
Obsolescence of multi-word expressions in Updated Old English: the case of impersonal constructions

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The paper proposes to explore several structural tendencies at work in the first stages of the decline of impersonal constructions as reflected in the texts of the copies of homilies by Ælfric as well as of some of the anonymous Old English homilies preserved between 1066 and 1220 and catalogued and analysed now, along with other texts, as the so-called Updated Old English.

Proceeding by the method of manual collation of the Old English originals and their copies, the analysis will focus on the incipient demise of impersonal verbs but will also take into consideration some of the conditions, circumstances and consequences of category and marker loss in the English of the day related to this central issue, such as case marking (with a focus on the dative and on the variation in its formal representation as related to the syntactic and semantic complexity of the context), the functional rise of prepositions, and changes in syntactic and lexical representation of the “inherited” phrases, clauses and constructions.

Though this approach may appear, by objective necessity, methodologically antiquarian, it allows us to open up useful new perspectives on one of the decisive periods in the typological transformation of English over time, when so much happened offstage, and on the subtle quasi-synchronic mechanics of language change generally.

References: • Čermák, J. (2008): Ælfric’s homilies and incipient typological change in the 12th century English word-formation. *Prague Studies in English*, XXV, 1, 109–115. • McColl Millar, R. and A. Nicholls (1997): Ælfric’s *De Initio Creaturae* and London, British Library, Cotton *Vespasian A.xvii*: omission, addition, retention and innovation. In: *The Preservation and Transmission of Anglo-Saxon Culture*. Ed. P. C. Szarmach and J. T. Rosenthal. *Kalamazoo: Publications of the Center for Medieval Studies*, 431–64. • da Rold, O. (with M. Swan) (2012): Linguistic Contiguities: English Manuscripts 1060 to 1220. In: *Conceptualizing Multilingualism*. Ed. E. Tyler, Brepols, 255–70.