhisneach
increase.PA.IMPS on   my   courage
'my courage (was) increased'

   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   reilg áitiúl
bury.FUT.AUT him.ACC in-the graveyard local
'he will be buried in the local graveyard'

(21)
*Cuirfear   sé   sa   reilg 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   reilg 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   reilg 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   bhuail   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
*Buaileadh   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).[8]

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

(35)
*Maraĺodh   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   Shémais Uí
*Say.PA.3PL to Fiana Fáil that accept.COND.IMPS **adv. will**   with name Shéamas Ó*
Chonghaile ... (LSgC, p. 27)
Conghail.GEN
'They told Fianna Fáil that they would willingly accept the name of Shéamas Ó
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'

(42)
*Cuireadh   sneachta
put.PA.IMPS   snow

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:

29

(45)
*es   wird   sich   getötet
EXPL become.3.SG.PR REF.3.SG.ACC killed
'there is self killing'

The impersonal passive does not permit agent by-phrases:

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

(50)
in der Kuche   wird   geraucht
in   the kitchen become.3.SG.PR   smoked
'there is smoking in the kitchen'

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*

	German *es*	Irish autonomous inflection
Reflexive	yes	yes
Agent-oriented adverb	yes	no
Agent phrase	yes	yes

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 krampouzh [eat.inf aff one.does pancakes] "One eats pancakes"
or

(51) (Hewitt 2002, 17)
prezeg   a   raffer   dissul
preach.INF PART do.FUT.IMPS Sunday
'one/somebody will preach on Sunday'

(52)
*prezeg   a   raffer   dissul gant an Tad Erwan Lagadeg
preach.INF PART do.FUT.IMPS Sunday   with the Father Erwan Lagadeg

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)
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)
*man   raucht   von Studenten
pro   smoke.3SG.PR by   students

German generic pronoun permits agent-oriented adverbs:

(57)
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

	German *es*	Irish autonomous inflection	German *man*	Breton autonomous inflection
Reflexive	no	no	yes	yes
Agent-oriented adverb	no	no	yes	yes
Agent phrase	no	no	no	no

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 fhuinneg
break.PA.IMPS the window
'the window broke'/'the window was broken'

(60)
Mhéadaíodh   ar   mo mhisneach.
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

35

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
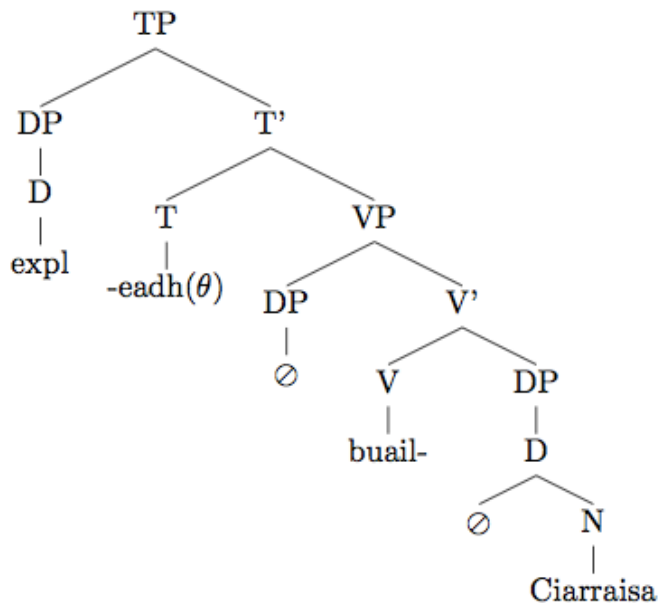*so   eat.IMPS pancakes*
'so one eats pancakes'
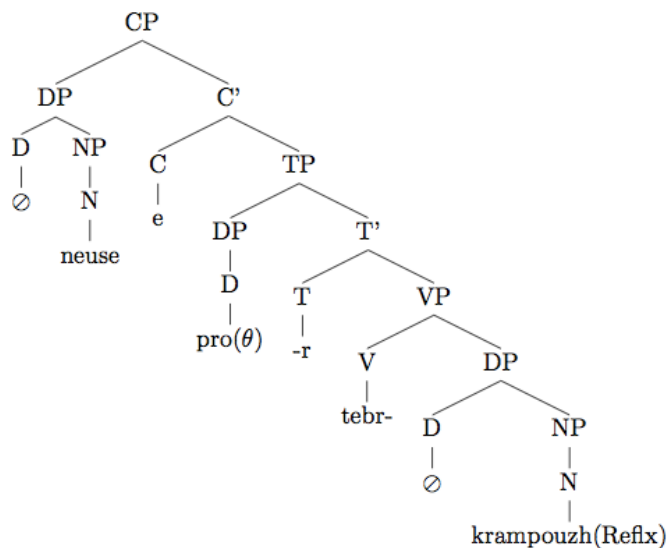
Because the theta role is present on the DP, it can support reflexive pronouns bound by the

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.[14]

(67) Irish impersonal form
Buaileadh Ciaraissa
beat.IMPS Kerry
'someone beat Kerry'

```
                      TP
            _____/    _____
          DP                      T'
          |                _____/  _____
          D               T                VP
          |               |            ___/  \___
         expl         -eadh(θ)        DP          V'
                                      |        __/  \__
                                      ∅       V        DP
                                              |        |
                                            buail-     D
                                                    __/ \__
                                                   ∅      N
                                                          |
                                                       Ciarraisa
```

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).

---

[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 heterogenous 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

Anderson, S. R. (1982). What is Morphology?. *Journal of Linguistic Inquiry*, *13* (4), 571-612.

Baker, M., Johnson, K., & Roberts, I. (1989). Passive Arguments Raised. *Linguistic Inquiry*, *20*(2), 219-251.

Blevins, J. P. (2003). Passives and Impersonals. *Journal of Linguistics*, *39*, 473-520.

Canger, U. (1996). Is there a passive in Nahuatl?. *Content, Expression and Structure: Studies in Danish functional grammar* (pp. 1-15). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Chomsky, N. (1981). *Lectures on government and binding*. Dordrecht, Holland: Foris Publications.

Chomsky, N. (1986). *Knowledge of Grammar*. Westport, CT: C. J. Fallon.

Christian Brothers, the. (1977). *The New Irish Grammar*. Dublin: C. J. Fallon.

Comrie, B. (1981). *Language Universals and Linguistic Typology*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Creissls, Denis. (2008). Impersonal and related constructions: a typological approach. From lectures given at the University of Tartu.

Dowty, D. (1991). Thematic Proto-Roles and Argument Selection. *Language*, *67* (3), 547.

Franks, S. (1990). On the status of null expletives. *Lingua*, *81* (1), 1-24.

Givon, T. (1985). Iconicity, Isomorphism and Non-Arbitrary Coding in Syntax. In John Haiman editor, *Iconity in Syntax*. (pp. 187-218). Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

– (2001). Grammatical relations and case-marking systems. *Syntax. An Introduction. Volume I* (pp. 173-232). Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Co.

Haider, Hubert. 1990. Germanic languages. *Issues in Germanic syntax* (pp. 44. 49).

Hardie, D. W. F. (1948). *A Handbook of Modern Breton*. (97; 117-119). Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

Hewitt, S. (2002). The Impersonal in Breton. *Journal of Celtic Linguistics* 7, 1-39.

Jackendoff, R. S. (1972). *Semantic Interpretation in Generative Grammar*. Cambridge, Massachusetts MIT Press.

Jaeggli, O. & Safir, K. (1989). The null subject parameter and parametric theory. *The Null Subject Parameter*. (pp. 1-44). Kluwer Academic Pub.

Keenan, E. L. (1985). Passive in the world's languages. *Language Typology and Syntactic Description* (pp. 243-281). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Koenig, J. P. & Mauner, G. (2000). A-definites and the Discourse Status of Implicit Arguments. *Journal of Semantics 16*. 207-236.

Lasnik, H. (2003). On the Extended Projection Principle. *Studies in Modern Grammar* 31. 1-23.

Legendre, G. (1990). French Impersonal Constructions. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 8 (1), 81-128.

Lewis, Henry & Pedersen, Holger. (1989). *A Concise Comparative Celtic Grammar*. 3rd edition. Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Maling, J. & Sigurjónsdóttir, S. (2002). The 'new impersonal' construction in Icelandic. *Journal of Comparative Germanic Linguistics* 5, 97-142.

McCloskey, J. (2007). The Grammar of Autonomy in Irish. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory*. 25 (4), 825-857.

Perlmutter, D. M. (1978). Impersonal Passives and the Unaccusative Hypothesis. *Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society*.

Perlmutter, D. M. & Postal, P. M. (1977). Toward a Universal Characterization of Passivization. *Proceedings of the Third Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society*. 157-190.

– (1983b). Some proposed laws of basic clause structure. *Studies in Relational Grammar 1*. (pp. 81-128). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

– (1984). Impersonal Passives and Some Relational laws. *Studies in relational grammar*, *2*. (pp. 126-170). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Polinsky, M. & Potsdam, E. (2002). Backward Control. *Linguistic Inquiry* 33 (2), 245-282.

Shafer, R. (1995). Negation and Verb Second in Breton. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 13, 135-172

Ó Siadhail, M. (1989). *Modern Irish: Grammatical structure and dialectal variation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Sportiche, D., Koopman H. & Stabler, E. (2014). *An introduction to syntactic analysis and theory*. Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell.

Sproat, R. (1985). Welsh Syntax and VSO Structure. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 3 (2), 173-216.

Stenson, N. (1989). Irish Autonomous Impersonals. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory*. Vol. 7, No. 3. 379-406.

Stump, G. T. (1984). Agreement vs. Incorporation in Breton. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 2 (3), 289-348.

Timberlake, A. (1982). The Impersonal Passive in Lithuanian. In *Proceedings of the Eighth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society*. 508-524.