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Taking Stock to Look Ahead

Celebrating Forty Years of English Studies in Spain

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ASOCIACIÓN ESPAÑOLA DE ESTUDIOS ANGLO-NORTEAMERICANOS

Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana
Universidad Zaragoza

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2018
Prensas Universitarias de la
Universidad de Zaragoza

1.ª Edición. Zaragoza, 2018
Edita: Servicio de Publicaciones. Universidad de Zaragoza
ISBN: 978-84-16723-51-5

Servicio de
Publicaciones
Universidad Zaragoza

Table of Contents

Preface

For Anglicists in Spain, November is the month that marks our annual opportunity to get together and share our latest work with colleagues from all over the country. The conference that gave rise to the papers that make up this volume, held in Huesca on November 9-11, 2016 and organized by the Department of English and German Studies at the University of Zaragoza, provided a special cause for celebration since it marked the 40th anniversary of the Spanish Association of English and North-American Studies (1976-2016). What is more, after exactly thirty years, the Department of English and German Studies at the University of Zaragoza has had the honor of hosting our association's yearly conference for the second time, a happy coincidence that has inspired our design of this e-book's cover. As the editors of last year's conference e-book aptly put it in the Preface, "[g]lancing backwards is probably one of the most common gestures in scholarly work." It seems particularly fitting to borrow their words now.

A look at the figures from AEDEAN's early years tells us that membership has increased from around four hundred members during the first few years to almost three thousand members nowadays. Similarly, while the first few conferences of our Association gathered an average of forty presentations, participation has increased to around two hundred contributions in the 40th AEDEAN Conference in Huesca, in the form of plenary lectures, roundtables, workshops and scholarly papers.[1] Needless to say, the exponential growth of these figures also means a significant diversification in the research interests and approaches of AEDEAN members and, by extension, of the contributions to our annual conference, as both the diversity of thematic panels and the varied sample of scholarly work included in this e-book shows. It seems apt, therefore, to take advantage of the occasion of putting together this volume and writing this Preface to celebrate the continuing good health of English Studies in Spain.

As the title of this volume suggests, taking stock is important in order to look ahead. The considerable amount of young researchers who have joined AEDEAN in the last years—a good number of whom may have chosen Huesca to participate in our annual conference for the first or second time—provides unequivocal proof of the bright future that hopefully awaits our association in particular and scholarship in English and American studies in Spain in general, despite the decidedly adverse economic and political conditions in the last few years. So does the enthusiasm with which volunteer graduate students from the Department of English and German Studies at the University of Zaragoza tirelessly contributed to the success of the AEDEAN Conference at Huesca.

[1] See Prof. Pedro Guardia Massó's presentation to commemorate the first twenty-five years of AEDEAN: https://aedean.org/?page_id=7

Taking Stock to Look Ahead: Celebrating Forty Years of English Studies in Spain brings together a diverse but well-balanced selection of the plenary lectures, scholarly papers and round tables presented at the AEDEAN Conference at Huesca. The contents of this e-book are divided into four sections. The volume opens with two thought-provoking essays by writers Anne Karpf (London Metropolitan University) and Tabish Khair (Aahrus University), who compellingly reflect on the relationship between fiction and reality. The next two sections constitute the main body of the volume and comprise over thirty essays on the two wider areas of scholarship within English and North-American studies: literature and cultural studies (Part I) and language and linguistics (Part II). It is worth highlighting that an effort has been made to represent the different thematic areas evenly, with an average of two or three contributions per thematic panel. Finally, the last section of this volume includes some of the latest findings of three research projects in the form of round tables, dealing with cutting-edge research topics such as Neo-Victorian studies, musical narratives of the American West and European renditions of the American West. In short, the contributions included in this volume succeed not only in putting forward provocative and innovative research, but also in sampling the wealth and breadth of scholarly interests and approaches that the annual AEDEAN Conference unfailingly gathers.

We would like to conclude this Preface by expressing our sincere gratitude to all those who have made the edition of this volume possible. To begin with, special thanks are due the Executive Board of AEDEAN, who have generously offered their support and advice from the moment that the University of Zaragoza was accepted as host for the 40th AEDEAN Conference up to the last stages of the publication of this e-book. In that sense, our gratitude also extends to the panel coordinators and anonymous colleagues for their collaboration in the process of double-blind reviewing of the submitted papers. We are deeply indebted to Professor Susana Onega Jaén and Professor Francisco Collado Rodríguez—the President and Treasurer of the organizing committee—for giving us the generous opportunity to be a part of AEDEAN's 40th anniversary conference at Huesca and trusting us with this project. Our profound appreciation goes also to the authors of the contributions included in this e-book, since it is the excellence of their scholarship that constitutes the core of this project and that will make it relevant to any reader within the field of English and North-American studies. Finally, we would like to thank the volunteer students of the Department of English and German studies at the University of Zaragoza for their tireless assistance and support, and to all the participants in the 40th AEDEAN conference.

María Ferrández San Miguel and Claus-Peter Neumann
Zaragoza, April 2018

Impersonal Constructions in Early Modern English: A Case Study of *like* and *please*

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Abstract

One of the most widely discussed topics in the field of English historical syntax is the so-called impersonal construction. Although traditional accounts generally relate the demise of the impersonal construction to the deep morphosyntactic transformations that took place over the history of the English language, recent investigations have outlined additional hypotheses to account for the cause(s) for its loss. In light of the most recent studies on the topic, this investigation provides a corpus-based analysis of two formerly impersonal verbs, namely *like* (<OE *(ge)līcian*) and *please* (<Anglo-Norman *plaiser, pleser*) in the Early Modern English period. Based on data from the *Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Early Modern English* (1500–1710), this case study aims at offering a diachronic account of the development of these two verbs, with a focus on the range of morphosyntactic patterns documented for each of them.

Keywords: Construction Grammar; impersonal construction; transitivity; Early Modern English

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is concerned with the later stages of impersonal constructions in English, an example of which is given in (1):

(1) *Me* ***liketh*** *nat to lye.*
me-OBJ pleases-3SG not to lie

'I do not like to lie' [MED c1425(a1420) Lydg. *TB* (Aug A.4) 4.1815]

The construction exemplified in (1) was frequent in Old and Middle English (henceforth OE and ME, respectively). Morphosyntactically, impersonal constructions share the characteristic that they contain a finite verb inflected for the third person singular person, but lack a subject marked for the nominative case controlling verbal agreement. Besides, the impersonal construction shows variation in form, and exhibits a number of different patterns. The verb may take complements that are formally realised as clauses (e.g. example [1] above *nat to lye*), or as noun phrases marked for the objective case in ME, or for the accusative, dative or genitive case in earlier English (e.g. OE *ðætte oft ðone geðyldegestan scamað ðæs siges* 'so that often the most patient one is ashamed of the victory'). The semantic roles denoted in the former constructions will be labelled as EXPERIENCER (the animate and sentient entity which perceives or experiences a concrete state) and THEME ("something from which the experience emanates or by which the experience is effected," Fischer and van der Leek 1983, 346).

In English, the frequency of the impersonal construction is said to begin to decrease between 1400 and 1500 (Allen 1995, among many others), although impersonal instances continue to be attested until about two centuries later (cf. Möhlig-Falke 2012, 206-207). The Early Modern English period (1500–1710; henceforth EModE), therefore, is of great interest from a historical point of view and it is with it that this study is specifically concerned.

2. WHAT IS *IMPERSONAL*?

A variety of labels have been used in the literature to refer to impersonal constructions and the verbs involved in them (see Méndez-Naya and López-Couso 1997), which eventually led to a conceptual confusion over what an impersonal construction really is. In view of the existing terminological maze, it should be made clear that the definition of *impersonal* adopted in the present study is primarily syntactic. Following Möhlig-Falke (2012, 6), the notion of *impersonal* is understood here as a morphosyntactic pattern that exhibits the following characteristics: 1) the predicate verb is invariably marked for third-person singular; 2) a nominative argument is missing; 3) if it is encoded at all, the first argument appears in accusative or dative case in Old English and in object case in Middle English; 4) if more than one nominal argument is encoded, the second one is in genitive case, appears as a prepositional phrase, or is a clausal complement, most commonly a *þæt*-clause or a nonfinite clause.

3. PREVIOUS ACCOUNTS

Some of the best-known interpretations of the historical development of English impersonal constructions date from the twentieth century. Very influential accounts such as Jespersen ([1927] 1961), Fischer and van der Leek (1983) or Allen (1995), among others, generally link the demise of the impersonal construction to the deep morphosyntactic transformations the English language underwent during the OE (449–1066) and ME (1066–1500) periods. More recently, authors like Möhlig-Falke (2012) point out that the interpretation of the historical development of impersonal constructions in these terms is not viable if we take into account that a great many ME verbs developed new impersonal uses between 1200 and 1450, a period of time when such morphosyntactic changes were either in the course of development or had already taken place. Thus, recent studies on the impersonal construction outline some additional hypotheses about the possible motivations for the change (Trousdale 2008; Möhlig-Falke 2012), or tend to show a lesser interest on such motivations in order to place the focus on the interaction between the semantics of impersonal verbs and the semantics of the constructions where they appear (e.g. Möhlig-Falke 2012; Miura 2015). In what follows I summarise the studies taken as a point of departure for the present investigation.

Möhlig-Falke's monograph (2012) focuses mainly on the OE period. The empirical data comprise a group of 47 verbs that are documented in impersonal use in the database for the *Dictionary of Old English Corpus*, which allows her to show that the impersonal construction did not decline in use between 1200 and 1500, but was even analogically extended to 63 new verbs (cf. Möhlig-Falke 2012, 15; 209ff). For his part, Trousdale (2008) takes a new approach by examining the loss of the English impersonal construction from the perspective of grammaticalisation theory (Hopper and Traugott 2003, among many others) and its re-conceptualisation in the light of Construction Grammar (Goldberg 1995; Croft 2001, among others). Trousdale puts forward the hypothesis that

the demise of the impersonal construction is a result of a large-scale readjustment of the taxonomy of the transitive construction (TrnCxn). This taxonomy is understood as comprising various schemas and subschemas which subsume impersonal constructions and which vary in their degree of similarity to the prototype of transitive construction. The prototype of transitive construction is referred to by Trousdale as *Type T*, and is represented by examples like OE *he* $_{NOM}$ *acwealde [þone dracan]*$_{ACC}$ 'he killed the dragon,' where the subject has the semantic role of AGENT. According to Trousdale (2008, 302), "the loss of the impersonal construction is tied in with the increased productivity and schematicity of the transitive construction": at some point in time, it became possible to use the transitive construction for events or states of affairs that deviated from the prototype of transitive event. In other words, transitive constructions became more schematic by developing new grammatical uses which allowed EXPERIENCER subjects and, generally, "a wider range of subjects [and] a wider range of thematic relations between the verb and its arguments" (2008, 311); witness in this connection PDE clauses such as *The tent sleeps six*. Trousdale's hypothesis will be referred to again in the discussion of data in Section 8.

4. TWO CASE STUDIES: *LIKE* AND *PLEASE*

The verbs chosen for this corpus-based study are EModE *like* and *please*. The verb *like* goes back to OE *(ge)līcian* 'to please, be pleased,' one of the verbs that have been identified by Möhlig-Falke (2012) as capable of impersonal use in OE. ME *plēsen* is a loan from Anglo-Norman and Old French (cf. OED s.v. *please, v.*) and it belongs to the group of verbs which developed new impersonal uses during the ME period (Möhlig-Falke 2012). These two verbs have survived into Modern English (henceforth ModE) in their personal transitive use, a complementation pattern that is attested in earlier English as well (Möhlig-Falke 2012, 219, 278-292). Besides, this pair of verbs is semantically related in that they denote different conceptualisations of the same kind of emotional event (i.e. the experience of a feeling of pleasure). This difference in conceptualisation is reflected in their respective canonical syntactic usages, where the semantic roles of EXPERIENCER and THEME find different syntactic expressions. Witness for example ModE *Jim pleases Mary,* with the semantic role of THEME functioning as the subject of the clause, compared to ModE *Mary likes Jim,* where the subject of the clause is aligned with the semantic role of EXPERIENCER.

5. AIMS OF THE STUDY

As already pointed out, the main aim of this study is to carry out a corpus-based analysis of two formerly impersonal verbs, namely *like* (<OE *(ge)līcian*) and *please* (<Anglo-Norman *plaiser*, *pleser*). The selected period is EModE (1500–1710), as it is a stage of particular interest in that the impersonal construction had just lost its productivity (cf. Section 1), and formerly impersonal verbs were in the process of developing new syntactic alternatives. In order to trace the historical change in these two semantically related verbs from impersonal to personal use, this case study focuses on the range of morphosyntactic patterns documented with each of them. The analysis of data is expected to shed light on (a) the frequency of occurrence of the various syntactic patterns that came to replace the impersonal construction; (b) the diachronic development of each syntactic pattern in the course of EModE; and (c), at the theoretical level, the extent to which the corpus evidence serves to confirm, or reject, Trousdale's abovementioned hypothesis (2008, 302) about the motivations for the loss of this construction.

6. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The data for this study are taken from the *Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Early Modern English* (1500-1710; henceforth *PPCEME*, see Kroch, Santorini and Delfs 2004), a 1.7 million-word corpus divided into three sub-periods, namely E1 (1500–1569), E2 (1570–1639) and E3 (1640–1710). The search program used to retrieve data is *WordSmith Tools* (Scott 1996), analysis software containing several analytical tools that are useful for looking at how words behave in texts. The tools that have been resorted to are *Concord*, which allows specific tokens to be viewed in context, and *WordList*, which allows the researcher to run an alphabetically ordered list of words prior to the retrieval of data. As a first step, the different possible spellings and verb forms for *like* and *please* in EModE were identified. Secondly, the list of possible spellings was used in running a search, obtaining a total of 2,744 hits. Finally, the retrieved data were manually sifted using the POS-tagged version of the corpus, a process that yielded 825 tokens of both *like* and *please*.

7. COMPETING SYNTACTIC PATTERNS WITH *LIKE* AND *PLEASE* IN EMODE

After the loss of productivity of the impersonal construction, early English impersonal verbs developed along a set of syntactic paths that offered themselves as an alternative to the former syntactic possibilities (cf. Elmer 1981; Allen 1995; Möhlig-Falke 2012). The syntactic patterns that have been attested with EModE *like* and *please* are the following:

- Personal (in)transitive constructions: these are understood here as a kind of complementation pattern in which a nominative subject is present and controls verb agreement (cf. Möhlig-Falke 2012, 154). The verb can be used in a personal (in)transitive construction where the semantic role of EXPERIENCER is encoded either as the subject of the clause (e.g. EModE *I doe like that thow doest inditt thy owne letters thy selfe*) or as the object of the clause, in which case the subject takes on the semantic role of THEME (e.g. EModE *And the saying pleased the whole multitude*).
- *(H)it*-extraposition constructions are complementation patterns in which the EXPERIENCER is encoded as the object of the clause, and the subject is filled by formal *(h)it*. The second argument is commonly realised by a complement or a non-finite clause (e.g. EModE *hyt had plesyd Almyghty God that he had levyd tyll myghelmas*).
- Passive/Adjectival constructions contain a periphrastic verb form of *to be* or *become* plus a passive or adjectival participle. The EXPERIENCER is encoded as the subject of the clause (e.g. EModE *I am pleased with it*).

8. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The search for *like* in EModE yielded 208 tokens in the data extracted from the *PPCEME*. As Figure 1 illustrates, the syntactic patterns attested are personal (in)transitive, *it*-extraposition and impersonal. The syntactic pattern that clearly predominates with *like* is the personal (in)transitive, which is attested in 85.1% of the occurrences of the verb (177 occ., N=208). Second is *it*-extraposition, which occurs in 13.9% of the instances (29 occ., N=208), whereas impersonal constructions are only marginally attested in sub-period E1 (1500–1569), with only 1% of the total occurrences of the verb (2 occ., N=208).

As for *please*, the search for this verb yielded 617 tokens (see Figure 2). The syntactic patterns attested are personal (in)transitive constructions, *it*-extraposition, passive or adjectival constructions and impersonal patterns. As is the case with EModE *like*, the most frequent syntactic pattern with EModE *please* is the personal (in)transitive, with 54.1% of the occurrences (334 occ., N=617). Similarly, the second most frequent pattern is *it*-extraposition with 25.8% of the occurrences of the verb (159 occ., N=617). This is followed by passive/adjectival patterns, which occur in 19.9% of the cases (123 occ., N=617), while impersonal constructions are attested only once, also in sub-period E1 (1500–1569), which barely represents 0.2% of the total occurrences of the verb.

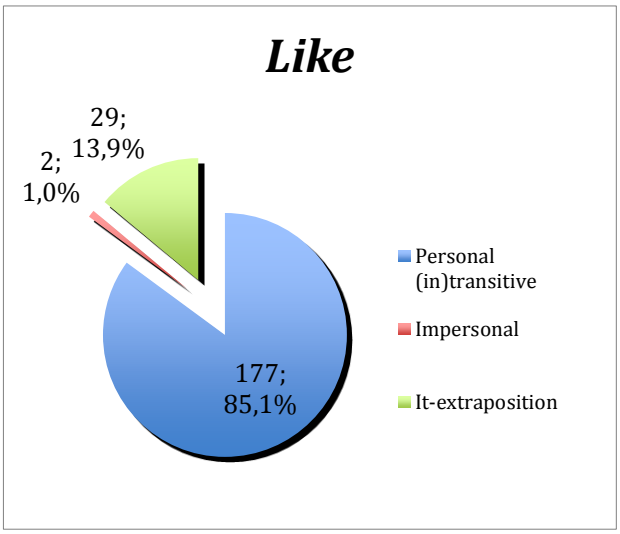

Figure 1: Relative proportion of syntactic constructions attested with *like* in EModE

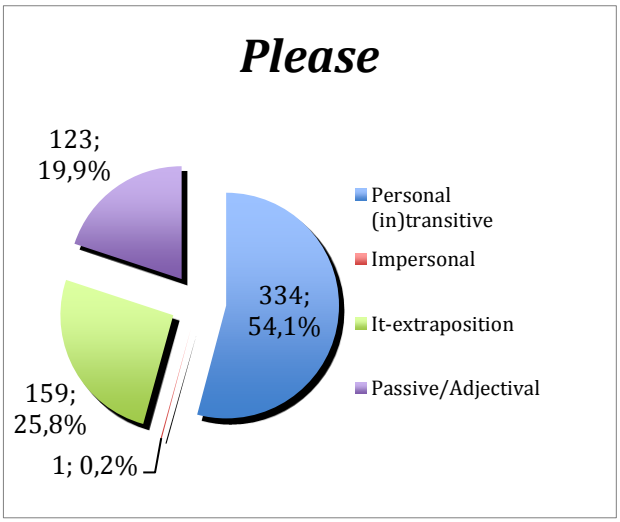

Figure 2: Relative proportion of syntactic constructions attested with *please* in EModE

Figures 3 and 4 plot the relative distribution of the competing syntactic patterns with *like* and *please* for each of the three sub-periods in *PPCEME*. Broadly speaking, two diachronic tendencies can be observed:

1) Personal (in)transitive patterns tend to increase in number with both *like* and *please* throughout EModE. With *like*, the personal (in)transitive pattern occurs in

63% of the total occurrences in sub-period E1, but its percentage rises to 100% in both E2 and E3. This tendency is also observed with EModE *please*, with which the personal (in)transitive pattern increases from 41% in sub-period E1 to 48% in sub-period E2, and 67% in sub-period E3.

2) The variety of patterns attested with *like* is progressively reduced throughout the three sub-periods. Impersonal constructions are found only in sub-period E1, and *it*-extraposition also shows a notable decrease in frequency to the point that it becomes nonexistent in sub-periods E2 and E3. Likewise, with *please*, *it*-extraposition decreases from 56% in sub-period E1 to only 4% in sub-period E3.

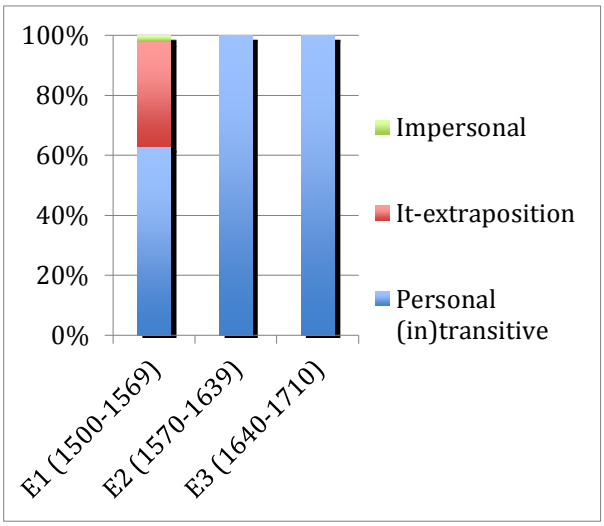

Figure 3**:** Diachronic overview of competing syntactic patterns for *like* in EModE

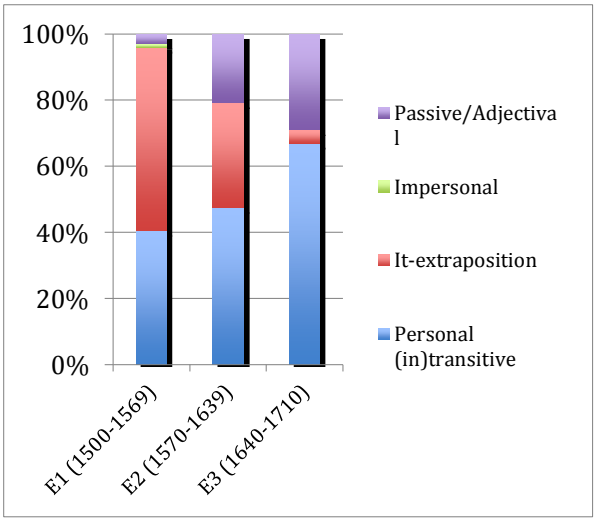

Figure 4: Diachronic overview of competing syntactic patterns for *please* in EModE

Interestingly, what the abovementioned findings seem to indicate is that personal (in)transitive patterns, alongside passive/adjectival patterns in the case of *please*, seem to increase in use at the expense of the decreasing impersonal and *it*-extraposition constructions. Also noteworthy is that the diachronic tendencies observed in the data may, arguably, be better understood when examined in the light of Trousdale's (2008) hypothesis on

the factors behind the loss of the impersonal construction, as outlined in Section 3 of this paper. In this respect, a further diachronic tendency can be detected in the data, as illustrated in Figures 5 and 6 below.

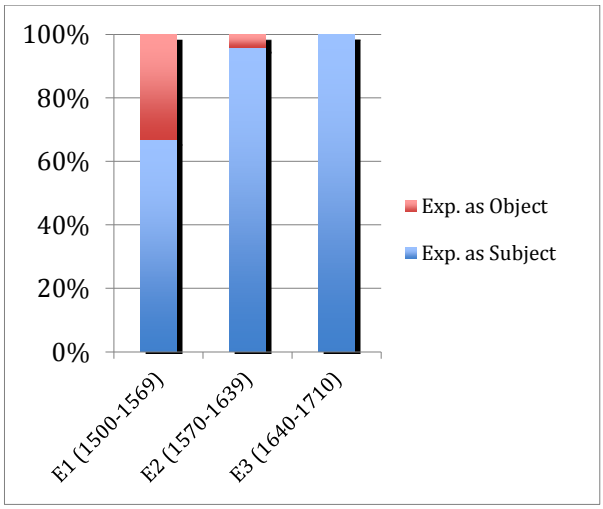

Figure 5: Diachronic overview of the syntactic realisation of the EXPERIENCER in personal (in)transitive constructions with *like* in EModE

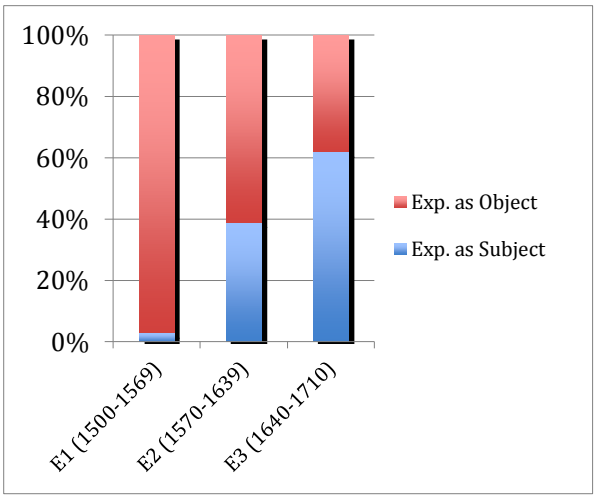

Figure 6: Diachronic overview of the syntactic realisation of the EXPERIENCER in personal (in)transitive constructions with *please* in EModE

As we can see, the number of instances coding the EXPERIENCER in subject role increases markedly in the course of EModE, from 67% of the instances of personal (in)transitive patterns with *like* in sub-period E1 to 100% in sub-period E3. With *please*, EXPERIENCER subjects occur in 3% of the instances in sub-period E1, but increase to 62% in sub-period E3. In others words, both *like* and *please* increasingly allow EXPERIENCERS to be aligned with the syntactic function of subject in EModE personal (in)transitive patterns; parallel to this, EXPERIENCERS in the syntactic role of object gradually become disfavoured. This observation leads me to conclude that in EModE, personal (in)transitive constructions (cf. Section 7) not only increase in frequency at the expense of other competing syntactic patterns (as shown in Figures 3 and 4), but they also expand in use to allow for a wider range of subject types in the way suggested by Trousdale (2008).

9. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Two main conclusions can be drawn from this study. First, the data suggest that impersonal constructions are only sparsely recorded in the EModE period, which lends support to the periodisation suggested in the literature for the loss of productivity of this construction. Second, and parallel to this, personal (in)transitive patterns tend to increase in number throughout EModE with both *like* and *please*. Ultimately, the fact that the range of patterns documented is gradually reduced throughout EModE seems to tie in with Trousdale's hypothesis that the loss of the impersonal construction is connected with the increased productivity and schematicity of the transitive construction.

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