Notes on the Use of *Remembren* in Chaucer

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0. Introduction

The verb *remembren* is of Old French origin and appeared in English at the beginning of the fourteenth century (*OED* s.v. *remember*). It denotes "psychological phenomena" (Nakao 297). Most of the impersonal verbs in Old and Middle English became personal with the lapse of time. [1] *Remembren*, however, had been used only personally before Chaucer's time, that is, the late fourteenth century, and he began to use it impersonally as many scholars such as van der Gaaf (§173) and Nakao (298) put it. To borrow Burnley's phrase, the impersonal construction was "coined" (228–29). Many scholars have pointed out the peculiarity of Chaucer's impersonal use of *remembren*, [2] but no comprehensive survey of the use seems to have been made. Chaucer[3] uses the verb both personally and impersonally and there may be some differences between the two constructions.

In this paper I will define the impersonal and personal use of the verb *remembren* (§1), classify the examples of Chaucer's use of the verb syntactically and survey syntactic features of the impersonal and personal constructions (§2), and examine several determinants of the use of the impersonal construction (§3).

1. Definition of the Personal and Impersonal Use

There are two kinds of impersonal verbs. Ogura uses "the term 'impersonal' (with single quotes) for the verbs which take a dative person, like *him likeþ* and *him þinceþ*, to make a distinction between them and the real impersonal verbs like *rain* and *snow*" (1991 : 75). *Remembren* is not a real impersonal verb, but this paper deals with the verb only and therefore the term impersonal (without quotes) is used for Ogura's 'impersonal.' On the other hand, a personal construction, in contrast with the impersonal, occurs with a nominative experiencer. [4] But in Chaucer there are many examples in which the case of the experiencer is obscure or in which the experiencer is not explicitly expressed. For such examples the mark '?' is used. However, the examples of the imperative are classified into a personal construction for the reason that in the imperative the subject *thou* or *ye* is expected. When an auxiliary accompanies the verb, the auxiliary is thought "transparent to verbal restrictions" (Denison 1990 : 144)[5] and the example is classified into a personal or an impersonal construction.

2. Classification of the Examples of *Remembren*

In this section the examples of *remembren* are classified syntactically. At the same time they are classified into three parts : impersonal and personal constructions and '?'.

There are several problems in classifying the examples of *remembren*. First, this verb has largely two groups of meanings : "to remember" and "to remind" (*OED* s.v. *remember* I and II) and to the latter group belong two examples of Chaucer :

"thou recordist and *remembrist* me thise thinges yet the seconde tyme ; " (*Bo* 3 prl2.2–3)

"And this was, as thise bookes me *remembre*,

The colde, frosty seson of Decembre." (*FranT* 1243–44)[6]

In each of these two examples the pronoun *me* is an experiencer and the subject is a reminder and therefore these examples cannot be classified into personal nor impersonal constructions in this paper.

Next, this verb has a reflexive construction. Ogura states that it is difficult to "distinguish a reflexive construction with the subject understood from an impersonal construction, when the verb form is in the 3rd pers. sg." (1991 : 79) and that "the element order is not a crucial factor to identify a certain construction even as late as the fifteenth century" (78). In each citation below the pronoun *hym* may be a dative experiencer or a dative pronoun for a reflexive use :

This Eneas is come to paradys

Out of the swolow of helle, and thus in joye

Remembreth *hym* of his estat in Troye. (*LGW* 1103–05)

"Thanne who so that sekith sothnesse, he nis in neyther nother habite, for he not nat al, ne he ne hath nat al foryeten ; but yit *hym* remembreth the somme of thinges that he withholdeth, and axeth conseile, and retretith deepliche thinges iseyn byforne" (*Bo* 5 m3.47–53)

Nobody mentions the former example, and only the *MED* (s.v. *remembren* 1d) refers to the latter, considering this example impersonal. In this paper the former example is classified into a reflexive use on the ground that the verb *remembreth* is joined to *is come* in line 1103, and the latter into an impersonal use on the ground that the semicolon separates the sentence. Thus, the latter is worth noting in that the personal verbs *axeth* and *retretith* show the subjecthood of *hym* in the deep structure.

There are syntactically ambiguous examples. First, in the citations below it is difficult to tell whether the *it*s are impersonal *it*s or not :

"Yif thow loke," quod sche, "first the thynges that thou hast graunted, it ne schal nat ben ryght fer that thow ne schalt remembren thilke thing that thou seidest that thou nystist nat."

"What thing?" quod I.

"By whiche governement," quod sche, "that this world is governed."

"Me remembreth *it* wel," quod I ; "and I confesse wel that I ne wyste it nat."   (*Bo* 3 prl2.9–18)

". . . this is a thyng that greetly smerteth me when *it* remembreth me." (*Bo* 2 pr4.5–7)

"And I have schewyd that God is the same good?"

"*It* remembreth me wel," quod I. (*Bo* 3 prl2.67–69)

The *it* in each citation above may be an impersonal *it* or it may refer to the preceding clause or NP. According to Denison (1993 : 97), there is much argument about the meaning of *it*. Therefore, the *its* above are treated as impersonal *its* in this paper.

Second, in the quotations below it may be ambiguous whether the impersonal constructions occur with a sentential complement or not, but this paper treats these examples as the constructions without the complement :

'but now it remembreth me wel, here was I born, her wol I fastne my degree, here wol I duelle.'

(*Bo* 4 ml.37–39)

"Remembre yow, myn owene lord so deere,

I was youre wyf, though I unworthy weere." (*ClT* 881–82)

Now, Tables 1, 2 and 3 below[7] show the frequency of *remembren* in each structure and each construction (impersonal, personal or '?'), that of the word order in impersonal and personal constructions and that of the grammatical person of the experiencer in the two constructions respectively.

Table 1 Frequency of *Remembren*

	Impers.	Pers.	?	Total
(*it*) (NP$_E$) (refl.) V	6 (+*it* : 5)	3	0	9
(NP$_E$) V (refl.) NP$_O$	1	8	3	12
(*it*) (NP$_E$) V (refl.) prep. NP$_O$	3 (+*it* : 1)	11	11	25
NP$_R$ V NP$_E$ NP$_O$	0	0	1	1
(*it*) NP$_E$ V (refl.) (prep.) cl.	4 (+*it* : 2)	12	4	20
NP$_E$ V infin.	0	1	0	1
Pa. Ppl.	0	0	1	1
Total	14	35	20	69

Note

The word order is not taken into consideration in the table. The letters E, O and R denote an experiencer, an object and a reminder respectively. The expression "refl" is used for a dative pronoun for a reflexive use. The expression "+*it* : 5" shows that there are five examples with an impersonal *it*. In the example "Remembryng hym his erand was to doone / From Troilus, and ek his grete emprise" (*TC* 2.72–73) *remembryng* takes a sentential complement "his erand was to doone From Troilus" and a nominal one "his grete emprise" and therefore this example is classified into two structural patterns : (*it*) NP$_E$ V (refl.) (prep.) cl. and (NP$_E$) V (refl.) NP$_O$. An impersonal *it* does not co-occur with a "refl."

The tables indicate the following. First, the verb mainly takes a nominal complement (NP$_O$) (38 of 69 examples) or a sentential complement (21 of 69 examples). When the verb is accompanied by an NP$_O$, the verb frequently takes a preposition, which governs the NP$_O$ (25 of 38 examples) :

And so bifel how that this goode man

Remembred hym *upon* this Damyan, (*MerT* 1897–98)

First a man shal remembre hym *of* his synnes ; (*ParsT* 133)

Table 2 Word Order

	Impers.	Pers.
NP$_E$ V	1	1
it V NP$_E$	4	0
NP$_E$ V *it*	1	0
(NP$_E$) V refl.	0	2
NP$_E$ V NP$_O$	1	5
NP$_E$ V refl. NP$_O$	0	3
(NP$_E$) V prep. NP$_O$	1	4
prep. NP$_O$ V NP$_E$	1	0
it V NP$_E$ prep. NP$_O$	1	0
(NP$_E$) V refl. prep. NP$_O$	0	7
NP$_E$ V infin.	0	1
(NP$_E$) V cl.	1	3
V NP$_E$ cl. (interrog.)	0	2
cl. V NP$_E$	1	0
it V NP$_E$cl.	2	0
(NP$_E$) V refl. cl.	0	4
NP$_E$ refl. V cl.	0	2
NP$_E$ V prep. cl.	0	1
Total	14	35

Table 3 Grammatical Person of NP$_E$

	Impers.	Pers.
1st person	10	6
2nd person	3	21
3rd person	1	8

Second, an impersonal construction occurs in every structural pattern (14 of 69 examples) except in the pattern with three NPs, in which the verb *remembren* means "to remind." The examples of impersonal constructions outnumber those of the other constructions in the pattern without a complement (6 of 9 examples), and the impersonal construction very frequently has the *it* V NP$_E$ order (4 of 6 examples) :

"Frend, in Aperil the laste —

As wel thow woost, if *it remembre the* —

How neigh the deth for wo thow fownde me," (*TC* 3.360–62)

Next, an NP$_E$ always adjoins the verb and most of the examples show the NP$_E$ + V order. In other words, an NP$_E$ occupies the subject position whether it is in the nominative or in the dative. When an impersonal *it* appears, the *it* is almost always put in the subject position and the NP$_E$ in the object position. When the *it* and an NP$_O$ co-occur, a preposition appears, governing the NP$_O$:

> But—Lord Crist!—whan that *it remembreth me*
>
> *Upon my yowthe*, and *on my jolitee*,
>
> It tikleth me aboute myn herte roote. (*WBPro* 469–71)

Conversely speaking, an impersonal *it* appears when the verb does not take a direct object.

Finally, as to the grammatical person of an NP_E, most examples of impersonal constructions have an experiencer in the first person singular *me* (10 of 14 examples). The examples of personal constructions, on the other hand, prefer an experiencer in the second or third person (29 of 35 examples). In other words, impersonal and personal constructions are closely related to the first person experiencer and to the second or third person experiencer respectively.[8]

3. Impersonal Use of *Remembren*

This section inquires into several determinants of the use of the impersonal *remembren*. Chaucer began to use the verb impersonally in English after Old French (*il*) *me remembre*,[9] and there is corroborative evidence to show that. The following passage, in which the verb is impersonal, is a near translation of *Roman de la rose* :[10]

> But—Lord Crist!—whan that *it remembreth me*
>
> *Upon my yowthe*, and *on my jolitee*,
>
> It tikleth me aboute myn herte roote. (*WBPro* 469–71)

The fact that half the examples of the impersonal constructions (7 of 14 examples) appear in *Boece* may also be good evidence of the fact, although I have no information about the original *De Consolatione Philosophiea* now.

As to an impersonal construction Ogura observes that "'Dat/Acc V X' constructiolls [*sic*] were indirect ways of expressing one's feelings in contrast with the direct 'Nom V X' constructions" (1990 : 44). Fischer and van der Leek say the following :

> The difference between (i) [an impersonal construction] and (iii) [a personal construction] is one of volitionality. In (iii) the animate experiencer is nominative subject and therefore the initiator of the 'action,' fully involved in what the verb expresses, whereas in (i) the experiencer, bearing dative or accusative case, is only passively related to what is expressed in the verb. (351)

In Chaucer there are two examples which seem to match the opinion of Fischer and van der Leek :

> "this is a thyng that greetly smerteth me whan it remembreth me." (*Bo* 2 pr4.5–7)
>
> "At every tyme that me remembreth of the day of doom I quake ; " (*ParsT* 159)

However, in Chaucer's examples of *remembren* there seems to be no other conclusive evidence to support any of these opinions.

In Chaucer's verse there are three examples in which a dative NP_E is at the end of the structure and at the end of the line as well. In other words, the NP_Es occur in rhyme :

>   And what his compleynt was, remembreth *me* ; (: adversyte) (*Mars* 150)
>
>   As wel thow woost, if it remembre *the* — (: se, me) (*TC* 3.361)
>
>   On tyme ypassed wel remembred *me*, (: thre, ise) (*TC* 5.746)

Masui says that "the personal pronouns like 'me, he, she' are extremely frequently used at the end of the line" (1964 : §24). The dative pronouns in the citations above are convenient for rhyme. The first citation is the only example in which the sentential complement precedes both the verb and the experiencer.

Finally, as has been pointed out in §2 above, an impersonal construction occurs mainly in the expression *it remembreth me*. Concerning this fact, Masui suggests that Chaucer uses impersonal constructions as fixed expressions (1962 : 190–91)[11] and Mair also mentions the "formulaic expressions" (216). It is safe to say that the expressions with the first person experiencer are frequently used and therefore they are easy to remember.

4. Conclusion

What has been said above can be summarized in the following sentences. An experiencer seems to play the subject role in spite of its case. In Chaucer an impersonal construction occurs with an experiencer in every grammatical person, but impersonal and personal constructions have closer relation to the first person experiencer and to the second or third person experiencer respectively. The predominant phrase of the impersonal construction *it remembreth me* seems to be a stereotyped one. A few imaginable causes of the impersonal use are a calque on an Old French expression and the use of a dative experiencer as a rhyme word. The directness and volitionality may be related to personal and impersonal constructions, but they need to be ascertained more clearly. The original of *Boece* needs to be studied. These will be considered in a future study.

Notes

1) The transition from the impersonal to the personal construction has been studied by van der Gaaf, Jespersen, Elmer, Ogura, Visser, Denison, Fischer and van der Leek, McCawley, Tripp and so on.

2) The verb *recorden*, which also denotes psychological phenomena, is considered personal (*OED* s.v. *record*, v. and *MED* s.v. *recorden*) and few scholars mention the impersonal use of the verb. Higuchi (1990 : 211), however, shows that two examples in Chaucer are impersonal, although he gives no example. Judging from the pattern of sentence structure in his table, two examples below seem to square with his idea :

>   "Remembreth the," quod sche, "that I have gaderid and ischewid by forseide resouns that al the entencioun of the wil of mankynde, whiche that is lad by diverse studies, hasteth to comen to blisfulnesse."
>
>   "It remembreth me wel," quod I, "that it hath ben schewed."
>
>   "And *recordeth* the nat thanne," quod sche, "that blisfulnesse is thilke same good that men requiren, so that whanne that blisfulnesse is required of alle, that good also is required and desired of alle?"
>
>   "It ne *recordeth* me noght," quod I, "for I have it gretly alwey ficched in my memorie." (*Bo* 4 pr2.47–61)

The *MED* quotes the former as an example of a reflexive use (s.v. *recorden* 1(b)) and the latter as that of the verb meaning

"to come to the mind of (sb.)" (s.v. *recorden* 2). But as to the latter *recordeth* it is worth noting that in line 52 there is an impersonal construction "It remembreth me wel," which is similar to "It ne recordeth me noght." These two verbs mean both "to remember" and "to remind" and there seems to be similarity between them.

3) All references are to Larry D. Benson, gen. ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed. (Boston : Houghton Mifflin, 1987). Abbreviations in each quotation are according to Benson's *Concordance* (1993) and the italics are mine.

4) The "experiencer" is "a term used . . . to refer to the case of an entity or person affected by the action or state expressed by the verb" (Crystal 143).

5) Concerning Old English Denison states that "an auxiliary + impersonal verbal group behaves exactly like a finite impersonal" (1990 : 145) and quotes an example of Middle English from Chaucer : "Hym wolde thynke it were a disparage / To his estaat" (*ClT* 908–09) (163).

6) This example is the earliest citation of the meaning "to remind (a person)" in the *OED* (s.v. *remember* 7. a.).

7) These tables are based on the first volume of Benson's *Concordance*, which contains the works considered to be of Chaucer's own making.

8) Tani examines the verbs *like* and *list* in late Middle English and early Modern English and concludes that an impersonal construction frequently occurs with the first or second person experiencer and a personal construction with the third person experiencer (1997 : 54).

9) The late ME *me remembreth* 'I remember'. . . is a calque on OF (*il*) *me remembre*" (Mustanoja 436). See also the *OED* s.v. *remember* 6. a.

10) Christine Ryan Hilary, who writes the explanatory notes to the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* in Benson's edition, observes that in lines 469–73 "Chaucer follows RR 12932–48 very closely" (Benson 1987 : 869).

11) Masui quotes "if the (yow) liste," "as the (hem), etc. leste," "as hym oughte," "Me were levere" and "I had levere" (1962 : 190–91). See also Masui (1964 : §102) and Ohno (1995 : 4, 1996 : 5).

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