Transitivity and impersonality: the demise and return of the Spanish impersonal constructions

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The notion of transitivity plays a major role in the grammar of the Indo-European languages. Its influence can be exerted beyond the verbal syntax and affect also the grammar of sentence. In the history of Spanish and other Romance languages, the transitive sentence, as a complex unit, was grammaticalized. As a result, it became a construction, in the sense that this term has in the work of Croft (2001) and Goldberg (2006). The main effect of this process is that the transitive construction was linked with a specific semantic prototype. On the other hand, the consolidation of the transitive construction was the cause that other sentence frames with opposite meaning ended up grammaticalized and gave rise to the birth of new constructions. This was just the case of the impersonal construction, which was integrated into a semantic associative network of constructions in the Romance languages.

The purpose of this research is to address the history of these impersonal constructions that were possible in Old Spanish (and also in the early stages of some Indo-European languages) but tended to be replaced by new constructions with subject, that emerged under the growing influence of the grammaticalized transitive construction.

These impersonal constructions, that were possible within a specific group of stative verbs, were semantically linked with the conceptual field of emotions, feelings, pains, and modality. The syntax of these constructions shows a consistent evolutive pattern, similar to the one which can be observed among the Germanic languages. Their use was much more frequent then than it is nowadays, and therefore it is reasonable to claim that they are moving back in all these languages partially or even totally. In recent linguistic research, specially in the Germanic area, there has been an intense debate on the syntactic status of some of these constructions wherein no NP bears the expression of a canonical subject (nominative case, concordance with verb, etc). These impersonal constructions (of the type of *me-thinks*) normally have a subject-like NP which bears a dative or accusative case marking. Most of these “quirky subjects” (as they are usually called) have tended to be replaced by similar constructions with standard subjects.

In Latin they were even more frequent and varied than they are in modern Indo-European languages. They were also not scarce in the Romance family. In Old Spanish they can be easily found in texts from the Middle Ages or even later. Some residues of these structures still remain in nowadays Spanish (e.g. *me da vergüenza de ti*).

The central thesis of this research is that the loss of the impersonal constructions is tied in with the increased productivity and schematicity of the transitive construction.

REFERENCES