

IMPERSONALIZED IMPERSONALS
ARGUMENT STRUCTURE AND LANGUAGE CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates some problems posed by the argument structure of impersonal and passive constructions in Estonian. I propose that the impersonal affix constitutes the syntactic satisfaction of the highest argument of a verb, rather than a demotion of this argument. The question is raised of why in some instances the impersonal affix is grammatical in contexts where a pronominal or nominal personal argument is ungrammatical. This mismatch occurs in cases of impersonal perfect clauses, with intransitive verbs and transitive non-aspectual verbs. The periphrastic perfect verb form allows the affixation of an impersonal marker onto the auxiliary verb, thereby impersonalizing an already impersonal construction. A formulation of the argument structure of this construction is attempted, which in turn raises questions about the nature of the elements in the construction. It is posited that only after a process of ‘semantic bleaching’ are these constructions able to enter the grammar.

1. Introduction

In this paper, the characteristics and argument structure of the Estonian impersonal and passive are examined in an effort to answer the question of why the impersonal affix is grammatical in some contexts where a referential nominal argument is ungrammatical. The impersonal affix is taken to constitute the syntactic satisfaction of the highest argument of a verb, which gives rise to an interpretation of a generalized referent. The impersonal verb form can be used in combination with a passive or an impersonal construction, by impersonalizing the auxiliary in a compound construction. These are the cases where argument structure can sometimes be confounded. An account of these constructions involves questions about the nature of participles and passive arguments in Estonian, and the argument structure of auxiliaries. We find, however, that the answer to parsing these constructions lies beyond argument structure, on the level of language change.

1.1 Impersonal and passive paradigms

To begin with, the distinctions between the two constructions examined in this paper should be clarified. In (1-2), examples of a prototypical impersonal and a prototypical passive are given. Note that in (1), intransitive verbs are impersonalized (though transitives, modals, and others can be impersonalized as well), whereas for the personal passive in (2), the verb must be transitive, and the patient is promoted to subject, triggering verb agreement.

(1) *meie* *peol* **lauldi** *ja* **tantsiti**
 our *party.ade* **sang.imp** and **danced.imp**
 there was singing and dancing / people sang and danced at our party

(2) *maja* **oli** *tormis* **hävitatud**
 house.nom **was.3s** *storm.ine* **destroyed.p.part**
 the house was destroyed in a storm

The impersonal is semantically similar to a fourth person¹ (German *man*, French *on*), but only to a certain degree, and it is expressed through inflectional means. The dynamicity of the verb is not changed with the impersonal, whereas Estonian personal passives are stativizing. Passives are periphrastically formed with an auxiliary and a passive participle. The impersonal affix has the implication of a human, generalized, exophoric agent (as in 1). The passive implies no agent, suppressing the agent both syntactically and semantically (as in 2).

Rajandi (1999:69-70) outlines four structural differences between the Estonian impersonal and personal passive, summarized here.

1.1.1 Inflectional paradigms

As shown in (3), the inflectional paradigms of the two constructions differ. The periphrastic perfect tenses of the impersonal are isomorphic to the simple passive tenses, as illustrated by the bold text in (3). However, as the shaded auxiliaries show, a difference can still be drawn, in that the auxiliary takes a default 3rd person singular form in the impersonal, and never agrees with a noun phrase, whereas in the passive, a plural NP triggers plural auxiliary verb agreement.²

(3)	IMPERSONAL		PASSIVE		
PRES.	loe-takse		lehed	on	loetud
	read.imp.pres		papers.pl.nom	be.3p.pres	read.p.par
PAST	loe-ti		lehed	olid	loetud
	read.imp.past		papers.pl.nom	be.3p.past	read.p.par
PRS.PERF	on	loetud	lehed	on	olnud loetud
	be.3s.pres	read.p.par	paper.pl.nom	be.3p	been.p.par read.p.par
PST.PERF	oli	loetud	lehed	olid	olnud loetud
	be.3s.past	read.p.par	paper.pl.nom	be.3p	been.p.par read.p.par

Hence, although some ambiguity arises in certain tenses, for aspectual verbs (i.e. verbs which can take a total object) with totally affected patients, it is nevertheless clear that there are two distinct constructions with distinct paradigms.

1.1.2 Negation

Negation is coded differently in the impersonal and the passive, as demonstrated in (5a-c), the three options for negating the ambiguous affirmative construction in (4).

- (4) AFFIRMATIVE (*ambiguous between passive and impersonal*)
 saar oli mandriga ühendatud
 island.nom be.3s.past mainland.com connected.p.part
the island was connected to the mainland (Rajandi 1999:69-70)
- (5) PASSIVE NEGATION
- a. saar ei olnud mandriga ühendatud
 island.nom neg be.a.part mainland.com connected.p.part
*the island was **not connected** to the mainland*
- b. saar oli mandriga ühenda-mata
 island.nom be.3s.past mainland.com connected.p.part-neg
*the island was **unconnected** to the mainland*

¹ Rajandi (1966) details reasons the term ‘fourth person’ is infelicitous for Estonian (footnote 3, 539-40).

² There is no ambiguity with 1st and 2nd person subjects both because the default is 3SG and also for reasons of pronominal morphology which are not relevant here.

IMPERSONAL NEGATION

- c. saart ei olnud mandriga ühendatud
 island.part neg be.a.part mainland.com connected.p.part
they hadn't connected the island to the mainland (Rajandi 1999:69-70)

The passive subject, in (5a-b), remains unaffected by negation, whereas the same NP in an impersonal (isomorphic in the affirmative) takes the partitive in a negated clause (as in 5c). The impersonal patient is not a promoted subject; rather, it remains closer to an object, and takes nominative case only if totally affected. A negative impersonal clause always takes a partitive (partial/ not wholly affected) NP. Negation does not affect the case of the passive nominal argument, which behaves much like a prototypical subject. Only in the passive can the participle take a negation affix (cf. English *un-*) (5b).

1.1.3 Agentive adverbials

Genitive and adessive agentive adverbials are only possible in personal passives, not in the impersonal³. The agentive adverbials in (6) give the same reading as an agentive *by*-phrase. In (7), these constructions are ungrammatical with the impersonal, under the relevant reading where the pronoun referent is the same as the agent.

- (6) a. õunapuu oli **Oskari** istutatud
 apple.tree.nom be.3s.past **Oscar.gen** planted.p.part
the apple tree was planted by Oscar
- b. **tal** on töö tehtud
s/he.ade be.3s.pres work.nom done.p.part
s/he has done the work (lit: she has the work done)
- (7) (* tal) tööd (*ta) tehakse
 s/he.ade work.par s/he.gen do.imp.pres
*the work is being done *by him/her* (Rajandi 1999:70)

1.1.4 Verbs Types

The set of verbs available to each construction overlaps, but with differences. One verb which is possible with the impersonal but not the passive is given in (8). Rajandi also gives an example of the opposite restriction with a psychological verb with unconventional case-marking, *huvitama* 'interest', which usually appears as a personal passive with an elative phrase for the object of interest, and cannot be impersonalized (I will not elaborate further on this due to space restrictions).

- (8) a. * õnnetus oli aimatud
 accident.nom be.3s.past sensed.p.part
the accident was sensed
- b. aimati õnnetust
 sense.imp accident.part
people guessed/divined the accident (Rajandi 1999:70)

³ Other types of agent phrases are, however, attested in the impersonal (e.g. *by*-phrases), which is significant for the typological claim that languages with the Estonian type of impersonal do not express an agent with it (Siewierska 1984:94,100).

2. Relationship between the impersonal and the passive

Before looking at how the constructions combine, we turn to the relationship between them. The impersonal appears to be basic, and the personal passive is derived from it. Historical, semantic and syntactic evidence is presented to support this claim.

2.1 Historical

There is good evidence for saying that the personal passive in Estonian developed historically from the impersonal, rather than vice versa. First of all, the impersonal is clearly an older form within Estonian. The compound tenses (perfect and pluperfect) are innovations in Finnic (Laakso 2001:190). The impersonal has synthetic forms of the present and preterite, and compound perfect tenses, whereas the entire passive paradigm is periphrastic, which implies a newer development in Finnic. Second, the impersonal construction has also acquired various additional functions throughout Finnic. In colloquial Finnish, the impersonal is used with the 1PL pronoun (Shore 1988, Laakso 2001),⁴ whereas in “Karelian, Veps, Votian and Ingrian, the [impersonal] form is (more or less exclusively) used instead of 3PL,” most likely due to Russian influence (Laakso 2001:189).⁵ The impersonal is attested throughout Finnic, unlike the personal passive. Furthermore, the impersonal is an attested source for passives cross-linguistically (cf Haspelmath 1990:49 ‘Passives from generalized-subject constructions’).

In addition, the personal passive often assumed to have once existed in Uralic is a synthetic one, whose *W* suffix “(>Finnic *u, ü*) or complex suffixes with *W* are now used in lexical verb derivation to express reflexive, passive or related functions.” (Laakso 2001:195) In standard Estonian, this has developed into an essentially middle-marking suffix, but has nothing to do with the current personal passive.

On the other hand, evidence from dialects of Estonian shows older forms of a synthetic passive with a full paradigm of person agreement in present indicative, e.g. a synthetic verb form expressing ‘I-am-being-courted’, ‘you-are-being-courted’, and so on (Pihlak 1993:24). This is no longer used in dialects, but suggests that the personal passive may have developed by analogy with this usage.

Regardless of whether this dialect usage had any influence on the development of the periphrastic personal passive, it is clear that the German or Russian passive must have served as a model for its development. The history of Finnic is riddled with the difficulty of distinguishing areal versus genetic features in related languages, as well as heavy influences from Indo-European. Cross-linguistically, the analytic (auxiliary + participle) passive is rare outside IE (Haspelmath 1990:29). The inflectional impersonal is quite clearly Finnic (Finno-Ugric), whereas the Estonian personal passive developed from the impersonal perfect. As far as I am aware, no Finnic languages other than Estonian are reported to have a personal passive construction (Viitso 1998:111-13).

⁴ Note the similarity to French, where the “impersonal pronoun *on*... shows a tendency to be used in the 1pl sense.” (Haspelmath 1990:50)

⁵ Haspelmath (1990) argues for the unidirectionality of grammaticalization, and in particular the unidirectional development of a passive from the 3pl. The use of an impersonal verb form for 3pl would seem to provide a counterexample to Haspelmath’s hypothesis. However, he does not include impersonals (or ‘desubjectives’, Haspelmath 1990:34) in the passivization under discussion. On the other hand, he does cite 3pl as a source for passives but not vice versa (1990:49), and so the use of an impersonal form for 3pl still has relevance for a different perspective on his unidirectionality argument.

2.2 Semantic

The semantic feature common to both the impersonal perfect and the personal passive is that of resultativity, which indicates a cognitive explanation for the development of the passive from the impersonal.

The perfect is most often used to express a completed action, associated with the endpoint (and result) of a process. It is therefore intimately linked to the notion of resultativity. The Estonian passive, more than the English passive, is highly stative and very commonly interpreted as expressing a result-state. The high dynamicity of the impersonal (with dynamic verbs), on the other hand, is reduced by the association of completedness in the perfect tense. The impersonal is usually oriented toward an ongoing process, whereas the perfect points to a completed process.

Nedjalkov admits that “it is not always easy to distinguish between statives and resultatives.” (1988:7) He delineates the difference between the two, not unlike the distinction between the passive and the impersonal in Estonian: “the stative expresses a state of a thing without any implication of its origin, while the resultative expresses both a state and the preceding action it has resulted from.” (1988:6) He also makes explicit the cognitive closeness between resultative and passive, which is precisely the relationship in question in the development of the passive from the impersonal perfect: “The resultative from transitive verbs typically expresses a state of the patient of the latter which usually surfaces as a subject in a resultative construction, and therefore the agent has to be deleted. This results in an intersection of the properties of resultative and passive.” (1988:17) However, the impersonal agent is already reduced to a verbal inflection, and so the step from an impersonal perfect to a personal passive is a very small one.

That small step involves a construction expressing a result state, with only an *unspecific* agent, developing into a stative-resultative construction with no agent present at all, and no reference to the process resulting in the state. “It is probably no coincidence that of the ambipersonal [impersonal] forms, the perfect – and especially the perfect of result – is most naturally interpreted as a prototypical passive, and the object, which was the patient of the action,... as a subject.” (Tommola 1993:78-79)

The development of a full personal passive “proper” is unsurprising, especially when the influence of Indo-European languages is taken into account.

2.3 Syntactic

The semantic and historical relationship between the impersonal and the passive relies on a diachronic perspective. However, the syntactic relationship between them can also be seen as one of a basic impersonal and a derived personal passive. Here we have an abstract, synchronic relationship which supports the primacy of the impersonal.

Using Grimshaw’s (1990) theory of argument structure, the structure of a basic transitive clause is given in (9a). The effect of both the impersonal affix and the periphrastic passive is to suppress the identity of the highest argument, x (9b). The impersonal construction satisfies the x -argument through an impersonal referent denoted by a verbal affix, and it is syntactically present, though semantically unspecified and implicit (9c). Evidence that the impersonal referent does constitute an argument of the verb includes the fact that it can support anaphoric reference with a reflexive pronoun (Vihman 2001:4). Pragmatically, as the impersonal referent is generalized and unspecific, the impersonal construction is not often used with anaphoric personal or reflexive pronouns, but syntactically it can support them.

The personal passive, on the other hand, suppresses the highest argument entirely (9d). Syntactically, the argument is deleted and the internal argument is promoted to subject. Semantically also, the agent is removed in the passive, which is why the personal

passive is more amenable to an agentive adjunct phrase than the impersonal. The impersonal agent is expressed on the verb. The passive agent is not expressed, and can be specified in a by-phrase. This is represented in (9).

- (9) a. Transitive clause: (x (y))
 b. Suppressed identity of x: (\bar{x} (y))
 c. Impersonal ($\bar{\bar{x}}$ (y)) $\bar{\bar{x}}$ signifies a satisfied argument
 d. Passive (x-0 (y)) x-0 signifies a deleted argument

Passive agent-deletion, then, takes impersonal agent-demotion one step further: the impersonal suppresses the identity of the agent semantically, whereas the passive suppresses the agent both semantically and syntactically, removing it altogether. The impersonal perfect again provides the link between the two. Semantically, a resultative perfect is easily interpreted as being agentless even in an impersonal clause (focussed less on the preceding action and more on the resultant state), and therefore already looks like a passive in ambiguous contexts.

3. Constructions which combine the impersonal and passive

3.1 Impersonalized passives

Having established the distinction between the Estonian impersonal and passive, we turn to constructions which combine the two, profiting from the existence of distinct but semantically related forms. To illustrate the mechanics of these constructions, with which this paper is concerned from Section 3.2 on, a straightforward example will be presented of the sort of combined construction in question. This straightforward construction could be called an impersonalized passive. It is a clause in which the passive subject is expressed by an impersonal verbal inflection rather than a pronoun or NP. Here, the impersonal functions semantically as a fourth person. Note, however, that since the impersonal is only marked on the verb, it could not be used as a patient in a synthetic impersonal form, for instance, where the verb does not agree with any NP. The passive auxiliary expresses tense and agrees with its subject in person and number, and passive voice is marked on the participial verb form. The impersonal auxiliary suffix and the passive lexical verb suffix can thus coexist in the periphrastic passive.

Ex. (10) presents a series of passive clauses with the transitive verb *küüditama* ‘deport’ with various subjects. (10a) gives a standard clause in active voice, the highest argument expressed by the subject and the internal argument expressed as object. Passive clauses are given in (10b-d), where a personal pronoun acts as promoted subject, expressing the internal argument of the verb, with person and number concord on the auxiliary. In (10e), the impersonal functions as subject, exactly parallel to the ordinary passive clauses in (b-d). The impersonal affix here satisfies and saturates the empty argument slot in the argument structure, in the same way the pronoun does in (10b-d).

- (10) a. valitsus_x küüditas [tuhandeid inimesi]_y
 government.nom deport.3s.past thousands.par people.par
the government deported 1,000s of people
 b. ma_y olin küüditatud (x-0 (\bar{y}))
 1s be-1s.past deported.p.part
I was deported
 c. sa_y olid küüditatud
 2s be-2s.past deported.p.part
you were deported

- d. *nemad_y olid küüdata-tud*
 3p be-3p.past deported.p.part
they were deported
- e. PASSIVE WITH IMPERSONAL “SUBJECT” (x-0 (\boxed{y}))
 (loomavagunites) *ol-di_y massiliselt küüdata-tud*
 animal-car.pl.ine be-imp.past massively deported.p.part
people were deported in great numbers (in cattle cars)

3.2 Impersonalized impersonals

In contrast to the previous examples, the constructions we now turn to are grammatical with the impersonal affix on the auxiliary, but they have no counterpart such as (10b-d). They are ungrammatical with a personal pronoun, but the impersonal affix is acceptable. This usage has been prescriptively rejected by some linguists (Pihlak, 1992, 1993, 1995, Aavik, 1936), but the majority of other native speakers consulted have judged it to be acceptable.

Example (12a) contrasts with (11a-b), and appears to be a conflation of the two. In (11a), we see an impersonal perfect, with the personal pronoun *teda* as a partitive object, and the auxiliary marked as *default* 3SG. The verb is compound, but interpreted as a unit, with tense information from the auxiliary and voice information from the participial verb. In (11b), both the agent and the patient are impersonal. The agent of the event of photographing is unspecified, general, and so is the patient. Now the auxiliary, which in (11a) expresses only tense information, is also used to express information about the patient. This is another example of the impersonalized passive given in (10e).

- (11) a. *teda_y [oli pildista-tud_x] (\boxed{x} (y))*
 s/he.par be-3s.past photographed-p.part
s/he was photographed
- b. *[ol-di_y pildista-tud_x] (\boxed{x} (\boxed{y}))*
 be-imp.past photographed-p.part
people were photographed

The construction in (12), however, is new. Now we have both the pronominal patient of (11a) and the impersonal patient marked on the auxiliary of (11b). These do not agree with each other, so how is (12a) parsed? Is the impersonal auxiliary read as patient-oriented, as marked indexically in (12b), along the same lines as in (11b); or is the impersonal auxiliary associated with the impersonal agent, agreeing with the participial verb in some sense, like in (12c)? Neither one is self-evident, and it is important to note, in passing, that this construction depends on the impersonal being a verbal affix, as no pronominal subject/agent element would be accepted here (12d).

- (12) a. *teda oldi pildistatud*
 s/he.par be.imp.past photographed
s/he was photographed (www.cl.ut.ee ILU1990\ilu0005)
- b. *teda_y ol-di_y? pildista-tud_x (x (y))*
 s/he.par be.imp.past photographed
- c. *teda_y ol-di_x? pildista-tud_x (x (y))*
 s/he.par be.imp.past photographed
- d. **teda_y me_x olime_x pildista-tud_x (x (y))*
 s/he.par 1p be.1p.past photographed
**s/he we had been photographed (?)*

The reading of (12a) is in fact that of an agent-marking auxiliary, but that does not resolve our quandary. If that reading is the same as in (11a), without any impersonal affix, then what information does the impersonal affix add? Why is the affix used in a construction where the arguments are satisfied without it? And what is the role of that impersonal referent? It should also be noted that this construction type is found in the Estonian corpus accessible online (www.cl.ut.ee) with both intransitive (with no patient NP) and transitive verbs.

3.3 Reflexive impersonalized impersonals

Reflexives are situated between intransitives and transitives, with two syntactic arguments, but semantic identification of the two as one entity. Transitive constructions of the type in (12) with reflexives seem to constitute a middle ground, where even linguists who reject (12a) disagree over what the acceptable form would be.

An example from Pihlak (1993), citing Aavik (1936) illustrates the ambiguity of reflexives. Aavik, who claims that an impersonal auxiliary is always incorrect with a passive participle, “wavered whether the sentence ‘? Kui **oldi end** risticõiduks **korraldatud**’ [13a] ... was more acceptable than the same sentence with Personal [active] Past Participle of the Reflexive ‘Kui **oldi end** risticõiduks **korraldanud**’ [13b]... He somehow missed the third alternative ‘*Kui oli end risticõjaks* [sic] *korraldatud*’ [13c].” (Pihlak 1993:20) The three versions of the clause are given in (13); the intended meaning is the same for (a) through (c), and Pihlak’s translations are given under (13a-b).

- (13) a. kui **oldi** end risticõiduks **korraldatud**
 when be-imp.past self .rfl.par Crusade-trl organised-p.part
 ‘lit. when there was being got himself ready for the Crusade’
- b. kui **oldi** end risticõiduks **korraldanud**
 when be-imp.past self .rfl.par Crusade-trl organised-act.part
 ‘lit. when there was having got himself ready for the Crusade’
- c. kui **oli** end risticõiduks **korraldatud**
 when be-3sg.past self .rfl.par Crusade-trl organised-p.part
 when people had got themselves ready for the Crusade...

The past participle requires suppression of the external argument, and identification with the internal argument (*korraldatud* (x-0 (y))), but (13a), though structurally parallel to (12a), is easier to analyze because of the semantic identification of the object with the subject, or the reflexive pronoun with its referent, the impersonal actor. The argument structure of (13a) is as in (14). The highest argument is suppressed, but the impersonal affix on the auxiliary is associated with that suppressed argument. This is parsable, since the reflexive pronoun identifies the patient with the agent, and therefore returns the impersonal agent to some status in the clause.

- (14) Kui oldi_x end_y risticõiduks korraldatud (x-0 (y=x))
 When be-imp.past self .rfl.par Crusade-trl organised-p.part

Aavik accepts (13a) and (13b), despite disapproving of the intransitive cases where the orientation of the participle does not seem to match the arguments in the clause.

The reflexive pronoun resolves this construction, yet its structure is still problematic. The impersonal affix behaves like a passive subject, yet the internal argument slot is somehow still open for a partitive reflexive pronoun, which ought to be in competition for the already satisfied argument position. The conflict is resolved semantically, yet the realization of more syntactic positions than the verb would seem to

have available is still puzzling. Additionally, it is odd that (13a) should emerge at all, if (13b-c) exist and do not pose any conflict of argument structure or parsing. We turn to possible solutions.

4. Solutions for analyzing impersonalized impersonals

4.1 *Is the impersonal argument not an argument?*

One possible solution posed by the dilemma of examples like (12a) is to claim that the impersonal affix is not actually an argument here, since there is no argument position for it to fill. The external argument is already satisfied with the passive participle expressing an impersonal referent, and the internal argument is satisfied by the partitive pronoun. In this case, the impersonal affix on the auxiliary must not be an argument. An option for pursuing this line of reasoning is that it is “associated with” an internal slot in the same way Grimshaw claims agentive by-phrases are associated with the suppressed external-become-internal agent (1990:109,115).

This is problematic in that there is no morphological difference between the impersonal affix operating as an argument or as an oblique adjunct. There is good evidence for the claim that the impersonal is an argument elsewhere, so it would not be justified to make a case for the impersonal always acting obliquely. Also, this oblique function nevertheless realizes an argument position on some level with regard to the verb, namely the suppressed external argument. Without this position being available on some level, the structure is ungrammatical. Clauses where both arguments are already fully satisfied do not support the addition of an impersonal affix – it is the suppressed external argument which allows the apparently extra impersonal affix. Example (15) shows that it is impossible to insert an impersonal affix onto just any auxiliary.

- (15) *me_x ollakse maja_y ehitanud (x (y))
 1p-nom be-imp.pres house.nom build-p.part
 “We one-has built a house”

The passive in (16), on the other hand, shows that with a nominative passive subject the construction also becomes ungrammatical: here, the auxiliary is not marked as a default 3SG, but rather agrees obligatorily with the (coincidentally 3SG) subject, and therefore cannot take an impersonal affix.

- (16) *ta_y ollakse juba pildistatud (x-0 (y))
 3s.nom be.imp.pres alreadyphotographed-p.part
 “S/he one-has-been photographed already”

Hence, it is an impersonal, rather than a passive, which is in question. This makes it more awkward to use Grimshaw’s claim that the impersonal argument is “associated with” a suppressed external argument, because in fact it is not suppressed, and not internalized: it is expressed through syntactic means, namely through the impersonal voice.

Finally, although instances like (12a) are attested in the corpus, and judged to be grammatical, they are nevertheless not very common. It would be preferable not to have to stipulate an entirely new function for this use of the impersonal affix. In addition, it is distinctly uncharacteristic in Estonian for a non-argument to be expressed through verbal marking. It would seem that the counter-arguments outweigh the potential usefulness of claiming that the impersonal is not an argument.

4.2 Is the impersonal argument an argument of the auxiliary?

The auxiliary is often taken to be a function word without argument structure, and without the ability to assign thematic roles. However, one possible line of argumentation for analyzing these constructions would be to say that in these cases, the auxiliary *does* assign thematic roles and is used as a separate post for latching arguments to. The auxiliary is an intransitive verb whose argument structure does not merge with and is incompatible with that of the lexical verb. Because of this mismatch, they remain separate structures, as in (17).

- (17) $teda_y$ $[ol-di_z]$ $[pildista-tud_x]$
 (z) (\bar{x} (y))
 s/he.par be.imp.past photographed.p.par
 s/he was photographed

This solution is appealing for the simple reason that these constructions can only occur in auxiliary-main verb constructions, and so do indeed use the auxiliary to increase the number of argument positions. This conception of the argument structure of these constructions is well suited to explaining the reflexive examples discussed in section 3.3. The argument structure is formally separate, but functionally equated, and so more easily tolerated.

However, the structures of the two verbs need to be somehow related in constructions without the reflexive pronoun, and it is not clear how this is effected. The argument of the auxiliary seems to be borrowed, in a sense, from the external argument of the main verb. It is not evident that the argument structure of the two verbs is entirely separate – at least not in these examples. Certainly the thematic role of the single argument of the auxiliary is marked by the external argument of the participial verb: in (17), the equation $z=x$ needs to enter at some point.

Two questions remain. First, how is semantic role information carried over from the participial verb without having to be compatible in argument structure? Despite this question, this approach seems to work mechanically. But the more unsettling question is the following: Why does Estonian allow three constructions with identical semantics? In (18), (11a) and (12a) are repeated for reference alongside (18c), where the impersonal referent is marked on *only* the auxiliary, with an active participle instead of a passive one.

- | | | | | | |
|------|----|----------|-------------|--------------------|------------------------------------|
| (18) | a. | teda | oli | pildistatud | } <i>s/he was
photographed</i> |
| | | s/he.par | be.3s.pres | photographed.p.par | |
| | b. | teda | oldi | pildistatud | |
| | | s/he.par | be.imp.past | photographed.p.par | |
| | c. | teda | oldi | pildistanud | |
| | | s/he.par | be.imp.past | photographed.a.par | |

If we question the notion that these constructions really have identical semantics, or if we accept that they do and question instead why they coexist, the resulting puzzle remains. What is it that (18b/12a) adds to the informational content or expressive possibilities of this construction that motivates its being used and accepted in certain cases over the other two?

4.3 Semantic “bleaching” of the impersonal perfect

Leaving argument structure to the side, it seems that the explanation for the emergence of the three distinct impersonal perfect forms lies in an ongoing process of

semantic “bleaching” (weakening, reduction). Though this concept is most strongly connected to work done in the grammaticalization framework, the aim here is not to claim that this is a case of grammaticalization in the standard sense of lexical items developing into grammatical items. Rather, one or more of the processes typically involved in grammaticalization, at least those of desemanticization and decategorialization, are involved in and illuminate the development of the impersonalized impersonal (as a third viable impersonal perfect) in Estonian. Heine (1997) defines grammaticalization as “a process whereby a linguistic expression *E*, in addition to its conventional meaning M_1 , receives a more abstract and more grammatical meaning M_2 .” (1997:6) Under this definition, these constructions could be described by means of grammaticalization, but it is still the concept of semantic weakening which provides the key to the impersonalized impersonals. A sidenote is that in the following description, phonetic reduction is not involved in the changes. Under some views, this disqualifies the case at hand from the general term ‘grammaticalization’, but this is not a problem for the claims being made. The element in common with other examples of grammaticalization is the change from concrete to abstract meaning.

To begin with, the notion of semantic “bleaching” needs to be unpacked insofar as it applies to the impersonalized impersonals. Initially, with the development of a personal passive from the impersonal perfect, a certain amount of semantic generalization begins the process of desemanticization. As was shown in section 2.2, the personal passive does not require any great metaphorical leap from the impersonal. Nevertheless, with the grammaticalization of the personal passive, that compound form necessarily undergoes a certain amount of generalization, to cover more semantic ground than the impersonal perfect alone allows for.

Secondly, this move also furthers the process of decategorialization of the verb. Decategorialization involves the development from a full category (such as verb) to a secondary grammatical category (such as participle) (Heine 1993:55). In the case of the personal passive, the verb has already begun this development, and has begun to “lose or neutralize the morphological markers and syntactic privileges characteristic of the full categories..., and assume characteristics of secondary categories such as Adjective, Participle, Preposition, etc.” (Hopper 1991:22) In the passive, the verb has assumed the category of participle. The impersonal, on the other hand, also makes use of the participle, but it shows evidence of not having entirely lost the full categorial verbal status, as the passive participle is associated with the impersonal agent, and the inflectional paradigm it participates in fluctuates between synthetic and periphrastic forms. The development of the personal passive shifts the form further toward the functional end of a lexical-functional cline.

Third, the above two steps lead to an ineluctable semantic reduction of the informational content associated with the verb, or desemanticization (Heine 1993:54). Initially, in the impersonal perfect, the passive participle contains an implicit human agent, as in the simple tenses. With the development of the personal passive, which has no implied agent, occasional ambiguity is entailed by the syncretism of the two constructions. Crucially, as an effect of this ambiguity, the agentivity of the impersonal perfect loses some of its force. To put this another way, the informational content regarding agentivity carried by the impersonal form is compromised, and therefore not as surely expressed, by virtue of the existence of an isomorphic construction which is similar in meaning, but for lacking any agentive implication.

Heine outlines steps along the path of desemanticization in the development of auxiliaries. Although we are looking at a different (albeit related) development, the first and last steps he refers to have relevance for this discussion. In the first place, “the subject is typically human, the verb expresses a lexical concept, and the complement a concrete object or location.” This is the case for impersonals (if we replace ‘subject’ with

‘agent’). Further down the grammaticalization path, “the subject is no longer associated with willful human referents, and the verb acquires a grammatical function.” (1993:54) This seems to reflect the personal passive quite directly. Therefore, although we are not discussing a lexical item becoming grammaticalized (focusing instead on a *grammatical construction* becoming *more* grammatical), the steps along the way mirror the process of grammaticalization quite well.⁶

At this stage, then, the impersonal perfect tenses are less imbued with impersonal semantics than the simple tenses. Alongside the ambiguity and weakening in the perfect, however, the impersonal affix in present and preterite tenses remains a strong indicator of the impersonal actor. Hence, when the impersonal actor is relevant and needs to be stressed alongside the temporal perfect, the impersonal affix can be reinserted into a construction whose impersonal color is beginning to fade. The default auxiliary provides a convenient empty slot to reinstate the impersonal, while the passive participle remains ambiguous regarding the presence or absence of an impersonal actor. Using the impersonal affix is a way to emphasize the presence of the impersonal actor without compromising tense information. The impersonal affix is reinserted into a construction which originally included that information, but where this information has weakened.⁷

5. Conclusion

As this paper demonstrates, the impersonalized impersonals are not simply an aberration in Estonian grammar. They seem, rather, to be a clue to a (possibly incipient) process of language change. Examining the argument structure of these constructions on the assumption of a static grammatical system proves cumbersome. Invoking the concept of ‘semantic bleaching’ is helpful in this particular analysis. Once we see that (some) speakers have lost the force of an implied impersonal agent in the perfect forms, it becomes possible to refine the argument structure analysis as well, to incorporate this ambiguity and demonstrate the parsability of the re-impersonalized impersonals.

More generally, the effect of the double impersonal and the impersonalized passive should add proof to the incontestable evidence of the existence of two distinct constructions in the passive functional domain in Estonian. It might seem unnecessary to point this out, as the distinction is robust, and the literature seems to have reached a consensus regarding the existence of a personal passive in Estonian. Erelt et al. (1993:30-31, 1997:391-3) make a distinction between the stative, resultative personal passive and the impersonal (subjectless) passive. Rajandi (1999), Pihlak (1993), Tommola (1993), Torn (2001), Vihman (2001) are among those who have explicitly contrasted the

⁶ With regard to the claim “that grammatical morphemes usually (always?) eventually arise out of lexical words through semantic bleaching and phonological reduction,” Campbell is a dissenting voice, noting (coincidentally discussing Estonian), “it is nevertheless the case that the examples considered here do not come from lexical items, but rather from the (re)grammaticalization of participles, bound clitics, and postpositions.” (Campbell 1991:294) Wiemer (in press), in a study of the evolution of passives, also argues for a broader view of grammaticalization: “for [morpheme-based approaches], grammaticalization would stop where it should actually start for construction-based approaches.”

⁷ Intriguingly and relevantly, a similar thing is reported to occur in colloquial Finnish with IPL forms (Maija McKinnon, p.c.). The impersonal construction is used for IPL indicative. In the compound perfect tenses, we find a parallel development to that in Estonian. (Ia) gives the inflectional paradigm for Finnish first person plural, and (b) shows that in Finnish as well as Estonian, the auxiliary is sometimes used for person information, rather than being marked as a default 3SG.
I.a. PRES: me (1p.nom) mennään (go.imp.pres) *we go*, PAST: me mentiin (go.imp.past) *we went*, PRS.PERF: me on (be.3s.pres) menty (go.p.part) *we have gone*, PST.PERF: me oli (3s.past) menty (go.p.part)
b. me (1p.nom) **oltiin (be.imp.past)** menty (go.p.part) (>**pro “me oli menty”**), *we had gone (=PST.PERF)*
Semantic bleaching of the perfect tense could explain the use of (Ib) similarly to the Estonian equivalent.

Estonian impersonal and passive constructions. However, although this grammatical distinction is documented, it is also frequently overlooked.

A recent publication contains the following fallacious claims:

[In Finnish/c?] ... though some forms of the passive are periphrastic and consist of a participle, combined with the auxiliary *olla* 'be', **there will be no agreement** in those cases either: the participle is not declined, and the auxiliary is always in the 3rd person singular... **In modern standard Estonian, the situation is basically similar to Finnish** (Holvoet, 2001:367-368)

There **does not seem to be a tendency in Finnic to develop the agentless passive into a passive proper**. (Holvoet, 2001:368, my boldface)

In fact, as the above-cited literature documents, in Estonian a 'passive proper' has developed, with a nominative subject and auxiliary verb agreement, as well as other effects such as the impersonalized passive, which behaves differently from the impersonalized impersonal. This evidence ought to be taken into account both for descriptions of Finnic and for typological descriptions of passivization.

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