



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

[Review of: A. von Steffens-Montag (1983) Syntaktische functionen und wortstellungsveränderung: die entwicklung 'subjektloser' konstruktionen in einigen Sprachen]

Fischer, O.; van der Leek, F.

Publication date

1985

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Journal of Linguistics

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Fischer, O., & van der Leek, F. (1985). [Review of: A. von Steffens-Montag (1983) Syntaktische functionen und wortstellungsveränderung: die entwicklung 'subjektloser' konstruktionen in einigen Sprachen]. *Journal of Linguistics*, 21, 497-503.

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)

A. von See Franz-Montag, *Syntaktische Funktionen und Wortstellungsveränderung: die Entwicklung 'subjektloser' Konstruktionen in einigen Sprachen*. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1983. Pp. 288.

Von See Franz-Montag (1983) comprises a study of subjectless constructions, e.g. German *mich friert*, and their historical development in various Indo-European and non-Indo-European languages. She is interested in these constructions because their occurrence in a language is, or so she hypothesizes, determined by the (morpho-)syntactic structure of the language and because the constructions seem to have developed along the same lines in all the (partly unrelated) languages she has investigated, a development which seems to

reflect certain generally valid principles of change. She argues that the English language exhibits the most consistent development along these lines and shows, typologically speaking, model behaviour, whereas e.g. German, and Icelandic even more so, lag behind. She predicts, however, that in the end these languages will also catch up and reach the typologically more ideal stage that English has already reached. Crucial in her interpretation of the development of the construction in English is her hypothesis that it involves, not a change from a construction truly without a subject to one with a subject, but rather the acquisition by the already present subject of a number of morpho-syntactic subject characteristics which it had hitherto lacked. Although we agree that the disappearance of the impersonal construction – for reasons to be made clear later we prefer this term to ‘subjectless’ – from many languages is related to changes in the morpho-syntactic system (such a view is hardly challengeable), we feel the greatest hesitancy with respect to her taking the English language as a ‘tentative model’ (84) exhibiting patterns to be followed by other languages in due time. Moreover, we cannot accept her interpretation of the English data.

The book contains ten chapters, in which the author sketches the development of syntactic functions which are arguments of the verb in Indo-European languages (Chapter 1); defines various types of impersonal constructions and discusses the notion of ‘subject’ (Chapters 2 and 3); surveys the various existent theories about the genesis of the impersonal construction (Chapter 4) as well as its disappearance (Chapter 6) and gives a characterization of the semantics of the construction and of its formal properties in different types of languages (Chapter 5). Chapters 7, 8 and 9 (part II of the book) are devoted to the historical development of the impersonal construction in English and German, in the North Germanic (mainly Icelandic) and Romance (mainly French) group of languages and in Hebrew and Georgian (her discussion of the latter two, non-Indo-European, languages, introduced to support her view that the development of the construction follows from universally valid principles, is pathetically meagre). The final chapter summarizes her results.

Von Steffens-Montag sees the development of (Proto-)Indo-European (Chapter 1) roughly as follows.

(i) The language has a functional system of inflected case-marking; selection of a specific case for verb arguments is exclusively based on semantic criteria; verbs can occur with varying numbers and types of syntactically equal cases associated with distinct semantic functions (e.g. nominative = agent, dative = locative, etc.); word order is free except for information structure (theme–rheme order).

(ii) Due to a tendency towards economy, cases develop a semantic elasticity and assume a semantic-syntactic function. Some cases that are in little use are lost.

(iii) Depending on their relative topic frequency, specific types of verb arguments (with language-specific semantic function combinations) tend to

fall into a hierarchy that partly determines the direction of the reduction of the case system: the 'lower' cases (locative, ablative, instrumental) first get absorbed by dative and genitive, and the latter in their turn by accusative and finally nominative.

(iv) Thus the grammaticalization of verb arguments finally leads to the development of a small number of purely syntactic functions (subject, direct and indirect object) which hardly retain a basic semantic function.

(v) Nominative case, as highest in the hierarchy, becomes progressively less deletable and anaphoric subject pronouns become obligatory.

(vi) Thanks to the hierarchization of grammatical functions, word order can now be employed to encode grammatical functions: the topic position, preverbal, is usually filled by the subject as the most obligatory of all syntactic functions. The other functions follow the verb and word order can be defined as 'TVX' later to become 'SVX'.

(vii) Subjects cannot be absent anymore and formal, non-argument subject pronouns are used in the case of zero-place verbs ('weather' verbs) and impersonal verbs (because these do not select nominative case).

Assuming the above development, which provides the context for the author's hypothesis about the disappearance of the impersonal construction, to speak for itself, we will refrain from comment except for pointing out the obvious danger of an explanation based on a purely hypothetical historical development – relevant data are largely absent and the theory cannot be falsified.

In Chapters 2 and 3, von Steffens-Montag discusses a number of attempts by other linguists to provide a universal definition for the syntactic notion of 'subject' in terms of (nominative) case and she concludes that no such universal notion exists since different languages combine different pragmatic, semantic and syntactic ingredients into their subjects. Consequently, she adopts a relational approach for defining syntactic relations (following Vennemann & Harlow, 1977). In this approach a subject is defined as 'the last argument binding the verb'. Thus, any construction containing a verb accompanied by at least one argument is a construction with a subject: the one argument is by definition the last argument binding the verb. An expression like *es friert mich* ('it freezes me') is therefore analysed as follows: *mich*, being the only argument, is the true subject and *es*, being non-referential and therefore without argument status, is only a formal subject. *Es regnet* ('it is raining') has no true subject, only a formal one.

Though one might expect this new notion of 'relational subject' to play a role in her definition of 'subject' less constructions, this is not the case. A subjectless construction is, for her, 'a construction without a referential nominative subject'. The following four types of subjectless constructions can therefore be distinguished: (i) constructions without a subject of any kind, e.g. Latin *pluit*; (ii) constructions with only a formal subject, e.g. *it is raining* (she regards the formal subject as 'hardly' nominative); (iii) constructions

with only a relational subject, e.g. *mich friert*; (iv) constructions containing a formal subject as well as a non-nominative relational subject, e.g. *es friert mich*. Notice furthermore that she does not include examples like *it pleases me that you have come* in the set of subjectless expressions, arguing that *it*, being cataphorically related to the sentential complement, is referential in nature (we will return to the question why she finds it necessary to draw such a distinction between non-referential, formal *it/es* and referential, provisional – as we will call it – *it/es*).

Having acquainted the reader with the fundamental notions in von Seeffranz-Montag's approach (it should be clear by now that we prefer to use the term 'impersonal' rather than 'subjectless'; the latter is, it seems to us, somewhat confusing in that the majority of her subjectless constructions have a subject of some sort), we will now turn to the main part of the book (part II). Here the author gives a careful and minute description of the morpho-syntactic developments in each of the languages discussed. This is necessary since she assumes that the development of the impersonal construction is the result of changes in the way syntactic functions are encoded, i.e. the change involves the acquisition of morpho-syntactic subject characteristics (esp. position, nominative case and verb agreement) by the already present RELATIONAL subject. Most attention is paid to English as the typologically most ideal language, which, in this study, sets the scene for the description of the development of the other languages. The effect of the morpho-syntactic changes on the development of the English impersonal construction is described in four stages. *Stage 1*: the verb governs an experiencer complement in the dative or accusative (another complement – patient – may be present in the form of a genitive case, a prepositional phrase or a sentential complement). *Stage 2*: due to morpho-syntactic ambiguity the preverbal experiencer can in many cases be interpreted as nominative. *Stage 3*: the verb governs a formal (*h*)*it* nominative term and/or a patient complement in the nominative, with the experiencer complement still in the oblique case; the latter may also have the form of a prepositional phrase. (What von Seeffranz-Montag means by 'patient complement in the nominative' is not immediately clear. Presumably she refers to nominal as well as (finite or infinitival) sentential complements. To call the latter nominative seems to us a misapplication of the term: sententials do not show case, as she herself states on p. 110.) *Stage 4*: the dative/accusative complement (= experiencer) acquires nominative case and triggers verb agreement.

Now the central hypothesis developed in this study is that stage 4 represents the typologically ideal stage, in that here a single noun phrase combines the roles of relational subject (= experiencer) and morpho-syntactic subject (= nominative case, agreement). We are furthermore given to understand that stage 4 could be reached thanks to the earlier development in English of constructions with a one place verb governing an oblique experiencer and a non-referential, formal subject (stage 3). The latter construction type,

though satisfying the by then pressing need for nominative case, could not itself be the final stage since relational and morpho-syntactic subject had not yet collapsed. It paved the way for stage 4, however, in that the purely formal subject could be ousted as soon as the experiencer noun phrase took on the formal subject properties itself. Von See Franz-Montag predicts the same development for German: *mich friert* (stage 1) and *es friert mich* (stage 3), both still in use, will finally make way to *ich friere*. The other languages discussed will also basically follow this pattern.

All four stages are extensively discussed by the author. The data, taken from previous studies, are by and large correct, although there are mistakes that show that she is not always quite *au fait* with the English situation. For instance, she classes the verbs *offincan* and *reccan* (106) with a group of verbs that appear in impersonal constructions for the first time only in ME, whereas her own examples show that these verbs already occur in OE in such I constructions, she does not mention that the verbs that appear here to be active in the fifteenth, sixteenth centuries (107). Also, we cannot always agree with her interpretation of the data. Our main objection is that she tries to force the data into a strict chronological order. Thus, when discussing stage I constructions, she does not mention that the verbs that appear here simultaneously appear in constructions where the experiencer is syntactically the subject (her stage 4). Also, an example like *nu [sic] him se sige (NOM) gelicode* ('...him the victory pleased') (109), which is a straightforward example of stage 3 with a patient argument in the nominative case, is argued to belong to stage 1: *se sige* should not be interpreted as subject (in spite of its case form!) because when such nominative patient complements appear in OE, they usually do not occupy subject position, nor do they trigger agreement. However, examples of both these cases are found in OE.¹ For a different approach, which shows the *se sige* can only be subject, see Fischer & van der Leek, 1983: 358 ff. Her discussion of subject/object ambiguities, due to case loss (stage 2) is more convincing. She makes clear that this ambiguity ALONE cannot account for the change in impersonal constructions, as has been argued in many previous studies (here her comparison with other languages is very useful: in German many impersonal constructions disappear where one can hardly speak of subject/object ambiguities resulting from case loss). This strengthens the author in her belief that her own hypothesis (according to which relational and syntactic subject must ultimately collapse) is correct. However, another explanation is not only possible (cf. the one given by ourselves in the above mentioned article, pp. 354–60) but, we maintain, also necessary, since there is a crucial flaw in the way she argues her case, as will be shown later.

[1] See e.g. *Boethius*, ed. Sedgefield: 16, 4; *Blickling Homilies*, ed. Morris: 67, 34; *Aelfric, Genesis*, ed. Crawford: 171, 9; *A.S. Chronicle*, eds Earle & Plummer: 176.

The four stages assumed by von Seeffranz-Montag for English are based on a fourfold distinction made by van der Gaaf (1904: 40), but with two striking changes. First, she turns van der Gaaf's four *types* into four *stages*, because in her view they basically represent a chronological development (104) towards greater typological consistency. Second, she has radically changed the description of stage 3. The emphasis falls on the introduction of (*h*)*it*, whereas van der Gaaf's type 3 is concerned with the change from oblique experiencer to prepositional phrase, a change he happens to illustrate with (*h*)*it* examples. The point is that she sees the (*h*)*it*-construction as an in-between stage, arising due to the need for nominative case and disappearing again when the more consistent stage 4 is reached (that is, the *es friert mich* type disappears but not the *it*-construction with 'weather' verbs, since here there is no argument to take over nominative case, nor the provisional *it*-construction since there *it* is referential and need not disappear). We object to her line of argument because not only do provisional and formal (weather) (*h*)*it*-constructions already occur regularly in OE (so before stage 3) but worse, the specific (*h*)*it*-construction whose disappearance is explained as a step towards greater consistency, does not to our knowledge occur in English at all. The examples which the author does give of what she supposes to be *es friert mich* types in OE and ME (p. 119) all turn out to be examples of provisional or (non-provisional) referential (*h*)*it* (e.g. *hit licode Herode* (OE Gospels, Skeat (ed.) p. 118) does not mean 'Herod is pleased' as she suggests, but 'it pleased Herod', with *hit* referring to the dancing of Herod's daughter, mentioned earlier).

If, then, this construction never existed in English, the change from impersonal to personal construction in English must be explained differently. It also means that her claims that French and German, as well as other Indo-European languages, are developing along the same lines as English and can therefore be predicted to reach stage 4 in the end, cannot be maintained. The languages in question do give evidence of a similarity in development up to a certain point, but in our opinion the way in which they differ can best be explained by language-specific phenomena. E.g. in the case of English, the experiencer complement always occupied topic or front position unlike in German (161, note 88), where the patient complement can also be found preverbally (171). Also, in English, subject/object may well have played a role (it caused the experiencer complement to become ambiguous), whereas this ambiguity did not really exist for German, as she shows. These two factors favour the development in English of the construction found in stage 4. Interestingly enough, von Seeffranz-Montag shows that in German certain pronominal forms became ambiguous: nominative/accusative *es* and genitive *es* had collapsed. Since *es* always refers to the patient complement, it is perhaps not surprising that this complement was reinterpreted as nominative subject in German and that it is therefore the *es*-construction which is still the most frequent in that language.

Concluding, we can say that we have the impression that the author, in

REVIEWS

her wish to explain the development of the impersonal construction language-independently, did not approach the English data without bias (her choice of relational subject strikes us as suspiciously suitable for her purposes). On the positive side, we note that the book is very well documented as far as the relevant literature is concerned. We also appreciate the fact that methodological questions are not avoided (as e.g. the discussion of the notion 'subject' and the attention paid to the various explanations for word order change). A final remark: it would have been helpful if the author had provided the reader with glosses of the examples given for the older stages of English, French and German, with which not every linguist will be familiar.

REFERENCES

- Fischer, O. C. M. & van der Leek, F. C. (1983). The demise of the Old English impersonal construction. *JL* 19. 337-368.
- Gaaf, W. van der (1904). *The transition from the impersonal to the personal construction in Middle English*. Heidelberg: Winter.
- Vennemann, Th. & Harlow, R. (1977). Categorical grammar and consistent basic VX-serialization. *Theoretical Linguistics* 4. 227-254.

Review by OLGA FISCHER and
FREDERIKE VAN DER LEEK,
Engels Seminarium,
University of Amsterdam.

(Received 2 January 1985)