IMPERSONAL CONSTRUCTIONS IN OLD FRENCH AND THE AGREEMENT PUZZLE[*]

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1. Introduction

Quirky subjects are subjects surfacing with non-nominative case. Although they have clear subject properties (they can appear in first position in main and embedded clauses; they can undergo subject-verb inversion - in V1 and V2 environments; they can bind an anaphor; they can participate in raising constructions; they can be a controllee; and they can participate in conjunction reduction), they have the striking property of not entering into an Agree relation with the predicate. This puzzle remains to be explained, especially since subject-verb agreement is often taken to be a prototypical property of subjecthood.

The present paper focuses on Old French impersonal constructions where quirky subjects can be found. The paper relies on the facts introduced in Mathieu (2006a) which show that pre-verbal non-nominative elements in Old French are true subjects. They have all the properties listed above: they can bind an anaphor, be a controllee, etc. In the present study, I concentrate on agreement issues: first, I give a solution to the puzzle as to why there is no Agree relation between the oblique subject and the predicate in Old French impersonal constructions, and second, why in the absence of agreement nominative objects can nevertheless be licensed in these constructions.

Section 2 constitutes the body of the paper while Section 3 concludes with a summary.

2. Agreement

In Mathieu (2006a), I argue that Old French exhibits structures which call upon a quirky-subject analysis. Dubbed 'impersonal constructions' in the traditional literature, such structures typically involve an empty subject position that a dative, accusative or genitive XP comes to fill[1]. The Old French example in (1) involves the impersonal verb *plaire* 'please' and illustrates a prepositional

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[1] In that paper, I also show that there is a connection between Quirky subjects and the operation called Stylistic Fronting which is clearly available not only in Icelandic (Holmberg 2000), but also in Old French (Mathieu 2006b). More generally, a connection for Old French is made between the availability of quirky subjects, SF *and* V3 structures (see Fischer 2004 for the same generalization made with respect to Scandinavian languages, old and new).

(oblique) phrase XP appearing in the subject position while (2) involves a non-prepositional oblique XP[2].

(1) Et   bien set   qu'**a sa mere** plest
     and well know.3SG that-to his mother please.3SG
     Que rien   a   feire   ne   li   lest
     that nothing to   do.INF not   him.DAT   remain.3SG
     'And she knows well that it is her mother's will that she shall leave
      nothing   undone for him.'
      (*Le Chevalier au Lion*, year 1179, lines 5437-5438)

(2) Et   se   **Deu**   plaist,   outre s'en   passera
     and if   God-OBL   please.3SG others self-of.it go.FUT.3SG
     'If such is the will of God, he will force the passage.'
     (*Aliscans*, year c. 1165, line 1099, in Buridant 2000:322)

The example in (3) is the equivalent of (2), but with a clitic subject, this time morphologically specified as dative. This pattern has been traditionally treated as thematically based, i.e. the dative is an inherent case intrinsically linked to the role of Experiencer.

(3) Si **li**   plest,   el   l'amera
     if him.DAT   please.3SG   she   him.ACC-love.FUT.3SG
     'If it pleases him, she will love him.' (*Lais*, year c. 1160, line 28)

The weak dative pronoun *li* is often replaced by a strong ('emphatic') pronoun of the same case as (4) illustrates.

(4) Si   **lui**   plaist
     if   him.DAT   please.3SG
     'If it pleases him.'
     (*La Chanson de Roland*, year 1080, line: 519, *Le Chevalier à la
     Charrette*, c. 1180, line 2585)

Quirky subjects can also surface in the accusative form as shown in (5) where the verb impersonal verb *covenir* 'to suit/to be convenient' selects for a quirky argument and an infinitive (the infinitive has been displaced to the left edge of

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[2] Case marking is considerably reduced from that found in Latin. Only nominative and accusative cases - so-called *cas sujet* and *cas régime* in the traditional literature – are marked by the form of the nominal. In (2), *Deu* 'God' is thus not morphologically dative, but is simply a non-nominative form common to all oblique nominal cases. It must be noted, however, that for pronouns, the situation is different: they are marked not only for nominative and accusative, but also for dative.

the sentence via the operation Stylistic Fronting, since it would normally follow the main verb, see Mathieu 2006a for details).

(5) Car   desfandre$_i$ **le**   covenoit t$_i$
    thus   defend.INF   him.ACC   necessitate.PAST.3SG
    'thus it was necessary for him to defend (himself).'
    (*Le Chevalier à la Charrette*, year 1180, line 1182)

However, the dative form comes to replace the accusative very often not only across texts, but also in some cases within the same texts as the two following examples illustrate (both examples are from *Le Chevalier à la Charrette*). Note that in (6), the infinitival PP has been Stylistically Fronted.

(6) Qu'[a   remenoir]$_i$ li   covenoit t$_i$
    that-to   remain.INF   him.DAT   necessitate.PAST.3SG
    'that he had to stay.' (*Le Chevalier à la Charrette*, year 1180, line 3760)

The process by which an accusative form changes into a dative form is well-known from Icelandic and has been referred to in the literature as Dative Sickness (Eythórsson 2000, 2002) for that language. Finally, genitives in subject position are not common in Old French, but are attested in Icelandic.

One typical feature of quirky subjects is that, unlike other (nominative) subjects, they do not agree with the verb; an anti-agreement feature which is well-known for Icelandic. In (7) the verb takes the 3rd person singular while the subject is 3rd person plural. In (8) the verb also appears with 3rd person singular whereas the subject is 1st person singular.

(7) Guerpir   lor   estuet   les   chevals
    abandon.INF   them.DAT.3PL   necessitate.3SG   the   horses
    'They had to abandon the horses.' (*Le Bel Inconnu*, year 1214, line 1440)

(8) Kar mei   meïsme   estoet   avant   aler
    since me.DAT.1SG myself.1SG necessitate.3SG ahead   go.INF
    'Since I myself alone should go ahead.' (*La Chanson de Roland*, year 1080, line 2858)

(9)   is an example from Icelandic which illustrates the same point.

(9) Stelpunum   var   hjálpað
    the girls.DAT.3PL.FEM   was.3SG   helped.NEUTER.3SG
    'She was given the money back.' (Sigurðsson 1992:3)

One possibility worth investigating is the idea that agreement between the quirky subject and the verb actually obtains, as suggested by Boeckx (2000:365), thus making quirky subjects fully fledged subjects. The idea is that the agreement cannot be morphologically realized for independent reasons and

surfaces as default (third person singular). This is an idea compatible with Distributed Morphology (Halle and Marantz 1993; Noyer 1997; Embick and Noyer 2001) and has been popular in the literature lately (Rivero 2004, Sedighi 2005, etc.). It allows the unification of structural and inherent case, a welcome result from the perspective of minimalism.

However, there are problems with such a proposal as highlighted by Boeckx (2003) himself. Some of these problems are irrelevant to the issue at hand, thus I will leave them aside. One problem worth mentioning, however, has to do with the licensing of nominative case: although, in Icelandic the verb in a quirky subject construction surfaces as default third person when the preverbal element is dative, accusative or genitive, in case the postverbal element is nominative, the verb agrees with the nominative NP, not the quirky subject. This is illustrated in (10).

(10)　Henni　　voru　　　　gefnar　bækurnar
　　　her.DAT　were.3PL　　　given　books.NOM.PL
　　　'She was given the books.' (Sigurðsson 1992:5)

This Agree relation, however, is blocked when there is an intervener between the verbal agreement and the postverbal nominative element as illustrated in (11): a case of defective intervention in the sense of Chomsky (2000, 2001). The φ-set of *henni* 'her' blocks the satisfaction of Match between the φ-sets of T and *þeir* 'they', i.e. the φ-set of *henni* 'her' constitutes a defective intervener.

(11)　Mér　　　fannst/*fundust　henni　　leiðast　　　　þeir
　　　me.DAT　seemed.3SG/3PL　her.DAT　be-bored　　　they.NOM
　　　'It seemed to me that she was bored with them.' (Boeckx 2000:370)

The postverbal NP nevertheless appears in the nominative case. Boeckx (2000) has no explanation as to why the nominative can be licensed without agreement. This is because Boeckx (2000, 2003), like Chomsky (1981, 1995, 2000, 2001) and others (e.g. Schütze 1997), follows the so-called George-Kornfilt hypothesis according to which nominative case is incumbent on agreement properties within the functional domain.

In order to save the George-Kornfilt hypothesis, Boeckx (2003) proposes that when the subject surfaces with a non-nominative case, v^0 is responsible for the assignment of nominative case if a postverbal NP is present (see also Alexiadou 2001); or rather v^0 is endowed with the relevant ϕ-features that permit the assignment of nominative case to the postverbal nominal. However, I note that in Old French the verb can surface as third person singular even in the presence of a nominative-marked DP and without a defective intervener. This is illustrated by (12).

(12)　Buenes　　　　　armes　　　　　　　li　　　　　covanroit
　　　good.NOM.3PL　weapons. NOM.3PL　him.DAT　　　need.3SG
　　　'He needs good weapons.' (*Enéas*, year 1150, line 4327)

The DP is not in a postverbal position because it has undergone Stylistic Fronting (details about Stylistic Fronting can be found in Mathieu 2006a and b). The important point, however, is that Nominative valuation is clearly possible in the absence of agreement. There is no intervener between T^0 and the postverbal XP because *li* 'him' has cliticize to T^0 and has thus shifted out of the way. This means that matching does occur between the φ-set of T^0 and the φ-set of *buenes armes* (good weapons) prior to movement of the DP to the left periphery of the clause.

It turns out that such nominative-agreement mismatches are also exhibited in Icelandic. The following example is parallel to the French one introduced in (12), since there is in this case no intervener[3].

(13) a.   þeim   likaði   ekki þessar athugasemdir.
            them. DAT.3SG liked.3SG not   these   comments. NOM.3PL
            'They do not like these comments.' (Sigurðsson 1992)
      b.   Honum   myndi   alltaf líka   þeir.
            him.DAT.3SG would.3SG   always like   they.NOM.3PL
            'He would always like them.' (Eythórsson and Barðdal 2005:860).

Rather than assuming that v^0 and its relevant φ-features are responsible for the licensing of nominative case in the relevant contexts, I follow a growing trend according to which Case and agreement are not reflexes of a unique syntactic relation after all. For example, Bejar (2003) shows that in Georgian, as (14) illustrates, an object can be assigned nominative Case even though it cannot control number agreement. In (14a), person agreement is with the subject, not the object *cigni* (books) while (14b) and more explicitly (14c) show that number agreement is not possible with the object despite the fact that it receives nominative case.

(14) a.   (Me)   cign-i   da-v-c'er-e
            I.1SG.ERG book.NOM   PREV-1SG-write-INDIC.AOR
            'I wrote the/a book.' (Hewitt 1995:117)
      b.   (Me)   cign-eb-i   da-v-c'er-e
            I.1SG.ERG book.NOM.PL   PREV-1SG-write-INDIC.AOR

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[3] Like in Icelandic (i), it is also possible in early Old French for the predicate to agree with the postverbal nominative logical subject

(i)   Honum myndu   alltaf líka   þeir.
        him.DAT would.3PL   always like   they.NOM
        'He would always like them.' (Eythórsson and Barðdal 2005:860).

(ii)   Il   i   vont   ci   vieil   prestre.
        it   there go.3PL   these. NOM.MAS.3PL   old. NOM.MAS.3PL
        priests. NOM .MAS.3PL
        'There go these old priests.'
        (*Aucassin et Nicolette*, year 1220, 111, 6, in Arteaga and Herschensohn 2004:5)

'I wrote the books.'

c. *(Me) cign-eb-i da-v-c'er-en/t
I.SG.ERG book-NOM.PL PREV-1SG-write-INDIC.AOR.PL/PL
'I wrote the books.' (Bejar 2003:180)

A rising consensus is that tense rather than agreement is responsible for nominative Case assignment (Haeberli 1999, 2002, Pesetsky and Torrego 2001, Rivero and Geber 2004 Alboiu 2005, etc.)[4]. We know independently that in Old French it is possible for tense to license Nominative subjects: Old French had so-called personal infinitives where nominative subjects could surface without the presence of agreement features on the verb (Roberts 1993). The example in (15) is an illustration of this phenomenon: the verb is in the infinitival form while a nominative subject is nevertheless licensed (the nominative subject *sa color* 'his color' is postverbal).

(15) Lors por revenir sa color…
then for return.INF his.NOM color.NOM
'Then, in order for his color to return…' (*Erec et Enide*, 12th century, line 5222)

Another possibility worth entertaining at this point is that Old French quirky subject constructions involve an empty category akin to *pro* that would be equivalent to the expletive pronominal form *il* (which contrary to English *there* has the relevant φ, D and Case features) and that it is this element that enters into an Agree relation with the verb. In fact, overt expletives in Old French start developing rather early, but are in competition with their null counterparts until quite late (16th century, see Buridant 2000). Hence, the availability of strings such as *Il me faut* 'I need', *Il me souvient* 'I remember', etc. This would make quirky subject constructions equivalent to existential sentences where the postverbal element surfaces in nominative while the verbal form is third person singular as (16) illustrates.

(16) Tant i avrat de besanz esmerez
so-many there be.FUT.3SG of need.NOM pure-gold.NOM
'There will be so much need of pure gold.'
(*La Chanson de Roland*, year 1080, line 132, in Buridant 2000:427)

On this view, the difference between (17a) and (17b) would thus be a simple alternation between a null subject expletive, i.e. *pro*, and a fully specified expletive pronoun *il* 'it'.

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[4] Another possibility, which is worth investigating, but which I will not pursue here, is that Case is not part of narrow syntax, but part of PF as in Distributed Morphology (Halle and Marantz 1993, Embick and Noyer to appear).

(17) a. si   li   covenoit   a   remenoir
         if   him.DAT   necessitate.PAST.3SG   to   stay.INF
     b. si   il li   covenoit   a   remenoir
         'if he had to stay.'

However, there is a better solution. Empty categories have not been very popular since the advent of minimalism, and many researchers have abandoned *pro* in favor of an alternative analysis (see, however, Rezac 2004 and Alboiu 2005 for a revival of *pro*). Thus, unless shown otherwise, postulating *pro* is theory-dependent, since it presupposes the existence of null arguments (Eythórsson and Barðdal 2005). Like Haeberli (2002), I would like to propose that the licensing of default agreement does not involve movement of some XP (overt or non-overt) to an agreement projection. It is sufficient for the verbal head containing ϕ-features to enter into an Agree relation with T^0. When the verb raises overtly to T^0, as it did in Old French, it also satisfies the D feature associated with T^0 (Alexiadou and Anagnostopoulou 1998). It remains to be determined what the trigger is for the raising of quirky subjects to Spec-TP in Old French. An answer to this question is provided in Mathieu (2006a). Suffices to say for this occasion that, as in Boeckx (2003), Move may take place solely under Match; Agree not being a prerequisite for Move.

Interestingly, Eythórsson and Barðdal (2005) discuss the case of German, a language which exhibits impersonal constructions with and without overt expletives: (18a) versus (18b).

(18) a. Mir   ist   kalt.
         me.DAT   is   cold
     b. Es   ist   mir   kalt.
         it   is   me.DAT cold
         'I'm cold.'

The fact that German *es* can optionally cooccur with the dative *mir* in the impersonal predicate in (18), while *það* in Icelandic cannot cooccur with the dative *mér*, as shown in (19), has been taken to support the claim that subject-like obliques in German are not syntactic subjects while their Icelandic counterparts are.

(19) *það   er   mér   kalt.
      it.EXPL   is   me.DAT   cold
      'I'm freezing.' (Eythórsson and Barðdal 2005:865)

However, Eythórsson and Barðdal (2005) show that this is not a valid comparison, since only indefinite arguments can occur with *það* in Icelandic while the same is not true, or at least not to the same extent, for German. Whereas definite oblique subjects cannot occur with *það* in Icelandic, it turns out that indefinite oblique subjects *can* as illustrated by (20).

(20) það   er   einhverjum   strákum kalt.
      it.EXPL   is   some.DAT   boys.DAT   cold
      'Some boys are freezing.' (Eythórsson and Barðdal 2005:865)

Eythórsson and Barðdal (2005) give many other arguments against treating impersonal constructions in German and Icelandic differently. The point about Old French is that it definitely patterns like Icelandic when it comes to inversion contexts. Whereas in German *es* 'it' can occur optionally with impersonal predicates in inverted positions (21a), *það* is unacceptable in such contexts in Icelandic (21b).

(21) a.   Mir   ist (es)   kalt.
             me.DAT is it.EXPL cold
      b.   Mér/Einhverjum   strákum   er   (*það)   kalt.
             me.DAT/some.DAT boys.DAT   is   it.EXPL   cold
             (Eythórsson and Barðdal 2005:866)

In Old French, strings of the sort illustrated in (22) where *il* 'it' surfaces in Spec-TP are not attested.

(22) *Moi   ne   chaut   **il**   por   les   biens.
       me   not   care.3SG it   for   the   goods
       'He doesn't care for the goods.'

In embedded contexts, strings of the kind found in (23) are not found either. These are the putative cases where the expletive subject would be rejected in a postverbal position.

(23) *Si   a   sa   mere   plest   **il**.
       if   to   his   mother please.3SG   it
       'If it pleases his mother.'

Finally, I would like to point out that if *pro* was really the subject in impersonal Old French constructions, then it would be difficult to explain why oblique subjects have properties of subjects rather than of objects: they can appear in first position in main and embedded clauses; they can undergo subject-verb inversion - in V1 and V2 environments; they can bind an anaphor; they can participate in raising constructions; they can be a controllee; and they can participate in conjunction reduction (see Mathieu 2006a).

3.   Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the reason why oblique subjects in Old French impersonal constructions do not enter into an Agree relation with the verb is because default agreement is obtained via the checking of the [D] feature of T^0 by the pronominal features of the verb. The verb not only raised to T^0 in Old

French, but its features were rich enough to license the [D] feature of T^0. I also argued that nominative case is dependent, not on agreement, but on tense. Finally, I argued that the alternative proposal according to which *pro* is the real subject in Old French impersonal constructions is not valid.

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