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On the Impersonal Constructions in *The Canterbury Tales*: With Special Reference to Phrasal Impersonals¹

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1. Introduction

Impersonal constructions in Old and Middle English included particular verbs called impersonal verbs such as *liken*, *thynken* and *geven*. There was a similar type of impersonal construction in terms of the semantic and syntactic features. Such constructions consisted of a personal pronoun in the objective case, the verb *be* and a group of adjectives such as *well*, *good*, *leef* and *loath*, as in (1) and (2).

(1) Yet *were me levere* houndes had me eten (*CT*, IV 1438; emphasis added)

(2) How *looth hire was* to been a wikked wyf, (*CT*, V 1599)

In (1) and (2), *levere* (*leef*) and *looth* (*loath*) are used with the personal pronoun in the objective case and *be*. Denison (1990: 125) names constructions such as those in (1) and (2) ‘phrasal impersonals’. However, *leef* also takes the personal pronoun in the nominative case, as in (3).

(3) *I have wel levere* evere to suffre wo (*CT*, V 1531)

In (3), *leef* occurs with *have* and the personal pronoun in the nominative case. This study deals with the constructions consisting of *be/have* + *well*, *good*, *leef* and *loath*². Notably, few studies examine phrasal impersonals compared to impersonal constructions with impersonal verbs. Although several studies mention that phrasal impersonals were used by Chaucer

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² *Be* stands for all forms of the verb *be*. Moreover, *well*, *good/leef/loath* are used to represent all variants, their comparative and superlative forms.

(Shimizu 1939, Kerkhof 1982 and Nohara 1999), there remains a need for a quantitative analysis.

Nakamura (1991) and Ohno (2018) examine how the impersonal and personal constructions with *leef* differ syntactically in Chaucer's works. Ohno (2018: 266-7) claims that the syntactic factors such as the grammatical person of the experiencer, the complementation patterns and the word order are barely related to the difference in the construction type.

However, it remains unclear, concerning other phrasal impersonals consisting of *well*, *good* and *loath*, whether they show variations between the impersonal and personal constructions. We will investigate the *be + well*, *good/leef/loath* constructions not only from the factors examined by Ohno (2018) but also in terms of the types of clauses.

The purpose of this study is to analyse those constructions in *The Canterbury Tales* (henceforth *CT*) from syntactic perspectives. Constructions with impersonal verbs such as *liken* are excluded. To achieve this aim, two research questions are formulated: 1) In which construction do phrasal impersonals tend to occur? and 2) Is there any difference between impersonal and personal constructions from syntactic viewpoints?

2. Methods

We examine the differences in impersonal and personal constructions in Chaucer. The examples in this study are from Benson's edition (2008).

This study categorises the constructions into two groups according to the case of a personal pronoun. First, the impersonal construction dealt in this study is defined as the one which includes the personal pronoun in the objective case. The examples in which the pronoun follows a preposition such as 'to me' are included. Constructions with formal *it* also belong to this group in this study. Second, the personal construction is defined as the one which includes the personal pronoun in the nominative case.

Our study collects examples in which a personal pronoun is used with adjectives/adverbs *well*, *good/leef/loath* and the verb *be*. The personal pronoun in the collected examples is supposed to have the semantic role of the experiencer, who has the feeling which adjectives describe.

The words used as phrasal impersonals in our study are *well*, *good*, *better*, *best*, *leef*, *levere*, *levest*, *loath*, *lother* and *lothest*. In the case of *well*, the part of speech is often ambiguous as to whether they are an adverb or an

adjective. Therefore, this study deals with all examples of *well*, *better* and *best* used as phrasal impersonals regardless of their parts of speech. In Chaucer, *leef*, *levere* and *levest* are used as either a noun or an adverb in addition to an adjective, but in this study, they are only examined when used as an adjective.

Moreover, the examples in which *leef* occurs with the verb *have* are included. The examples with the verb *worthe* are excluded.

Our analysis excludes the following examples without a personal pronoun, as in (4), and the examples which involve two personal pronouns, either of which is not assigned the semantic role of the experiencer as in (5) and (6). Quotations (5) and (6) have the pronoun *ye* and *I*, respectively, which cannot be considered the experiencer.

(4) And seith Salomon that ‘bet it is to dye than for to have swich poverte.’
(*CT*, VII 1571)

(5) And though to me that ye be lief and deere, (*CT*, IV 479)

(6) But I to yow be also good and trewe (*CT*, III 1243)

Additionally, the examples in which the experiencer is presented by a noun, as in (7), are also excluded from our study. We exclude them because deciding whether the noun can be interpreted as either a nominative or an objective case is difficult.

(7) For unto Crist it is so lief and deere (*CT*, VIII 1467)

In the next section, the examples are categorized into two construction types and then examined from four syntactic perspectives according to the construction type.

3. Results and Discussion

In this section, we will discuss the results from the analysis of the *be + well*, *good/leef/loath* constructions. In Sections 3.2 to 3.5, we will demonstrate the differences in the features between impersonal and personal constructions from syntactic viewpoints.

3.1 Frequency

Let us first look at the frequency of phrasal impersonals. Table 1 presents the frequencies of the *be + well*, *good/leef/loath* constructions in the impersonal and personal constructions based on the categorisation in Section 2.

Table 1. Frequency of *be + well*, *good/leef/loath* constructions according to the construction type

Type of construction	<i>good, well</i>		<i>leef</i>		<i>loath</i>		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Impersonal	9	90.0	18	60.0	11	100.0	38	74.5
Personal	1	10.0	12	40.0	0	0.0	13	25.5
Total	10	100.0	30	100.0	11	100.0	51	100.0

As Table 1 shows, our data contain 51 examples of phrasal impersonals with *well*, *good*, *leef* and *loath*. The total percentage of impersonal constructions (74.5%) is higher than that of personal constructions (25.5%). In particular, the usage of phrasal impersonals with *good*, *well* and *loath* is exceedingly high in impersonal constructions. It is notable that every phrase prefers impersonal constructions to personal constructions.

Regarding personal construction, however, each proportion varies according to adjectives. The percentage of *good*, *well* in the personal construction is 10.0% and that of *loath* is 0%. On the other hand, *leef* has 30 examples, of which 12 (40.0%) are used in personal constructions. It is noteworthy that the rate of *leef* in personal constructions is much higher than that of *good*, *well* and *loath*.

This outcome can be attributed to the emergence of personal constructions. Van der Gaaf (1904) demonstrates that *leef* with the verb *have* is used faster in personal constructions than the others. Table 2 shows the time when the phrasal impersonals first appeared in personal constructions in Middle English based on the analysis by van der Gaaf (1904: 41-6, 52-3, 57, 59-60 and 66-8).

Table 2. Development of personal constructions according to each phrase

Type of construction	1250–	1300–	1350–	1400–
<i>I have leef//lever//levest</i>	+	+	+	+
<i>I am loþ</i>	–	+	+	+
<i>I am well</i>	–	+	+	+
<i>I am leef//lever</i>	–	+	+	+
<i>I am better</i>	–	–	+	+
<i>I had better</i>	–	–	–	+

Based on the analysis by van der Gaaf (1904: 41-6, 52-3, 57, 59-60 and 66-8)

As shown in Table 2, while the construction type *I have leef//lever//levest*, observed from 1250, occurs earlier, the others are used from 1300. This may have led to the higher percentage of *leef* in personal constructions than the others, as shown in Table 1.

This section has discussed the frequencies of the *be + well*, *good//leef//loath* constructions according to the construction type. Next, we will investigate the difference between impersonal and personal constructions from syntactic viewpoints from 3.2 to 3.5.

3.2 Grammatical person of the experiencer

This section investigates the grammatical person used as the experiencer according to the construction type. Table 3 shows the tokens of the *be + well*, *good//leef//loath* constructions and their proportions, depending on the grammatical person of the experiencer.

Table 3. Frequency of *be + well*, *good//leef//loath* constructions according to the grammatical person of the experiencer

Grammatical person of the experiencer	<i>well, good</i>				<i>leef</i>				<i>loath</i>				Total			
	Impersonal		Personal		Impersonal		Personal		Impersonal		Personal		Impersonal		Personal	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1st-person	2	100.0	0	0.0	8	42.1	11	57.9	4	100.0	0	0.0	14	56.0	11	44.0
2nd-person	3	100.0	0	0.0	2	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	5	100.0	0	0.0
3rd-person	4	80.0	1	20.0	8	88.9	1	11.1	7	100.0	0	0.0	19	90.5	2	9.5
Total	9		1		18		12		11		0		38		13	

According to Table 3, the second-person experiencer is exclusively used in the impersonal constructions. The tendency is mostly true for the third-

person experiencer. That is, the second- and third-person experiencer are used exclusively or predominantly in the impersonal constructions.

Similarly, in the first-person experiencer, *well*, *good* and *loath* always appear in the impersonal constructions. However, the *be + leef* construction is different from the others. The proportion of impersonal constructions having *leef* is 42.1%, and that of personal constructions is 57.9%. It is worth noting that the *be + leef* constructions with the first-person experiencer are used more in the personal constructions than in the impersonal constructions.

Overall, the *be + well*, *good/leef/loath* constructions prefer the impersonal constructions to the personal ones regardless of the grammatical person of the experiencer, except for *leef* with first-person experiencer.

3.3 Complement type

This section examines the complement types of the *be + well*, *good/leef/loath* constructions. We divide the complement types into six groups: no complement, adverbial, nominal, prepositional (a preposition with a noun), infinitival and clausal complement.³ Table 4 illustrates the frequencies according to the complement types in the impersonal and personal constructions.

Table 4. Frequency of *be + well*, *good/leef/loath* constructions according to the complement type

Type of complement	<i>well, good</i>				<i>leef</i>				<i>loath</i>				Total			
	Impersonal		Personal		Impersonal		Personal		Impersonal		Personal		Impersonal		Personal	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
No complement	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	100.0	0	0.0	5	100.0	0	0.0	7	100.0	0	0.0
Adverbial	1	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	100.0	0	0.0
Nominal	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	100.0	0	0.0
Prepositional	1	50.0	1	50.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	50.0	1	50.0
Infinitival	6	100.0	0	0.0	9	50.0	9	50.0	5	100.0	0	0.0	20	69.0	9	31.0
Clausal	1	100.0	0	0.0	4	57.1	3	42.9	1	100.0	0	0.0	6	66.7	3	33.3
Total	9		1		18		12		11		0		38		13	

It is clear from Table 4 that almost all complement types are used more frequently in the impersonal constructions than in the personal constructions, except for the prepositional complement. The examples with no complement are always used in the impersonal constructions, as in (8) and

³ With respect to impersonal constructions with formal *it*, *it* can be considered as a nominal complement. However, the constructions with *it* are grouped into the type of no complement in our study.

(9). In (8) and (9), the *be + leef/loath* constructions are guided by the contrastive conjunction *al(though)* and this collocation seems to be used as a kind of a fixed phrase in *CT*.

(8) That oon of you, al *be hym looth* or *lief* (*CT*, I 1837)

(9) With yow, my wyf, although it *be me looth*. (*CT*, VII 384)

In addition to the no complement type, the examples which take an adverbial and nominal complement type are typically seen in the impersonal constructions. Examples (10) and (11) below take the adverb *therwith* and the phrase *pees or werre* as the complements, respectively.

(10) He loved hire so that *wel was hym therwith*. (*CT*, VII 2876)

(11) First thou shalt make no semblant wheither *thee were levere pees* or *werre*, or this or that, ne shewe hym nat thy wille and thyn entente. (*CT*, VII 1149)

It is remarkable that the no complement, adverbial and nominal complement types are used in the impersonal constructions at all times.

Another important finding from Table 4 is that infinitival and clausal complements are always used in the impersonal constructions in the *be + well, good/loath* constructions, while they occur with *leef* in both constructions, accounting for approximately half of the examples. To give a few examples, in (12) and (13), the infinitive as the complement is used in the impersonal constructions and the personal constructions, respectively.

(12) For, by my trouthe, *me were levere dye*
Than I yow sholde to hasardours allye. (*CT*, VI 615-6)

(13) *Levere ich hadde* to dyen on a knyf
Than thee offende, trewe deere wyf! (*CT*, IV 2163-4)

Both examples take the infinitive *dye* as the complement. In (12), the impersonal construction takes just *dye* as the complement. On the other hand,

in (13), the personal construction has *dye* as the complement with the prepositional phrase *on a knyf*. In the examples of *leef* with the infinitival complement, the impersonal constructions like (12) tend to take the infinitives as the complement, while the personal constructions like (13) are frequently accompanied by the infinitive with the prepositional phrase.

When the *be + well, good/loath* constructions take the infinitival complement, it is interesting that they are always used in the impersonal constructions. The *be + well, good* constructions occur with the infinitival complement six times in the impersonal constructions, as in (14) and (15).

(14) And therefore *yow is bettre* to hyde youre conseil in youre herte than praye him to whom ye han biwreyed youre conseil that he wole kepen it cloos and stille. (*CT*, VII 1146)

(15) Whan *hem were bet* to slepe; (*CT*, VII 744)

In addition to these examples, the remaining four examples are also used with the infinitival complement in the impersonal constructions in *CT*.

3.4 Word order

The difference between impersonal and personal constructions from the viewpoint of word order is examined in this section. The diachronic change in word order contributes to the shift from the impersonal to the personal constructions. That is to say, the establishment of word order affects the development of personal constructions (van der Gaaf 1904: 3, Jespersen 1927: 335). As for phrasal impersonals, it is worth examining the types of word order in both impersonal and personal constructions. Table 5 shows the distribution of the word order of phrasal impersonals in *CT*. Types of word order and the system of symbols in Table 5 are adopted from Ohno (2018: 267). The letters E and V indicate the experiencer and the verb. In addition, the letter X denotes the complement. The letter A indicates an adjective in our analysis. For example, the sentence *me is levere to* is thus represented by EVAX.

Table 5. Frequency of *be + well, good/leef/loath* constructions according to the word order

Type of word order	<i>well, good</i>				<i>leef</i>				<i>loath</i>				Total			
	Impersonal		Personal		Impersonal		Personal		Impersonal		Personal		Impersonal		Personal	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
AVEX	3	100.0	0	0.0	1	100.0	0	0.0	1	100.0	0	0.0	5	100.0	0	0.0
AEVX	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	100.0	2	100.0	0	0.0	2	66.7	1	33.3
EVA/EVAX/XEVA	3	75.0	1	25.0	11	61.1	7	38.9	3	100.0	0	0.0	17	68.0	8	32.0
EAVX	1	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	100.0	0	0.0
VEA/VEAX	0	0.0	0	0.0	6	60.0	4	40.0	4	100.0	0	0.0	10	71.4	4	28.6
VAE/VAEX	2	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	100.0	0	0.0	3	100.0	0	0.0
Total	9		1		18		12		11		0		38		13	

We find from Table 5 that the EVA/EVAX/XEVA orders (henceforth (X)EVA(X)) are used 25 times. Those orders are the most frequent of all orders in both constructions. The impersonal constructions take the (X)EVA(X) order seventeen times out of 38, and the personal constructions take the (X)EVA(X) order eight times out of thirteen. Moreover, it is worth noting that the (X)EVA(X) order prefers the impersonal constructions to the personal constructions.

Ohno (2018: 267) examines the *be + leef* constructions and states that ‘the constructions most frequently take EVAX order’. Our result demonstrates that not only the *be + leef* constructions but also the *be + well, good/loath* constructions also frequently exhibit (X)EVA(X), especially in the impersonal constructions.

Next, what we want to emphasise is that the AVEX, EAVX and VAE/VAEX (henceforth VAE(X)) orders are used only in the impersonal constructions. First, the AVEX order is found only in the impersonal constructions. This order is observed in all adjectives. For example, the *be + well, good* constructions take the AVEX order three times, all including *well*, as in (16).

- (16) God woot, this noble kyng, as to my wit,
 The firste nyght had many a myrie fit
 With ech of hem, so *wel was hym* on lyve. (CT, III 41-3)

In (16), the *be + well* constructions are used in the AVEX order. When they take the AVEX order, it always occurs in the impersonal construction like ‘*wel + be + personal pronoun* in the objective case’. In the case of the *be +*

leefloath constructions, they take the AVEX order one each in the impersonal constructions, as in (17) and (18).

(17) Ful *lief were me* this conseil for to hyde, (CT, VII 159)

(18) Ful *looth were hym* to cursen for his tithes, (CT, I 486)

In both examples, *ful* occurs in the initial position and before the adjective *leefloath*, which may lead to taking the AVEX order.

Second, the EAVX order is seen only in the impersonal constructions, as illustrated in (19).

(19) /Than I, and where *me best were* to allyen. (CT, IV 1414)

In (19), the *be + well, good* construction is introduced by the conjunction *where*. This is the only example in this study, in which *where* is placed before the *be + well, good/leefloath* constructions, as we will discuss in Table 7 in Section 3.5.

Third, the VAE(X) order is used only in the impersonal constructions, as in (20), (21) and (22).

(20) “And yet, God woot, this *is ful looth to me*; (CT, IV 491)

(21) And therefore it *were bettre for yow* to lese so muchel good of youre owene than for to taken of hir good in this manere, (CT, VII 1841)

(22) I wol conclude that it *is bet for me*

To sleen myself than been defouled thus. (CT, V 1422-3)

In (20), the *be + loath* constructions take the demonstrative *this*. In (21) and (22), the *be + well, good* constructions occur with the formal subject *it*. Moreover, these three examples all take the personal pronoun with the preposition *to* or *for*.

3.5 Type of clause

This section examines the clause types in impersonal and personal constructions. Table 6 demonstrates the frequency of phrasal impersonals in the impersonal and personal constructions according to the type of clause.

Table 6. Frequency of *be + well, good/leef/loath* constructions according to the clause type

Type of clause	<i>well, good</i>				<i>leef</i>				<i>loath</i>				Total			
	Impersonal		Personal		Impersonal		Personal		Impersonal		Personal		Impersonal		Personal	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Main clause	4	100.0	0	0.0	4	25.0	12	75.0	3	100.0	0	0.0	11	47.8	12	52.2
Subordinate clause	5	83.3	1	16.7	14	100.0	0	0.0	8	100.0	0	0.0	27	96.4	1	3.6
Total	9		1		18		12		11		0		38		13	

According to Table 6, the *be + well, good/loath* constructions clearly prefer the impersonal constructions to the personal constructions regardless of the clause type. However, when the *be + leef* constructions appear in the main clause, they are more frequently used in the personal constructions than in the impersonal constructions. In the main clause, the *be + leef* constructions appear twelve times (75.0%) in the personal constructions, while in the impersonal constructions, they occur only four times (25.0%).

Ohno (2015: 18-9, 42-3, 63, 83, 92 and 120) also examines the clause type in both the impersonal and the personal constructions, with special reference to impersonal verbs, but not phrasal impersonals. He observes that the construction types are not closely related to the clause types. As far as phrasal impersonals in our study is concerned, however, the construction types seem to affect the clause types with respect to the *be + leef* constructions.

Next, we examine the examples in the subordinate clauses in detail. We focus on which conjunction occurs with the impersonal constructions. Table 7 shows the frequency of conjunctions when the *be + well, good/leef/loath* constructions occur in the impersonal constructions. There is only one example in which personal constructions occur in the subordinate clauses and therefore the examples of personal constructions are excluded here.

Table 7. Frequency of *be + well, good/leef/loath* constructions in the impersonal constructions according to the subordinator type

Type of subordinator	<i>well, good</i>		<i>leef</i>		<i>loath</i>		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<i>that</i>	3	60.0	4	30.8	0	0.0	7	28.0
<i>though/al(though)/or</i>	0	0.0	2	15.4	4	57.1	6	24.0
<i>where/wher</i>	1	20.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	4.0
<i>whan</i>	1	20.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	4.0
<i>wheither</i>	0	0.0	1	7.7	0	0.0	1	4.0
<i>if</i>	0	0.0	1	7.7	0	0.0	1	4.0
<i>so</i>	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	14.3	1	4.0
<i>zero that</i>	0	0.0	3	23.1	1	14.3	4	16.0
<i>for</i>	0	0.0	2	15.4	1	14.3	3	12.0
Total	5	100.0	13	100.0	7	100.0	25	100.0

From Table 7, the *be + well, good/leef/loath* constructions occur with subordinators in the subordinate clauses 25 times⁴. Among them, *that* occurs seven times and *though/al(though)/or* six times. It is noteworthy that when the *be + well, good/leef/loath* constructions appear in the subordinate clauses, they come after *that* and *though/al(though)/or* at high frequency. The total proportion of *zero that* is also high (16.0%).

Having discussed the syntactic features of impersonal and personal constructions, we note that overall, impersonal constructions are preferred over personal constructions as shown in Sections 3.2 to 3.5. However, the *be + leef* constructions show a different tendency than the others in three respects: (1) the examples with the first-person experiencer occur much more frequently in the personal constructions than in the impersonal constructions, (2) the infinitival and clausal complements are used in the impersonal and personal constructions at a similar rate and (3) the quotations which occur in the main clause overwhelmingly appear in the personal constructions.

Two tendencies were observed in only impersonal constructions. First, the examples with no complement, an adverb and a nominal phrase as the complements always appear in the impersonal constructions. Second, there are three types of word order, which are used only in the impersonal constructions.

⁴ There are two examples in which the *be + leef/loath* constructions are used as fixed phrases without any subordinator. Those examples are excluded from Table 7.

4. Conclusion

We have examined the *be + well, good/leef/loath* constructions in *CT* from syntactic perspectives.

First, we investigated whether the *be + well, good/leef/loath* constructions tend to occur in impersonal or personal constructions. We concluded that concerning the *be + well, good/leef/loath* constructions in *CT*, the impersonal constructions are observed much more frequently than the personal constructions in *CT*. However, the proportions of personal constructions vary according to each phrase. It is noteworthy that the *be + leef* constructions are much more frequently used in personal constructions than the *be + well, good/loath* constructions.

Next, we discussed how impersonal and personal constructions differ according to the syntactic factors from 3.2 to 3.5. Concerning the grammatical person of the experiencer, the first-, second- and third- person experiencer are almost always used in the impersonal constructions except in the case of *leef* with the first-person experiencer. With respect to the complementation patterns, almost all complement types prefer impersonal constructions to personal constructions. However, regarding *leef*, the infinitival and clausal complements are used mostly equally in the impersonal and personal constructions.

As for the word order, both constructions take the (X)EVA(X) order the most. Moreover, the (X)EVA(X) order is used much more frequently in the impersonal constructions than in the personal constructions. Another interesting finding is that there are three types of word order in which the *be + well, good/leef/loath* constructions are used only in the impersonal constructions. Regarding the clause type, the impersonal constructions are exceedingly frequent regardless of the clause type except for *leef*. When the *be + leef* constructions are used in the main clause, they appear predominantly in the personal constructions. Moreover, the impersonal constructions in the subordinate clauses are introduced by the subordinator *that* the most.

The results demonstrated that impersonal constructions are preferred over personal constructions in general. However, it is noteworthy that only the *be + leef* constructions show the syntactic variation between the impersonal and personal constructions under the condition that they occur with the first-

person experiencer (the grammatical person), the infinitival and clausal complements (the complement type) and in the main clause (the clause type).

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