



# Impersonal modals in Middle English

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UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

# 'De-auxiliarization in the Dutch and English modals: A comparative diachronic corpus investigation'



Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research

**(1) Middle English, 15th c.**

*him must be vp be tyme to goo on huntyng*

‘he must be up in time to go hunting’

MED: c1460 *Ipom.*(3) (Lngl 257) 345/14

# Plan for today

1. Old English impersonals
2. The demise of the impersonal
3. The case of *ought*
4. Future work

# Old English impersonals

# Old English clause types (1)

## Intransitive clause

NOM VERB

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## Intransitive clause

NOM VERB

## Transitive clause

NOM VERB {Acc, GEN, DAT}

NOM VERB COMPCL

# Old English clause types (2)

## **'Impersonal' clause**

{DAT, Acc} VERB

{DAT, Acc} VERB {Acc, GEN}

{DAT, Acc} VERB COMPCL

*ofhreowan* ‘pity’

(2) Old English, 10th c.

<i>him</i>	<i>ofhreow</i>	<i>bæs</i>	<i>mannes</i>
him.DAT	pitied.3SG	the.GEN	man.GEN
‘he pitied the man’			

DOE Corpus: ÆCHom I, 13, 4

# *mætan* ‘dream’

## (3) Old English, 11th c.

Æfter twam gearum faraone mætte þæt  
after two.DAT years.DAT pharao.DAT dreamt.3SG COMP

he stode be anre ea  
he.NOM stood.3SG.SBJV by a.DAT river

‘After two years Pharao dreamt that he was standing by a river’

DOE Corpus: Gen (Ker), 106

‘Sume word synd gecwedene INPERSONALIA, þæt synd butan  
hade. hi habbað þone ðriddan had and synd ateorigenlice’

*Ælfric’s Grammar* (Zupitza 1880: 206)

[Some verbs are called IMPERSONALS, which are without person.  
They have the third person and are defective]

# Old English clause types (3)

**'Impersonal' clause?**

{DAT, ACC} VERB NOM

# ‘Impersonal’ with NOM

## (4) Old English, 10th c.?

*Dam wife ba word wel licodon*  
the.DAT woman.DAT those.NOM words.NOM well pleased.3PL

‘Those words pleased the woman very much’

DOE Corpus: Beo, 174

# Semantic fields

**Elmer (1981)**

RUE

PLEASE

BEHOVE

HAPPEN

SEEM

# Semantic fields

**Elmer (1981)**

RUE  
PLEASE  
BEHOVE  
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SEEM

**Möhlig-Falke (2012)**

PHYSICAL SENSATION  
EMOTION  
COGNITION  
EXISTENTIAL EXPERIENCE  
MOTION  
OWNERSHIP/APPROPRIATENESS  
(NON)AVAILABILITY  
BENEFACTION

# Non-canonical ‘subjects’

**Keenan (1974)**

TYPICAL SUBJECT PROPERTIES

Control of co-reference

Control of agreement

Topicality

Agentivity

...

# Non-canonical ‘subjects’

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**Hopper & Thompson (1980)**

TRANSITIVITY PROPERTIES

Kinesis

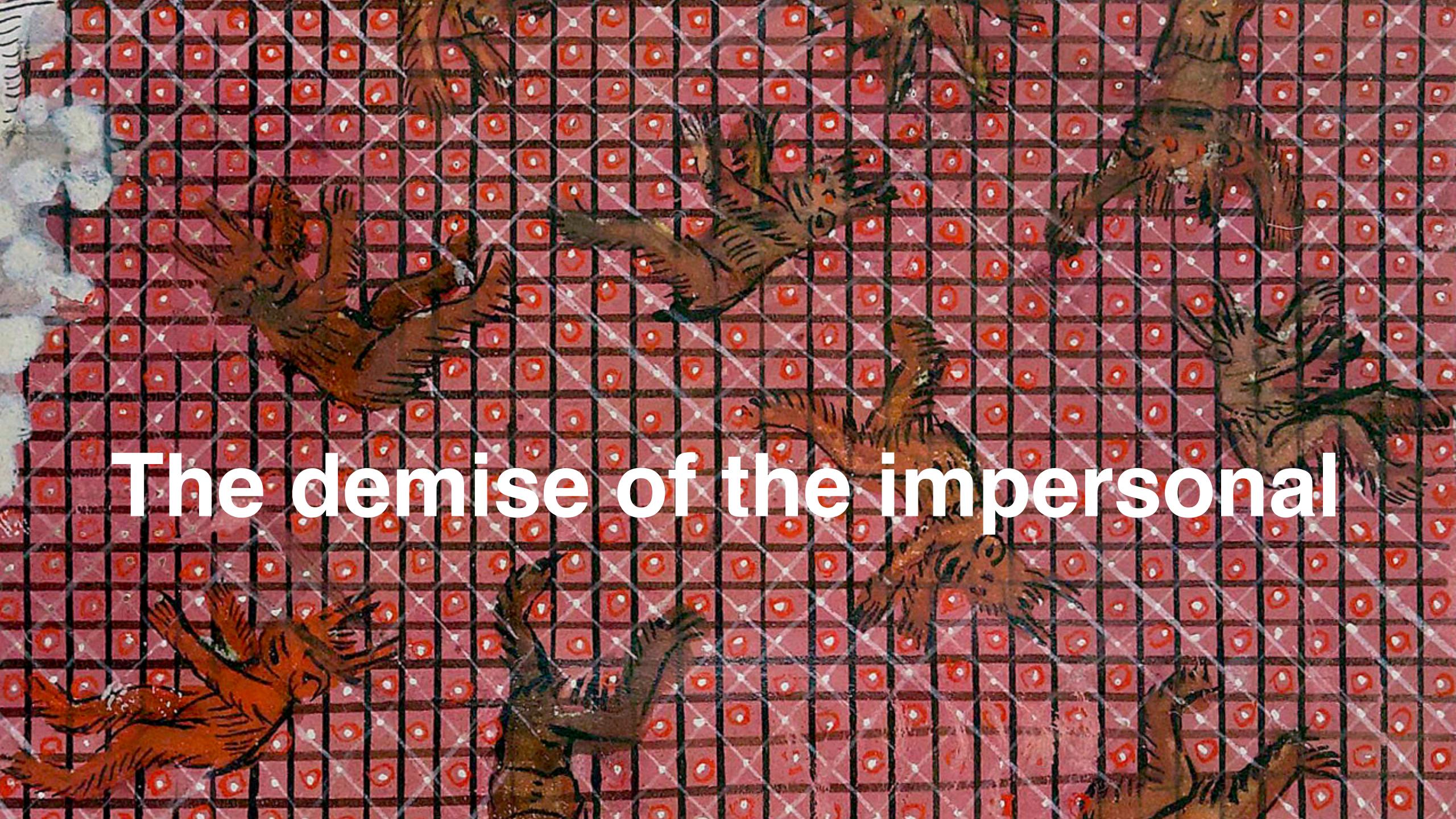
Aspect

Volitionality

Agency

Affectedness of O

...



The demise of the impersonal

# **Anglistische Forschungen**

Herausgegeben von Dr. Johannes Hoops

Professor an der Universität Heidelberg

Heft 14

## **The Transition from the Impersonal to the Personal Construction in Middle English**

by

**W. van der Gaaf**



**Heidelberg**

Carl Winter's Universitätsbuchhandlung

1904

# Work on impersonals

Van der Gaaf (1904)

# Work on impersonals

Van der Gaaf (1904)

Jespersen (1927)

# Work on impersonals

Van der Gaaf (1904)

Jespersen (1927)

Butler (1977)

Elmer (1981)

Fischer & van der Leek (1983; 1987)

Anderson (1986)

Allen (1995; 1997)

Möhlig-Falke (2012)

Miura (2015)

# *like* with caseless noun

## (5) Middle English, 13th/14th c.

*Ille liked ðanne balaac / Euerilc word ðe prest balaam spac.*

'And every word that Balaam the priest spoke displeased Balak'

MED: a1325(c1250) *Gen.& Ex.(Corp-C 444)* 4029

# *like* with NOM

## (6) Middle English, late 14th c.

*He made me lopen þat þat i most lyked.*

'He made me loathe that which I liked the most'

MED: c1390 ?Hilton *Qui Habitat* (Vrn) 8/7

# However: *like* with DAT until 1500

## (7) Middle English, 15th c.

*He doth all that hym lyketh.*

‘He does everything that he likes’

MED: a1500(?c1450) *Merlin* (Cmb Ff.3.11) 1

# Multiple pathways

## 1. Loss of the verb

*me listeth, me meteth*

## 2. Addition of formal subject

*me seemeth > it seems (to me)*

## 3. Dative experiencer > nominative subject

*me liketh > I like*

## 4. Use of passive

*me shameth > I am ashamed*

# Object-like experiencer?

## (8) Gothic, 6th c.?

*haiwa skulup gaggan jah galeikan guda*  
how should.2PL walk and please God.DAT  
'how ye ought to walk and to please God' (KJV)

1 Thess 4:1, Ambrosianus B ([wulfila.be](http://wulfila.be))

Cole et al. (1980: 721), but cf. Eyþórsson & Barðdal (2005: 832)

# Subject-like experiencer

## (9) Modern Icelandic

*Henni svelgdist á steikinni {sinni / \*hennar}*  
she.DAT choked.3SG on steak.DEF.DAT {REFL / \*POSS.3SG.FEM}  
'She choked on her steak'

Cole et al. (1980: 724), quoted from Anderson (1977)

# Acquisition of subject properties

## (10) Earlier Georgian

<i>me</i>	<i>m-i-qvar-an</i>	<i>isini</i>
1SG.DAT	1SG-APPL-love-PL	3PL.NOM
'I love them'		

Cole et al. (1980: 739), quoted from Tschenkeli (1958: 454)

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## (11) Modern Georgian

*mat            Ø-u-qvar-t            is*  
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‘They love him/her/it’

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# Non-canonical agreement in English?

## (12) Middle English, 14th c.

*Sum men þat han suchē likynge wondren what hem ailēn*

'Some men that have such pleasure wonder what ails them'

a1450(a1401) *Chastising GC* (Bod 505) 103, 15

Bazire & Colledge (1957), quoted in Butler (1977: 159)

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## (13) Middle English, 14th c.

*And seyde to hem in a goodly manere how that hem oghten haue greet  
repentance*

‘And [she] explained to them in a gracious manner how they ought to have  
great repentance’

Chaucer, *Tale of Melibee* (ed. Blake, I. 1731)

Innsbruck Corpus: MELBLA, Hengwrt MS

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# The case of *ought*

# Sources of new impersonals

	<i>n</i>	Examples
Old English (inherited)	31	<i>gladen, ofdreden</i>
Middle English (new formations)	9	<i>happenen, misteren</i>
Old Norse	7	<i>irken, semen</i>
Norman French	16	<i>chauncen, merveillien</i>

cf. Möhlig-Falke (2012: 15)

# Impersonal necessity verbs

## Old English

DAT *gedafenian*

DAT *gebyrian*

DAT *gerisan*

## Middle English

(DAT *bir*)

DAT *behave*

DAT *must*

DAT *ought*

DAT *tharf*

# Impersonal *must*

## (14) Middle English, 15th c.

*him must be vp be tyme to goo on huntyng*

‘he must be up in time to go hunting’

MED: c1460 *Ipom.*(3) (Lngl 257) 345/14

# Impersonal *ought*

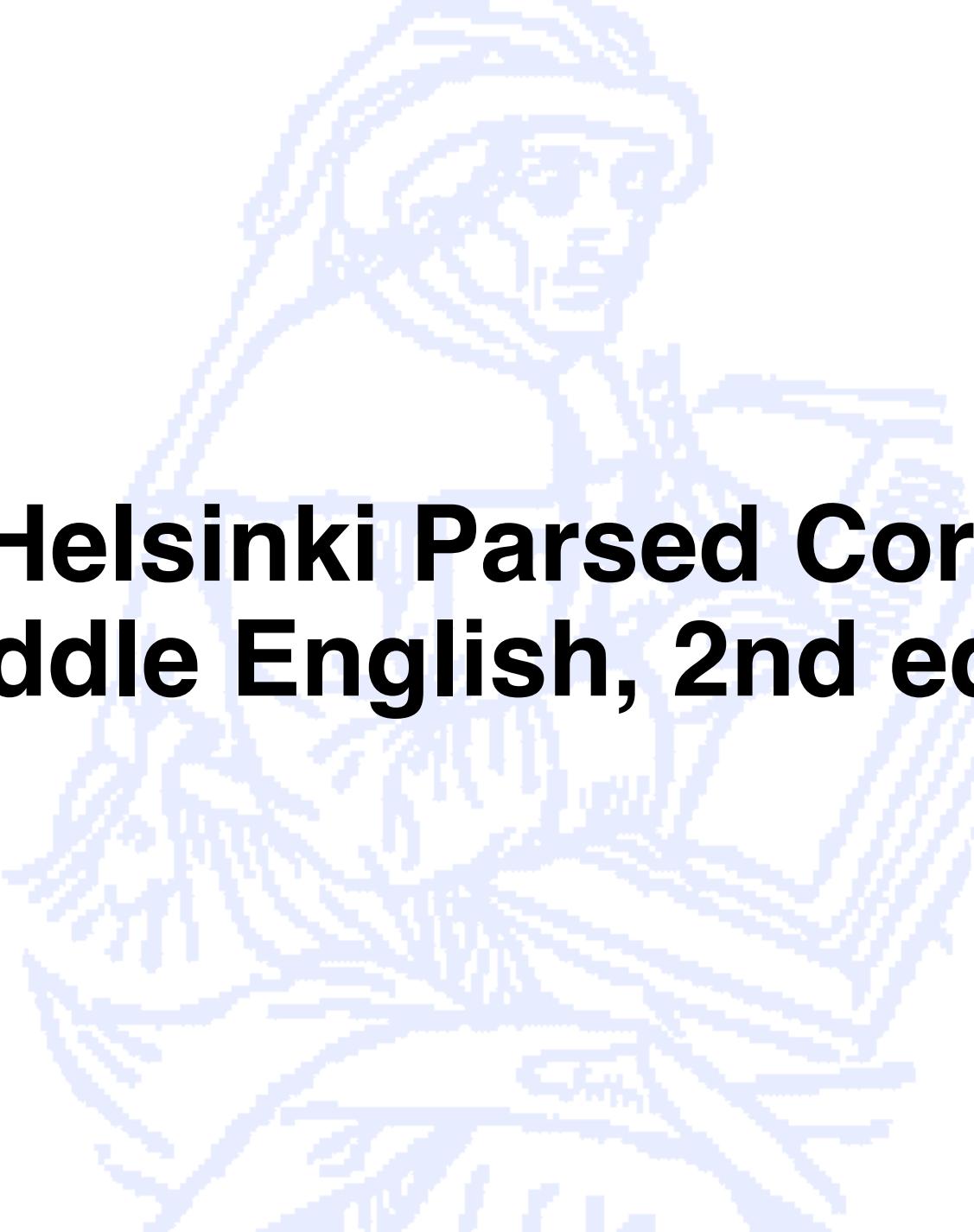
## (15) Middle English, 15th c.

*Me awghte to knowe þe Kynge: he es my kydde lorde*  
‘I ought to know the king; he is my noble lord’

CMEPV: *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, l. 3509 (Thornton MS.)

‘The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries may, with regard to English syntax, be called a period of confusion [...] the language was in an unsettled state [...] mistakes were occasionally made’

Van der Gaaf (1904: 143)



# **Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Middle English, 2nd edn.**



# CorpusSearch 2: a tool for linguistic research

CorpusSearch 2 is a Java program that supports research in corpus linguistics. It is useful both for the construction of syntactically annotated (parsed) corpora and for searching them. Running CorpusSearch on an appropriately annotated corpus a user can automatically:

- find and count lexical and syntactic configurations of any complexity
- correct systematic errors
- code the linguistic features of corpus sentences for later statistical analysis

# CorpusSearch 2

Both the input and output files of CorpusSearch are ordinary text files, with syntactic annotations in the [Penn-Treebank format](#).

CorpusSearch 2 runs under any Java-supported operating system, including Linux, Macintosh, Unix and Windows. It requires Java 2, version 1.3 or later. In addition to being downloadable from this site, CorpusSearch is distributed with the [Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpora of Historical English](#).

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## (16) Middle English, c. 1400

*and þe Britons were cristen: wel auȝt him þan ham forto helpe, so as þai  
weren of on law*

‘and the Britons were Christians; so he ought to help them, since they were  
of the same law [faith]’

PPCME2: CMBRUT3, 942.839 (CMEPV: *The Brut*)

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**(17) Middle English, early 15th c.**

*Right wel aughte vs for to loue & worscipe to drede & serue such a lord*  
‘We really ought to love and worship, fear and worship such a lord’

PPCME2: CMMANDEV, 2.24 (CMEPV: *Mandeville’s Travels*)

## (17) Middle English, early 15th c.

*Right wel **aughte vs** for to loue & worscipe to drede & serue such a lord*

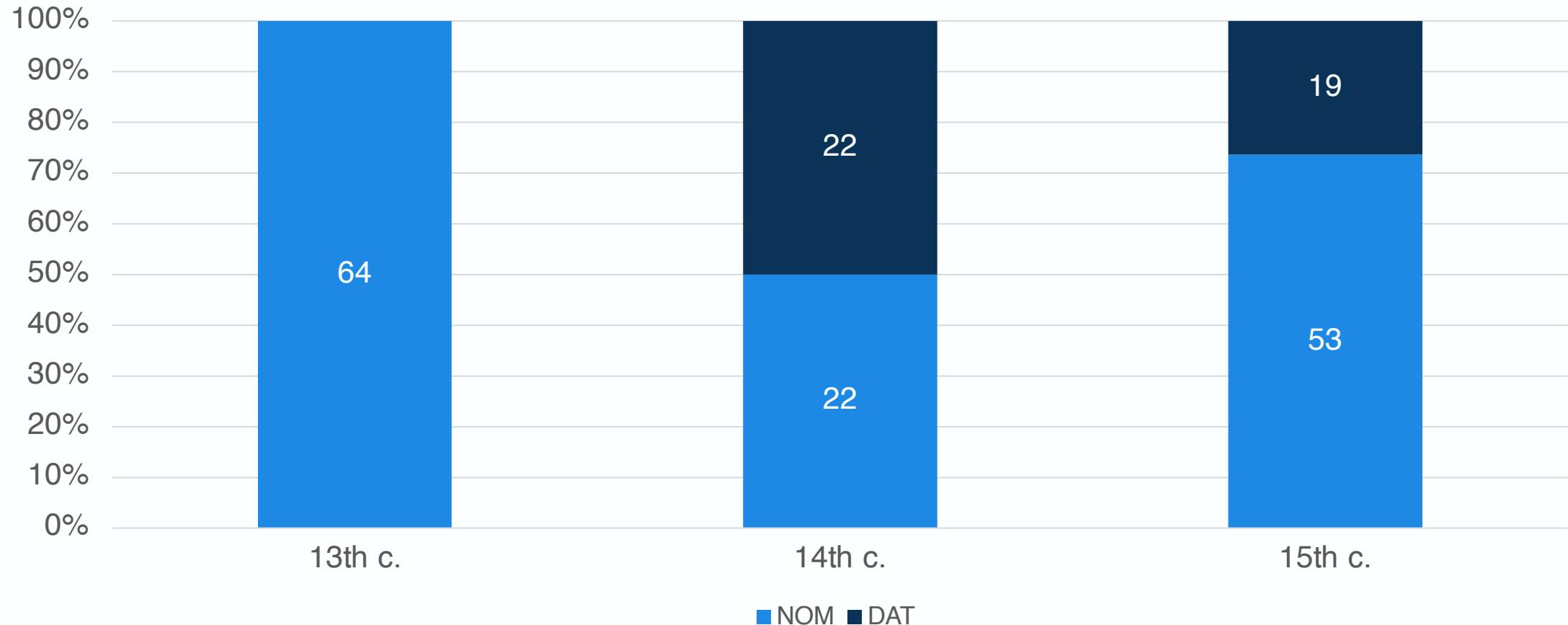
'We really ought to love and worship, fear and serve such a lord'

PPCME2: CMMANDEV, 2.24 (CMEPV: *Mandeville's Travels*)

# PPCME2 – case per century

	Wordcount	[NOM <i>ought</i> ]	[DAT <i>ought</i> ]	% DAT
13th century	199,149	64	0	0%
14th century	378,517	22	22	50%
15th century	527,986	53	19	26.4%

# [DAT *ought*] per century



# PPCME2 – 14th century

Text	[NOM <i>ought</i> ]	[DAT <i>ought</i> ]
CMAELR3	2	
CMBRUT3	1	3
CMCTMELI	6	8
CMCTPARS	3	11
CMPURVEY	10	

# PPCME2 – 15th century

Text	[NOM <i>ought</i> ]	[DAT <i>ought</i> ]	Text	[NOM <i>ought</i> ]	[DAT <i>ought</i> ]
CMAELR4	2		CMMALORY	16	1
CMBENRUL	15		CMMANDEV	2	1
CMBOETH	2		CMMIRK	1	
CMEDTHOR	2	4	CMREYNAR	3	
CMGAYTRY		9	CMROLLEP	1	1
CMJULNOR	1		CMROLLTR	2	3
CMKEMPE	4	1	CMROYAL	1	

# Summing up

1. Non-nominative ‘subjects’ cross-linguistically common
2. Gradual acquisition of subject properties rather than abrupt reanalysis
3. [DAT *ought*] attested in the 14th and 15th c.
4. Unexplained in-text variation

# Future work



# In-text variation

## (18) Middle English, 14th c.

- a. *I moste trette of a trew towchande bise nedes*  
‘I must necessarily negotiate a truth concerning this’  
CMEPV: *Alliterative Morte Arthure* (Thornton MS.), l. 263
- b. *Vs moste with some fresche mette refresche oure pople*  
‘We must revitalise our people with some fresh food’

ibid., l. 2491

‘For some reason, dative Experiencers are particularly common in clauses introduced with *as*, particularly when the second element was not expressed, as in *as hem ought*.’

Allen (1995: 250, fn. 30)

# Analogy in necessity verbs?

## Old English

DAT *gedafenian*

DAT *gebyrian*

DAT *gerisan*

## Middle English

(DAT *bir*)

DAT *behave*

DAT *must*

DAT *ought*

DAT *tharf*

# Old Norse ‘impersonals’

## (19) Old Norse (Iceland, 13th c.)

*vilja mundu goðin at þenna ás*  
want would.3PL gods.DEF COMP this.M.ACC ás (type of god)

*þyrfti eigi at nefna*  
was.necessary.SBJV not to mention

‘the gods would wish that it was not necessary to mention this ás’

*Gylfaginning* 28, Codex Regius (GKS 2365 4°)

# References (1)

## Data sources

CMEPV = *Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse*. University of Michigan 2006  
(<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/cme/>) [accessed 10 Apr 2017].

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## Illustrations

Slides 1 and 62: BnF, Latin 1429, fol. 8r (16th c.)

Slide 5: BnF, Latin 8878, fol. 139v (11th c.)

Slide 14: BnF, Français 316, fol. 23v (14th c.)

Slide 31: Huntington Library, HM 144, fol. 81r (15th c.)

Slide 51: BL, Royal 18 E III, fol. 24r (12th c.)

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Thank you!