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## Latin Impersonal Passive and the Category of Pluractionality\*

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This article aims to put Latin impersonal passive into the context of covert categories, specifically pluractionality. I try to reanalyse six passages from the Roman grammatical texts, mostly compiled in Heinrich Keil's *Grammatici Latini*, in which the meaning of Latin impersonal passives is considered. There are two groups of evidence. The first one (passages from Diomedes, Priscian, and *frg. Bobiense de verbo*) presents the impersonal passive as a linguistic strategy that shifts focus from an agent to a situation, while the second one (Diomedes and two excerpts of Servius' commentaries on Virgil) concentrates upon the number of agents. In the last case, a verbal action is considered to be a collective one involving many people, and therefore, in my opinion, falls into the category of pluractionality. Being a diverse phenomenon, the term pluractionality includes participant plurality, which is realised either in a subject or in an object depending on whether the verb is intransitive or transitive. Intransitivity of the Latin impersonal passive forms, as it seems, may imply agent plurality rather than subject plurality, since impersonal passive constructions are subjectless. Furthermore, in my opinion, the evidence provided by Latin grammarians demonstrates a contraposition of the 1<sup>st</sup> person singular, 1<sup>st</sup> person plural and 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular passive forms.

*Keywords:* Latin, pluractionality, agent plurality, subject plurality, covert category, impersonal passive, Roman grammarians.

The aim of this paper is to examine whether the Latin impersonal passive may be treated as a means to express the category of pluractionality.

The term “impersonal passive” in Latin normally refers to the verb forms ending in *-tur* in the present tense and *-tum est* in the perfect, which are derived either from intransitive verbs (for example, *statur* ‘one stays’) or from transitive verbs used in absolute mean-

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ing (for example, *amatur* ‘one loves’) (Pinkster 2015, 267). Usually, if there is no overt subject NP, impersonal passive (hereinafter IP) is interpreted as in the following example: *dormitur* ‘one sleeps’.

The term *impersonal passive* can be argued to be incorrect and should rather be called a subject impersonal (form),<sup>1</sup> which is a type of interpretative derivation<sup>2</sup> (Plungian 2011, 216–217; 222–223). The subject impersonal does not allow for exact identification of the argument (“unknown or unimportant who/what”; “any person/object”), for example, in *Tuk ne se pushi* “Here is not smoken” in Bulgarian and *Se regala cobaya* “One gives a guinea pig” in Spanish (Plungian 2011, 217). Due to the change of communicative ranks, impersonal forms have the same morphological parameters as passive ones in many languages including Latin (Plungian 2011, 218).

Let us take a look at the semantics of Latin IPs from the standpoint of ancient grammarians.<sup>3</sup> Having analysed their descriptions concerning IP, I found two views based on how the phenomenon of IP should be explained.

Grammarians who hold the first view (1)–(3) describe Latin IP as a strategy which shifts focus from agent to action itself. For example, the 4<sup>th</sup>-century<sup>4</sup> grammarian Diomedes gives the following interpretation of IP:

- (1) *Qua specie non qui facit, sed quid fiat demonstratur.* (GL I 399. 7 (Diom.))  
“By means of this species, what happens rather than who does is shown”.

To explain IP, another grammarian, Priscian (5–6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD)<sup>5</sup>, employs the Latin word *res* ‘affair, event, fact’ (Glare 1968, 1626–1627):

- (2) *possunt habere intellectum nominativi ipsius rei, quae in verbo intellegitur. nam cum dico curritur cursus intellego et sedetur sessio et ambulatur ambulatio* (Prisc. II 231. 35–232. 2 Hertz).  
“They can have the meaning of the nominative of the noun expressing the action, which is implied in the verb. For, when I say *curritur* ‘one runs’, I imply *cursus* ‘running’, *sedetur* ‘one sits’ — *sessio* ‘sitting’, *ambulatur* ‘one strolls’ — *ambulatio* ‘strolling”.

In the text *frg. Bobiense de verbo*, which is an abridged and transformed version of Macrobius’ treatise *De verborum Graeci et Latini differentiis vel societatibus*,<sup>6</sup> the above-mentioned term *res* is preceded by *impersonaliter* ‘in an impersonal way’:

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, however, I adhere to the tradition of Roman grammarians, who called these forms *impersonalia*.

<sup>2</sup> Плунгян В. А. Введение в грамматическую семантику: грамматические значения и грамматические системы языков мира. Москва, Российский государственный гуманитарный университет, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Each of the excerpts (1)–(6) comes either from comprehensive treatises on Latin grammar or from commentaries on Latin literary texts. On types of Roman grammatical literature see Zetzel 2018, 169–172.

<sup>4</sup> Digital Library of late antique Latin texts s.v. Diomedes, *Ars grammatica* (Diomedes), see also Zetzel 2018, 294–295.

<sup>5</sup> Digital Library of late antique Latin texts s. v. Priscianus, *Ars grammatica* (priscianus), see also Zetzel 2018, 309–310.

<sup>6</sup> Zetzel 2018, 300.

- (3) *nam qui dicit legitur curritur agitur impersonaliter, non dicit quod ille aut illa aut illud, sed rem tantum exprimere contentus praetermittit personas, apud quas officium est lectionis aut cursus aut actionis* (fr. Bob. de verbo 42. 11–14 Passalacqua).

“For who says *legitur* ‘one reads’, *curritur* ‘one runs’, *agitur* ‘one acts’ in an impersonal way, does not say *he, she, it*, but being satisfied with expressing only a fact, omits the persons, whose duty is reading, running and acting”.

Now let us move to the second group of evidence (4)–(6), which concentrate on the indefinite and generic meanings of IP. In the passage below, grammarian Diomedes provides an example of the verb *curritur* in all verbal moods and describes the semantics of this IP form as follows:

- (4) *Nam cum sit indicativus curritur, hoc est omnes currunt, facit imperativum curratur, optativum curreteretur, coniunctivum cum curratur, infinitivum curri* (GL I 399. 28–30 (Diom.)).

“Since indicative is *curritur* ‘one runs’, i.e. ‘all run’, it makes imperative *curratur* ‘let them run’, optative *curreteretur* ‘if only they ran’, subjunctive *cum curratur* ‘since they run’, infinitive *curri* ‘to run’”.

In (4), Diomedes considers the form *curritur* as expressing the idea of a collective action, in which, as it seems, more than two participants are involved.

The second piece of evidence in this group is a passage from Servius’ commentary<sup>7</sup> on Virgil’s *Aeneid*:

- (5) ***Regnabitur*** *impersonalibus usus est, quia de multis dicit, ut usque adeo turbatur agris* (Serv. *Aen.* I. 272. 8–9).

“*Regnabitur* ‘they will rule’: [he] used the impersonal forms, since he talks about many people as in *usque adeo turbatur agris* ‘so far they cause such a commotion in the fields’”.

Here, Servius stresses that Virgil has used the form *regnabitur* in order to express that many people will be involved in the action.

The next passage from *Bucolics* was also commented upon by Servius:

- (6) *sane vera lectio est ‘turbatur’, ut sit impersonale, quod ad omnes pertinet generaliter: nam Mantuanorum fuerat communis expulsio. si enim ‘turbamur’ legeris, videtur ad paucos referri* (Serv. *Buc.* I, 12, 3–5).

“Obviously, the correct reading is *turbatur*<sup>8</sup> ‘they cause commotion’, which gives the impersonal meaning that refers to all (participants) in a general sense, because the expulsion of Mantuans had been common. If one would read *turbamur* ‘we are getting disturbed’, it seems to refer to a few”.

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<sup>7</sup> Digital Library of late antique Latin texts s. v. Servius; see also Zetzel 2018, 262.

<sup>8</sup> In Latin literary sources, there are two more instances of impersonal use of the verb *turbare*: (i) *nescio quid absente nobis turbatum est domi* (Ter. *Eun.* 4, 3, 7) ‘while we were out, a mess happened in the house’; (ii) *si in Hispaniā turbatum esset* (Cic. *Sull.* 20, 57) ‘if there had been a disorder in Spain’.

The quotation above comes from the dialogue between Meliboeus and Tityrus. The full sentence sounds as *undique totis usque adeo turbatur agris* ‘everywhere so far they cause commotion in all the fields’. As we see, the commentator compares the two possible readings — *turbatur* and *turbamur*. The latter refers to the interlocutors and means ‘we, being a few, are getting disturbed’, and hardly corresponds to the modifiers *totis agris* and *undique*. However, there is a problem concerning the voice meaning of the verbs analysed. *Turbamur* has both passive form and passive meaning, while *turbatur* is an ‘impersonal passive’ and, therefore, suggests an active meaning (‘one causes commotion’). Whether the 1<sup>st</sup> person plural form is in active or in passive, it indicates that there are less participants involved in the action than if expressed by the IP form.

To draw an interim conclusion, let us make a list of expressions by means of which Roman grammarians used to describe the IPs: *omnes (currunt)* ‘all (run)’, *de multis* ‘about many (people)’, *ad omnes pertinet* ‘relates to all’ (vs. *ad paucos referri*), *generaliter* ‘in a general sense’, *communis* ‘common’. Seemingly, these meanings fall within the semantic field of pluractionality.

In his work *Pluractionality: A cross-linguistic perspective*, Simone Mattiola argues that the category of pluractionality cannot be considered as an integral phenomenon in a cross-linguistic perspective. He identifies four types of pluractionality: plurality of repeating situations which are happening during one event, i. e. iterativity; plurality of repeating situations which are happening during several events, i.e. frequentativity; plurality of situations happening in several places, i.e. spatial distributivity; and, finally, participant plurality (Mattiola 2020, 8). In my opinion, the last type in Mattiola’s classification is a type of pluractionality which is directly related to the ancient grammarians’ interpretation of IP in Latin.

As S. Mattiola points out, pluralization affects objects in transitive constructions and subjects in intransitive constructions (Mattiola 2020, 9). G. Corbett addressed the topic by illustrating subject multiplicity with the English verb *to scatter*, which entails an action of more than three people, if taken intransitively. In transitive use, the verb *to scatter* implies a multiple object: “one cannot scatter two seeds, nor perhaps three, but it is hard to say what the lower limit would be” (Corbett 2000, 248).

Another example relevant to our topic is given by Marianne Mithun. In Koasati (Muskogean language) some verbs oppose singular and dual forms to plural: *illin* ‘die’ and *óntin* ‘come’ for singular, *hápkan* ‘die’ and *ilmá:kan* ‘come’ for dual and plural (Mithun 1999, 85). This opposition of paucal and plural numbers resembles our passage (6).

Significantly, there are two strategies of verbal plurality to be distinguished: the “external Person-Number morphology”, which is in fact agreement morphology and relates to the inflectional process, and “stem internal Number morphology”, which is ‘stem selecting for number’ and relates to the derivational process (Durie 1986, 362, cited in Cabredo-Hoffher 2010, 31). The Koasati verbs (see above) are examples of so-called “plural verbs” which “do not show strict singular-plural contrast” (Cabredo-Hoffher 2010, 22): they are suppletive, that is, relating to derivation process, whereas Latin *turbamur* in (6), taken as a paucal form, and *turbatur*, taken as a collective plural, relate to inflectional process and differ in a morphological way.

I assume that, from the viewpoint of ancient grammarians, there is a following number distinction possible in intransitive constructions: 1<sup>st</sup> person singular passive — 1<sup>st</sup> person plural passive — 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular passive. Given that “pluractionality tends to

work on an ergative basis and, interestingly, independently of the alignment pattern found in the language” (Mattiola 2020, 9), we might speak of a covert category of participant plurality hidden in IP forms, since the ending *-tur*, although singular in form, has the meaning of plural. However, the ending *-tur* should not be exclusively regarded as a marker of agent pluractionality, because, as it was shown by Harm Pinkster (Pinkster 1992, 166–172; Pinkster 2015, 269–270), Latin IP also expresses an explicit definite personal meaning (by means of preposition *a/ab* with *abl. auctoris*) or, mostly, an implicit one which is clear from the context.

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## Латинский имперсональный пассив и категория плюрациональности\*

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Цель статьи — поместить латинский имперсональный пассив в контекст скрытых категорий, а именно категории плюрациональности. В ходе исследования делается попытка проанализировать шесть цитат из римских грамматических текстов (большинство из которых собраны в издании *Grammatici Latini* Генриха Кейля), где затрагивает-

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ся значение имперсонального пассива. В статье выделяется две группы свидетельств. В первой группе (Диомед, Присциан, *frg. Bobiense de verbo*) имперсональный пассив представляется лингвистической стратегией, смещающей фокус с действующего лица на саму ситуацию. Во второй группе свидетельств (Диомед, два отрывка из комментария Сервия к Вергилию) речь идет о количестве действующих лиц. В последнем случае глагольное действие подразумевается как коллективное, затрагивающее множество людей, и подпадает, как представляется, в категорию плюрациональности, которая совмещает в себе разнородные феномены. Среди прочего под термином плюрациональность понимается множественность участников, которая реализуется в объекте или субъекте в зависимости от того, является ли глагол непереходным или переходным. Непереходность латинских имперсональных пассивов, как кажется, предполагает скорее множественность действующего лица, чем субъекта, поскольку конструкции с имперсональным пассивом бессубъектны. В статье будет показано, что в свидетельствах, дошедших от римских грамматиков, содержится скрытое противопоставление 1 л. ед. ч., 1 л. мн. ч. и 3 л. ед. ч. пассивного залога.

*Ключевые слова:* латинский язык, плюрациональность, множественность агенса, субъектная множественность, скрытая категория, безличный пассив, римские грамматики.

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