

# From passive to impersonal. An Italian case study and its implications

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*Abstract. In contemporary Italian, two constructions with the reflexive marker si coexist, a passive and an impersonal one. The co-occurrence of the two constructions is the result of a long-lasting process by which an originally passive construction has gradually acquired some syntactic properties of an impersonal construction such as, e.g., the possibility of being used with intransitive verbs or the optionality of agreement with the patient argument when the verb is transitive. In this paper we will trace the history of this gradual development from passive to impersonal in the history of Italian, based on a large corpus of literary and non-literary documents. In particular, we will focus on the initial stage of the process, namely the extension of the si-construction to intransitive verbs, and the emergence of the non-agreeing pattern with transitive verbs. We will argue that although passive and impersonal constructions are functionally similar as agent-defocusing strategies, the different type of agent defocusing that characterizes the two construction types (passive and impersonal) requires us to posit a covert reanalysis of si as a marker of generic human agency as a necessary precondition preceding and motivating the syntactic impersonalization of the construction.*

## 1. Introduction: from passive to impersonal

Impersonal constructions derived from passive constructions are known from a number of languages (Polish, Frajzyngier 1982: 272-275, Siewierska 1988; Icelandic, Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir 2002; German, Abraham & Leiss 2006). The following examples from Italian, German, and Polish all exemplify constructions displaying passive morphology (either past participle – as in (2) and (3)<sup>1</sup> – or a reflexive marker, as in (1)), but in which the patient remains unpromoted to subject:

(1) Italian

*In Italia si mangia spaghetti*  
in Italy si[REFL] eats spaghetti[PL]  
'In Italy, one eats spaghetti / it is usual to eat spaghetti'

(2) German (Abraham & Leiss 2006: 511)

*Heute abend wird richtig Zähne geputzt*  
tonight becomes readily teeth brushed  
'Tonight the teeth will be readily brushed'

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<sup>1</sup> -no and -to are petrified neuter singular forms of the so-called nominal declension of the past participle. The neuter form of the past participle in Polish is now -ne/-te.

(3) Polish (Abraham & Leiss 2006: 511)

*Dano mu książkę*  
given:N he:DAT book:ACC.SG.F  
'He was given a book'

All these constructions are also possible with intransitive (or intransitively-used) predicates, as in the following examples:

(4) Italian

*Qui si lavora troppo!*  
here si[REFL] works too much  
'Here people work too much!'

(5) German

*Es wurde getanzt*  
it became danced  
'There was dancing (going on)'

(6) Polish (Kibort 2008: 265)

*Tutaj tańczono*  
here danced  
'There was dancing here.'/[They] danced here.'

Both the constructions in (1)-(3) and the constructions in (4)-(6) are sometimes subsumed under the same rubric of “impersonal passives”, to be intended as constructions in which “the predicate is associated with passive morphology” (past participle, reflexive marker/suffix, etc.; Abraham & Leiss 2006: 509), but in which either there is no patient, i.e. the predicate is intransitive, or the patient does not fill the subject position. Under the subject-based view of impersonality proposed by Siewierska (2008: 116ff.), however, these constructions are all instances of impersonal constructions to full right.<sup>2</sup>

There appears to be little known about the emergence of the impersonal constructions exemplified in (1)-(3), and their relationship with both promotional passives and the “impersonal passive” of intransitive verbs exemplified in (4)-(6). Although the nature of this process remains “an open question” (Abraham & Leiss 2006: 511), it is generally stated that the constructions in (1)-(3) repre-

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<sup>2</sup> The definition of *impersonal construction* adopted in this paper is exclusively structure-based: following Siewierska (2008: 116), we define an impersonal construction as one which lacks a canonical subject, i.e. “a verbal argument which is fully referential and manifests the morphosyntactic properties of subjects in a language”. This definition includes (i) constructions in which the subject is not fully referential (e.g. *man*-constructions in German, vague *they* in English, and comparable constructions in pro-drop languages); (ii) constructions in which the subject is identified (in one way or another) by means of special morphology, e.g. by means of an originally reflexive marker (as in the case of the so-called Romance and Slavic reflexive impersonals; Siewierska 2008: 117); (iii) constructions with overt expletive subjects (as the so-called “impersonal passive” of German and Dutch), (iv) constructions that lack an overt subject at all (as the *-no/-to* construction in Polish). *Passive constructions*, on the other hand, are minimally defined as constructions in which a non-agent argument has been promoted to subject (or, at least, has taken on a subset of the morphosyntactic properties of subjects in a given language, e.g. it controls agreement with the verb) and the verb is morphosyntactically derived in some way from the form used in the unmarked active voice construction (Haspelmath 1990). The motivation for a purely structural definition of *impersonal* and *passive* constructions has to do with the nature of the process of change described in this paper, which involves the “impersonalization” of a formerly passive construction, i.e. its progressive acquisition of “impersonal” traits and the consequent loss of passive characteristics. Under a different, functionally-driven view, both passive and impersonal construction serve the function of defocusing the main initiator of the event (Siewierska 2008: 122), and although it is possible to distinguish between different types of agent defocusing (Myhill 1997; Sansò 2006), these distinctions only loosely correspond to the structural divide between passive and impersonal constructions.

sent a rather late development, and the diachronic mechanisms involved in this development are generally described as including two steps:

- (i) a “promotional” passive construction/marker starts being used with intransitive verbs, or with intransitively-used transitive predicates;
- (ii) on the basis of analogy with these intransitive counterparts, the construction/marker ceases to be perceived as passive even when the verb is transitive, and acquires impersonal traits.

Semantically, this process involves a change in the meaning of the passive marker/construction: whereas in promotional passives the passive marker simply signals a switch in the relative prominence of agent and patient (triggered, e.g., by the topicality/discourse-relevance of the patient), when the same marker is used with intransitive verbs it develops a different function, namely that of expressing that the action denoted by the verb has a loosely specified human agent. The same function can be assigned to the formerly passive marker in the impersonal constructions exemplified in (1)-(3), in which there is a patient that remains unpromoted to subject. This semantic change sets impersonal constructions apart from passive constructions: while the function of passive markers and their various diachronic sources (reflexives, anticausatives, resultatives, etc.) has generally to do with the affectedness of the patient (signalling, e.g., the resulting state of the patient, as in resultatives, or its being affected by the verbal action, as in anticausatives and middles), the function of impersonal markers derived from passive markers is simply to signal that the agent is generic and human, without any implications of patient affectedness.

From a general point of view, step (i) is usually thought of as an instance of extension of a construction to new contexts, while step (ii) can be characterized as a process of reanalysis without grammaticalization, as “no particular element ... become(s) more grammatical(ized) as a result of the change, i.e. no element changes from a lexical item to a grammatical item, and the whole construction does not necessarily become tighter” (Haspelmath 1998: 325, adapted).

Frajzyngier (1982: 274ff.) posits these two steps to explain the emergence of the impersonal *no/to* construction in Polish, which was only possible with intransitive verbs in the oldest Polish texts (Frajzyngier 1982: 275, quoting Brajerski 1979).<sup>3</sup> Siewierska (1988: 266), on the other hand, invokes such a path to account for the development of the reflexive impersonal construction in Polish. In this construction, illustrated in (7), the patient appears in the accusative rather than in the nominative case and the verb is invariably third singular:

(7) Polish (Siewierska 1988: 262)

*Traktuje się go jako malarza autentycznej natury ludzkiej*  
 treats:3SG REFL he:ACC as painter authentic nature human  
 ‘He is treated (one treats him) as a painter of the real people’

Similarly, Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002: 101; see also Maling 2006) consider the “new impersonal construction”<sup>4</sup> of present-day Icelandic as representing a case of reanalysis of the canonical

<sup>3</sup> It should be remarked, however, that according to Siewierska’s (1988: 271, our emphasis) reconstruction, “impersonal passives with the *no/to* participle **were formed** [in Old Polish, *AGR-AS*] **mainly, but not exclusively from transitive verbs**, in Russian (sic!) predominantly from perfective verbs. Intransitive verbs stopped being used in this construction in literary Russian [...] around the eighteenth century, while in Polish they began to be more widely used, and nowadays occur with the same frequency as transitive verbs”.

<sup>4</sup> This construction is rapidly spreading in the language of young Icelanders, and its acceptance rate is significantly lower in Inner Reykjavík than in other parts of the country (Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002: 109ff.), possibly due to normative pressure. The German construction *Es wird Bücher gelesen* is often cited as a parallel to the new Icelandic construction, but differs from it in several crucial ways. For instance, the German construction seems to allow mainly determinerless nouns, and more generally indefinite and inanimate nouns, while the Icelandic construction also allows

passive morphology from passive to syntactically active (i.e. impersonal). Unlike the canonical passive in which the direct object is moved to subject position (see (8a)), in the “new impersonal construction” exemplified in (8b) “the null *pro* [...] is an external argument which gets interpreted as an ‘unspecified human subject’”, and the direct object retains object marking:<sup>5</sup>

(8) Icelandic (Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002: 98)

- a. *Stúlkan var lamin í klessu*  
 the.girl:NOM was hit:F.SG.NOM in a.mess  
 “The girl was badly beaten”
- b. *Það var lamið stúlkuna í klessu*  
 it[EXPL] was hit:NEUT.SG the.girl:F.SG.ACC in a.mess  
 “The girl was badly beaten”

The explanation proposed by Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir for this reanalysis, however, is somewhat different from the two-step process described above. In their view, the process has been fostered by the fact that only in Icelandic among Scandinavian languages the promotional periphrastic passive is restricted to [+human] agents, and this feature has set the stage for the reanalysis of a thematically empty null subject as a generic human agent.<sup>6</sup>

Those who postulate a two-step evolution from passive to impersonal have never discussed why passive morphology should extend to intransitive verbs. As discussed above, passives and impersonals are semantically so markedly different that we must be cautious when postulating a mere extension of a construction to new contexts: impersonal constructions typically have a generic human agent, whereas passive constructions are in general not characterized by any restriction concerning the agent. As Abraham & Leiss (2006: 502, adapted) correctly observe, impersonal passives “do not involve any passive semantics ... [and] the demoted subjects of these constructions carry the features [+AGENT], [+HUMAN]”. In other words, while in (9b) the intended agent may be only a generic person (= *one*) or a loosely specified set of humans, in (9a) it can coincide with a specific person the speaker does not want to mention, with a generic person, and even with a natural force.

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animate and definite nouns. This fact is even more significant if one considers that postposed subjects in Icelandic must be indefinite in both passive and active voice sentences, as illustrated by the following contrast:

- (i) *Það hafa loksins flutt strákar inn í húsið*  
 it[EXPL] have finally moved boys:NOM into in the.building  
 “Some boys have finally moved into the building”
- (ii) *\*Það hafa loksins flutt strákarinn inn í húsið*  
 it[EXPL] have finally moved the.boys:NOM into in the.building

<sup>5</sup> The expletive subject *Það* is not a grammatical subject, but serves only to satisfy the V2 constraint (Maling 2006: 198). As such, it does not appear, for instance, in yes-no questions:

- (iii) *Var [\*Það] beðið þig að vaska upp?*  
 was [it] asked you:ACC to wash up  
 ‘Did they ask you to do the dishes?’

<sup>6</sup> The fact that in standard Icelandic there is both a canonical passive with postverbal subjects (only allowed with indefinite subjects) and an impersonal passive with agentive intransitive verbs, exemplified in (iv) and (v) respectively, is not taken into consideration by Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) as one of the possible motivations for the reanalysis:

- (iv) *Það voru seldir margar bílar / \*bílarnir í gær*  
 it[EXPL] were sold:M.PL many car:M.PL.NOM the.cars:M.PL.NOM yesterday  
 “Many cars were sold yesterday” / “\*The cars were sold yesterday”
- (v) *Það vad dansað í kringum jólatréð*  
 it[EXPL] was danced:NEUT.SG around the.Christmas.tree  
 “People danced around the Christmas tree”

- (9) Dutch (Kirsner 1976: 387-388)
- a. *De huizen werden verwoest*  
 the houses became destroyed  
 ‘The houses were destroyed’ (by the enemies/by the hurricane etc.)
- b. *Er wordt gefloten*  
 there becomes whistled  
 “There is whistling” (= people whistle/someone whistles)

Following Comrie (1977; see also Kirsner 1976; Shibatani 1985), one could explain such an extension in terms of “spontaneous demotion”, i.e. as an instance of defocusing not caused by the promotion of some other noun phrase to subject. Such a hypothesis enjoys wide currency in the literature on “impersonal passives”. If this hypothesis is accepted, a passive marker would have a very abstract function, that of defocusing the main participant (i.e. the agent), and the meaning of this marker when used with intransitive verbs would be the result of a process of accommodation: in passive constructions there is another participant that is focused, and the defocusing of the main participant is only relative, whereas in impersonal passives the defocusing of the agent is absolute, which is tantamount to saying that the agent is not particularly noteworthy, representing virtually all humanity, or a subgroup thereof (e.g. people in a given location).

Based on the history of the Italian *si*-construction, in this paper we will argue in favour of a context-based reinterpretation of a passive marker as a marker of a generic human agent. This reinterpretation *precedes* and *motivates* its use with intransitive verbs, which cannot be simply thought of as a mere extension of a passive marker to new contexts. In other words, we will not postulate a general abstract function of the passive marker that is “accommodated” when this marker is extended to intransitive verbs, and we will propose a different view of the passive-to-impersonal reanalysis, which is at the same time more gradual (i.e. the extension of the passive marker to intransitive verbs does not affect all the verbs at one time) and more “local”, i.e. triggered by a bundle of ambiguous contexts which facilitate the reinterpretation of the passive marker as a marker of a generic human agent even in the presence of a patient.

In what follows, we will describe the initial stage of the history of the *si*-construction in Ancient Italian (Section 2): it will be shown that the prerequisites for the reinterpretation of the passive marker *si* as a marker of a generic human agent were already present in the earliest stage of the Italian language. In Section 3, the Ancient Italian situation will be compared with the situation of present-day Italian, with a view to underscoring the differences between the two stages. In present-day Italian two different *si*-constructions exist, a passive and an impersonal one; beside them, there is an “inclusive” *si*-construction, structurally indistinguishable from passive and impersonal *si*-constructions, roughly corresponding to a 1<sup>st</sup> person plural form of the verb. Section 4 will sketch the main steps of the passive-to-impersonal development, which is by no means an abrupt process, as testified by the co-existence of two different *si*-constructions in the contemporary language, a passive and an impersonal one. Finally, in Section 5, the general implications of the present analysis will be briefly discussed.

## 2. The *si*-construction in Ancient Italian

In this section, the syntactic and semantic features of the *si*-construction in Ancient Italian will be discussed in detail, with a view to identifying the characteristics that have favoured its reinterpretation as an impersonal construction. Ancient Italian is to be intended here as a rather arbitrary term covering literary and non-literary Tuscan documents written in the 13<sup>th</sup> century (more details on the corpus used in the present study are provided in the Appendix).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Impersonal constructions in non-Tuscan texts will not be discussed in this paper. In Old Venetian the *si*-construction was limited to transitive and intransitively-used transitive predicates (*chom se leze in la ystoria*, ‘as one can read in the

The construction in question involves the use of the 3<sup>rd</sup> person reflexive marker *si*, which had already grammaticalized into an anticausative and a passive marker well before the earliest written records. In Ancient Italian the *si*-construction behaves syntactically as a passive in more than 95% of the cases. This means that the patients in this construction **almost always** control agreement on the verb, as in example (10). This example also nicely shows that the *si* construction is a functional equivalent of another passive construction of Ancient Italian, the so-called periphrastic passive (*fu coronato*  $\cong$  *corono-ssi*), used immediately after the *si* construction to refer to the same event, namely the coronation of Frederick the First. Moreover, Frederick the First, the subject of *corono-ssi* ('crowned-*si*'), is also the main topic of the portion of text from which this passage is taken, which means that both the *si*-construction and the periphrastic passive, in Givónian terms, can be used to introduce a non-agent topic (and to maintain it discourse-central as the narration proceeds). An example of *si*-construction with the same function is provided in (11):

- (10) *Federigo primo decto Barbarossa imperò anni xxxvij, et corono-ssi*  
 F. first called B. reigned years 37 and crowned-*si*  
*ne-lla chiesa di Sam Pietro ad Roma ... Elli fu coronato da*  
 in-the church of Saint Peter at Rome he was crowned by  
*papa Adriano il di medesimo ch' elli giunse ad Roma*  
 pope A. the day same that he arrived to Rome  
 (Cronica Fiorentina, 102, 21, 1; 13<sup>th</sup> century)  
 'Frederick the First, called Barbarossa, was emperor for 37 years, and was crowned in the church of St Peter in Rome ... He was crowned by pope Adrian on the very same day he arrived in Rome'
- (11) *ma il suo filgluolo, il qual era allora co llui, sì llo*  
 but the his son who was then with him in.this.way him  
*inbalsimò e reco-llo infino a tTiro, e quivi si soppellio*  
 embalmed and took-him as.far.as T. and here si buried  
 (Cronica Fiorentina, p. 106; 13<sup>th</sup> century)  
 'But his son, who was with him at that time, embalmed him in this way and took him as far as Tyre, and he was buried there'

The demoted agent in the *si*-construction is often a specific person or group, and can be overtly encoded by means of a PP headed by *per* or *da*, a possibility definitely excluded in present-day Italian (Sansò, to appear), as in (12). This fact shows that the *si*-construction in Ancient Italian was a fully grammaticalized passive, directly concurring with the periphrastic passive in many, if not all, of its contexts of usage:

- (12) *Anche fue ordinato la seççaia domenica di giennaio, per*  
 also was ordered the last Sunday of January by  
*Ghese e per Bonaguida capitani e per li loro consiglieri, che*  
 G. and by B. captains and by the their councillors that  
*si dovesse bandire la nostra processione la primaia domenica di*  
 si should announce the our procession the first Sunday of  
*ciascheuno mese per Angnello banditore*  
 each month by A. town-crier  
 (Carmine, §26; 1280-1298)  
 'The last Sunday of January the Captains Ghese and Bonaguida and their councillors ordered that our procession should be announced publicly by Agnello, the town-crier, the first Sunday of each month'

On the other hand, the patient NP promoted to subject acquires not the complete set of subject properties, but only a subset thereof. Indeed, in approximately half of the occurrences (55.94%) of the *si* construction in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the patient NP maintains **a behavioural property typical of objects**, i.e., it appears post-verbally (*si* + V + N, as in examples (13)-(15)). From a semantic point of

history'), while in Old Neapolitan there are examples of *si*-constructions with unergative and unaccusative intransitive verbs (*non se pò plu andare*, 'one cannot go further'). The reader is referred to Cennamo (1998: 94, 98) for a survey of passive and impersonal *si*-constructions in these two vernaculars.

view, the preverbal vs. postverbal position of the patient in the *si*-construction tends to correlate with the referentiality/topicality of that participant. In other words, there is a tendency for postverbal patients to be non-topical and non-referential and for preverbal patients to be topical and referential:

- (13) *A Roma si vende ogne cosa e a pochi è più cara la*  
 in Rome *si* sells each thing and to few:PL is more dear the  
*fede che la pecunia*  
 faith than the money  
 (*Fiori e vita di filosafi e d'altri savi e d'imperadori*, p. 170; 1271-1275)  
 'In Rome everything is sold, and few care about faith more than about money'
- (14) *Fue trovato che in Roma si trattava tradimento*  
 was found that in Rome *si* plotted betrayal  
 (Brunetto Latini, *Rettorica*, p. 90; 1260-1261)  
 'It was found that in Rome people were plotting betrayal'
- (15) *Et lo camarlengo si debbia chiamare comunamente per tutta*  
 and the chamarling *si* should call communally by all  
*l'Arte, là unque si trova lo migliore*  
 the Art so that *si* finds the best  
 (*Statuto dell'Università ed Arte della lana di Siena*, 1, 9; 1298)  
 'And the chamarling should be elected communally by the whole Art (a professional association, *AGR-AS*), so that one can find the best one'

The passages in (13)-(15) exemplify the kind of contexts that are associated with the reinterpretation of the *si*-construction as an impersonal construction. These contexts are highly ambiguous, both in structure and meaning:

- from a semantic-pragmatic point of view, while preverbal patients are likely candidates for subjecthood, being topical and persistent referents, those following the verb generally lack the semantic-pragmatic characteristics of subjects, though being syntactically subjects;
- from a structural point of view, when a singular patient NP appears in postverbal position the construction is ambiguous between a passive and an impersonal interpretation, as the 3<sup>rd</sup> person agreement on the verb might equally well be triggered by the singular patient or be the default choice in the case of lack of agreement.

It must also be added that a generic human agent interpretation is also favoured in many cases in which the *si*-construction is accompanied by a temporal or spatial specification, as in example (13) above (*in Roma*, 'in Rome'), in which the spatial or temporal specification induces an interpretation of the agent as a loosely specified set of individuals (e.g. 'people living in Rome').

These characteristics might be considered as the necessary preconditions for the reanalysis of the construction as impersonal. In other words, the reanalysis starts with patients that are particularly low on the referentiality/topicality scale, as these are unlikely candidates to subjecthood from a semantic point of view, and is favoured by clusters of contextual features that invite a generic human agent reading of the construction (e.g. a spatial/temporal specification, the atemporal present tense, or the imperfective/unbounded aspect). Contexts such as those exemplified in (13)-(15) thus represent the critical contexts (in the sense of Diewald 2002: 109) in which semantic and syntactic ambiguity provides "several options for interpretations", among which the innovative impersonal reading appears to be favoured. The reanalysis of *si* as a marker of a generic human agent is covert at this stage, but the **first formal symptoms of the reanalysis** are found during a narrow time span in the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. These include both the extension of the construction to intransitive verbs (and intransitively-used predicates) and the emergence of a new construction in which the patient does not agree with the verb. These two new syntactic environments in which the *si*-construction can be found will be discussed in detail in the next two subsections.

## 2.1. The extension to intransitive verbs

As to the extension to intransitive verbs, Salvi (2008: 135) states that “of the intransitive verbs, only the unergatives were possible in this construction” in Old Italian and that “in the works of Dante the construction begins to be used with [...] unaccusative verbs too, mainly with verbs of movement”. The following examples show, contra Salvi, that this construction was equally possible with both unergative (*questionare* ‘discuss, question’, *contrastare* ‘fight with’, etc.) and unaccusative (*andare* ‘go’, *venire* ‘come’, *entrare* ‘enter’) predicates within the same rather narrow temporal span (and that unaccusative verbs were possible well before Dante’s works, as examples (20) and (21) show). If our analysis is correct, this is exactly what we expect to find, given that at least a sub-part of unaccusative verbs (especially motion verbs) imply a volitional agent that can be conceptualized as generic. There is no doubt a relative difference in terms of types (though not in terms of tokens) of unergative vs. unaccusative intransitive verbs that can be used in the *si*-construction, but this difference has possibly an independent explanation. Most unaccusative verbs had a *si*-marked counterpart in Old Italian (Jezek, to appear). This is especially true of verbs of change of state (*morire* and *morir-si* ‘die’) and location (*andare* and *andar-si* ‘go’, *partire* and *partir-si* ‘leave’), in which *si* is used as a middle marker, to be intended, following Kemmer (1993: 15), as a “morpho-syntactic marker that appears in the expression of some cluster of distinct situation types [...] that are hypothesized to be semantically related to one another”, such as, e.g., grooming or body care situations, translational and non-translational motion, change of state, etc. The alleged incompatibility of unaccusative predicates with the *si*-construction would thus be motivated by the necessity of avoiding ambiguities between an impersonal (*si va* ‘one goes’) and a purely intransitive (*[egli] si va* ‘he goes’) interpretation of these verbs.

- (16) *se ne-l paese di Francia si guadagniase meglio che no*  
 if in-the country of France *si* earn.money:SBJV.IMPF.3SG better than NEG  
*vi si può guadagnare oggi*  
 there *si* can earn.money:INF today  
 (Lettera di Vincenti di Aldobrandino Vincenti e compagni, da Siena, a Iacomo di Guido Cacciaconti, 1260)  
 ‘if in France one could earn more (money) than one can earn today’
- (17) *quando i farai el pagamento, sì ne fa fare*  
 when to.him make:FUT.2SG the payment EMPH of.it make:IMP make:INF  
*la sc[r]ipta ne libro di Signori de’ merchatanti, chome si*  
 the registration in book of Lords of merchants as *si*  
*chustuma di fare*  
 use:3SG of do:INF  
 (Lettera di Vincenti di Aldobrandino Vincenti e compagni, da Siena, a Iacomo di Guido Cacciaconti, 1260)  
 ‘when you will pay him, make sure that the registration [of payment] be made in the book of the Lords of merchants, as it is customary’
- (18) *La iudiciale costituzione è quella ne-lla quale ... si questiona*  
 the iudicial constitution is that in-which *si* questions  
*sopra la quantitate o sopra la comparazione o sopra la*  
 about the quantity or about the comparison or about the  
*qualitate d’ un fatto*  
 quality of a fact  
 (Brunetto Latini, *Rettorica*, p. 103; 1261)  
 ‘The iudicial constitution is the one in which one questions about the quantity or the comparison or the quality of a fact’
- (19) *i fermi argomenti ne-l principio, i deboli ne-l mezzo, i*  
 the strong arguments in-the beginning the weak in-the middle the  
*fermissimi, co’ quali non si possa contrastare lievemente, ne-lla fine*  
 strongest with which NEG *si* can contrast easily in-the end  
 (Brunetto Latini, *Rettorica*, p. 75; 1261)  
 ‘the strong argument (should be put) in the beginning, the weak ones in the middle, and the strongest ones, against which one cannot contrast easily, in the end’
- (20) *tutte le cupidità [sono porte] de-l ninferno per le quali si*  
 all the pleasures are gates of-the hell through which *si*



*va a la morte*  
goes to the death

(Andrea da Grosseto, 2, 17; 1268)

(21) ‘all the pleasures are gates of the hell, through which **one goes** to death’

*Et per la [necessità] si viene a la povertà*  
and through the necessity si comes to the poverty

(Andrea da Grosseto, 4, 9)

(22) ‘and through necessity one comes to poverty’

*Sappi che cinque sono le porti per le quali s'entra, anzi che*  
know:IMP that five are the gates through which si enters before  
*andare si possa in paradiso*  
go:INF si can to paradise

(Bono Giamboni, *Libro de' Vizî e delle Virtudi*, 69,2; 1292)

(23) ‘Be aware that there are five gates through which **one can enter**, before **one can go** to heaven’

*Io tenni li piedi in quella parte de la vita di là da*  
I kept the feet in that part of the life beyond  
*la quale non si puote ire più per intendimento di ritornare*  
which NEG si can go further through intention of come.back:INF

(Dante, *Vita Nuova*, 14, 1; 1292-1293)

(24) ‘I have just set foot on that boundary of life beyond which **no one can go**, hoping to return’

*Legge-si de-lla bontà de-l re giovane...*  
read-si about-the kindness of-the king young

(*Il Novellino*, 18, 3; end of 13<sup>th</sup> century)

(25) ‘**One can read** about the kindness of the young king’

*E ne-l ricévere alcuno novizio si proceda in questo modo*  
and in-the welcome:INF any novice si proceed:SBJV.3SG in this way

(Capitoli della Compagnia dei Disciplinati di Siena, 11; 1295)

‘and when welcoming a novice, one should proceed in this way’

More importantly, the earliest examples of this construction with intransitive verbs are **exceptionless** in the (omnitemporal) present tense or in other tenses/moods that are **most compatible with the genericity of the human subject** (as in examples (16)-(25)). Salvi (2008: 136) only talks of a restriction to non-compound tenses, and seems to imply that this restriction only characterizes the use of the *si*-construction with unaccusative intransitives. This is clearly incorrect, as the restriction to non-compound tenses characterizes *si*-constructions with transitive verbs as well. The crucial point is that while passive *si*-constructions are equally possible with specific and generic time reference, the first examples of the impersonal *si*-construction with intransitive verbs all have generic time reference. The fact that the first contexts in which the *si*-construction is used with intransitive verbs are those in which the genericity of the agent is also independently triggered by other contextual features corroborates our hypothesis that the reinterpretation of *si* as a marker of a generic human agent precedes and motivates its extension to intransitive verbs.<sup>8</sup>

## 2.2. The emergence of the impersonal *si*-construction with transitive verbs

During the same temporal interval, we also see the beginnings of a tendency towards the impersonalization of the *si*-construction, which manifests itself in the **optionality of agreement** with patient NPs. This typically happens in four cases:

- when the patient is a **quantified noun** (see exx. (26)-(28))
- when the patient is a **determinerless plural noun** (exx. (29)-(30))
- when the patient is a **coordinated noun phrase (N and N)**; see examples (31) and (32)

<sup>8</sup> Another argument in favour of an early reinterpretation of the *si*-construction as an impersonal construction implying a generic human agent is the early attestation of the inclusive reading of this construction, that will be discussed in Section 4: an impersonal/generic reading of the construction is indeed necessary for an inclusive interpretation to emerge.

- with **nominals in light-verb constructions**, formed by a semantically bleached verb (mainly *fare*, ‘do’, ‘make’) and a nominal contributing large part of the predicative content (ex. (33))

- (26) *E ancho vi si rameta tuti i miei denari propi, ch 'io*  
 and also there *si* recalls all the my money[PL] own that I  
*debo avere di chostà*  
 must have from there  
 (Lettera di Iacomo de' Sansedoni da Siena a Goro e Gonteruccio de' Sansedoni, in Parigi, 1294)  
 ‘and all the money that I must receive from there are mentioned there (i.e. in that letter)’
- (27) *andando su per questo fiume XII giornate, si truova*  
 going up along this river 12 days *si* **find.3SG**  
*città e castella assai*  
 towns and castles many  
 (Marco Polo, *Il Milione*, 126, 4; beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century)  
 ‘travelling along this river for 12 days, one meets with a good number of towns and castles’
- (28) *in una cosa si truova quattro cause, cioè la cagione materiale e*  
 in one thing *si* finds four causes that.is the cause material and  
*la cagione formale e la efficiente e la finale*  
 the cause formal and the efficient and the final  
 (Andrea da Grosseto, *Trattati morali di Albertano da Brescia volgarizzati*, 1, 5; 1268)  
 ‘in each thing one finds four causes, the material one, the formal one, the efficient one, and the final one’
- (29) *uno paramento da prete, co-l quale vi si debia dicere*  
 one paraments[SG] for priest with-which with.it *si* should[SG] say  
*messe per anima del conte Guido Guerra, mio figliuolo*  
 masses for soul of.the count G. G. my son  
 (Testamento della contessa Beatrice da Capraia, 1279)  
 ‘priest vestments, with which masses should be said for the soul of Count Guido Guerra. my son’
- (30) *In questa città si fa giambellotti di pelo di camello,*  
 in this city *si* make:3SG camlet:PL of hair of camel  
*li più belli del mondo*  
 the most beautiful of,the world  
 (Marco Polo, *Il Milione*, 72, 1)  
 ‘They make in this city great quantities of camlets of camel’s wool, the finest in the world’
- (31) *Et certo la colpa e la cagione si mette sopra altrui*  
 and surely the fault and the cause *si* puts on others  
 (Brunetto Latini, *Rettorica*, p. 113; 1261)  
 ‘and surely the blame and the fault are put on others’
- (32) *li argomenti e le legagioni [...] per li quali si fa la*  
 the arguments and the legations through which *si* makes the  
*confermagione e la risponsione*  
 affirmation and the answer  
 (Fiore di rett., red. gamma, a. 1292 (tosc.) cap. 12, p. 140)  
 ‘the arguments and the legations through which confirmations and replies are made’
- (33) *tutto l' arde infino che l' uccide, se non vi si*  
 whole him burns until him kills if not against.it *si*  
*fa argomenti*  
 does arguments  
 (Tesoro di Brunetto Latini volgarizzato [Libri III, IV e V], p. 76; 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century)  
 ‘[the poison] burns him entirely and kills him if one does not take an antidote for it’

According to Salvi (2008: 134-135), cases such as (26)-(33) are not indicative of the reinterpretation of the construction as impersonal. In his view, these non-agreeing postverbal patients are not the direct objects of the verb but the subjects, lack of agreement being “normal in Old Italian with a postverbal Subject in unaccusative constructions” (Salvi 2008: 134), given examples such as (34)-(37):

- (34) *Iddio [...] da-l quale nasce tutti e' beni e tutte le grazie*  
 God from-whom is.born all the goods and all the graces  
 (Anonimo, *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*, volgarizzamento toscano, p. 41; 1300)  
 ‘God, from whom all the goods and all the graces derive’

- (35) *E appresso viene speranza e disperanza, che vanno innanzi a paura e ardimento*  
 and after comes hope and despair that go before  
 fear and courage  
 (Egidio Romano *volg.*, 1, 3, 2; 1288)  
 ‘and after come hope and despair, which go before fear and courage’
- (36) *De-lla cattiva e rea volontà, di cui nasce i sette vizi capitali*  
 from-the bad and guilty will from which is.born the seven sins  
 deadly  
 (Bono Giamboni, *Trattato di Virtù e di Vizi*, Cap. 3, rubr.)  
 ‘from the bad and guilty will, from which the seven deadly sins derive’
- (37) *per questa guerra nacque grandissime battaglie e mortali[ta]te tra Guasconnesi e Normandi e Franceschi*  
 for this war was.born great battles and mortality  
 among Gasconian.PL and Norman.PL and French.PL  
 (Cronica Fiorentina, p. 140)  
 ‘because of this war many battles arose among Gasconians, Normans and the French, which caused many victims’

Salvi fails to acknowledge that the types of patients that do not trigger agreement on the verb share a crucial property, i.e. they rank low on the scale of referentiality/topicality. Moreover, the statement that lack of agreement is “normal” with postverbal arguments of unaccusatives invites the inference that we have to do with a rule. On the contrary, this is just a tendency, and examples of postverbal arguments that trigger agreement are easy to find:

- (38) *la delectanza de-l corpo [...] de la quale nascono tradimenti*  
 the delight of-the body from which are.born betrayals  
*de le Terre*  
 of the lands  
 (Andrea da Grosseto, 2, 17)  
 ‘bodily delights, from which betrayals of the lands derive’
- (39) *Da questo peccato vengono furti, symonia, inganni, usura, tradimenti (et) deceptioni*  
 from this sin come:3PL thefts simony deceits usury betrayals and deceptions  
 (Questioni filosofiche, p. 160; 1298)  
 ‘from this sin thefts, simony, deceits, usury, betrayals and deceptions derive’

Moreover, lack of agreement in the *si*-construction is also attested in a few cases ((40)-(41)) in which the patient appears in preverbal position as the head of a relative clause (but also in other cases: recall example (31)). In (40) the patient is not only preverbal but also definite and specific:

- (40) *i quali danari si diedero ne-le spese che si fece p(er)*  
 which money si gave:3PL in-the expenses that si made:3SG for  
*Baldovino il die che si supelio*  
 B. the day that si buried:3SG  
 (Libro d’amministrazione dell’eredità di Baldovino Iacopi Riccomanni, 1278)  
 ‘this money was invested in the expenses that were made for Baldovino the day he was buried’
- (41) *VII. [soldi] che si diè ne la soprasberga di Matasala*  
 seven coins that si gave:3SG in the soprasberga of M.  
 (Libro di conti di Matasala di Spinello, 1233-1243; quoted after Wehr 1995: 112)  
 ‘seven coins that were paid for Matasala’s *soprasberga* [a kind of military vestment]’

To sum up, as a result of the availability of an impersonal interpretation, the *si*-construction started developing impersonal features already in Ancient Italian. As will be described in the next Section, this process did not end up in a complete “impersonalization” of the construction (as, e.g., in Polish), and in present-day Italian a passive and an impersonal *si*-construction co-exist. The

stages of the process that resulted in the differentiation and divergence between an impersonal and a passive construction will be sketched in Section 4.

### 3. The situation in present-day Italian

In present-day Italian, two types of *si*-constructions can be distinguished on structural grounds. One of them can be considered as an impersonal construction, following the definition introduced in Section 1. The other one can be defined as a passive construction, although it maintains some hybrid syntactic and semantic features that distinguish it from the other passive construction of present-day Italian, formed with the auxiliaries *essere* ‘be’ and *venire* ‘come’ + the past participle. A third construction type, formally indistinguishable from the two other constructions, will be labelled ‘inclusive *si*-construction’: in this construction *si* + verb is equivalent to a 1<sup>st</sup> person plural form of the verb. The three constructions will be examined in turn in the next paragraphs on the basis of two corpora of present-day spoken and written Italian (see Appendix).<sup>9</sup>

#### 3.1. The passive *si*-construction

In the passive *si*-construction the patient agrees with the verb, but in the overwhelming majority of cases (more than 70% in our corpus) it appears postverbally, and tends to be inanimate and non-topical. From a semantic point of view, the agent in the passive *si*-construction is typically generic, the construction tends to occur in the present tense and with imperfective aspect, and is often characterized by modal overtones (see e.g. exx. (42) and (46)), even in the absence of overt modal operators or verbs:

- (42) *si annota il trasferimento solo su-l foglio complementare*  
*si annotates the transfer only on-he sheet complementary*  
 (Lessico dell’Italiano Parlato, Naples, 55, 89)  
 ‘The (property) transfer is recorded only on the additional sheet’ / ‘The property transfer must be recorded only on the additional sheet’
- (43) *La sicurezza di tutti [...] potrà essere ottenuta [...] se si accetteranno efficaci sistemi di verifica.*  
*the security of everybody can:FUT.3SG be obtained if si accept:FUT.3PL effective systems of checking*  
 ‘the general security can be obtained only if effective systems of checking will be accepted’
- (44) *Ne-lla zona si sono fatte, a-ll’ inizio de-gli anni ’70, battaglie famose per la tutela de-ll’ ambiente*  
*in-the area si be[AUX] made at-the beginning of-the years seventies battles famous for the protection of-the environment*  
 ‘in this area many famous battles for the protection of the environment were made in the early Seventies’
- (45) *bruciata come si bruciano le streghe e gli eretici*  
*burned as si burnt:3PL the witches and the heretics*  
 ‘burnt just as witches and heretics were burnt’
- (46) *Non si regolano in quarantott’ ore [...] i problemi accumulatisi*  
*NEG si resolve:3PL in 48 hours the problems piled.up*  
*in cinque anni*  
*in five years*  
 ‘The problems piled up in five years cannot be resolved in 48 hours’

<sup>9</sup> Unless otherwise specified, the examples in the following subsections are taken from “La Repubblica” corpus.

### 3.2. The impersonal *si*-construction

The impersonal *si*-construction in present-day Italian appears with every kind of intransitive (or intransitively-used) predicates, including reflexives (ex. (47)), reciprocals (ex. (48)), the copula (ex. (49)), and the periphrastic passive (ex. (50)):

- (47) *per non sputar-si in faccia quando ci si guarda al-lo*  
 for not spit-REFL in face when oneself *si* watches at-the  
*specchio, a volte bisogna saper-si accontentare*  
 mirror sometimes it.is.necessary be.able.to-REFL content:INF  
 ‘in order not to spit on one’s face when one looks at himself in the mirror sometimes it is necessary to content’
- (48) *In famiglia e tra amici ci si consola de-lle privazioni*  
 in family and among friends RECIIP *si* consoles of-the deprivations  
*e de-lle limitazioni*  
 and of-the limitations  
 ‘within families and among friends people console each other of deprivations and limitations’
- (49) *La vita de-lla pendolare, soprattutto quando si è giovani,*  
 the life of-the commuter mostly when *si* is young:M.PL  
*belli e futuri “dottori” appare crudele*  
 beautiful:M.PL and future:M.PL doctors appears cruel  
 ‘living as a commuter, mostly when one is young, beautiful and is going to graduate, looks cruel’
- (50) *Poi, a-l terzo giorno, si spiega come comportarsi quando si viene*  
 then on-the third day *si* explains how behave:INF when *si* comes[AUX]  
*presi in ostaggio*  
 taken:M.PL in hostage  
 ‘then, on the third day, they explain how one should behave when one is taken hostage’

Unergative and unaccusative intransitive verbs behave differently in compound tenses: whereas the past participle of unergative verbs displays a singular ending (*si è telefonato*, *si* is[AUX] phoned, ‘somebody called’), in unaccusative verbs the past participle has the plural ending (*si è arrivati*, *si* is[AUX] arrived:M.PL, ‘somebody/we arrived’).

The impersonal *si*-construction is also possible with transitive verbs when the patient is non-pronominal. Unlike Ancient Italian, the impersonal construction is possible with patients of any kind, including specific and definite patients:

- (51) *io spero siccome si tocca anche argomenti anche piuttosto*  
 I hope given.that *si* touches.upon also issues also rather  
*difficili spero ci sarà una partecipazione anche da parte de-i professori*  
 difficult I.hope there will.be a participation also by-the professors  
 (LIP, Florence, 3, 77)  
 ‘I hope ... because also **some rather difficult issues will be touched upon**, I hope that also teachers will take part in it’
- (52) *si è agitato questa questione de-lla fiscalizzazione de-gli*  
*si* is(AUX) raised.M.SG this.F.SG question.F.SG of-the fiscalization of-the  
*oneri sociali*  
 burdens social  
 (LIP, Milan, 6, 26)  
 ‘The question of the fiscalization of social burdens **has been raised**’
- (53) *io volevo fare delle liste tanto per avere un’ idea su*  
 I wanted make:INF some lists in order to have:INF an idea on  
*come come si svolgerà i lavori*  
 how how *si* carry\_out.FUT.3SG the.PL works  
 (LIP, Florence, 3, 54)  
 ‘I wanted to make some lists in order to figure out how **the activities will be carried out**’

With transitive predicates, the impersonal *si*-construction is the only option available with pronominal patients:<sup>10</sup>

- (54) *un po' come si fa con le "Sonate" quando le si*  
 a bit like *si* does with the *Sonate* when them *si*  
*suona su-l fortepiano*  
 plays on-the fortepiano  
 'a bit like one does with *Sonate* when one plays them on the fortepiano'
- (55) *spero proprio che non mi si accusi di falso moralismo*  
 I.hope really that NEG me *si* accuses of false moralism  
 'I hope not to be accused of false moralism'

According to D'Alessandro (2007: 37, and *passim*), lack of agreement between the patient and the transitive verb reflects "an aspectual difference": in particular, *si*-constructions with agreement (passive *si*-constructions in our terminology) encode accomplishments (to be intended as bounded events with a duration and an endpoint), whereas *si*-constructions without agreement encode activities (i.e. unbounded events with a duration but no endpoint). While there may be some correlation between agreement (or lack thereof) and the aspectual properties of the predicate, it must be admitted that the passive *si*-construction is largely more frequent than its impersonal counterpart in the written language, so that it is not difficult to find cases of activity predicates with verb-patient agreement. At the same time, the impersonal construction appears to be favoured with a special class of achievements constituted by the phasal verbs *cominciare/iniziare*, 'start' and *finire*, 'finish'. This fact alone shows that the aspectual properties of the predicate are not the only factor at play. With these phasal verbs both the passive and the impersonal *si*-construction are allowed (as shown by the contrast between (56)-(57), and (58)-(59) respectively); yet, the rate of impersonal *si*-constructions is somewhat higher (e.g. 15.17% with *iniziare/cominciare*; 26,66% with *finire*) than in other syntactic configurations (*si* + verb + NP; *si* + modal auxiliary + verb + NP):

- (56) *su consiglio de-l segretario di Stato Shultz [...] si comincia*  
 on advice of-the Secretary of State S. *si* starts  
*a frenare le aspettative*  
 at repress the expectations  
 'on advice of the Secretary of State Shultz, they are starting to repress expectations'
- (57) *per il cui pagamento si cominciano a nutrire preoccupazioni*  
 for whose payment *si* start:3PL at nurture concerns  
 'about whose payment one starts to nurture some concerns'
- (58) *Vogliamo che si finisca di trattare gli stranieri come*  
 we.want that *si* finish:SBJV.3SG to treat:INF the foreigners as  
*vengono trattati adesso*  
 come:3PL[AUX] treated now  
 'we wish that one gives up to treat foreigners as they are treated now'
- (59) *mentre si finiscono di spogliare i voti de-l Senato*  
 while *si* finish:3PL of sort.out:INF the votes of-the Senate  
 'while they finish to sort out the votes of the Senate'

Moreover, our corpus data show that the crucial property favouring lack of agreement is one that is superordinate to the aspectual properties of the predicate, namely the genericity of the event,

<sup>10</sup> With third person plural pronouns a further possibility is mentioned in the literature in which the verb agrees with the patient, although the pronoun itself remains in the accusative form (Lepschy 1989: 112):

- (vi) *Le si considerano e studiano*  
 them:F.PL *si* consider:3PL and study:3PL  
 'They are considered and studied'

This possibility appears to be syntactically a blend between the two opposing passive and impersonal *si*-constructions and is quite rare in the corpora we made use of.

which subsumes temporal, aspectual and modal differences. In particular, the impersonal *si*-construction appears to be favoured with modal verbs (*dovere*, ‘must’, *potere*, ‘can/may/be able to’; *volere* ‘want’), which significantly correlate with generic human agency. The three modal verbs *dovere* ‘must’, *potere* ‘can/may’, and *volere* ‘want’ behave differently with respect to their preference for the passive vs. the impersonal *si*-construction. While *dovere* and *potere* generally appear with the passive *si*-construction (only 10,35% of the cases of *si* + *potere* + *V* + *N* are impersonal; even less so – 6,42% – for *dovere*), *volere* appears to admit the impersonal *si*-construction more easily (20,95%):<sup>11</sup>

- (60) *non si può far paragoni co-i giocatori di cinquanta*  
 NEG *si* can:3SG make:INF comparisons with-the players of fifty  
*anni fa*  
 years ago  
 ‘One cannot compare (them) with the (football) players of fifty years ago’
- (61) *un risvolto tecnologico [...] di fronte a-l quale non si può*  
 a side-effect technological in front to-which NEG *si* can:3SG  
*chiudere gli occhi*  
 close:INF the eyes  
 ‘a technological side-effect in front of which one cannot close one’s eyes’
- (62) *Ma quand’anche [...] si volesse ridare a-lle facoltà*  
 but even if *si* want:SBJV.3SG give.back:INF to-the faculties  
*quelle competenze [...] non si potrebbe far-lo lasciando in piedi*  
 those competences NEG *si* could do-it leaving in feet  
*la struttura dipartimentale*  
 the structure departmental  
 ‘but even if one wished to give back those competences to the faculties, one could not do that leaving the departmental structure intact’

### 3.3. The inclusive *si*-construction

The third construction in question will be labelled inclusive *si*-construction: in this construction, which is structurally indistinguishable from passive and impersonal *si*-constructions, the agent is identified as an “unspecified set of people including the speaker” (Cinque 1988: 542):

- (63) *In 20 anni in questo paese non si è andati a fondo a*  
 in twenty years in this country NEG *si* is[AUX] gone to bottom to  
*uno solo de-i casi scottanti*  
 one only of-the cases hot  
 ‘In this country in twenty years we didn’t manage to discover the truth about any of the hot cases’
- (64) *Quindi, secondo lei, si è stati troppo precipitosi?*  
 then according.to You *si* is[AUX] been too rash  
 ‘Then, according to You, were we too rash?’

<sup>11</sup> From these counts three cases have been removed, in which the impersonal *si*-construction is the only possibility in contemporary Italian:

- intransitive (both unergative and unaccusative) verbs (*si può andare*, ‘one can go’)
- verbs with a pronominal object (*li si può vedere*, ‘they can be seen/one can see them’)
- cases in which the construction is used as an equivalent of a 1<sup>st</sup> person plural, as in

- (vii) *Non è che qui si voglia affrontare temi teologici*  
 NEG is that here *si* want:SBJV.3SG address:INF issues theological  
 ‘it is not true that we want to address theological issues here’

According to Cinque (1988: 542), in independent sentences with specific time reference *si* acquires this new interpretation only when it occurs with unaccusative, psych-, copular and passive verbs.<sup>12</sup> In the following examples (drawn from Cinque 1988: 542), the choice of a predicate that is incompatible with the inclusion of the speaker results in a pragmatically odd sentence:

- (65) %Oggi, a Beirut, *si è nati senza assistenza medica*  
 ‘Today, in Beirut, we were born with no medical assistance’  
 (66) %Oggi, a Beirut, *si è stati uccisi inutilmente*  
 ‘Today, in Beirut, we have been killed in vain’

An inclusive interpretation is not excluded also when the verb is transitive or unergative (as in, e.g., exx. (67)-(68); see D’Alessandro 2007: 144). D’Alessandro (2007: 152ff.), elaborating on Cinque’s (1988) seminal proposal, argues that the crucial factor triggering an inclusive reading of a *si*-construction is not time-specificity *per se* but rather the boundedness of the event. The following examples, however, show that the inclusive *si*-construction can also refer to unbounded events, provided that the context facilitates such a reading (in (67), for instance, the event of studying a given subject is unbounded, as shown by the temporal modifier *per cinque anni*, ‘for five years’).

- (67) *Non si vede perché non si debba fare un compito scritto di una materia che si è studiata per cinque anni, cui sono dedicate parecchie ore ogni settimana*  
 NEG si sees why NEG si should do:INF an exam written of a subject that si is[AUX] studied for five years to.which si are[AUX] devoted many hours each week  
 (Context: a student talking about her final high school exams)  
 ‘We don’t see any reason why we don’t have to take a written exam in a subject that we have studied for five years and to which we have devoted many hours each week’  
 (68) *L’ indicazione decisiva è arrivata da Craxi: “non si fanno questioni di uomini [...] ma si affrontano problemi politici e si tiene conto de-i bisogni [...] che ha Milano”*  
 the indication decisive is[AUX] arrived from C. NEG si make:3PL questions of men but si address:3PL problems political and si takes count of-the needs that has Milan  
 ‘The final indication has been given by Craxi: “we are not questioning about specific persons; rather, we are dealing with political issues and we are taking into account the needs of Milan’

Although the inclusive *si*-construction is indistinguishable from the passive and impersonal *si*-constructions, there may be some unambiguous clues pointing to an inclusive interpretation such as, e.g., the use of 1<sup>st</sup> person plural possessive pronoun *nostro*, ‘our’ (when an inclusive interpretation is excluded, the possessive pronoun triggered by *si* is *proprio*, ‘own’), or the presence of the independent 1<sup>st</sup> person plural pronoun before *si*. The reader is referred to D’Alessandro (2007: 140-143) for a detailed discussion of some tests for an inclusive reading of a *si*-construction.

To sum up, except for the inclusive *si*-construction, both passive and impersonal *si*-constructions in present-day Italian share an important semantic feature, namely the genericity of the agent. This is the result of a long-lasting process in which the impersonal *si*-construction has progressively emerged and spread, fostering the (semantic, if not syntactic) “impersonalization” of the passive *si*-

<sup>12</sup> As Cinque (1988: 544) observes, a pure impersonal interpretation of the *si*-construction is possible if the unaccusative, psych-, copular, or passive verb “is embedded in a context that suspends the specificity of the time reference”, as in the following examples:

- (vii) *Mi domando se a Beirut si sia nati senza assistenza medica anche oggi*  
 ‘I wonder whether in Beirut one was born with no medical assistance today still’  
 (viii) *Quando si è sfiniti dalla fame non si ragiona*  
 ‘When one is worn out by hunger one cannot reason properly’



construction. In the next section, the most important stages of this long-term development will be discussed in detail.

#### 4. What happened in the meantime

As discussed in the previous section, the impersonalization of the *si*-construction in Italian is far from complete, and the impersonal *si*-construction exemplified in (51)-(53) is less widespread than its passive counterpart. From a semantic point of view, however, the reinterpretation of *si* as a marker of a generic human agent is much more advanced. Such an interpretation holds in most cases in which there is agreement between the patient and the verb, as in examples (42)-(46).

In the present section we will sketch the main stages of the diachronic processes leading to the present-day situation. We will mainly focus on three different evolutionary paths, which will be the object of the next three subsections:

- (i) the extension of the *si*-construction to intransitive verbs;
- (ii) the development of impersonal *si*-constructions with transitive verbs;
- (iii) the emergence and establishing of the inclusive *si*-construction.

##### 4.1. The extension to intransitive verbs

As discussed above, the earliest examples of the *si*-construction with intransitive verbs all have generic time reference. The first examples of the impersonal *si*-construction with specific time reference are as early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and there are no differences between unergative and unaccusative predicates. In (69) and (70) the verbs are unergative, while in (71)-(72) they are unaccusative:<sup>13</sup>

- (68) *cioè sacrifici de' quali si racontoe di sopra*  
 that.is sacrifices of which si told:3SG above  
 (Anonimo, *Volgarizzamento B del secondo libro di Valerio Massimo*, par. 31, glossa x; 1326)  
 'that is, the sacrifices discussed above' (lit: about which it was told above)
- (69) *Ma molto si ragionò a quello mangiare de-ll' opere di*  
 but much si talked.about at that dinner of-the deeds of  
*Merlino*  
 M.  
 (Paolino Pieri, *La Storia di Merlino*, 34, 15; between 1310 and 1330)  
 'at that dinner people talked a lot about Merlin's deeds'
- (70) *e co-l gonfalone de-l popolo in furia si corse a casa i*  
 and with-the gonfalon of-the people quickly si ran to house the  
*Cavalcanti, e mise-vi-si fuoco, e da capo furono cacciati*  
 C. and put:PST.3SG-there-si fire and again were chased  
*di Firenze i Cavalcanti*  
 from Florence the C.  
 (Villani, *Cronica*, 9, 33; 1348)  
 'and the crowd ran quickly to the Cavalcanti's house with the people's gonfalon, and set it on fire, and the Cavalcanti were exiled from Florence again'
- (71) *quando si venne al-la battaglia, fu quell' asprezza utile*  
 when si came to-the battle was that harshness useful  
 (*Deca prima di Tito Livio volgarizzata*, 8, 8; 1350)  
 'when people started to fight, that harshness turned out to be useful'

<sup>13</sup> *Si racontoe* in (68) cannot be intended as an instance of an inclusive *si*-construction; the example is drawn from a commentary added by a person different from the author on the margins of the manuscript.

- (72) *Come si sapesse, vi si andò, e trovo-ssi, e fu*  
 as si know:SBJV.PST.3SG there si went and found:3SG-si and was  
*preso*  
 taken

(Marchionne di Coppo Stefani, *Cronaca fiorentina*, 830; 1385)

‘as soon as the news spread, people went there, and he was found and captured’

On the contrary, there is an important difference between unergative and unaccusative intransitive verbs with regard to the compound tenses of the *si*-construction. While unergative verbs appear quite early with compound tenses (see examples (73)-(74); (73) has an inclusive interpretation), the earliest instances of the compound tenses of the *si*-construction with unaccusative verbs are as late as the 16<sup>th</sup> century (see examples (75)-(77)). In all these instances, unlike in present-day Italian, the past participle displays singular agreement:

- (73) *benché di lui e de’ suoi compagni assai ragionato*  
 although of him and of his fellows much discussed  
*si sia*  
 si be:SBJV.3SG

(Boccaccio, *Decameron*, IX, 3; 1370)

‘although we have (already) discussed a lot about him and his fellows’

- (74) *e sotto lo steccato medesimo si sarebbe combattuto*  
 and under the fence same si be:COND.3SG fought

(*Deca terza di Tito Livio volgarizzata*, p. 324; 1400)

‘and they would have engaged battle under the same fence’

- (75) *dove quando l’ esercito era stato meno potente non si era*  
 where when the army was[AUX] been less mighty NEG si was[AUX]  
*potuto andare senza pericolo*  
 can:PPT go:INF without danger

(Guicciardini, *Storia d’Italia*, 6, 11; 1537-1540)

‘where one could go with no risk when the army was less mighty’

- (76) *Stanno-si a-l presente pacifiche e servon [...] a-gli Spagnuoli [...]*  
 stay:3PL-si at-the present peaceful and serve:3PL to-the Spanish:M.PL  
*se ben per mancar la gente non si è tornato*  
 although for lack:INF the people NEG si is[AUX] come.back:PPT  
*ad abitar la terra*  
 to inhabit:INF the land

(Ramusio, *Relazioni di Cortés su Nuova Spagna*, 4, 3; 1550-1559)

‘they are presently peaceful and serve the Spanish Empire, although nobody came back to inhabit (those lands) when the populace decreased in size’

- (77) *immediate si è venuto a conoscere che ’l detto*  
 immediately si is[AUX] come:PPT to know:INF that the mentioned  
*mappamondo fu senza alcuno dubbio cavato da quello di messer Marco Polo*  
 world.map was without any doubt drawn from that of Sir M. P.

(Ramusio, *I viaggi di Marco Polo*, Dichiarazione di Ramusio)

‘Immediately people came to know that the aforementioned world map was no doubt drawn from the one sketched by Sir Marco Polo’

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the earliest examples of the *si*-construction with the verb *essere* ‘be’ are also attested, apparently only with prepositional phrases, as in (78)-(79):

- (78) *Si era insino a ora stato in ambiguo quale dovesse essere il*  
 si was[AUX] up to now been in doubt which should be the  
*cammino de’ tedeschi*  
 path of.the Germans

(Guicciardini, *Storia d’Italia*, 17, 16, 1)

‘Up to now people had been in doubt about which path the Germans would have followed’

- (79) *mentre si era su-l maggior furor de-lla battaglia un' ala*  
 while si was on-the bigger rage of-the battle a wing  
*de cavalaria polona secretamente passò a-lle trinciere nemiche*  
 of cavalry Polish secretly passed to-the trenches enemy[ADJ]  
 (Ramusio, *Descrizione della Sarmazia europea, Croniche di Polonia*, 38, 3)  
 ‘while the battle raged most (lit.: while one was on the biggest rage of the battle), a wing of Polish cavalymen secretly slipped into the enemy’s trenches’

The earliest attestations of the *si*-construction with *essere* + an adjective or a noun in our corpus date to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In example (80), drawn from Vittorio Alfieri’s autobiography (1790-1803), the adjective displays plural agreement (and the construction has an inclusive meaning). The singular agreement, on the other hand, continues to be attested after the emergence of the plural agreement pattern, as example (81) shows. In this period, the coexistence of singular vs. plural agreement also characterizes the *si*-construction when it occurs with unaccusative intransitive verbs (as shown by the contrast between (82) and (83)):

- (80) *si era certi di non poter più partire*  
 si was sure:M.PL of NEG can:INF longer leave  
 (V. Alfieri, *Vita*, 4, 22; 1790-1803)

‘we were sure we couldn’t leave any longer’

- (81) *Ma, se vi vuole del coraggio per dar-si la morte,*  
 but if there wants some courage for give:INF-REFL the death  
*non se ne richiede uno minore per non dar-se-la, quando*  
 NEG si of.it requires one lesser for NEG give:INF-si-it when  
*si è certo di aver-la da altri*  
 si is sure of have:INF-it from others  
 (V. Cuoco, *Saggio storico sulla rivoluzione napoletana del 1799*, 50; 1801)

‘but, if some courage is necessary in order to commit suicide, no less courage is required in order not to kill oneself when one is sure to be killed by someone else’

- (82) *Il mio curatore, co-l quale non si era mai entrato*  
 the my administrator with-whom NEG si was[AUX] never entered:M.SG  
*in conti [...] mi scrisse in quell' occasione de-ll' ottenuta*  
 in counts to.me wrote in that occasion of-the obtained  
*permissione*  
 permission  
 (Alfieri, *Vita*, 3, 3)

‘my administrator, with whom I had never discussed counts, wrote to me on that occasion about the permission obtained’

- (83) *e raccontò [...] come si era tornati senza aver*  
 and told:3SG how si was[AUX] come.back:PPT.M.PL without have:INF  
*fatto nulla, ma senza aver lasciato traccia*  
 done nothing but without have:INF left trace  
 (Manzoni, *Fermo e Lucia*, 2, 7; 1827)

‘and he told how we had come back without doing anything and without leaving traces’

Finally, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the earliest examples of the *si*-construction with the periphrastic passive are attested:

- (84) *Quando si tratta d' uomini che camminano in cadenza e*  
 when si treats of men who walk:3PL in rhythm and  
*gestiscono invece di parlare, si è portati in un altro mondo*  
 gesture:3PL instead of talk:INF si is[AUX] brought:M.PL in another world  
 (*Il Conciliatore*, n.28 [*Sulla poesia romantica*]; 1818-1819)

‘when we have to do with men who walk rhythmically and gesture instead of talking, we are brought to another world’

#### 4.2. The development of impersonal *si*-constructions with transitive verbs

As discussed above, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century optionality of agreement with patient NPs in the *si*-construction was possible with a limited number of patients, including quantified and non-referential patients, and nominals in light verb constructions. The extension to other kinds of patients is quite precocious: starting from the very beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, lack of agreement is attested also with definite patients (both uniquely identifiable referents as in (86) and patients that have been mentioned before, as in (85) and (87)):

- (85) *Ne la terza parte si pone l' armi le quali il Signore prese, e*  
 in the third part *si* posits the arms which the God took and  
*co le quali egli s' armò e combatté e vinse*  
 with which he REFL armed and fought and won  
 (Giordano da Pisa, *Quaresimale fiorentino*, p. 41; 1306)  
 'in the third part one posits the arms that our Lord took, of which he armed Himself and with which he fought and won'
- (86) *Sopra la detta porta si è lavorato, d' opera mosaica, santa*  
 over the said door *si* is[AUX] worked:M.SG of work mosaic holy  
*Maria co-l suo Figliuolo in braccio*  
 Mary with-the her Son in arm  
 (Niccolò da Poggibonsi, *Libro d'oltramare*, Cap. 211; 1345)  
 'over the aforementioned door someone represented the Virgin Mary with her Son in her arms in a mosaic work'
- (87) *Ne-lla detta chiesa si è figurato per ordine tutta questa*  
 in-the said church *si* is[AUX] represented:M.SG through order all:F.SG this:F.SG  
*storia di Moisè*  
 story:F.SG of Moyses  
 (Niccolò da Poggibonsi, *Libro d'oltramare*, p. B153)  
 'in the aforementioned church someone represented this entire story of Moyses in order'

The earliest examples of the impersonal construction with 3<sup>rd</sup> person accusative clitics are found in the 18<sup>th</sup> century:

- (88) *se cambiati non vi avesse egli i nomi de-gli attori [...]*  
 if changed:M.PL NEG there have:SBJV.3SG he the names of-the actors  
*la si potrebbe piuttosto denominare una semplice traduzione*  
 her *si* could rather call:INF a simple translation  
*de' Menecmi di Plauto*  
 of.the M. of P.  
 (Goldoni, *I due gemelli veneziani*, Prefazione; 1750)  
 'and if he hadn't changed the names of the actors, one could call it a simple translation of Plautus' Menaechmi'

#### 4.3. The emergence and establishing of the inclusive *si*-construction

As discussed before, *si*-constructions with an inclusive meaning are structurally indistinguishable from passive and impersonal *si*-constructions. An inclusive flavour of the *si*-construction, however, can be safely reconstructed on the basis of the context already in some passages from texts of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century, as the following examples show. In (89), (90) and (91), for instance, the *si*-construction alternates, respectively, with a 1<sup>st</sup> person plural pronoun (*noi*), with a 1<sup>st</sup> person plural possessive (*nostra eletta*), and with a first person plural verb form (*abbiamo ricevuto*), whereas in (92) and (93) it is clear from the context (and from previous letters belonging to the same correspondence) that the author is talking about a group of people including herself:

- (89) *quest' ultima preghiera, signor caro, già non si fa per noi,*  
 this last prayer Lord dear now NEG *si* makes for us

*ché non bisogna, ma per color che dietro a noi restaro*  
 because NEG needs but for those who behind us remained  
 (Dante, *Purgatorio*, 11, 23)

‘this last request we now address to You, dear Lord, not for ourselves – who have no need – but for the ones whom we have left behind’

- (90) “*Se qui per dimandar gente s’ aspetta*”, *ragionava il*  
 if here for inquire:INF people *si* waits argued the  
*poeta, “io temo forse che troppo avrà d’ indugio nostra*  
 poet I fear perhaps that too.much will.have of delay our  
*eletta*”  
 choice

(Dante, *Purgatorio*, 13, 10)

“‘If we wait here in order to inquire of those who pass,” the poet said, “I fear our choice of path may be delayed too long.”

- (91) *e se meno si ne fosse ricevuto di fior. 3200 d’*  
 and if less *si* of.it be:SBJV.3SG received than *fiorini 3200 of*  
*oro per anno sì gli ci dè fare aconpiere d’*  
 gold per year EMPH to.him to.us must:3SG make:INF fulfil:INF from  
*altre sue rendite [...] sicchè in capo de l’ anno [...] abbiamo ricevuto*  
 other his incomes so.that in the end of the year [...] we.have received  
*interamente la sopradetta pagha di fior. 3200 d’ oro*  
 entirely the aforementioned pay of *fiorini 3200 of gold*

(*Libro delle rede di messer Niccolò Gianfigliuzzi*, p. 96; 1325)

‘and should we receive less than 3200 golden *fiorini*, he should compel him to satisfy us (by drawing money) from other incomes of his, so that at the end of the year we have received the aforementioned pay of 3200 golden *fiorini* entirely’

- (92) *Questo di si comperorno gli occhiali, e ti si mandano*  
 this day *si* bought:3PL the glasses and to.you *si* send:3PL  
*sotto lettere di Niccolò Strozzi*  
 under letters of N. S.

(A. Macinghi Strozzi, *Lettere*, 22 marzo 1463)

‘today we bought the glasses (for you), and we are now sending them to you along with letters by Niccolò Strozzi’

- (93) *De-lla dota ti si scrisse, ch’ ella non si poteva avere, se*  
 of-the dowry to.you *si* wrote that it NEG *si* could have:INF  
*non si pagava el Comune*  
 NEG *si* paid:3.SG the municipality

(A. Macinghi Strozzi, *Lettere*, 31 agosto 1465)

‘as far as the dowry is concerned, we wrote to you that we couldn’t have it if we hadn’t pay the municipality’

It could be remarked that in these examples specific time reference is not a necessary condition for an inclusive interpretation to hold: while there is specific time reference in (89) and (92)-(93), in examples (90) and (91) the *si*-construction is under the scope of the conditional operator *se* (‘if’) and thus has generic time reference. The relatively early occurrence of inclusive *si*-constructions is another piece of evidence in favour of the hypothesis discussed in this paper that the reinterpretation of *si* as a marker of a generic human agent occurs at earlier times than assumed by Salvi (2008), as the impersonal/generic reading is the necessary precondition for an inclusive interpretation: both interpretations usually refer to groups of people, which vary in size and composition according to the context, and this semantic overlap is notoriously the reason why languages often use impersonal forms for 1<sup>st</sup> person plural reference.

Salvi (2008: 140) also tentatively proposes that the use of the construction to express 1<sup>st</sup> person plural might have influenced the plural agreement pattern of adjectives and past participles discussed above and exemplified in (80) and (83). In our view, the availability of the inclusive reading is not directly responsible for the emergence of the plural agreement pattern in the 18<sup>th</sup> century: although plural adjectives and participles are a necessary condition for the inclusive interpretation by this time, the earliest examples of this pattern more often than not have a generic rather than an inclusive reading:

- (94) *Confrontando una pittura ed un ballo, questo ha lo svantaggio di*  
 comparing a painting and a dance this has the disadvantage of  
*non offrire forme ideali, giacché si è costretti a*  
 NEG offer:INF forms ideal because si is forced:M.PL to  
*servirsi di ballerini tali quali sono*  
 make.use of dancers just like they.are

(*Il Conciliatore*, n. 28; 1818-1819)

‘comparing a painting and a dance, the latter has the disadvantage that it does not offer ideal forms, because one is forced to make use of dancers just like they are’

- (95) *quanto più si è lontani da-llo stato naturale, cioè*  
 the more si is far:M.PL from-the state natural that.is  
*quanto più si sa*  
 the more si knows

(Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, 22 dicembre 1820)

‘the farther one is from the natural state, i.e. the more one knows’

- (96) *Ma ne-lla cas-etta di Lucia da-l momento che il*  
 but in-the small.house of L. from-the moment that the  
*padre ne era partito non si era stati in*  
 father from.it was[AUX] left NEG si was[AUX] been:M.PL in  
*ozio*  
 idleness

(Manzoni, *Fermo e Lucia*, 1, 6; 1827)

‘but in Lucia’s house from the time her father passed away people had not stayed idle’

We argue on the contrary that the plural agreement pattern in the examples above is, so to speak, the “natural” result of the reanalysis of *si* as a generic human agent: generic human agents often coincide with loosely defined groups of people, and plural agreement functions as a marker of such a plurality.

## 5. Conclusions

The long-term development sketched in this paper can be better described as an incomplete process of impersonalization of an originally passive construction. On the syntactic side, this process has led to the coexistence of two *si*-constructions in present-day Italian, a passive and an impersonal one. On the semantic side, the process has gone somewhat further: in both the passive and the impersonal *si*-constructions the agent is typically generic in present day Italian, and both constructions tend to be associated with a cluster of morphosyntactic features that favour a generic interpretation, such as, e.g., the present tense or the imperfective aspect. The following table summarizes the main stages of the passive-to-impersonal development described in the previous sections.

13 <sup>th</sup> century	14 <sup>th</sup> century	16 <sup>th</sup> century	18 <sup>th</sup> -19 <sup>th</sup> centuries	present-day Italian
<p><b>Impersonal <i>si</i>-construction:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• possible with unergative and unaccusative intransitive verbs (present tense, or other tenses/moods inducing generic-time reference)</li> <li>• possible with a small subset of non-referential patients, generally indefinite and appearing postverbally</li> </ul> <p><b>Passive <i>si</i>-construction:</b> impossible with compound tenses</p>	<p><b>Impersonal <i>si</i>-construction:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• possible with unergative and unaccusative intransitive verbs (past tense and other tenses/moods inducing specific-time reference)</li> <li>• <b>possible with compound tenses of unergative intransitives</b></li> <li>• possible with definite and referential patients</li> </ul> <p><b>Passive <i>si</i>-construction:</b> possible with compound tenses</p> <p>Earliest attestations of the <b>inclusive <i>si</i>-construction</b> (with both specific and generic time reference)</p>	<p><b>Impersonal <i>si</i>-construction:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>possible with compound tenses of unaccusative intransitives</b> (the past participle shows singular agreement)</li> <li>• possible with <i>essere</i> + PP</li> </ul>	<p><b>Impersonal <i>si</i>-construction:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• possible with <i>essere</i> + AP/NP (the N or Adj, as well as the past participle in unaccusative verbs, may show plural or singular agreement)</li> <li>• possible with 3<sup>rd</sup> person accusative clitics (18<sup>th</sup> century)</li> <li>• possible with reflexive verbs and with the periphrastic passive (19<sup>th</sup> century)</li> </ul> <p>Specific time reference with unaccusative verbs does not necessarily trigger an inclusive interpretation (see example (96))</p>	<p><b>Impersonal <i>si</i>-construction:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• plural agreement of the past participle (with unaccusative verbs) and the N or Adj (with <i>essere</i> + AP/NP) is obligatory</li> </ul> <p>The inclusive interpretation has entrenched itself and is particularly favoured (if not obligatory) with unaccusative verbs with specific time reference (though not being excluded in other cases)</p>

Table 1. *The main stages of the passive-to-impersonal construction reanalysis of the si-construction in Italian.*

As shown in Section 2, the prerequisites for such a reinterpretation were already available in the earliest written documents analyzed in this paper. This does not amount to saying, however, that these prerequisites represent a sufficient condition, as other factors might equally well have played a role in this development. One of these factors is possibly the existence of another construction, the periphrastic passive, which is functionally comparable to the *si*-construction, in that both can be considered as agent-defocusing strategies. In the earliest stage discussed in this paper, the area of overlap between the two constructions was larger than in Modern Italian: example (10) exemplifies the functional similarity between the periphrastic passive and the *si*-construction. The periphrastic construction was also possible with both unergative and unaccusative intransitives, a possibility definitely ruled out in present-day Italian:

- (97) *Veramente per diversi filosofi de-lla differenza de-lle nostre*  
truly by different philosophers of-the difference of-the our  
*anime fue diversamente ragionato*  
souls was variously reasoned
- (Dante, *Convivio*, 4, 21, 2; 1304-1307)

- ‘Different philosophers, it is true, have held different opinions regarding the difference of our souls’
- (98) *quella provincia nel-la quale prima fu andato da’ Romani*  
that province in-which first was gone by Romans
- (*Deca terza di Tito Livio*, 8, 12; early 14<sup>th</sup> century)
- ‘that province where the Romans went first’

In present-day Italian the periphrastic construction has usually a specific reading, which is possibly connected with the resultative meaning of the past participle: the past participle contains an intrinsic feature of completion which renders it unsuitable for representing typically imperfective/atemporal states of affairs such as those connected to generic human agency. Throughout the history of Italian, the periphrastic passive has lost its “impersonal” features (ceasing to be employed with both unergative and unaccusative intransitive verbs quite early) and has reinforced its resulta-

tive features, resulting in a fully promotional passive construction, typically used when the patient is a discourse-salient entity. In other words, two concurrent and largely overlapping constructions belonging to the same functional space ended up being preferentially associated with the expression of two different situation types, as a result of the emergence of a formal/functional contrast between the two. We may speculate whether this functional/formal contrast was already present at an embryonic stage in 13<sup>th</sup> century Italian (as the data discussed in Section 2 seem to show; see also Sansò, to appear), but what is crucial for the present purposes is that the process sketched in this paper is a clear instance of polarization, to be intended as the functionalization of an opposition between concurrent and alternative grammatical strategies within the same functional domain.

The diachronic process described in this paper is also language-specific and idiosyncratic, and in other languages different processes of passive-to-impersonal development with different outcomes may have taken place. The present Italian case study, however, may be instructive as to the initial stage of the process, namely the extension of a passive construction to intransitive verbs: although passive and impersonal constructions are functionally similar as agent-defocusing strategies, the different type of agent defocusing that characterizes the two construction types requires us to posit a covert reanalysis of the passive marker as a marker of generic human agency as a necessary precondition motivating its extension to intransitive verbs.

## Abbreviations

1, 2, 3 = 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> person; ACC = accusative; ADJ = adjective; AUX = auxiliary; DAT = dative; EMPH = emphatic particle; EXPL = expletive; F = feminine; FUT = future; IMP = imperative; IMPF = imperfective; INF = infinitive; M = masculine; NEG = negation; NEUT = neuter; NOM = nominative; PL = plural; PST = past; PPT = past participle; RECIP = reciprocal; REFL = reflexive; SBJV = subjunctive; SG = singular.

## Appendix

### Corpora

#### 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century Italian

**OVI (Opera del Vocabolario Italiano) Corpus** – The OVI Corpus is a large-scale corpus of early Italian containing 1849 vernacular texts (21.2 million words, 479,000 unique forms), the majority of which are dated prior to 1375, the year of Giovanni Boccaccio's death. This corpus aims to collect both literary and non-literary texts in a single repository: besides early masters of Italian literature like Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, lesser-known and obscure texts by poets, merchants, and medieval chroniclers, as well as non-literary texts such as private letters, *Statuti* (statutes) and *Registri* (official records) are well-represented in the database

#### 1400-1900 Italian

**LIZ 4.0 (Letteratura Italiana Zanichelli) Corpus** – The LIZ 4.0 Corpus contains approximately 1000 works of Italian literature. The works included in this resource span a chronological period of time beginning with Francesco d'Assisi's *Laudes Creaturarum* (12<sup>th</sup> century) and ending with Italo Svevo's *Coscienza di Zeno* (20<sup>th</sup> century).

#### Present-day Italian

**LIP (Lessico dell'Italiano Parlato) Corpus** – The LIP Corpus is a 500000 word corpus of contemporary spoken Italian, collected by a team of linguists coordinated by Tullio de Mauro. The corpus includes different types of everyday conversation, ranging from spontaneous face-to-face interactions to unidirectional speech such as broadcast news speech. The data have been collected in four major Italian cities (Rome, Milan, Naples, and Florence).

**La Repubblica Corpus** – The “La Repubblica” corpus is a very large corpus of Italian newspaper text (approximately 380M tokens) developed at the University of Bologna (Scuola Superiore di Lingue Moderne per Interpreti e Traduttori, Forlì) and available online at the following address: <http://dev.sslmit.unibo.it/corpora/corpora.php>T. The corpus is tokenized, pos-tagged, lemmatized, and categorized in terms of genre and topic



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