Impersonal configurations and theticity

The case of meteorological predications in Afroasiatic

Amina Mettouchi & Mauro Tosco

EPHE, Paris/University of Turin

Impersonal predications are often viewed as structures expressing either agent defocusing, or lack of canonical subject properties. The study of one type of prototypical impersonal predication, meteorological predicates, in various Afroasiatic branches suggests that the subject or agent may not be centrally associated to the notion of impersonal. Rather, defocussing or backgrounding can concern either the entity or the event, resulting not only in subjectless structures and non-canonical subjects, but also in verbless structures and non-canonical predicates. What unifies those structures, rather than lack of canonical subjecthood or agent defocusing, is theticity, which may also be at play in other impersonal types than meteorological predicates.

Keywords: impersonal; Afroasiatic; theticity; meteorological predications; weather verbs

1. Preliminaries

Most studies on impersonals are based on European languages, and originally started with a class of structures whose characteristics are to have either unspecified agent pronouns ('on' in French, 'man' in German, etc.) or non-referential expletive third-person pronouns ('il' in French, 'it' in English, 'es' in German, etc.). Among the prototypical structures that have been studied, we find meteorological predications,[1] existential sentences, experiencer sentences, reflexive constructions, and sentences with an extraposed clausal argument. From this heterogeneous series of constructions, the notion that there could be a domain of "impersonal

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[1] See for instance Chapter 3, 'Impersonal Verbs', in Bauer (2000). As well as Ruwet (1986; 1988).

predication", around the notion of non-referential or non-specific status of the subject, has emerged.

This in turn has led linguists to find general criteria common to the various constructions listed above. Two directions have recently been taken (Siewierska): one is the analysis of impersonal predication as involving non-canonical subjecthood (Aikhenvald et al. 2001), the other one is the analysis of impersonalization as involving agent-defocusing. According to Creissels (Creissels 2006: 325) for instance,[2] 'the constructions that are usually labelled impersonal constitute a heterogeneous set, the delimitation of which is the object of controversies. What is however constant in the use of the term impersonal construction, is that it is somehow or other difficult to apply to those constructions the notion of subject.'

Both trends in turn give rise to the possible inclusion under the label "impersonal" of various constructions that were not necessarily considered as such traditionally, such as action nominalizations, anticausatives, etc. Where should we draw the borders of the domain of impersonal predication, supposing that such a domain can indeed be delimited? At some point, is it not simpler to just define the domains we are studying as either that of non-canonical subjecthood, or that of agent-demotion, rather than as the domain of impersonal predication? Those questions are clearly beyond the scope of this paper, but they underline the fact that the underlying features found when investigating impersonal constructions always extend beyond the original boundaries of the domain. Such is also the case for the feature of theticity, which we would like to bring forward as a central feature of at least some impersonal predications.

Because we wished to have a precise starting point for the study of impersonality in Afroasiatic languages, we settled on the study of a subset of constructions that are considered as prototypical impersonals, namely meteorological predications describing raining events. We show that the formal strategies to encode raining predications are varied, and correspond to the backgrounding of either the entity or the situation. Further investigations concerning another type of meteorological constructions, external temperature predications, reinforce the claim we make that rain and temperature predications are impersonal constructions that centrally involve theticity. Theticity being a type of information packaging, several morphosyntactic encodings are possible. We argue that the fact that the subject or agent is involved

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2. '[l]es constructions couramment désignées comme impersonnelles constituent un ensemble hétérogène, dont la délimitation est l'objet de controverses, mais ce qui est constant dans l'utilisation du terme de construction impersonnelle, c'est qu'il y a d'une manière ou d'une autre une difficulté à appliquer aux constructions ainsi désignées la notion de sujet' (Creissels 2006: 325).

in the coding of impersonals is language-specific, and depends on the properties of particular languages with respect to the referentiality of personal indexes for instance, or the existence of non-verbal predications.

Our preliminary investigation is based on various languages belonging to most branches of the Afroasiatic phylum: Cushitic, Berber, Semitic and Chadic. Afroasiatic languages are spoken in the northern and eastern parts of Africa and in the Near and Middle East. In the first part of this paper we show that raining predications involve partial or total backgrounding of either the entity or the process involved. In the second part we focus on two languages for which we have first-hand data, and show that raining and external temperature predicates are expressed by constructions that are typically thetic, and that some of them are similar to predications belonging to other domains, such as epistemic modality, or attributive/equative predication. We also show that the grammatical elements involved in the construction of raining or external temperature predications are varied, and not limited to non-canonical subjecthood or agent-demotion strategies.

2. Atmospheric predications and impersonal constructions

Creissels (2006: 328) notes that 'it is often, though not always, the case that meteorological predications simply conform to the subject + predicate format. Problems regularly arise however, and they are due to the the fact that it is difficult to recognize a 'participant-event' schema in all those situations.'[3] Creissels' observations underline the fact that it is not specifically the subject, but rather the categorical (topic-comment) format which is problematic for the expression of meteorological phenomena.

The next section will briefly show the richness of these backgrounding processes in the atmospheric predications of different Afroasiatic languages. Backgrounding can

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3. '[i]l est relativement courant dans les langues du monde que la description des phénomènes météorologiques se coule tout simplement dans le moule syntaxique sujet + verbe, mais la réduction des phénomènes météorologiques au schème sujet + verbe ne se fait pas toujours de la même façon, ce qui est déjà révélateur d'une difficulté à reconnaître dans ces situations une articulation événement – participant(s); et même dans des cas où une construction syntaxique canonique doit être reconnue, il n'est pas rare d'observer des particularités qui suggèrent la possibilité de dériver vers une construction où la reconnaissance d'un schème sujet + verbe serait problématique' (Creissels 2006: 328).

affect the entity or the process, and may be partial or total. This double articulation of backgrounding may be represented graphically as:

	partial	total
entity		
process		

Figure 1. Representation of the backgrounding possibilities

It seems that each backgrounding possibility may be actualized only once: in other words, partial backgrounding of an element and total backgrounding of another cannot cooccur. There are therefore four logically possible backgrounding types. Backgrounding of both the entity and the process is excluded – it would amount to nothing else than the absence of predication. Absence of backgrounding corresponds instead to the global apprehension of the predication, to which we turn in the next section.

Our analysis will concentrate on the different strategies used in the expression of "raining events". One may object that raining is not a prototypical atmospheric predication. This is certainly true: for one thing, it conveys much less a state than predications like 'to be sunny/cloudy' or even of 'to dawn/set (of sun)'; raining is much more something which happens against the backdrop of its absence, and this is probably true everywhere. It is an "event" much more than a state of affairs; it is dynamic rather than static.[4]

On the other hand, precisely this exceptionality of raining events (as well as of other less frequent atmospheric events like snowing, hailing, and the like) seems conducive to a wide array of possible linguistic realizations, where either the entity or the process are fore- and backgrounded. It is the ideal playground of backgrounding processes, as the following sections will show.

2.1   Global apprehension: The "the rain rains" strategy

When both the entity and the process are apprehended *in toto*, globally, there is no backgrounding. We have therefore constructions of the type "the rain rains", which are well represented in the languages of the Horn of Africa, both in the Cushitic, represented here by Oromo, and the Semitic branch of Afroasiatic and represented here by Amharic:

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4.   As to Afroasiatic languages, they are mostly and traditionally spoken in areas where annual rainfall is well below the world average, and which are classified either as arid or semi-arid. A partial exception is provided by limited areas of the highlands of the Horn of Africa (where Semitic, Cushitic, and Omotic languages are spoken), and by certain tropical wet parts of West Africa where Chadic languages are found.

(1) *bokee roob-e*[5]
     rain   rain-PFV.3M
     'The rain rained' > 'it rained'   (Standard [Western] Oromo)

(2) *bokee hir-roow-a*
     rain   FOC-rain-IPFV.3M
     'The rain will rain' > 'it will rain'   (Waata Oromo; Stroomer 1987: 381)

(3) *zǝnab yǝ-zänbal*
     rain   IPFV.3M-rain
     'The rain is raining' > 'it is raining'   (Amharic)

It will be noted that in 3. the entity and the process share the same root, contrary to
1. and 2. While such a construction is syntactically canonical in its entity-predication
duality, it is semantically odd: one could easily speak here, following again Creissels
(2006: 343), of the subject of such a configuration as a "prolongement du verbe", an
"internal subject" of the verb itself. Likewise, one can envisage that the predicate is here
the "internal verb" of the subject.

    One finds a similar strategy in Wandala (Central Chadic, Biu-Mandara;
Frajzyngier in press), where a verb that means 'to fall', but is exclusively used with
atmospheric predications, takes a noun meaning water or hail:

(4) *á   ɬà   nàlàndzè*
     3SG fall hail
     "The hail is falling" > 'it is hailing'   (Wandala; Frajzyngier in press)

2.2   Partial backgrounding of the entity: The "the world rains" strategy

As soon as there is backgrounding, one of the two parts of the predication will be
affected. The backgrounding of the entity corresponds to the well-known use of generic
subjects (such as "sky", "world", "God", or a semantically more abstract "state, situation").

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5.   Transcription follows the sources or the standard orthography of the languages. Glosses
have been modified when necessary. The following abbreviations are used:

ABS	absolute state	F	feminine	PRS	present
ANNX	annexion state	FOC	focus marker	PST	past
AOR	aorist	INGR	ingressive	RED	reduplicated
ART	article	IPFV	imperfective	REL	relative
ASSOC	associative	IRR	irrealis	SBJ	subject
COMPL	complementizer	M	masculine	SG	singular
COP	copula	MID	middle	SPEC	specific
DECL	declarative marker	PFV	perfective	SUJN	subjunctive
DEF	definite	PROG	progressive	UNM	unmarked

At the same time that the entity is backgrounded, the process comes by necessity to the foreground. This is a very common model in our languages. Among the many possible examples, it is the one found in Oromo (East Cushitic, Oromoid):

(5)   *waak'ii   nu-u   roob-e*
      God   us-to   rain-PFV.3M
      'God/the sky has rained upon us' > 'it has rained for us'
                                      (Borana Oromo; Stroomer 1987: 381)

In Chadic, we find similar examples for instance in Lele (East Chadic), where '[s]ome serial verb constructions have become fixed lexicalized expressions. The term for rain, clouds, is the same as the term for God, *kumno*. The expression 'it rains' is interesting in that it has a serial verb construction consisting of the verb *bá* (*bàá* [W[eibegué] & P[alayer] 1982]) 'fall' and the verb *ongi* 'to push as in childbirth', and 'to rain') in association with *bá* 'all" (Frajzyngier 2001: 122)

(6)   *kumno   se   bá   ongi*
      rain (= God) INCEPT   fall rain (= push as in childbirth)
      'It started to rain'   (Lele; Frajzyngier 2001: 122)

In Kabyle (Berber), this strategy is at the root of meteorological expressions containing the subject *lḥal* 'situation', which is coindexed, as the Annexed state shows,[6] with the third person masculine singular prefix on the verb:

(7)   *ye-ḥma   lḥal*
      SUBJ3MSG-be_hot.PFV   situation.ANNX
      'It (the weather) is hot'   (Kabyle)

Partial backgrounding of the entity may acquire an intensive meaning, as in modern varieties of Arabic:

(8)   *id-dinya   b-it-maṭṭar*
      ART-world   PRS-IPFV.3M-rain
      "The world rains" > 'it is raining a lot'   (Egyptian Arabic)

while total entity backgrounding (the "it rains" model, cf. 2.4. below) has a more neutral meaning.

The partial backgrounding of the entity does not need its substitution with a generic entity: the natural entity may well be present, but lose at the same time its

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6.   The Annexed state is one of the two forms a noun can take in most Berber languages. It is obligatory in a number of contexts whose common denominator is dependence on a previous element for interpretation. For further details, see Mettouchi (2008).

agentivity. Reduced to the role of syntactic object of a transitive verb, it may carry the semantics of the predication (the act of raining, for example), while both the syntactic subject and the predicate are external to it. This is the configuration "X ("the sky, God") Y ("makes, hits") the rain". Although marginal in our domain, it is nevertheless found in Sidamo (East Cushitic, Highland):

(9)   *(Magan-u)/(gord-u)   xeen-a*[7]   *gana-nno*
       God-SBJ /sky-SBJ   rain-ABS   hit-IPFV.3M
       "(God/the sky) hits the rain" > 'it is raining'   (Sidamo; Gasparini 1983: 112)

(10) *(Magan-u)/(gord-u)   xeen-a   birr-i*
       God-SBJ /sky-SBJ   rain-ABS   rain-PFV.3M
       "(God/the sky) has rained the rain" > 'it rained'   (Sidamo; Gasparini 1983: 325)

Magan-u and *gord-u* are the Subject-case forms of *magan-o* 'God' and *gord-o* 'sky', respectively. They can be omitted, yielding, e.g. *xeena birri*. But in neither case the "natural" entity involved in the state of affairs (*xeen-a* 'rain') is the grammatical subject of the sentence. In this configuration the rain is rather the object, as shown by the presence of a transitive verb and, most of all, by the caseform of the noun itself: this appears in the Absolutive (citation) case, not in the Subject case. We find, e.g. *xeen-a*, 'rain', not *xeen-i*: **xeen-i birr-i* is not acceptable.

2.3   Partial backgrounding of the process: The "the rain falls/hits" strategy

When backgrounding affects the process, it results in the use of a generic predicate, like "to fall", or "to happen", or, alternatively, in the use of a deictic particle. The consequence of the backgrounding of the process is of course, conversely, the foregrounding of the entity. This is the common model "the rain falls", "the wind blows", etc. found in many languages of the Horn of Africa, such as Somali (East Cushitic, Omo-Tana branch):

(11) *roob   baa   da'-ay-a*
       rain   FOC   fall-PROG-PRS.3M.FOC
       "The rain is falling" > 'it is raining'   (Somali)

as well as in Ts'amakko (East Cushitic, Dullay):

(12) *ʔerr-o-se   ɗib-i*
       rain-M-DEF   fall-3SGM.UNM
       "The rain fell" > 'it rained'   (Ts'amakko; Savà 2005: 84)

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7.   In the Sidamo orthography ⟨x⟩ stands for ejective /t'/.

Interestingly, neither Somali *da'* [daʔ] nor Ts'amakko *díb* are the usual verbs for 'to fall' (which are rather expressed by *dhac* [daʕ] in Somali and *púʕ* in Ts'amakko). We have seen above (cf. (4)) that, likewise, in Central Chadic Wandala a special verb for "atmospheric fall" is used. Somali *da'* may actually be used for any falling liquid; its use for dripping water is fully acceptable:

(13) *biyo   baa   da'-ay-a*
      water   FOC   fall-PROG-PRS.3M.FOC
      'Water is falling'   (Somali)

Other atmospheric entities will use other semantically more pertinent generic verbs:

(14) *danab   baa   dhacay*
      thunder   FOC   fall-PST.3M
      "A thunder fell" > 'it thundered'   (Somali)

(15) *dabaysha   baa   socota*
      wind-ART.F   FOC   walk-MID-PRS.3F
      "The wind walks/comes" > 'the wind blows'   (Somali)

(16) *cadceedda baa   soo   baxatay/dhacaday*
      sun-ART.F   FOC   here   go_out-MID-PST.3F/fall-MID-PST.3F
      "The sun came out/fell" > 'the sun dawned/set'   (Somali)

For less dynamic atmospheric predications other than 'to rain' other strategies will be used, as will be seen in §3.1. below with data from Gawwada, another East Cushitic language.

The "Rain falls" strategy is very widespread; instead of 'to fall,' the generic verb is often 'to hit' (which has been encountered upon above (9) in Sidamo "God hits the rain". In East Cushitic, this use is attested, e.g. in Dhaasanac (Omo-Tana branch):

(18) *ʔír   ká   tutuna*
      rain   here   hit-RED-IPFV.A
      "Rain is hitting" > 'it is raining'   (Dhaasanac; Tosco 2001: 530)

The use of a 'to hit' verb is further found in Berber and Chadic:

(19) *te-kkat   lehwa*
      SUBJ3FSG-hit.IPFV   rain.ANNX
      "Rain is hitting" > 'it is raining'   (Kabyle)

(19') *ye-kkat   wedfel/waḍu*
      SUBJ3MSG-hit.IPFV   snow.ANNX /wind.ANNX
      "Snow/wind is hitting" > 'it is snowing/the wind is blowing'   (Kabyle)

Note that in Berber the verb must be in the imperfective aspect, and the subject must always be postverbal (this will be elaborated on below, in §3). In Gidar (Central Chadic), we also find the verb 'to fall' used in conjunction with the noun 'rain':

(20) *sómbò   ná-n   à-gàp-ɔ́k   éngìlì   bùn dɔ́-rdì   á   wrà*
      Sombo   GEN-3M 3M-arrive-PRF PREP.home rain 3M-fall PREP bush

      à   ká-n   ɓà
      PREP on.3M   NEG

      'As for Sombo, he arrived home, the rain did not fall on him in
      the bush'   (Frajzyngier 2008: 478)

2.4   Total backgrounding of the entity: The "(it) rains" strategy

So far, backgrounding has been partial – either the entity of the process have been lexically and semantically backgrounded through the use of a more general, less specific lexical entry. But backgrounding can be pushed to the complete obliteration of either the entity or the process. Total backgrounding of the entity results of course in a subjectless predication, of the type "rains". This model may be represented in the Horn of Africa by North Cushitic Beja:

(21) *bireet-iya*
      rain-PST.3M
      'It rained'   (Beja; Wedekind, Wedekind & Musa 2007: 164)

(22) *bireet-iini*
      rain-PRS.3M
      'It is raining'   (Beja; Wedekind, Wedekind & Musa 2007: 164)

2.5   Total backgrounding of the process: The "it is rain" strategy

Conversely, total backgrounding of the process entails the obliteration of the verbal character of the predication, yielding a structure of the "copula rain" strategy. Within the Afroasiatic languages, one finds the model in Kabyle Berber:

(23) *d   ageffur*
      COP   rain.ABS
      'It is/was raining'   (Kabyle)

This strategy is also at play for various other meteorological predicates in Kabyle (*d azyal*, COP heat.ABS, 'it is hot', *d asemmiḍ*, COP cold.ABS 'it is cold', *d agu*, COP fog.ABS 'it is foggy', *d ṭṭlam*, COP darkness.ABS 'it is night', etc.). The copula is of deictic origin and is traditionally labelled 'predicative particle'.

2.6   Modeling the backgrounding

As far as the general presence of backgrounding is concerned, we have therefore three levels:

Zero Degree		
(global apprehension, absence of backgrounding): "rain rains"		
	Backgrounding **partial**	**total**
entity	"the sky rains"	"it rains"
process	"the rain falls"	"it is rain"
	Full Degree	
(total backgrounding of both entity and process): — (absence of speech)		

Figure 2.   Backgrounding levels

3.   Competing strategies and the role of theticity

The very fact that backgrounding (either partial or total) is central in meteorological predications of the 'rain' type poses the question of their status in terms of pragmatic organization: what are the consequences of the backgrounding of the entity or the process for the information structure of the predication?

The answer seems indeed to be that the topic-comment structure does not apply here. In other words, meteorological predications are instances of thetic sentences – sentences in which the bipartite organisation of the sentence into a presupposed and a non-presupposed portion is by definition absent: 'The thetic statement forms a unit with respect to what it contributes to the discourse at a given point. It expresses a pragmatically unanalyzed state of affairs and presents it as a piece of complex information' (Sasse 1987: 558); synthetically and more forcefully, Sasse (1995: 4) calls a thetic predication *monomial*. In Lambrecht's (1994) theory of focus, in thetic sentences (in his terminology 'sentence-focus') no element is predictable or presupposed; rather, 'both the subject and the predicate are in focus. The focus domain is the sentence, minus any topical non-subject arguments' (Lambrecht 2000: 617).

We are now going to show the centrality of theticity in the coding of meteorological predications in Gawwada and Kabyle.

3.1   Gawwada

In Gawwada (another East Cushitic language of the Dullay group, and very close to Ts'amakko, exemplified above in 2.3), we find different strategies being used, on the basis of their pragmatic implications.

The "the rain falls" strategy is possible:

(24)   *ʔirraw-o   ɖip-i*
        rain-M   fall-PFV.3M
        "The rain fell" > 'it rained'   (Gawwada)

But the most frequent construction is rather of "the world rained" type, in which a noun (here *ʔirraw-o* 'rain') is verbalized:

(25)   *piy-e   ʔí=ʔirraw-ti*
        world-F   SPEC=rain-PFV.3F
        "The world rained" > 'it rained'   (Gawwada)

This construction is the only one in use for less dynamic atmospheric predications; in the following example, the noun *kuyaʕ-ko* 'day' is verbalized:

(26)   *piy-e   ʔí=kuyaʕ-ti*
        world-F   SPEC=day-PFV.3F
        "The world became day" > 'it dawned'   (Gawwada)

Denominal verbalization provides another simply strategy; in the following example the noun *ʔawn-e* 'night' is verbalized by a productive Ingressive extension (*-uy-*); syntactically the subject noun *piy-e* 'the world' is here elided (and thereby the structure comes to resemble total backgrounding of the entity; cf. 2.4. above), but it still triggers agreement on the verb (which appears in the 3rd Feminine form):

(27)   *ʔí=ʔawn-uy-ti*
        SPEC=night-INGR-PFV.3F
        "It nighted" > 'it became night, night fell'   (Gawwada)

What are the structural features of those two constructions? While in (25) and (26) we find the by-now usual backgrounding of the entity though a generic noun, the structure exemplified in (24) is the one used to introduce new, and therefore non-topical subjects. The same applies to the Somali structure "the rain falls" shown above in (12): it is a structure usually called "subject focus" in Cushitic studies, characterized by the absence of subject case-marking on the subject noun and by the suspension of subject-verb agreement: the verb appears then in an invariable form (usually the third singular masculine, but in Somali a reduced agreement pattern applies, rather than the total suspension of agreement). Finally, the focus marker (*baa* in Somali) is found after the subject in its bare form without the subject clitics which normally appear before the verb (cf. Saeed 1999; cf. also Tosco 2003 for a text-based analysis of pragmatic marking in Somali). Paralleling 'it rained' above we'll find therefore a sentence like the following, where a singular verbal form agrees with a subject plural noun:

(28)   *niman   baa   yimi*
        men   FOC   3M-come.PFV
        '(Some) men came'   (Somali)

The same applies in Gawwada: here, no focus-marking particle exists, but the verb still is in an invariable third singular masculine form and no Subject Clitic is found. In the case of *ʔirraw-o* 'rain', itself a Masculine noun, absence of the Subject Clitic only will mark the theticity of the sentence. Suspension of subject-verb agreement will be visible when a subject noun is feminine or plural, as in the following sentence, where the subject is a feminine noun; still the verb appears in the default third singular masculine form; there is no Specific subject-clitic in front of the verb, and a common (but not obligatory) left-dislocation of the adverbial of place *šull-ito* 'in the calabash' occurs:

(29)   *šull-ito*   *warš-e*   *ʕak-a*
       calabash-ASSOC.M beer-F   be_there-IPFV.3M
       'There is beer in the calabash'   (Gawwada)

vs. the corresponding categorical, topic-comment sentence:

(29') *warš-e* *šull-ito*   *ʔí=ʕak-ta*
       beer-F   calabash-ASSOC.M SPEC=be_there-IPFV.3F
       'The beer is in the calabash'   (Gawwada)

3.2   Kabyle

Partially similar is the situation in Kabyle (Berber), where different strategies are used according to pragmatic implications.

In order to underline the proximity of meteorological predicates with other thetic predications, let us first have a look at presentative structures and sentence focus in general. Those constructions are characterized by a VS order (Mettouchi 2008) whenever a verb is present (30), and by the use of the accusative set of pronouns to refer to the main participant in the situation, with presentative non-verbal predicates (31).

(30)   *ye-wwḍ=d*   *wayɣen*
       SBJ3MSG-arrive.PFV=PROX ogre.ANNX
       'The ogre arrived'   (Kabyle)

(31)   *ha-t*   *wergaz-nni*
       LOC-ACC3MSG   man.ANNX-ANAPH
       'Here comes the man'   (Kabyle)

The VS order is strictly respected for all meteorological predicates: the SV order, which characterizes in Kabyle the topic-comment format (Mettouchi 2008), is ungrammatical.

Example (32) involves a dynamic entity or process: the verb 'to hit' and the "the rain falls" strategy is used.

(32)   *te-kkat*   *lehwa*
       SBJ3FSG-hit.IPFV   rain.ANNX
       'It is/was raining'   (Kabyle)

The word order is VS, and the formulation is not acceptable if the word order is SV (unless we want to characterize rain: 'rain falls, it is in the nature of rain to fall'):

(32') *lehwa*   *te-kkat*
      rain.ABS   SBJ3FSG-hit.IPFV
      *'It is/was raining'   (Kabyle)

Example (33) is of "the world rains" type. It is found with the expression of atmospheric predicates characterized by a strong experiential component. It also implies a VS word order, SV being ungrammatical and uninterpretable.

(33) *ye-ḥma*   *lḥal*
      3MSG.SBJ-be_hot.PFV situation.ANNX
      'It is hot' ("the weather is hot")   (Kabyle)

This structure is composed of a verb and its obligatory subject marker (here *ye-* for a Masculine Singular subject), and followed by a noun coreferential with that subject marker, *lḥal* (itself a loan from Arabic *al-ḥāl*) with the meaning 'state of affairs, situation, condition'. The verbal form *ye-ḥma* cannot be used by itself as an atmospheric predication: *lḥal* must be coreferenced to the subject marker on the verb, and is obligatorily postverbal. Those verbs can nevertheless be used without a coreferential noun (as in 34) or with a noun referring to the entity whose temperature is evaluated (as in 34'):

(34) *ye-ḥma*
      3MSG.SBJ-be_hot.PFV
      'It is hot' (i.e. "Something (an object) is hot")   (Kabyle)

(34') *ye-ḥma*   *uḍajin*
      3MSG.SBJ-be_hot.PFV tajine.ANNX
      'The tajine (cooking dish) is hot'   (Kabyle)

Those examples are important in that they underline the fact that person affixes are necessarily specific in Berber (cf. Mettouchi 2005), and that for a generic reading, such as the one needed for atmospheric predications (where the entity is difficult to delimit), a coreferential noun with vague reference is needed. We therefore have three elements here: the nature of the lexical noun (generic reference), its obligatoriness, and the VS word order. The first two components are needed to induce a non-specific interpretation of the person affix, the third one characterizes thetic predications (cf. Mettouchi 2006 and 2008).

    This coreferential generic noun also appears in epistemic predications (for more details on modal predicates in Kabyle, see Mettouchi 2009), that is, when the speaker assesses a situation:

(35) *y-uɣ*   *lḥal*   *t-ṛuḥ*
      SBJ3MSG-take.PFV situation.ANNX SBJ3FSG-go.PFV
      'It happens that she left'   (Kabyle)

(36) *ye-ḍheṛ*   *lḥal*   *ad*   *t-ṛuḥ*
      SBJ3MSG-be_clear.PFV   situation.ANNX   IRR   SBJ3FSG-go.AOR
      'It is clear that she will go'   (Kabyle)

Here again, this coreferential noun always appears in postverbal position, which is the position for thetic predications in Kabyle. The absolute ungrammaticality of the SV order (topic-comment interpretation) is evidence in favor of the thetic interpretation of the predication.

   We therefore have a configuration that is common to meteorological predicates, and some modal predicates, where the generic noun *lḥal* represents the entity, which is coindexed to a third person masculine singular that cannot in itself have a 'dummy' interpretation.

   We have mentioned above (in 2.5.) another format for meteorological predicates in Kabyle: the non-verbal copular structure, in which the invariable copula *d* is followed by a noun in the Absolute state:

(37) *d*   *azyal*
      COP   heatwave.ABS
      'It is/was very hot'   (Kabyle)

This structure is also the one used for equational clauses (and clefts):

(38) *d*   *argaz*
      COP   man.ABS
      'It/he is/was a man'   (Kabyle)

(39) *d*   *amellal*
      COP   white.ABS
      'It/he is/was white'   (Kabyle)

(40) d   argaz   i   ye-wwet
      COP   man.ABS   REL   SBJ3MSG-hit.PFV
      'It is a/the man that he hit'   (Kabyle)

We find here another grouping, parallel to that between the 'situation' atmospheric predicates and the epistemic modal predicates: a grouping between the 'deictic' atmospheric predicates and the attributive predicates. The translations of (38) and (39) must not hide the fact that those predicates are strictly monomial, in that they consist of the qualifying noun and the copula. No clausal topic is expressed here. 'COP + noun' nonverbal clauses therefore are thetic predications.

   We find similar situations in Somali, where the declarative marker *waa* behaves in a way reminiscent of the copula in Kabyle:

(41) *waa*   *run*
      DECL   truth
      "It is truth" > 'it is true'   (Somali)

(42) *waa*   *dhakhtar*
      DECL   doctor
      'he is a doctor'   (Somali)

(43) *waa*   *inaan*   *tago*
      DECL   COMPL-SBJ.1SG   go-SUJN.1SG
      'It is necessary that I go/I have to go'   (Somali)

All those configurations are used not only for meteorological predications, but also for other structures that in other languages are called impersonal, and involve the use of empty pronouns for instance. In Afroasiatic languages, or at least in the languages described in this paper, impersonal strategies do not involve empty pronouns, because third person pronouns are generally specific and referential. Other strategies are used, which involve generic coreferential nouns, or non-verbal structures, both strategies being characterized by their thetic (in the sense of monomial) dimension, which we propose to consider as an essential component of at least some impersonal predications.

4.   Conclusions

Atmospheric predications are the prototypical *topos* of impersonal predications: the difficulty to clearly separate the entity and the process strongly encourages backgrounding processes.

We have proposed to link the problematic separation of entity and process (at the cognitive level), to the thetic format as a monomial predication (at the linguistic level).

The partial survey we have conducted on Kabyle (Berber) and Gawwada (Cushitic), based mainly on raining and temperature predications, shows that when languages have special constructions for thetic predications, atmospheric predicates belong to that type. Moreover, in Kabyle atmospheric predicates share some features with epistemic modal predications, and with attributive ones (as in many languages).

The fact that attributive and atmospheric predicates do not involve dummy pronouns (as in English), but rather non-verbal predications, shows that the subject function is not centrally involved in impersonal constructions: rather, it is the backgrounding process that gives rise to constructions that may differ among languages. The 'dummy pronoun' strategy is only one among many other options.

We therefore propose to consider that the differences observed in impersonal structures are due to typological constraints (syntactic status of person markers, word order flexibility, presence of grammaticalized non-verbal predications, etc.): it seems to us that the category of the Impersonal only finds its unity at the semantic/cognitive level. This notwithstanding, some constant features can be found cross-linguistically.

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