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The Old English impersonal construction: a middle voice pattern?

Abstract

Old English did not retain the Indo-European inflectional category of middle voice, which expresses a verbal action that is performed by the subject but refers back to it and affects it (Beekes 1995: 239-42). Previous studies (e.g. Fraser 1985, Hermodsson 1952, Ogura 1990: 43-4) asserted that Old English expressed middle situations primarily by lexical means instead. Thus, intransitive verbs like *steorfan* 'to die', but also transitive verbs in ergative use, such as *openian* ' to become open', and reflexively used verbs like *ahebban* 'to raise oneself' have been identified as verbs with potential middle semantics. The present article, however, proposes arguments for a semantic interpretation by which the OE impersonal construction (e.g. *me*-ACC/DAT *hyngriað* 'I am hungry', *him*-DAT *scamode* 'he was ashamed', *me*-ACC/DAT *þynceþ þæt* ... 'it seems to me that ...') may be regarded as a grammaticalized pattern which specifically coded the middle voice. This interpretation is based on theoretical foundations laid by Cognitive and Construction Grammar (e.g. Goldberg 1995, 1996; Kemmer 1993, 1994; Langacker 1991, 1996, 2000), which acknowledge that not only lexemes but also grammatical patterns or constructions have semantic content, that grammatical patterns are prototypically structured categories, and that lexical meaning and constructional meaning interact. The article will also discuss how the subsequent loss of the impersonal construction in the course of Middle to Early Modern English affected the English voice system (Allen 1995, van der Gaaf 1904).

(233 words)

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