

# ***It*-Extrapolation and non-referential null subjects in the history of English**

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## **Abstract**

This paper investigates the alternation between overt and null non-referential subjects in extrapolation constructions in the history of English. In Old English (henceforth OE), impersonal verbs with a clause-final dependent clause could occur either with or without an overt non-referential subject (*hit* or *þæt*). This alternation is exemplified in (1) with two examples from the OE translation of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*.

- (1) a. Ða gelamp hit on þa ylcan tid, þe Albanus to him gelæded wæs,  
Then happened it at the same time, when Alban to him led-forth was,  
þæt he se dema stod æt his godgyldum & deoflum onsægdnesse  
that he the judge stood at his idols and to-the-devils sacrifice  
bær.  
brought  
'Then it happened at the same time that Alban was led forth to him that the  
judge was standing at his idols and offered sacrifice to the devils.' (cobede,  
Bede\_1:7.34. 29. 284)
- b. Ða gelamp þæt he sumne Godes mann preosthades, se wæs  
Then happened that he some God's man of-the-priesthood, who was  
ða reþan ehteras fleonde, on gestliðnysse onfeng.  
then wild persecutors fleeing, in hospitality received.  
'Then it happened that he entertained some God's man of the priesthood, who  
was fleeing from the wild persecutors. (cobede, Bede\_1:7.34.14.275)

In (1-a), there is the overt non-referential subject *hit*, which here immediately follows the finite verb *gelamp*. In (1-b), there is no overt non-referential subject. In the literature (Wahlén, 1925; Haiman, 1974; Elmer, 1981; Allen, 1986, 1995; Kim, 1999; Haugland, 2006; Möhlig-Falke, 2012), a number of different hypotheses have been presented as to why an overt non-referential subject would occur in constructions like the ones presented in (1). There is both (i) the question of what determines the alternation in a language that allows both overt and covert non-referential subjects and (ii) the question of what triggered the increase in the the proportion of overt non-referential subjects in the history of English.

Based on data from the the Penn Corpora of Historical English (Kroch et al., 2000, 2005, 2010) and the York-Toronto-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Old English Prose (Taylor et al., 2003), the present study gives an analysis of the extent to which different factors determine the presence or absence of an overt non-referential subject in the history of English. The factors that are investigated include the V2 constraint, the OV/VO alternation, the presence of dative experiencers and initial temporal or locative adverbials,

whether the construction occurs in a main clause or a sub-clause, complexity/weight and topicality/givenness. Preliminary results show that previous arguments against a possible influence of V2 (e.g. Allen, 1986, 1995) can be further strengthened, and that the OV/VO alternation (cf. Biberauer & Roberts, 2005) and the presence of a dative experiencer or a fronted adverbial seem to constitute important factors.

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