

Impersonal constructions in language-biographical conversations and related text types in Kurmanji

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This study approaches the interface phenomenon of impersonality in three types of Kurmanji data: (1) a growing corpus of conversations recorded in a multilingual diasporic context, (2) a small corpus of thematically related literary prose, (3) a small corpus of thematically related academic publications. The conversations thematically range between language-biographical narratives and sociolinguistic expert interviews. The literary texts cover issues of a multilingual historical heritage; the academic texts discuss historical and sociolinguistic topics.

The theoretical framework comprises discussions of functional concepts such as subject- and agenthood (Siewierska 2008a, b), actant representation (Johanson 1990), agent demotion (Blevins 2003), and specificity (Johanson 2006), cross-linguistic models of impersonality (Malchukov & Siewierska 2011, Malchukov & Ogawa 2011), inventories of constructions in Iranian (Jahani & Viberg 2010, Jahani, Axenov, Delforooz & Nourzaei 2010, Jahani, Delforooz & Nourzaei 2012), as well as discourse- and text-based approaches (Akar 2011, Berman 2011, Hohenstein 2012, Kameyama 2012).

Communicatively, impersonal constructions can fulfill functions of emotional mitigation, as in autobiographic narratives, or objectivisation and abstraction, as in academic registers. The present paper investigates the continuum between the two. While bordering on phenomena of ‘generalisation’ or ‘vagueness’, which also feature nonspecific agents, ‘impersonalisation’ is characterised by the specificity of the surrounding situation. At the morphosyntactic level, construction types are often shared, resulting in interesting overlap in the data. This is the point at which the discourse-empirical perspective becomes crucial: which forms are used in connection with which specific communicative purpose, text/discourse constellation and register?

Methodologically, the study proceeds along two routes, linking two theoretical approaches: (1) it draws on the typological and Iranianist literature on impersonality in identifying morphosyntactic constructions for a closer contextual look. (2) It uses discourse-analytical criteria to identify larger passages of text or conversation for a closer morphosyntactic investigation.

A preliminary inventory of forms can be given as follows: (1) lexical nouns, such as *mirov* or *însan* ‘man, human’ (example 1), (2) impersonal passives, (3) second-person impersonals (example 2), (4) third-person-plural impersonals, (5) abstract nominals in subject position.

- (1) Mirov dikare îdîa bike ku bêhtirî
man ASP-be.able.PRS-3SG claim SBJ-make.PRS-3SG COMP more-EZF

milyonek Kurdî li welatên Yekîtiya Ewrûpayê
million-one Kurd PRP country-EZF.PL Union-EZF.F Europe-OBL.F

dimînin.

ASP-stay.PRS-PL

‘One can claim that more than a million Kurds live in the countries of the European Union’ (Weqfa Navnetewî ya Jinên Azad 2007: 66)

- (2) Tu bi Kurdî bixivî, şerm e, ayib e.
2sg.RCT PRP Kurdish SBJ-speak.PRS-2SG shame is disgrace is

Tu bi Tirkî biaxivî, tu baş bibûyî.
 2sg.RCT PRP Turkish SBJ-speak.PRS-2SG 2sg.RCT good SBJ-be.PST-2SG
 ‘If you speak Kurdish, it’s a shame, it’s a disgrace. If you speak Turkish, you might be fine’ (MEMO_001_Ser).

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