The recent history of human impersonal pronouns: A corpus study

Florian Haas

Institut für Anglistik/Amerikanistik, FSU Jena

26 August 2014
Human impersonal pronouns

The term ‘human impersonal pronoun’ (HIP) refers to constructions with a non-referential human argument, such as certain uses of the English expressions *one*, *you* and *they* in sentences like *You/One live(s) only once* or *They have raised the taxes again*, whereby some typically non-specific, and often generic, participant is introduced.
We distinguish two basic types of impersonal reference (cf. e.g. Andersson 1972: 2-3; Siewierska & Papastathi 2011: 581):

1. Existential (cf. 1)
2. Universal (cf. 2)

(1) **They** stole my bike.
(2) **One** only lives once.
Objectives

Goal of the (ongoing) study

Describe and explain changes in the system of HIPs throughout the (esp. more recent) history of English on the basis of diachronic corpus data.
Work on the typology of impersonal reference: e.g. Gast and van der Auwera (2013); van der Auwera, Gast & Vanderbiesen (2012); Siewierska and Papastathi (2011).

Work on functional differences between English (and other) HIPs: e.g. Deringer, Gast, Haas & Rudolf (submitted); Stirling and Manderson (2011); Bolinger (1979).
Surprisingly little has been written on impersonal pronouns in classic historical works on English/Germanic pronouns and English grammar:

- Visser, F. Th. (1963) — some comments and data on man
- Jespersen, O. (1927) — despite a long section on the uses of one, the impersonal use is not even mentioned
Fortunately, there’s the University of Zurich!


English had an impersonal pronoun *man/men/me*, later *men/me* (not a PL of *man*, Rissanen 1997: 517-521). In OE and ME, it was the most frequent impersonal strategy.

(3) Her onginneþ seo boc þ man Orosius nemneþ here begins that book that IMPS Orosius calls

‘Here begins the book that is called Orosius.’ [Orosius, 1]

(4) a. Swa þatt me þe quemen

so that IMPS you please.SBJ

‘so that *me* may please thee.’ [Old English Homilies 2.27.18]

b. þær man nu nemnað Certicesford there IMPS now named.PL Charford

‘[...] which was now called Charford.’ [The Peterborough Chronicle, 519, 1121-1154]
This pronoun became obsolete in the course of the 15th century (*men/me* later than *man*). Possible reasons: The role of gender, religious aspects of the meaning of *man* ‘mankind’, which was competing with the impersonal use (Marchand 1937), homophony with other pronouns (Meier 1953, Jud-Schmid 1956), or the lack of an unambiguous non-reduced variant (Jud-Schmid 1956: 110-112).

Later, the plural form *men* had a short revival (Meyer 1953: 184-186; Rissanen 1997: 519-521), as an independent development and not as a strong form of *me*. 
This pronoun became obsolete in the course of the 15th cent (\textit{men/me} later than \textit{man}). Possible reasons: The role of gender, religious aspects of the meaning of \textit{man} ‘mankind’, which was competing with the impersonal use (Marchand 1937), homophony with other pronouns (Meier 1953, Jud-Schmid 1956), or the lack of an unambiguous non-reduced variant (Jud-Schmid 1956: 110-112).

Later, the plural form \textit{men} had a short revival (Meyer 1953: 184-186; Rissanen 1997: 519-521), as an independent development and not as a strong form of \textit{me}. 
One developed its impersonal use in the course of the ME period (first attested around 1420; there are no instances in OE and ME; cf. Meyer 1953: 6, 36), becoming common in eModE. The role of French influence is controversial (Jud-Schmid 1956; Mustanoja 1960: 224; Rissanen 1967: 67-68).

The impersonal use developed from existential quantifier uses (‘someone’) of the expression. These are already attested in the 14th cent.

(5) Doo thus from be to be; thus wol thai lede oon to thair dwelllyng place. [Palladius on Husbondrie, 1420; cf. Meyer 1953: 38]
One developed its impersonal use in the course of the ME period (first attested around 1420; there are no instances in OE and ME; cf. Meyer 1953: 6, 36), becoming common in eModE. The role of French influence is controversial (Jud-Schmid 1956; Mustanoja 1960: 224; Rissanen 1967: 67-68).

The impersonal use developed from existential quantifier uses (‘someone’) of the expression. These are already attested in the 14th cent.

(6) Doo thus from be to be; thus wol thai lede oon to thair dwellyng place. [Palladius on Husbondrie, 1420; cf. Meyer 1953: 38]
Apart from *one*, other impersonal expressions became more common in eModE, as well: *they*, *folk* (mostly as object; since the 17th cent. *folks*), later *people*.

“At the end of the ME period and in early ModE the use of *they* for the indefinite person gains ground rapidly. [...] in the 15th and 16th centuries indefinite *man*, as a rule, is replaced by *they* or *one.*” (Mustanoja 1960: 226)
Apart from *one*, other impersonal expressions became more common in eModE, as well: *they*, *folk* (mostly as object; since the 17th cent. *folks*), later *people*.

“At the end of the ME period and in early ModE the use of *they* for the indefinite person gains ground rapidly. [...] in the 15th and 16th centuries indefinite *man*, as a rule, is replaced by *they* or *one*.” (Mustanoja 1960: 226)
The 2nd pers. sg. pronoun (*thou* and later *you*) also became more frequent (some examples in early ME, more common in late ME and early ModE, but *one* still dominates; cf. Jud-Schmid 1956: 84,95).

(7) Euerich þing may losen his godhede Mid every thing may lose his value with vnme þe and ouerdede: Mid este þu lack.of.moderation and restraint with indulgence you þe maist ouerquatie & ouerfulle makie þe you.OBJ may oversaturate and glut makes wlatie.
annoy

‘Everything can lose its value through lack of moderation and restraint. You can glut yourself with pleasure, and surfeit makes you sick’ [The Owl and the Nightingale, 351-354]
The recent history of human impersonal pronouns: A corpus study

More recent changes

What this study is about

1. Bridging the gap between the available documentation of impersonal constructions in Old and Middle English, on the one hand, and what we know about HIPs in Present-day English.

2. Given that man/men/me was a highly frequent all-purpose HIP in earlier English, one/you/we would expect a reorganization of the remaining (and new) HIPs and their usage conditions.
What this study is about

1. Bridging the gap between the available documentation of impersonal constructions in Old and Middle English, on the one hand, and what we know about HIPs in Present-day English.

2. Given that *man/men/me* was a highly frequent all-purpose HIP in earlier English, *one/you/we* would expect a reorganization of the remaining (and new) HIPs and their usage conditions.
The corpus

ARCHER (A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers), version 3.1 (2006), is a representative diachronic corpus covering texts from 1650 to Present-day English.

- 674 files
- ca. 1.3 million words
- Registers: drama, fiction, sermons, journals, medicine, news, science, letters
- divided into 50 year periods: (1600-49 (1)), 1650-99 (2), 1700-49 (3), 1750-99 (4), 1800-49 (5), 1850-99 (6), 1900-49 (7), 1950-99 (8)
- BrE for all periods, AmE for periods 4, 6 and 8.
One: 5,355 hits; manual extraction of 279 impersonal uses.
They: 6,952 hits; manual extraction of 517 impersonal uses.
You: 16,652 hits; manual extraction of 471 impersonal uses.
People: 1,118 hits, manual extraction of 146 impersonal uses.
Methodology
Coding of the data

1. Year
2. Genre
3. Period
4. Variety: American, British
6. Verb
7. Verb class: cognition, communication, other
8. Inclusion of hearer: true, false
9. Genericity: generalizing, episodic
10. Veridicality: veridical, non-veridical
11. Combination with modals: modal, non-modal
12. Clause type
13. Self-reference: true, false
14. Quantification: universal, existential
15. Perspective: internal, external
Observations

Impersonal *you* is still rare in Period 2 (1650-1699), becoming more common in Periods 5 and 6. It has replaced *one* as the default strategy for generalizing contexts.

In this context, the role of the passive has to be considered, too. Although generally it has always been a stylistically marked choice, it has been (tentatively) noted that in late ME passives became more common in impersonal contexts (cf. Jud-Schmid 1956: 93-94).

For the present study, passives have not yet been analyzed.
The recent history of human impersonal pronouns: A corpus study

Observations

\[ \chi^2 = 84.52212, \text{ d.f.} = 18, p = 1.369736e-10 \]
The recent history of human impersonal pronouns: A corpus study

Observations

\[ \chi^2 = 35.19017, \text{ d.f.} = 6, p = 3.95888\times10^{-6} \]
Impersonal *they* is already relatively common in the earlier periods. In Period 2 it often combines with communication verbs like *say* and *write* to form a construction with a very specific function (in contrast to *people*, which has always been uncommon with such verbs):

(8)  
   a. From Naples **they** continue to tell us, of the great want of Corne that the Kingdom is at present in. [1672, News]  
   b. **They** write from Berlin that the new Levies go on very successfully. [1697, News]
The recent history of human impersonal pronouns: A corpus study

Observations

\[ \chi^2 = 19.02398, \text{ d.f.} = 6, p = 0.004123333 \]
We saw that impersonal *you* became more frequent in the periods covered by ARCHER, even long after *man* was no longer a competitor. Are there other factors that motivate its increasing popularity?

- Similar changes in other languages, possibly linked to cultural changes.
We saw that impersonal *you* became more frequent in the periods covered by ARCHER, even long after *man* was no longer a competitor. Are there other factors that motivate its increasing popularity?

- Similar changes in other languages, possibly linked to cultural changes.
Competition between *on* and *tu/vous* in French (Coveney 2003)

- Impersonal uses of the 2pers. pronoun *tu/vous* were uncommon before the 20th cent.; it is described as a ‘modern feature’.
- In recent decades it has become much more popular, especially in Canada, but also in France.
Competition between *on* and *tu/vous* in French (Coveney 2003)

- Impersonal uses of the 2pers. pronoun *tu/vous* were uncommon before the 20th cent.; it is described as a ‘modern feature’.

- In recent decades it has become much more popular, especially in Canada, but also in France.
Competition between *on* and *tu/vous* in French (Coveney 2003)

- Impersonal uses of the 2pers. pronoun *tu/vous* were uncommon before the 20th cent.; it is described as a ‘modern feature’.

- In recent decades it has become much more popular, especially in Canada, but also in France.
Competition between *man* and *du* in Danish (Jensen 2009; Nielsen et al. 2009)

1. Impersonal *du* has been in use for several decades, more frequently in the second half of the 20th century, spreading from Copenhagen to the rest of the country.

2. “[G]eneric *du* is a resource for showing something as opposed to telling about that something.” (Nielsen et al. 2009) *Du* has “the interpersonal potential of construing involvement” and its frequent co-occurrence with the present tense (unlike *man*) should be interpreted in terms of ‘enactment’.

3. Nielsen et al. (2009) speculate that “there is a linkage between the rise of generic *du* and the issue of intimacy [...] the intimization processes may be urban phenomena spreading from Copenhagen to the rest of the country.”
Competition between *man* and *du* in Danish (Jensen 2009; Nielsen et al. 2009)

1. Impersonal *du* has been in use for several decades, more frequently in the second half of the 20th century, spreading from Copenhagen to the rest of the country.

2. “[G]eneric *du* is a resource for showing something as opposed to telling about that something.” (Nielsen et al. 2009) *Du* has “the interpersonal potential of construing involvement” and its frequent co-occurrence with the present tense (unlike *man*) should be interpreted in terms of ‘enactment’.

3. Nielsen et al. (2009) speculate that “there is a linkage between the rise of generic *du* and the issue of intimacy [. . .] the intimization processes may be urban phenomena spreading from Copenhagen to the rest of the country.”
Competition between *man* and *du* in Danish (Jensen 2009; Nielsen et al. 2009)

1. Impersonal *du* has been in use for several decades, more frequently in the second half of the 20th century, spreading from Copenhagen to the rest of the country.

2. “[G]eneric *du* is a resource for showing something as opposed to telling about that something.” (Nielsen et al. 2009) *Du* has “the interpersonal potential of construing involvement” and its frequent co-occurrence with the present tense (unlike *man*) should be interpreted in terms of ‘enactment’.

3. Nielsen et al. (2009) speculate that “there is a linkage between the rise of generic *du* and the issue of intimacy [. . .] the intimization processes may be urban phenomena spreading from Copenhagen to the rest of the country.”
Competition between *man* and *du* in Danish (Jensen 2009; Nielsen et al. 2009)

1. Impersonal *du* has been in use for several decades, more frequently in the second half of the 20th century, spreading from Copenhagen to the rest of the country.

2. “[G]eneric *du* is a resource for showing something as opposed to telling about that something.” (Nielsen et al. 2009) *Du* has “the interpersonal potential of construing involvement” and its frequent co-occurrence with the present tense (unlike *man*) should be interpreted in terms of ‘enactment’.

3. Nielsen et al. (2009) speculate that “there is a linkage between the rise of generic *du* and the issue of intimacy [. . .] the intimization processes may be urban phenomena spreading from Copenhagen to the rest of the country.”
Simulation and self-reference

Changes in the usage of *you* in English:

1. “Hidden” reference to the speaker in generalizing/universal contexts; cf. (9) and any interview with football players.

2. Simulation, i.e. cases where the hearer is not a member of the group generalized over; cf. (10) and Deringer, Gast, Haas & Rudolf (submitted) and Stirling & Manderson (2011) for an account in terms of empathy.
(9) Hard to find any place to work now where people don’t bother you and will let you work. [1961, Letters]

(10) The windpipe closes; in fact, the hangman has you by the throat each ten or twenty minutes, you are a merry Gallows’ bird. And to be waked up at night by a seizure, is akin to the dark archangel’s intimation to you to prepare for immediate flight. [1879, Letters]
The recent history of human impersonal pronouns: A corpus study

Back to YOU

\[ \chi^2 = 44.82801, \text{ d.f.} = 6, p = 5.063301 \times 10^{-8} \]
The recent history of human impersonal pronouns: A corpus study
Back to YOU

\[ \chi^2 = 9.706049, \text{ d.f.} = 2, \ p = 0.007804737 \]
The recent history of human impersonal pronouns: A corpus study

Back to YOU

\[ \chi^2 = 54.33389, \text{ d.f.} = 6, p = 6.317467 \times 10^{-10} \]
The recent history of human impersonal pronouns: A corpus study

Back to YOU

\[ \chi^2 = 5.233434, \text{ d.f.} = 2, p = 0.07304227 \]
The recent history of human impersonal pronouns: A corpus study

Conclusions

Conclusions

1. The reorganization of human impersonal pronouns in English did not stop before 1650.

2. In earlier periods, impersonal *they* was part of a now extinct construction in the news genre (*They write from Paris that...*). This may have strengthened the general use of *they* in ‘collective/corporate’ contexts, i.e. reference to unidentified members of a known group (*They have raised the taxes.*).

3. After the demise of *man* (and related forms), impersonal *you* has been gaining in popularity.

4. Especially in more recent years it has become a welcome alternative to the more formal *one.*
Conclusions II

Changes in two (related) pragmatic functions of you could also be observed:

- The rhetorical strategy of generalizing away from one’s own experience/responsibility – “self-reference” has become more frequent.
- Inviting the hearer to simulate being member of a group (probably presupposing empathy of the hearer towards that group) – “simulation” has become more frequent.

The interesting question of whether the latter change can be related to extra-linguistic developments, as has been suggested for other languages, needs to be explored in more detail.
Thanks for your attention!


Coveney, Aidan. 2003. ‘Anything you can do, tu can do better.’ tu and vous as substitutes for indefinite on in French. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 7:164-191.


