

Ways of impersonalizing: Pronominal vs. verbal strategies

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1. Introduction

The notion ‘impersonal’ as used in linguistics is a very wide and arguably disparate one (see e.g. Siewierska 1984: 93-125, 237-251; Moreno 1987, Kitagawa & Lehrer 1990, Bauer 2000: 93-150; Blevins 2003). This is due to the fact that while some scholars conceive of impersonality in semantic terms, others adopt a syntactic approach and yet others a morphological perspective. Therefore any discussion of impersonalization must be prefaced by a specification of how exactly this term is to be interpreted.

The semantic characterizations of impersonality centre on two notions. The first of these is @[human agentivity] or rather the lack of it.¹ Constructions which qualify as impersonal by virtue of the lack of a human agent controlling the depicted situation or event include: a) those expressing weather phenomena such as *Está chovendo* ‘It’s raining’ in Galician and also many other European languages including English, b) bodily sensations and emotions such as the Irish *Tá ocras orm* ‘I’m hungry’ (lit. is hunger on me) or the Latin *Me pundit* ‘I’m ashamed’ (lit. me shames) and c) modality such as the Polish *Trzeba odejść* ‘It’s necessary to leave’ (lit. necessary to leave). The second semantic interpretation of impersonality has to do with reference. In contrast to the first approach, constructions which are considered to be impersonal in this second sense of the term depict situations and events which may be brought about by a @[human agent] but crucially one which is not specified. This @[non-specificity] of the entity bringing about the situation or event is variously understood. For some scholars it is taken to mean no concrete *person*, i.e. no concrete individual or group of

individuals, for others it is interpreted as implying any person, i.e. anyone and/or everyone. These differences in interpretation have quite significant repercussions on the nature of constructions which are considered to be impersonal in this semantic/referential sense of the term. Both include within their scope the potential referents of the Portuguese *se*-constructions in (1) as well as its English translation featuring the generalized *one*.

(1) Portuguese (Cavadas Afonso 2003: 17)

Corta-	se	cabelos	às	terças
cut:PRES:3SG	REFL:3SG	hair:PL	at:DEF:PL	Tuesdays

‘One cuts hair on Tuesdays.’

However, only the former embraces the Polish *no/to* @[participle impersonals] illustrated in (2) since such clauses cannot be seen as involving the @[speaker] and thus literally anyone.

(2) Polish

W	szkole	Piotrowi	często	dokuczano
in	school	Peter:DAT	often	make fun:IMPER

‘At school, Peter was often made fun of.’

The syntactic characterizations of impersonality involve @[subjecthood]. Impersonal constructions are seen to either lack a grammatical subject altogether or alternatively feature only a pleonastic (semantically empty) subject, be it an overt one or potentially a covert one. Chief among constructions which qualify as impersonal in these terms are impersonal passives such as the one in (3) from Lithuanian, in which the @[human agent] is not the @[subject], or the one in (4) from German, in which there is no lexical candidate for subject.

(3) Lithuanian (Ambrazas 1997: 282)

Vaikū	būvo	miėgama	sodė
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child:PL:GEN be:PAST:3SG sleep:PP.N garden:LOC

‘The children slept in the garden. (Lit. By the children was being slept in the garden.)’

(4) German

Es wurde getanzt
it become:PAST:3SG dance:PP

‘There was dancing.’

Also included under this type of impersonals are extraposed constructions with pleonastic elements such as the Dutch (5) as well as various existential constructions such as the one in (6) from Spanish, and locative constructions such as the one in (7) from French in which the only overt candidates for @[subject] do not display the full range of subject properties.

(5) Dutch

Er heeft iemand gelachen
there has someone laughed

‘Someone laughed.’

(6) Spanish (Gillaspy Marsh 2002: 421)

Hay tres estudiantes atrasados
have three students late

‘There are three late students.’

(7) French (Hoekstra & Mulder 1990: 43)

Il est tombé un enfant dans le canal
it is fallen a child into the canal

‘A child has fallen into the canal.’

Finally, under the morphological view of impersonality impersonal constructions are identified as having a main verb, normally differentiated for person, which either lacks any person specification altogether or is invariably @[3rd person]. The former is exemplified by infinitival constructions such as the Russian root infinitival clause in (8), the latter by Finnish clauses with verbs in the 3sg and no lexical subject such as (9).

(8) Russian (Perlmutter & Moore 2002: 620)

Mne	ne	sdat'	ekzamen
1sg:dat	not	pass:inf	exam:acc

‘It’s not (on the cards) for me to pass the exam.’

(9) Finnish (Hakulinen & Karttunen 1973: 165)

Jos	aikoo	laihtua	lopettaa	syömisen
if	intend:PRES:SG	lose weight:1st:inf	finish:PRES:3SG	4 TH :INF:GEN

‘If you want to lose weight you give up eating.’

These different characterizations of impersonality are not necessarily mutually exclusive.² For example, weather constructions in many languages qualify as impersonal not only by virtue of the lack of a human agent but also by the presence of a pleonastic rather than a thematic @[subject], as is the case in English and significantly also by featuring verbs which are invariably @[third person]. Impersonal passives, in turn, may not only lack a thematic @[subject] but also involve a non-specified @[human as agent], as may also infinitivals and constructions with an invariant 3sg form of the verb. Nonetheless, convergences such as the above should not obscure the fact that the two semantic, the syntactic and the morphological notions of impersonalization sketched above are distinct. Although it is not impossible that there may be a top- order notion under which all four senses of impersonal may be unified, no such notion has yet emerged.³

The current article concentrates on impersonal constructions in the second of the above-mentioned semantic senses of the term, i.e. on non-specific agent impersonals. In particular it seeks to establish how @[pronominal impersonals] differ from what I will refer to, for want of a better term, as @[verbal impersonals]. Pronominal impersonals will be here represented by the @[third person plural] (3pl) construction, and the verbal impersonals by @[agentless passives] such as, *The results were eagerly awaited*, @[reflexive impersonals] such as the Portuguese *se*-construction cited earlier in (1) and @[participle impersonals] such as the Polish construction in (2). In languages in which 3pl impersonals co-exist with some type of verbal impersonals, the former are often seen as potential functional equivalents of the latter. (cf., *They've stolen my bag.* vs. *My bag has been stolen.*)

In this paper I will explore the extent to which this is indeed so. The focus of attention will be on the issue of the referential range of the @[3pl] as compared to that of the @[verbal impersonals]. The hypothesis underlying the investigation is that there may be a correlation between the referential range of impersonal constructions and the degree of @[grammaticalization] of the linguistic expressions of their referents. If this is the case, the referential range of @[pronominal impersonals], in our case the @[3pl] one, may be expected to be more closely tied to the person/number features of the pronominal forms in question than that of @[verbal impersonals] which feature minimal or no morphological expression of their referents. Further, there may also be differences in the referential range of pronominal impersonals realized by free forms as opposed to bound, with the latter exhibiting fewer referential restrictions than the former.

The discussion is structured as follows. Section 2 takes a look at @[3pl impersonal constructions] from the point of view of different notions of impersonality and reviews their cross-linguistic distribution. Section 3 considers the referential properties of 3pl impersonals in the light of the impersonal vs. @[generic] distinction and the extent to which the difference

posited holds cross-linguistically and may be related to the degree of @[grammaticalization] of the *3pl* construction. In section 4 we compare our findings relating to the referential range of the *3pl* construction with the corresponding observations that have been made with respect to @[verbal impersonals]. Concluding remarks will be provided in section 5.

2. What is a third person plural impersonal construction?

While in some languages person forms of the @[3pl] may be interpreted @[non-specifically] in other than @[subject] function under some set of circumstances, here we will be concerned only with non-specific uses of the *3pl* as subjects. Two cases in point are illustrated below.

(10) Icelandic

Peir eru búnir að loka veginum einusinni enn.
 3PL BE.3PL finished to close road.DEF.DAT one time again
 ‘They’ve closed the road once again.’

(11) Polish

Muszę kończyć niestety, bo czekają na mnie z biadem.
 must:1SG finish unfortunately because wait:3PL for me withdinner
 ‘Unfortunately, I must end (our conversation) because they’re waiting for me at the dinner table.’

In so-called @[pro-drop] languages such as Polish the impersonal reading of the *3pl* is typically seen to depend on the absence of a corresponding free *3pl* form. In other words the addition of *oni* ‘they’ in (11) is said to induce a definite interpretation of the *3pl*. This is a curious property of not only the *3pl* but also of other pronominal impersonal constructions, which, however, does not hold across the board. We will return to the issue below. But first let us consider some of the subdivisions of *3pl* impersonals that have been suggested.

2.1 @[Vague] vs. impersonal reference

In characterizing the different senses of the term impersonal in section 1, I mentioned that even when conceived of as denoting an @[unspecific human agent], the notion of impersonality is not uniformly interpreted. For some scholars, for example, Cinque (1988), Cardinalletti & Starke (1998), Alonso-Ovalle (2002), it means essentially that the speaker has no concrete individual or sets of individuals in mind. For other scholars, most notably Kitagawa & Lehrer (1990), the notion of impersonality necessarily implies anyone or everyone with the possible inclusion of @[speaker] and @[addressee]. Under this second view the @[3pl] constructions in (10) and (11) do not qualify as impersonal. In fact, according to Kitagawa & Lehrer 3pl constructions are never impersonal, only @[vague], where by ‘vague’ is meant a specific group of individuals who are not identified or identifiable by the speaker and exclude the speaker and addressee. And indeed in terms of this approach the only instances of 3pl constructions which emerge as impersonal rather than @[vague] would be ones where the 3pl is anaphoric to *people*, *everyone* or *anyone* as in (12), for example.⁴

- (12) If anyone thinks they’re perfect, they must be crazy.

Needless to say, this restricted interpretation of impersonality is not the one espoused here.

A different characterization of the distinction between vague and impersonal which does not exclude 3pl constructions from the domain of impersonality is suggested by Cavadas Afonso (2003). Cavadas Afonso seeks to sub-divide Kitagawa & Lehrer’s class of vague constructions by making a distinction between the @[specificity] of a group and the individuals comprising the group. Under her analysis vague reference occurs when the speaker is assumed to have a specific group in mind but not any specific individuals within that group. In the case of impersonal reference, on the other hand, not only the individuals but

also the group is unspecified. That *3pl* constructions can be both vague and impersonal in this sense of the terms is suggested by examples such as those in (13) and (14) in which the relevant instances of the *3pl* are in italics.⁵

(13) Well my father's best friend was a grocer but he unfortunately died and *they* put a manager into the shop and I got a job as an apprentice, well an unauthorized apprentice.

(14) -What was the toilet like?

-It was a flush toilet, we were one of the lucky ones. *They*'d just started flush toilets in ordinary houses.

In the case of (13) it is highly likely that the speaker knows which group of people were involved in the arranging of a manager but not the actual identity of the individuals comprising the group.⁶ In (14), on the other hand, the nature of the group is unknown also to the speaker. It could consist of the council authorities, builders, plumbers, people in Britain, etc.

While Cavadas Afonso's reinterpretation of the distinction between impersonal vs. @[vague] points to the need for a more detailed analysis of the range of referents of *3pl* constructions, we will not pursue her particular approach to doing so here. Rather we will concentrate on yet another bifurcation of impersonals that has been suggested in the literature, namely into impersonal vs. @[generic].

2.2 *Impersonal vs. generic*

Whereas Kitagawa & Lehrer's notion of impersonality excludes @[3pl] constructions from its scope, in terms of the approach outlined in Cinque (1988) and further developed by Cardinaletti & Starke (1998), *3pl* constructions emerge as not only impersonal but as

prototypically so. Cinque and Cardinaletti & Starke juxtapose impersonal constructions to @[generic] ones. Under their view impersonal constructions express propositions which apply to some unspecified individual or set of individuals, while @[generic] constructions express law-like propositions which hold for all the members of a group, however defined.⁷ Given their law-like nature @[generics] are associated with the absence of specific time reference. The situations and events expressed in impersonal constructions, by contrast, take place at a specified time. The impersonal vs. @[generic] distinction is captured by Cardinaletti & Starke in terms of the four contrasts in (a) through (d).

- a. impersonal reference may be seen as involving quasi-existential quantification 'There is at least one X', while generic reference is associated with quasi- universal quantification 'For every/all/any X'.
- b. impersonal reference requires specific time reference, while generic reference precludes it.
- c. impersonal reference is incompatible with the inclusion of the speaker, while generic reference allows for the inclusion of the speaker.
- d. impersonal reference forbids but generic requires a range restriction on the @[subject].

Significantly in the light of these contrasts @[3pl] constructions may be used impersonally as in (15a) or generically as in (15b).

- (15) a. They have cleaned a cow today in Switzerland.
- b. They usually clean cows in Switzerland.

Cardinaletti & Starke argue that while the identity of the impersonal *they* in (15a) is truly unknown, it could be anybody, that of the generic *they* in (15b) is restricted to the inhabitants

of Switzerland. Thus the impersonal construction can be best paraphrased as ‘Somebody, whoever, cleaned a cow today and this event took place in Switzerland’ while the closest paraphrase of the generic *they* is ‘People who inhabit Switzerland clean cows’.

My analysis of spoken British English strongly suggests that the impersonal use of @[3pl] constructions is far more common than the @[generic]. It must be pointed out, however, that the distinction between an impersonal and generic reading is not always as obvious as in the case of the examples in (15). In my corpus data there are examples in which the context of utterance imposes a generic interpretation despite the lack of an overt range restriction and/or the presence of specific time reference in the clause containing the 3pl. Consider (16), for instance.

- (16) -How old were you when you left school?
-15. But I’d stayed on a year longer. *They* left at 14 then.

The clause containing *they* in (16) refers to a habitual activity in the past. *They* is clearly @[generic], in the sense of the term used by Cardinaletti & Starke, since it does not refer to some unidentified set of individuals but rather to any schoolchild at a certain period of time at a specific place, namely the North-West of England. But this restriction on the referential value of *they* is due to the context, not to any range-imposing adverbial in the clause itself. A similar situation may be observed in (17).⁸

- (17) Well there were no procedures, it was just willy nilly, anybody when they’re ready... (...) boys and girls got bathed in front of each other you know in those days, you know at that age *they* didn’t bother.

Interestingly, in both (16) and (17) the speaker is implicitly included among the potential referents of *they*.

The impersonal vs. @[generic] distinction as described above not only provides justification for regarding *3pl* constructions as impersonal ones but more importantly is claimed to carry with it a host of additional morpho-syntactic reflexes. One of these relates to the obligatory absence of a free-form @[subject] pronoun in pronominal impersonal clauses in so-called @[pro-drop] languages as mentioned at the beginning of section 2. Recall that in the relevant languages, an overt free form is claimed to induce a definite interpretation. According to Cardinaletti & Starke (1998: 157) this is indeed so but only in clauses which are impersonal under their narrow interpretation of impersonal, not in @[generics]. They argue that whereas an impersonal interpretation is compatible only with what they call deficient pronouns (weak forms, clitics and affixes), a generic pronoun may be strong, i.e. an independent person form. Their data suggest that this is so in Italian and Slovak. In Russian, Polish, Spanish and Greek, however, even in generic contexts the presence of a @[3pl] free form induces a definite reading. Thus (18a) in contrast to (18b) can receive only a definite or deictic interpretation not a @[generic] one.

(18) Russian (Perlmutter 2001: 9)

a. Zeds' umirajut ot goloda i boleznej
 here die:3PL from hunger and diseases
 'Here they're dying of hunger and diseases.'

b. Zdes' oni umirajut ot goloda i boleznej
 here they die:3PL from hunger and diseases
 'Here they're dying of hunger and diseases.'

What underlies the possibility of an overt @[3pl] form receiving a @[generic] as opposed to a necessarily definite interpretation remains unclear. The issue has not yet been systematically and exhaustively tested either within languages or across-languages.⁹

Now that we have a somewhat better idea of what is meant by the term '@[3pl impersonal construction]', we are in a position to say a few words about its cross-linguistic distribution. In what follows I will use the term 'impersonal' in both the broad sense of the term, i.e. for a construction denoting a non-specific agent irrespective of whether the agent may or may not receive a @[generic] interpretation and in the narrow sense, where impersonal means non-generic, clarifying in each case the relevant reading.

2.3 The commonality of 3pl impersonals

In the light of the above discussion of the impersonality of *3pl* constructions one would expect *3pl* impersonals, at least in the generic sense of the term, to be universal. However, this does not appear to be so. There are languages in which *3pl* forms may receive only a definite reading. According to the respondents to my questionnaire this is the situation in Mandarin, Cantonese and Colloquial Sinhala as well as Japanese, Vietnamese and Thai.¹⁰ That the latter three languages do not allow for an impersonal reading of the expression used for third persons is not surprising, since they are typically seen as lacking true personal pronouns. The nominals that are used in lieu of pronominal forms continue to have transparent semantic content and are thus not easily interpretable as impersonal. Mandarin, Cantonese and Colloquial Sinhala, on the other hand, do have true person forms. While my data relating to these languages may be unreliable, the possibility that they may indeed not allow for impersonal interpretations of their *3pl* forms is suggested by the fact that there are yet other languages in which the impersonal use of the *3pl* forms is marginal at best. This is so in the Baltic-Finnic languages, especially Finnish and Estonian (Holvoet 2001: 381). In both languages the impersonal use of the *3pl* seems to occur only with @[speech act verbs], particularly in reporting rumours, as in (19).

(19) Finnish (Mullonen 1963: 34)

Siellä	kuuluvat	tienaavan	hyvin
there	be:rumoured:PRES:3PL	earn:PART.ACT	well

‘It is said that one earns well here.’

This use of the non-specific *3pl* with speech act verbs is widely attested in European languages though in many it is stylistically restricted to proverbs, myths and fables. This is not the case in colloquial British English in which *they* with @[speech act verbs], particularly *call*, is not uncommon. Nonetheless, even in British English, the @[agentless passive] (as in the translation of (19)) is a much more common option than the 3pl with speech act verbs. According to the respondents to my questionnaire, in other European languages either the agentless passive is used with the relevant type of verbs or another @[non-specific agent] construction. For example, in German, Danish and Swedish the *man*-construction and in French the *on*-construction are also possibilities. It is therefore quite curious that a usage of the non-specific 3pl which is so heavily stylistically restricted in other European languages is the only one which occurs in Finnish and Estonian.¹¹ In some of the other Baltic Finnic languages such as Vepsian and Livonian the *3pl* appears to be used impersonally more widely. This, however, is attributed to the influence of Russian and/or Latvian. What is important in the context of this discussion is that there are good reasons to assume that the impersonal use of the 3pl may not be universal. Whether this is indeed so remains to be established.

Claims to universality aside, the impersonal use of @[3pl] forms is clearly widely attested. My own investigations reveal that such usage occurs in most macro-areas of the globe. In Eurasia it is found in virtually all branches of Indo-European: Indic (e.g. Kashmiri), Iranian (e.g. Persian), Greek, Celtic, Germanic, Romance, Slavic and Baltic. It also occurs in most branches of the Uralic languages, i.e. the Samoyedic (e.g. Nenets), Ugric (e.g. Hungarian), Permic (e.g. Udmurt, Komi), Volgaic (e.g. Erzya Mordvin, Mari) as well as in

the Turkic languages (e.g. Turkish), Caucasian (e.g. Abkhaz), the isolate Basque and in Dravidian (e.g. Tamil). In Africa @[non-specific] uses of the *3pl* are documented among the Afro-Asiatic languages within the Semitic (e.g. Hebrew, Arabic) and Chadic (e.g. Mupun) groups, among the Niger-Kongo languages in Bantu (e.g. Babungo, Nkore-Kiga), in Gur (e.g. Koromfe), Kru (e.g. Godie) and among the Nilo-Saharan languages in the Sudanic group (e.g. Kunama, Mundani, Ngiti). Among the languages of Oceania @[non-specific] 3pl usage has been noted in, for example, Paamese, Tawala and the languages of New Caledonia. In New Guinea @[non-specific] *3pl* forms have been reported in Amele and Kobon and in Australia in Marunguku. Among the languages of North America the non-specific use of the 3pl appears to be less common. It is attested in Copala Trique and Tetelcingo Nahuatl. However, according to Mithun (1991) many families of the North have special @[non-specific] bound forms attached to the verb corresponding to European free forms such as *somebody*, *someone* which are used impersonally rather than the 3pl.

In what sense of the term ‘impersonal’ the *3pl* constructions in the above languages are actually used is by no means clear. The issue is not discussed in reference grammars, and data beyond just a few examples are available virtually only for some European languages. And even in the case of European languages much unclarity about the uses of the *3pl* impersonal remains. The following discussion will be confined in the main to the languages of Europe and will draw on the information that I have collected from the previously mentioned questionnaire, which has been filled out for 31 languages.¹²

3. The referents of the 3pl

The range of referents of the *3pl* in impersonals differs from those of @[generics] in relation to both @[semantic role] and referential properties.

Beginning with semantic role, *3pl* impersonals are seen to be restricted to agentive @[subjects] of either transitive or intransitive clauses. Accordingly, the 3pl in the examples in (20) through (22) featuring an @[unaccusative] verb (20), a copulative verb (21) and occurring as the subject of a passive clause (22), can only receive a specific reading.

(20) Spanish (Jaeggli 1986: 50)

Mueren en defensa de la democracia

die:3PL in defence of the democracy

‘They die in defence of democracy.’

(21) Italian (Cinque 1988: 543, 545)

Ieri, sono stati villani con tutti

yesterday AUX:PRES:3PL be:PRT rude with all

‘Yesterday, they were rude to all.’

(22) They were exposed to a lot of radiation in 1986 in Chernobyl.

3pl @[generics], on the other hand, are argued by Cinque (1988: 545) and Cardinalletti & Starke (1998: 157) to be compatible with non-agentive subjects. Thus (23) through (25) featuring the same verb types as in (20) through (22) are seen to be fine under a generic interpretation.

(23) Spanish

Aquí mueren en defensa de la democracia

here die:3PL in defence of the democracy

‘Here they die in defence of democracy.’

(24) Italian

In questo ufficio, sono molto gentili col pubblico

in this office be:PRES:3PL very kind with: the public

‘In this office they are very kind to the public.’

(25) In Chernobyl, they’ve been exposed to a lot of radiation.

As for referential properties, in its @[generic] use the *3pl* is always semantically plural and typically denotes people at some location, as in the examples above. The referents of *3pl* impersonals are also often semantically plural but they need not be. The referents of *3pl* impersonals typically involve what I will refer to following Myhill (1997) as @[organizational grouping], i.e. one or more members of some organization or institution acting as a group. In (26), for example, the group in question is the army.

(26) This er very good orderly got local leave after he’d done his stint up country ’cos he’d made such a good job of it, *they* gave him local leave.

In (14) cited earlier the group is the local authorities. Much less frequently a *3pl* impersonal is used to denote a group of unspecified agents involved in the same specific physical action as in (27) and (28).

(27) (...) and it showed where *they* used to take the prisoners in and *they* took ’em in at the side where the steps are going up to Townley, *they* took them in at the side while they were dancing in the long gallery that was the ballroom and *they’d* take them in underneath there and *they* were torturing them

(28) Did your father work after his accident?

Oh, yes, he went back to work. You see, the accident, I was only a baby. I must have been only two months old actually when that happened. He used to joke about it. *They* brought him home on a door, carrying him from up these quarries up here on a door.

In both of these examples the referents of the italicized instances of *they* do not have any clear institutional or organizational affiliation. In (27) *they* denotes whoever was involved in bringing in prisoners to the castle and dealing with them there. The people in question may well have always been representatives of the same group of guards, but they may have had different affiliations. What seems to be relevant here is not their common affiliation but the fact that they were @[jointly involved in performing a series of specific activities]. This is even clearer in (28), in which the only contextual indication of who *they* might have been is not provided until the subsequent clause.

The results of the questionnaire suggest that of the above two uses of *3pl* impersonals, the @[organizational grouping] one, as in (14) and (26) and the @[joint specific common activity] one, as in (27) and (28), the former is cross-linguistically commoner than the latter. The @[joint specific common activity] use does not appear to be available in Swedish or the South-West dialect of Finnish and is considered to be marginal at best in Icelandic, Danish and German. These languages do, however, allow for the @[organizational group] use. Significantly, there are no languages among those that I have considered which allow for the joint specific common activity use of the *3pl* but not for the organizational group use. In short, it appears that the possibility of the joint specific common activity use in a language implies the possibility of the organizational group use, but not vice versa. It is worth mentioning that even those languages which do allow the common activity use differ with respect to the conditions under which such usage occurs. For instance, Myhill (1997: 814-815) suggests that English imposes considerably stricter requirements on this usage of the *3pl* than does Hebrew. Accordingly, while in Hebrew, the *3pl* may be used in a context such as (29), in English it cannot, and the agentless passive must be used, instead.

(29) vayishlax par'oh vayikra/ /et-yosef vayricuhu
 and-sent Pharaoh and-3SG-called acc-Joseph and:3PL-hurried-3SG

min-habor...

from the dungeon

‘Thereupon Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was rushed from the dungeon.’

(# they rushed him from the dungeon)

Coming back to the @[organizational grouping] use, as pointed out by Myhill it is often unclear whether one or more individuals are literally involved in the action. For instance in (26) it could well have been @[a single individual] who decided that the orderly should have left or alternatively a number of individuals. In English as well as in Dutch it is mainly in such instances, i.e. when they are acting as representatives of a group, that the referents of a 3pl impersonal are open to @[an individual interpretation]. However, this is not the case in other languages. For instance, Perlmutter (2001: 10) states that in Russian (30) is fine even when the speaker hears only a single person knocking.

(30) Russian

Stučat v dver`

knock:3PL at door

‘Someone is knocking at the door.’

And Myhill (1997: 815) mentions that (31) is possible in Modern Hebrew in an out-of-the-blue context when there is no reason to suppose that more than one individual is involved.

(31) Hebrew

Ganvu li /et-ha-mexonit

stole:3PL to-me acc-the-car

‘My car was stolen.’ (Lit. ‘They’ve stolen my car.’)¹³

In some languages the referent of a 3pl impersonal may actually be a person known to both speaker and addressee. For instance in both Spanish and Italian a 3pl impersonal may be followed by a clause specifying the identity of the person in question, as in (32).

(32) Italian (Cinque 1988: 543)

Prima hanno telefonato: mi pareva tua sorella
earlier have:3PL telephoned me seemed your sister

‘Someone (*They) telephoned earlier. It seemed to me that it was your sister.’

I have not been able to determine whether such a sequence would be felicitous in Russian. In Polish it would not be.

According to the respondents of my questionnaire, *3pl* impersonals are not open to an @[individual reading] in all languages. No such reading appears to be available in French, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Icelandic or German (for one informant) or the previously mentioned South-West dialect of Finnish. It is of interest to note that, with the exception of French, these are the very languages in which @[the joint common specific activity] use of the 3pl was either marginal (Icelandic, Danish and German) or completely disallowed (Swedish and Finnish). Thus among the languages in my sample the distribution of the uses of *3pl* impersonals seems to be in line with the implicational hierarchy in (33):

(33) @[organizational group use] > j@[oint specific activity use] > @[single individual] use

While the conditions under which an @[individual] reading of the *3pl* is possible differ from language to language, the possibility of such a reading seems also to imply the possibility of a @[joint specific activity] use of the *3pl*, and the existence of such usage in a language seems to entail the possibility of the @[organizational group] use. That the individual use of the *3pl*

should be the least common is not surprising if one takes into consideration the semantics of *3pl* forms. Interestingly enough, in the languages which do not appear to allow an individual reading of *3pl* impersonals, the *3pl* is realized either exclusively by a free form or necessarily by both a free and a bound form but not solely by a bound form. Observe that none of the above mentioned Germanic languages nor French are pro-drop ones, and Finnish normally drops first and second person pronouns but not third person ones.

4. @[Verbal impersonals]

Verbal impersonals, in the sense of the term used here, cover @[agentless passives], on the one hand, and active impersonal constructions such as the Romance or Slavic @[reflexive impersonals], or the Slavic or Finnic @[participle impersonals], on the other. In contrast to *3pl* impersonals, verbal impersonals – both active and passive – have received an enormous amount of attention in the literature. Our discussion, however, will focus only on their referential properties.

4.1 Reflexive impersonals

@[Reflexive impersonals] (see by Ruiz de Mendoza & Peña, this volume) in Romance and Slavic are morphologically third person. In Romance the reflexive marker is homophonous with a third person reflexive clitic and the verb is in the third person singular.¹⁴ In Slavic languages it is only the verb that is in the third person, the reflexive marker having no person features. The referents of reflexive impersonals, just like those of *3pl* impersonals, are necessarily human. However, whereas the referents of *3pl* impersonals are typically confined to third persons, those of active reflexive impersonals tend to denote people in general and crucially often include the speaker and may also include the addressee. Accordingly, in the context of Kitagawa & Lehrer's impersonal vs. vague distinction they qualify as impersonal

and while not necessarily always meeting Cardinaletti & Starke's criteria of genericity, they are often used @[generically].

@[Reflexive impersonals] can be formed from both @[transitive] verbs (see the Portuguese (1) in the introduction) and intransitive verbs of all classes, @[unergative] (34), @[unaccusative] (35), copulative (36) and even passive (37).

(34) Czech (Dorosz 1975: 79)

Z Brna se jede do Prahy přes Třebovou
from Brno REFL goes:3SG to Prague via Trebovo
'One goes from Brno to Prague via Trebovo.'

(35) Spanish (Jaeggli 1986: 51)

Se llega cansado después de un viaje tan largo
REFL arrives tired after of a trip so long
'One arrives tired after such a long trip.'

(36) Italian (Cinque 1988: 522)

non si è mai contenti
neg REFL be:pres:3ps never satisfied
'One is never satisfied.'

(37) Polish (Kibort 2000: 91)

Było się bitym przez kaprała.
be:NEUT:3SG REFL beaten by corporal
'One was beaten by the corporal.'

Unlike @[3pl] constructions, reflexive impersonals are typically used in contexts where the speaker is included or at least could be included as in (34) through (37).¹⁵ Nonetheless, this is

not always the case. In questions, such as (38) for example, it is not the @[speaker] but rather the @[addressee] who is included among the @[non-specific] referents of the @[reflexive] impersonal.

(38) Polish

Co się robiło na przerwach?

what REFL did:3SG on breaks.

'What did you used to do during the break?'

A clause such as (38) would normally be understood as asking about practices in which the @[addressee] was involved but definitely not the @[speaker]. In declaratives the exclusion of the speaker can be achieved contextually, as in (39) and (40) in which the @[speaker] explicitly excludes him/herself from the range of potential referents.

(39) Serbo-Croatian (Spalatin 1973: 126)

Pitao sam ga što se govori o meni

asked be:1SG him what REFL said:3Sg about me

'I asked him what was being said about me?/ I asked him what they were saying about me.'

(40) Polish

No nie wiedziałem, bo ja jestem na prowincji i w ogóle

well not knew:3SG because I am in provinces and at all

się mnie nie informuje.

REFL I:ACC not inform.:3SG

'Well I didn't know because I'm in the provinces and they don't inform me about anything at all.'

@[Reflexive impersonals] such as (39) and (40) are very close to @[3pl] impersonals, as the translations of the two clauses suggest. Unlike in the case of 3pl impersonals, however, in (39) and (40) the @[addressee] is not categorically excluded. It is sometimes suggested that reflexive impersonals are never open to a pure third person reading. But this is not so. Consider (41), for example as uttered now in 2006.

(41) Polish (Kubiński 1987: 39)

W XIX	wieku	rzadko	posiadano	łazienki.	Chodziło	się
in 19	century	seldom	possessed:IMPER	bathrooms	go:3SG	REFL
wówczas	do	łazni	miejskiej.			
then	to	bath	municipal			

‘In the 19th century people seldom had their own bathrooms. One would go to the municipal baths.’

Within the specified context, the referents of the reflexive impersonal are people in the 19th century among whom neither the @[speaker] nor the hearer could be included. Nonetheless, if an adverbial specifying the time frame were to be placed not in the preceding clause as in (41) but rather in the sentence containing the impersonal reflexive as in (42), the speaker would be necessarily included.

(42) W XIX wieku chodziło się do łazni miejskiej
in 19 century go:3sg refl. to bath municipal

‘In the 19th century people seldom had their own bathrooms. One would go to the municipal baths.’

Thus a clause such as (42) in Polish is only felicitous if uttered by a time traveller.

In Italian the extent to which the @[speaker] and @[addressee] are included depends on the specificity of time reference and the nature of the verb. Cinque (1988: 542) states that

while with @[transitive] and @[unergative] verbs in contexts of specific time reference the typically reading of the referent of the @[reflexive] impersonal is people in general, with other verbs such as @[unaccusative] and copulative ones specific time reference induces a first person plural interpretation. Therefore while (43a) with an @[unergative] verb is fine when neither the speaker nor the addressee is in Beirut at the time of uttering the sentence, (43b) would be felicitous only under such conditions.

(43) Italian

a. Oggi, a Beirut, si è sparato tutta la mattina
 today in Beirut REFL be shot whole the morning

'Today in Beirut they shot the whole morning.'

b. Oggi, a Beirut, si è nati senza assistenza medica
 today in Beirut REFL be born without assistance medical

'Today in Beirut we were born with no medical assistance.'

Recall that @[3pl] impersonals are in some languages open to an individual interpretation the exact nature of which differs from language to language. @[Reflexive] impersonals are only rarely used with reference to a @[single individual] and when so used the individual is necessarily the speaker in declaratives and the addressee in questions. A case in point is illustrated in (44).

(44) Polish

Proszę nie przerywać. Mówi się.
 please not interrupt speak REFL

'Please don't interrupt. I'm speaking.'

4.2 @[Participle impersonals]

Special participles used impersonally are found in Slavic, Baltic and Finnic languages (see e.g. Siewierska 1988, Holvoet 2001, Blevins 2003).¹⁶ In Finnic languages they appear to be able to denote a wide range of human referents; exclusively third persons as in (45a), a group among which the @[speaker] may be included (45b) and even a group necessarily including the speaker as in (45c).

(45) Estonian (Blevins 2003: 483, 485)

- a. Õues kakeldi
outside fight:PAST:IMPER
'People are fighting outside.'
- b. Soomes ollakse nii'tõsised
Finland:INES be:PRES:IMPER so serious:NOM:PL
'People in Finland are so serious.'
- c. Sooh siis nüüd loetakse ja naerdakse
So, then now read:PRES:IMPER and laugh:PRES:IMPER
ennast segaseks
self:PART muddled:TRAN
'So now one reads and laughs oneself silly.'

My data on the referential use of participle impersonals in Slavic are essentially restricted to Polish. The Polish *no/to* participles are used only in the perfective. Interestingly enough, unlike in the Estonian construction, the referents of the Polish *no/to* participles necessarily exclude the @[speaker]. In terms of referential range, they are very close to @[3pl] impersonals and in fact the two constructions are often interchangeable. The *no/to* impersonals are, however, neutral with respect to number. They are therefore more easily

used for singular referents than *3pl* impersonals. Accordingly, in (46) a *3pl* would hardly be felicitous and would imply that more than one kiss was involved with more than one party doing the kissing. The *no/to* participle carries no such implication.

- (46) Polish
Pocałowano go w czoło.
kissed:IMPER him in forehead
'He was kissed on the forehead.'

Though very similar in referential range to @[*3pl*] impersonals, the *no/to* participle in Polish is stylistically neutral. *3pl* impersonals, on the other hand, have a strongly colloquial flavour.

4.3 @[Agentless passives]

In contrast to the referents of @[*3pl*] impersonals and @[reflexive] impersonals and @[participle] impersonals, the referents of the covert agent of an @[agentless passive] are not typically confined to @[humans]. In many languages the implied agents are necessarily those occurring with @[transitive] verbs but they are typically not strictly agentive. They may include, for instance, experiencers. Nor do they display restrictions with respect to person or number. When non-specific they may be used to denote anyone and everyone, i.e. people in general, some loosely specified collective among which the speaker is or is not included or even one or more non-specific individuals. They thus embrace within their scope the potential referents of @[*3pl*] impersonals, @[reflexive] impersonals and @[participle] impersonals. It is thus not surprising that quite often and *3pl* impersonals or reflexive impersonals or participle @[agentless passives] impersonals are interchangeable or at least appear to be so. To what extent they actually are interchangeable depends on the full set of non-specific agent constructions available in the language in question and the stylistic and other restrictions that each has. In English, for example, @[agentless passives] and @[*3pl* impersonals] of

transitive clauses are mutually substitutable in the colloquial spoken language but not in other registers or styles. Examples where the two constructions are actually used interchangeably are, however, not that easy to come by. Two cases in point from my dialect corpus are presented in (47) and (48). (The material in square brackets is inserted by me.)

(47) I don't think it's holy communion specifically they need, it's nice to have someone visit them. Cos I'm convinced, *this was started years ago*, taking communion into these old people's homes. But what *they* forgot was that all these old people involved, they weren't all regular communicants

(48) Were bombs dropped in this area?

There was *one [which was] dropped* on Thompsons Park and *that [was] dropped* during the night and I never heard it, I slept through it and there were *some [which were] dropped* above Crown Point. There was supposed to be a mock airfield up there to distract the Germans and *they* dropped a few bombs round that area into the fields.¹⁷

5. Concluding remarks

We have seen that the various impersonal constructions that we have considered differ with respect to their referential range. The referential range of the @[3pl] is the most restricted. 3pl impersonal constructions denote third person referents among which the speaker and/or addressee are hardly ever included. The referents of the 3pl are typically semantically plural and in some languages must necessarily be so, i.e. an individual interpretation is excluded. The referential range of reflexive impersonals is considerably wider. In contrast to 3pl impersonals, they include the speaker and/or addressee within their scope, but given an appropriate context may exclude either. Further, while typically implicating a group they are

open to an individual reading which may denote the speaker or in questions the addressee. Participle impersonals do not constitute a unified group with respect to referential range. In Finnic, @[participle impersonals] seem to have properties of both @[reflexive impersonals] and @[3pl] impersonals in that they allow third person readings and also readings which include the speaker and hearer. Whether they allow for an individual reading I do not know. The Polish participle impersonals are rather different. They are very reminiscent of 3pl impersonals though more open than the former to an individual interpretation. Finally, @[agentless passives] are referentially unrestricted.

The fact that the narrowest referential range is displayed by @[3pl] impersonals and the widest by @[agentless passives] is of interest since it is suggestive of there being a correlation between the referential range of impersonal constructions and the degree of @[grammaticalization] of the linguistic expressions of their referents. While it is possible to argue that it is the whole construction rather than just the third person plural form which constitutes the linguistic expression of the referents of 3pl constructions, in the light of the above discussion there is no denying that the person and number features strongly restrict the range of referents that 3pl impersonal constructions denote. In @[agentless passives], on the other hand, there is no morphological expression of the non-specific agent. And significantly agentless passives display no referential restrictions on the implied agent. With respect to referential range, the non-specific agents of @[reflexive impersonals] and @[participle impersonals] stand in-between the two extremes of 3pl impersonals on the one hand and @[agentless passives] on the other. While the referents that they denote are not tied to any elements of the morphology (for instance, in the case of reflexive impersonals the reflexive marker and the third person singular form of the verb), there are person, number and in some languages even gender features associated with the construction which in concert with the lexical material, especially the predicate and adverbial modifiers, may have a constraining

effect on referential interpretation. There is no need to consider the various proposals that have been made relating to the above since what is of import in the context of the current discussion is that @[verbal impersonals] as a group are less referentially restricted than @[pronominal] ones.

That the transparency of morphological marking may have a bearing on semantic interpretation is also suggested by the differences in the referential range of *3pl* impersonals that we have noted on a cross-linguistic basis. Recall that the distribution of the various uses of *3pl* impersonals among the languages considered here appears to conform to the implicational hierarchy in (33), according to which the existence of the more restrictive uses of the *3pl* in a language, most notably the possibility of an individual reading, implies the presence of the less restrictive uses, i.e. the @[joint specific common activity] use and the @[organizational group] use, and the existence of the common activity use implies the existence of the organizational group use. The use of the @[3pl] to denote a @[single individual] runs counter to what the number feature of the person form would lead us to expect. It is therefore of considerable interest that, with the exception of English, the languages which allow for an individual reading of the *3pl* are those in which the third person plural morphemes are expressed solely by bound forms as opposed to free forms or a combination of free and bound forms. Recall that no @[individual reading] of the *3pl* appears to be possible in Danish, German, Icelandic, Norwegian, Swedish or the relevant dialect of Finnish. And the circumstances under which English allows for an individual reading are quite restricted, at least in comparison to languages such as Hebrew or Italian. That the possible interpretations of free person forms should be more restricted than those of their more @[grammaticalized] counterparts, i.e. bound person forms, is fully in line with the principles of @[grammaticalization] (see e.g. Lehmann 1982: 236; Haspelmath 1999: 1050, Croft 2000). This leads us to expect bound forms to evince a certain degree of @[semantic

bleaching] and thus be compatible with a wider range of interpretive possibilities than free forms. It now remains to be determined whether the same or comparable differences in the interpretation of @[3pl impersonal] constructions are to be found in languages other than the ones considered here and whether the existing differences also correlate with the morphological status of the 3pl morpheme.

Notes

1. The notion of agentivity is a highly controversial one. One reflection of this is that in cognitive linguistics it is viewed as a radial category with prototypical instances at the centre and less prototypical ones on the periphery. Langacker (1991: 238) defines a prototypical agent as being “human, exercising volitional control, being an energy source, directing action outward, and remaining basically unaffected by it”. My use of the term here covers both the prototypical and less prototypical instantiations (intransitive actions, no necessary control of effects of action) of agenthood provided that it involves humans.
2. A somewhat different typology of impersonal constructions is suggested by Carlos Moreno (1987), who makes a distinction between impersonals expressing uncontrolled events and those expressing controlled events. The former are agentless impersonals which are subdivided into those involving external events (e.g. weather phenomena) or internal events (e.g. bodily sensations). The controlled impersonals also fall into two types, those with a non-specific controller (which include my non-specified agent constructions) and those with a specific one which, however, is not the subject (agentless passives).
3. What the four types of impersonals have in common is that they lack a definite human agent as subject. Accordingly, they may all be seen as a means of agent backgrounding or defocusing. This, however, is hardly enough to provide a unifying definition of impersonals to the exclusion of other constructions such as anticausatives (e.g. *The stick broke*), unaccusatives (e.g. *Mary fell*) or instances of subject ellipsis (e.g. [*I returned late and found John waiting*]), for example.
4. The speaker may be included in certain types of so-called generic 3pl constructions, such as the one illustrated further below in (17).
5. Most of the English examples of 3pl impersonal constructions are taken from a 50,000 -word corpus of Lancaster dialect originating from the Northwest Sound Archive in Clitheroe.

6. This is even clearer in the Polish example in (11) given earlier, where the group of people waiting are the speaker's family (and potentially friends); the speaker is having a telephone conversation from home.
7. For a more comprehensive discussion of genericity and especially the difference between generic NPs and generic statements, on the one hand, and generic statements and characterizing sentences, on the other, see Behrens (2005) and the references therein. The constructions considered as generic by Cardinaletti & Starke (1998) would qualify as characterizing sentences as opposed to true generics in the more traditional approach discussed by Behrens and typically adopted within formal semantics.
8. The *they* in (17) is ambiguous in that it may be seen as anaphoric to *boys and girls* or as antecedentless.
9. Testing such delicate differences with informants is very difficult since the distinction between a non-specific group of individuals and anybody who fits the bill is not so easy to explain.
10. I developed a questionnaire aimed at establishing the uses of the 3pl in 15 different contexts which was filled out by 39 colleagues and postgraduate students of the Linguistics and English Language Department at Lancaster University. The questionnaire was rather elaborate and too difficult to enable one to consider the responses of the informants as entirely reliable. I have therefore treated the results as suggestive rather than conclusive.
11. This is not to say that a 3pl impersonal construction is the preferred non-specific agent construction with *verba dicendi* in Finnish and Estonian. The impersonal passive or the 3sg impersonal seem to be the preferred choice. In fact only one of the two Finnish respondents to my questionnaire allows the impersonal usage of the 3pl.
12. I would like to express my thanks to colleagues and postgraduate students of the Department of Linguistics and English Language at Lancaster University and several international colleagues for taking the trouble to fill out this rather demanding questionnaire.
13. Myhill (1997: 816) maintains that the Hebrew construction in this case cannot be translated into an analogous *they*-construction in English since the English *they* requires some context to make it less vague, such as a preceding clause as in *My car has been broken into. They've taken the radio.* Weiner & Labov (1983: 34), however, note that they elicited three uses of non-specific *they* e.g. *They broke into the liquor closet* in response to the question *What happened?*. Significantly though, the question was asked of people "milling round the broken door to the liquor closet", so in a situational context, not completely out of the blue.
14. There are differences throughout Romance in regard to whether past participles if found in reflexive impersonals display singular or plural number agreement. For instance, in Italian the agreement is

plural, in Spanish it is singular.

15. In Spanish the speaker is often excluded from reflexive impersonals formed from transitive verbs as opposed to intransitive ones.

16. I have not included in the discussion the impersonal Celtic autonomous verbal forms (see e.g. Fife 1992; Blevins 2003) which are similar to the Balto-Slavic constructions as they are not strictly speaking participles.

17. Under my analysis the *they* in (48) is not anaphoric to *the Germans* in the preceding clause, but rather to the referents of the covert agents of the preceding passive clauses: the German airforce.

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