From passive to impersonal

A case study from Italian and its implications*

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In contemporary Italian, there is a passive \textit{si}-construction in which the patient governs agreement on the verb and an impersonal \textit{si}-construction in which either the verb is intransitive or the patient is not promoted to subject. The coexistence of the two constructions is the result of a long-lasting process by which an impersonal has developed out of (and has progressively differentiated itself from) an original passive. In this paper we focus on the initial stage of this process, namely the extension of the \textit{si}-construction to intransitive verbs, and the emergence of the non-agreeing pattern with transitive verbs. Based on a large corpus of literary and non-literary documents, we argue that both these phenomena require a reanalysis of \textit{si} as a marker of generic human agency as a necessary precondition, and that such a reanalysis starts with patients that are unlikely candidates for subjecthood.

Keywords: reanalysis; impersonal passive; non-promotional passive; impersonalization of passive constructions

1. Introduction: From passive to impersonal

Impersonal constructions derived from passive constructions are known from a number of languages (Polish, Frązyngier 1982: 272–275, Siewierska 1988; Icelandic, Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002; German, Abraham & Leiss 2006; Vogel 2006). The following examples from Italian, German, and Polish all exemplify constructions displaying

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typically passive morphology (either a past participle – as in (2) and (3)\(^1\) – or a reflexive marker, as in (1)), but in which the patient remains unpromoted to subject:

(1) Italian

\[\text{In Italia si mangia spaghetti}\]

\[\text{in Italy si[REFL] eats spaghetti[PL]}\]

‘In Italy, people eat spaghetti (it is usual to eat spaghetti)’

(2) German

\[\text{Heute abend wird richtig Zähne geputzt}\]

\[\text{tonight becomes properly teeth brushed}\]

‘Tonight you should brush your teeth properly’

(3) Polish

\[\text{Dano mu ksiazke}\]

\[\text{given:NEUT he:DAT book:ACC.SG.F}\]

‘He was given a book’

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

(4) Italian

\[\text{Qui si lavora troppo!}\]

\[\text{here si[REFL] works too much}\]

‘Here people work too much!’

(5) German

\[\text{Es wurde getanzt}\]

\[\text{it became danced}\]

‘There was dancing (going on)’

(6) Polish

\[\text{Tutaj tańczono}\]

\[\text{here danced}\]

‘There was dancing here.’/‘People danced here.’

Both the constructions in (1)–(3) and the constructions in (4)–(6) are generally 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.),

\(^1\) -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.
however, these constructions are all instances of impersonal constructions to full right. Following Siewierska (2008:116), indeed, an impersonal construction can be defined 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).2

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) represent 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.3

2. 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 adopting 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 emergence of an impersonal construction out of an originally passive construction. Under a different, functionally-driven view, both passive and impersonal constructions 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 (see the discussion in Sansò 2006:265–267).

3. This diachronic sequentiality (impersonal passives of intransitive verbs precede impersonal passives of transitive verbs) is also mirrored by the cross-linguistic synchronic
This process may result in a complete “impersonalization” of the formerly passive construction, which no longer exists as such, or it may be the case that the passive construction continues to exist along with its impersonal “offspring”.

Semantically, this process may involve a change in the meaning of the passive marker/construction: whereas in promotional passives the passive marker usually 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 the so-called impersonal passives 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). Siewierska (1988: 266), on the other hand, invokes such a path to account for the distribution of these two construction types: as Kazenin (2001: 905) states, “(1) no language has impersonal passive of transitives without having (impersonal) passives of intransitives; (2) no language has (impersonal) passive of intransitives without having some type of passive of transitives”.

4. 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”.

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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; Eythórsson 2008) consider the “new impersonal construction” of present-day Icelandic as representing a case of reanalysis of the canonical 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.6

(8) Icelandic  
(Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002:98)  
a. *Stúlkan var lami í klessu*  
the:girl:NOM was hit:ESG.NOM in a.mess  
“The girl was badly beaten”  
b. *Þaad var lamið stúlkuna í klessu*  
it[EXPL] was hit:NEUT.SG the:girl:ESG.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

5. This construction is rapidly spreading in the language of young Icelanders, and its acceptance rate is significantly lower in Inner Reykjavik 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, and more generally indefinite and inanimate nouns as patient arguments, while the Icelandic construction also allows animate and definite nouns.

6. The expletive subject *Þaad* 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:

(i) *Var [*Þaad*] bedið big að vaska upp?*  
was [it] asked you:ACC to wash up  
‘Did they ask you to do the dishes?’

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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. Once reanalyzed, the construction spread first to intransitive verbs and then to transitive verbs via inherently reflexive predicates.7

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 semantic 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.

(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.)

7. Vogel (2006:96ff.) puts forward a model for the development “passive > impersonal” in which the emergence of impersonal passives of intransitives is kept apart from the emergence of impersonal passives of transitives. In her view, the emergence of impersonal passives of intransitive verbs (es wurde getanzt) presupposes the existence of passives in which there is a generalized patient (“generalisiertes Subjekt”, as in German gerade wird gegessen, ‘people are eating right now/there is eating going on’, in which a transitive predicate is used intransitively and the patient remains unspecified). The emergence of impersonal passives of transitive verbs presupposes the existence of passive constructions with “rhematic” subjects, which are typically indefinite (es wurden viele Grundsteine gelegt). Both passive constructions with subjects low in topicality and passive constructions with a generalized patient focus on the event rather than on the subject (in Vogel’s terms, they are “event-zentral” rather than “entity-zentral”). As will be discussed later, however, the two structures from which impersonal passives are supposed to arise (passives with subjects low in topicality and passives with generalized patients) share a significant property, i.e. they have patient arguments that represent unlikely candidates for subjecthood, so that it is not strictly necessary to posit two different paths. Moreover, if the two paths of development were independent from one another, there would be no way to account for the cross-linguistic distribution of impersonal passives: given the fact that impersonal passives of transitive verbs always imply the existence of impersonal passives of intransitive verbs across languages, it is more economic to consider the two developments as subsequent steps of a single process.
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 the extension of passive constructions to intransitive verbs in terms of “spontaneous demotion”, i.e. as an instance of defocusing not caused by the promotion of some other argument 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 different verb types would be the result of a process of accommodation: if there is another participant, the defocusing of the agent is only relative, i.e. it depends on the higher topicality of the patient; on the contrary, 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 generic human agency. 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 generic human agency even in the presence of a patient.

In what follows, we will describe the initial stage of the history of the *si*-construction in Old Italian (§2): it will be shown that the prerequisites for the reinterpretation of the passive marker *si* as a marker of generic human agency were already present in the earliest stage of the Italian language. In §3, the Old 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; besides them, there is an “inclusive” *si*-construction, structurally indistinguishable from passive and impersonal *si*-constructions, which roughly corresponds to a 1st person plural form of the verb. §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 contemporary Italian. Finally, in §5, the main stages of
this process will be briefly recapitulated, and the general implications of the present analysis will be discussed.

2. The *si*-construction in Old Italian

In this section, the syntactic and semantic features of the *si*-construction in Old Italian will be discussed in detail, with a view to identifying the characteristics that have favoured its reinterpretation as an impersonal construction. Old Italian is to be intended here as a rather arbitrary term covering literary and non-literary Tuscan documents written in the 13th century (more details on the corpus used in the present study are provided in the Appendix).\(^8\)

The construction in question involves the use of the 3rd person reflexive marker *si*, which had grammaticalized into an anticausative and a passive marker already in Late Latin (Cennamo 1998). In more than 95% of the cases in our Old Italian corpus, the *si*-construction behaves syntactically as a passive with respect to agreement.\(^9\) 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 Old Italian, the so-called periphrastic passive (*fu coronato ò 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

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\(^8\) 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 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 (2000:94, 98) for a survey of passive and impersonal *si*-constructions in these two vernaculars.

\(^9\) This percentage has been obtained by counting only *si*-constructions with plural patient arguments. In the case of *si*-constructions with singular patient arguments, there is no way to establish whether the singular form of the verb agrees with the patient or is simply the default form (see below). This fact advises us to remove *si*-constructions with singular patient arguments from the statistical count at issue in order to obtain a more realistic picture. The reader should be aware, however, that *si*-constructions such as those exemplified in (10)–(11) are undoubtedly genuine instances of passive constructions, given that the singular patient appears before the verb in these cases (a behavioural property of subjects in Italian).
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 dexto Barbarossa imperò anni xxxvij, et corono-si ne-lle chiesa di Sam Pietro ad Roma ... Elli fu coronato da papa Adriano il di medesimo ch'elli gionse ad Roma ... he was crowned by pope A. the day same that he arrived to Rome

(Cronica Fiorentina, 102, 21, 1; 13th 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 filguolo, il qual era allora co llui, si llo but the his son who was then with him enbalsimò e reco-llo infino a Tiro, e qui si soppellio enbalmed and took-him as.far.as T. and here si buried

(Cronica Fiorentina, p. 106; 13th century)

'But his son, who was with him at that time, enbalmed him 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 2011), as in (12). This fact shows that the si-construction in Old Italian directly concurred with the periphrastic passive in many, if not all, of its contexts of usage:

(12) Anche fue ordinato la seccaia 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 13th century, the patient NP maintains a **behavioural property typical of objects**, i.e. it appears postverbally (*si* + *V* + *N*, as in examples (13)–(15)). From a semantic point of 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* *ogni cosa* e *a pochi è più cara* *la fede* che *la pecunia*

In Rome *si* sells each thing and to few:*pl* is more valued the *fede* *che* *la* *pecunia*

(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 camarlenco* *si debba chiamare* comunemente *per tutta l’ Arte, là unque* *si trova* *lo milliore*

and the chamberlain *si* should call communally by all *l’ Arte, là unque* *si trova* *lo milliore*

(Statuto dell’Università ed Arte della lana di Siena, 1, 9; 1298)

'And the chamberlain should be elected communally by the whole Art (a professional association, *AGR-AS*), wherever 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 3rd person singular 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.

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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 examples (13) and (14) 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 postverbal patients that are particularly low on the referentiality/topicality scale, as these are unlikely candidates for 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.10 In contexts such as those exemplified by (13)–(15) the reanalysis of the construction is covert, i.e. there are no formal clues that *si* has been reinterpreted as a marker of generic human agency. During a narrow time span in the second half of the 13th century, however, we find the first formal symptoms of such a reanalysis. These include both the extension of the construction to intransitive verbs (and intransitively-used predicates) and the emergence of a new pattern with transitive verbs 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.

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10. An anonymous referee points out to us the possibility that the reflexive pronoun *se* had already become an indefinite pronoun in Late Latin, and quotes examples such as (ii) and (iii) (from Cennamo 1993:58):

(ii)  *attendite se ipsis*  
pay.attention:IMP.2PL  se  self:DAT.PL  
‘pay attention to yourselves’  

(ITA, act. 20, 28 (cod. e))

(iii)  *speramus beneficia uber-ior-a pos se consequituros*  
hope:1PL  benefits abundant-COMP-NEUT.PL  after  se  obtain:PTCP.FUT  
‘we hope to obtain more benefits’  

(CIL IX 1681; Benevento)

In these examples, however, *se* cannot be considered as an indefinite pronoun under any definition of this term: it is simply a generalized reflexive pronoun, used for all persons, and there are no examples of *se* appearing in subject position as an equivalent of ‘(some/any)one’.
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.

(16) se ne-l paese di Francia si guadagniase melgio
if in-the country of France si earn:SBjv:IMPF.3sg better
che no vi si puo guadagniare oggi
than NEG there si can earn: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, si ne fa
when to.him make:FUT.2sg the payment EMPH of.it make:IMP
fare la sc[r]ipta ne libro di Signori de’ merchantanti,
make:INF the registration in book of Lords of merchants
chome si chustuma di fare
as si 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 constituzione 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 f ermi argumenti 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,
strongest with which NEG si can:BJV:3SG contrast easily
ne-lla fine
in-the end
(Brunetto Latini, Rettorica, p. 75; 1261)
‘the strong arguments (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)
‘all the pleasures are gates of the hell, through which one goes to death’

(21) Et per la [necessità] si viene a la povertà
and through the necessity si comes to the poverty
(Andrea da Grosseto, 4, 9)
‘and through necessity one comes to poverty’

(22) Sappi che cinque sono le porti per le quali s' entra,
know:IMP that five are the gates through which si enters
anzi che andare si possa
before go:INF si can:BJV:3SG to paradise
(Bono Giamboni, Libro de’ Vizi e delle Virtudi, 69,2; 1292)
‘Be aware that there are five gates through which one can enter,
before one can go to heaven’

(23) 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
which NEG si can go further through intention
di ritornare
of come.back:INF
(Dante, Vita Nuova, 14, 1; 1292–1293)
‘I have just set foot on that boundary of life beyond which
no one can go, hoping to return’

(24) Legge-si de-l a bontà de-l re giovane...
read-si about-the kindness of-the king young
(Il Novellino, 18, 3; end of 13th century)
‘One can read about the kindness of the young king’
E ne-l ricévare 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’

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 2010); 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 goes back to the Late Latin dative reflexive pronoun sibi, used to mark change-of-state verbs and spontaneous processes (Cennamo 1999:122). 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.

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 in the 13th century the restriction to non-compound tenses characterizes si-constructions with unergative intransitive and transitive verbs as well (see §4.1). 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.11

11. 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 §4.3: an impersonal/generic reading of the construction is indeed necessary for an inclusive interpretation to emerge.
2.2 The emergence of the impersonal *si*-construction with transitive verbs

During the same temporal interval, we also see the emergence of another impersonal trait, i.e. the optionality of agreement with patient NPs. This typically happens in four cases:

- when the patient is a **quantified noun** (example (26)–(28))
- when the patient is a **determinerless plural noun** (example (29)–(30))
- when the patient is a **coordinated noun phrase** (*N and N*); (example (31) and (32))
- with **nominials in light-verb constructions**, formed by a semantically bleached verb (mainly *fare*, 'do', 'make') and a nominal contributing a large part of the predicative content (example (33))

(26) *E ancho vi si rameta tutti 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’ Sasedoni da Siena a Goro e Goneruccio de’ Sasedoni, in Parigi, 1294)

‘and all my money that I must have back from there is 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 14th 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* in one thing *si* finds four causes that.is the cause material

*e la cagione formale e la efficiente e la finale* and 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’
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 isperanza e disperanza, che vanno innanzi a
and after comes hope and despair that go before
paura e ardimento
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
from-the bad and guilty will from which is-born the seven
vizi capitali
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[tà]te
for this war was-born great battles and mortality
tra Guascongnesi e Normandi e Francesschi
among Gasconian.pl and Norman.pl and French.pl

(Cronica Fiorentina, p. 140)
‘because of this war many great 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 in the si-construction 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 possibility, and examples of postverbal argu-
ments that trigger agreement are easy to find:

(38) la delettanza 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,
from this sin come:3pl thefts simony deceits usury
tradimenti (et) deceptioni
betrayals and deceptions

(Questioni filosofiche, p. 160; 1298)
‘thefts, simony, deceits, usury, betrayals and deceptions derive from this sin’

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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)):

(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 a generic human agency interpretation, the si-construction started developing impersonal features already in Old Italian. As will be described in the next section, this process did not lead to the transformation of a passive construction into an impersonal one (as 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 progressive differentiation and divergence between an impersonal and a passive construction will be sketched in §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 §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* + 3rd person verb is interpreted as equivalent to a 1st 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).12

3.1 The passive *si*-construction

In the passive *si*-construction the verb agrees with the patient, in gender and number 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. example (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-the 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*

the security of everybody can:FUT.3SG be obtained if *si*

accetteranno efficaci sistemi *di* verifica.

accept:FUT.3PL effective systems of checking

‘the general security can be obtained only if effective checking systems will be accepted’

(44) *Ne-lla* zona *si* sono *fatte, a-ll’ inizio de-gli anni*

in-the area *si* are[AUX.3PL] made at-the beginning of-the years

‘70, battaglie famose per *la* tutela de-*l’* ambiente

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* bruciavano le streghe e gli eretici*

burned as *si* burnt:3PL the witches and the heretics

‘burnt just as witches and heretics used to be burnt’

12. Unless otherwise specified, the examples in the following subsections are taken from “La Repubblica” corpus.
The impersonal *si*-construction in present-day Italian appears with every kind of intransitive (or intransitively-used) predicates, including reflexives (example (47)), reciprocals (example (48)), the copula (example (49), and the periphrastic passive (example (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 your face when you look at yourself in the mirror sometimes you must content yourself’

(48) *In famiglia e tra amici ci si consola de-lle privazioni* in family and among friends *recip* *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”* appears cruel  

‘living as a commuter, particularly 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 presi in ostaggio* then on-the third day *si* explains how behave:*INF* when *si* *comes*[aux] taken:*m.pl* in hostage  

‘then, on the third day, they explain how to 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 telefo-nato, *si* *is*[aux] phoned, ‘people called’), in unaccusative verbs the past participle has the plural ending (*si è arrivati, *si* *is*[aux] arrived:*m.pl*, ‘one/we arrived’).
The impersonal *si*-construction is also possible with transitive verbs. Unlike Old 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
difficult I.hope there will.be a participation also
da parte de-i professores
by.the professors

'L 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 si is aux raised.M.SG this.F.SG question.F.SG of-the fiscalization
de-gli oneri sociali of-the burdens social

'This question of the fiscalization of social burdens *has been raised*'

(53) *io volevo fare delle liste tanto per avere un’ idea*
    I wanted make:INF some lists just in order to have:INF an idea
*su come come si svolgerà i lavori*
on how how *si* carry_out.fut.3sg the.pl works

'I wanted to make some lists, just to figure out how the activities
will be carried out'\(^{13}\)

With transitive predicates, the impersonal *si*-construction is the only option available when the patient is pronominal:\(^{14}\)

\(^{13}\) The context appears to exclude that the *si*-constructions in examples (51)–(53) are instances of inclusive *si*-constructions.

\(^{14}\) With third person plural pronouns a further possibility is mentioned in the literature, namely a construction in which the verb agrees with the patient, although the pronoun itself remains in the accusative form (Lepschy 1989:112):

(iv) *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 passive and the impersonal *si*-constructions and is quite rare in the corpora we made use of.
(54) un po' come si fa con le “Sonate” quando lei 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 (see, for instance, example (68)). At the same time, the impersonal construction appears to be favoured with a special class of bounded predicates involving the phasal verbs cominciare/iniziare a, ‘start’ and finire di, ‘finish’. 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 cominciare/iniziare; 26,66% with finire in the two corpora of spoken and written present-day Italian, see the Appendix) than in other syntactic configurations (si + verb + NP; si + modal auxiliary + verb + NP). This fact alone shows that the aspectual properties of the predicate are not the only factor at play.15

15. An alternative analysis should be mentioned with regard to what constitutes the subject of phasal and modal verbs. If we take a couple of sentences such as (iv) and (v), we might say that there is agreement in (iv) because in this case the lexical verb (fare) is considered to be part of the predicate, whereas it is felt as a phrasal subject together with its object (fare paragoni) in (v) (therefore triggering singular agreement):

(iv) [si possono fare] [paragoni] si can:3PL make:INF comparisons ‘comparisons can be made’

(v) [si può] [fare paragoni] si can:3SG make:INF comparisons ‘comparisons can be made’
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

That there are two alternative constituency relations at play is testified by the impossibility of (vi–c) and (vi–e) below:

(vi) a. *si può mangiare le caramelle adesso?
   yes si can:3SG eat:INF the candies now
   ‘can we eat candies now?’/‘is it possible to eat candies now?’

b. si, si può
   yes si can:3SG
   ‘yes, you can’/‘yes, it is’

c. *si, si può mangiare
   yes si can:3SG eat:INF
   ‘yes, you can’/‘yes, it is’

d. si possono mangiare le caramelle adesso?
   yes si can:3PL eat:INF the candies now

e. *si, si possono
   yes si can:3PL

f. si, si possono mangiare
   yes si can:3PL eat:INF
genericity of the event, which subsumes other temporal, aspectual and modal properties. 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%):

\[\text{(60) } \non si può far paragoni co-i giocatori di cinquanta anni fa} \]

‘One cannot compare (them) with the (football) players of fifty years ago’

\[\text{(61) } \text{un risvolto tecnologico [...] di fronte a-l quale non si può chiedere gli occhi} \]

‘a technological side-effect in front of which one cannot close one’s eyes’

\[\text{(62) } \text{Ma quand’anche [...] si volesse ridare a-lle facoltà quelle competenze [...] non si potrebbe far-lo lasciando in piedi la struttura dipartimentale} \]

‘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

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16. From these counts two 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 argument (*li si può vedere*, ‘they can be seen/one can see them’).
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 in twenty years in this country NEG si [aux] gone to bottom a uno solo de-i casi scottanti to 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 [aux] been too rash 'Then, according to You, were we too rash?’

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.17 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 examples (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.

17. 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'
Ne ho fatto anche sette contemporaneamente, si lavorava a casa mia, in ogni stanza c’era un gruppo che scriveva un film diverso.

(Context: a movie director talking about his activity)

‘I worked on even seven movies at the same time, we used to work at my place, (and) in every room there was a group working on a different movie’

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”

(Context: Craxi is giving a speech at a political meeting of his party)

‘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 the 1st 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 1st person plural pronoun noi before si. The reader is referred to D’Alessandro (2007: 140–143) for a detailed discussion of the tests for an inclusive reading of the 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. In particular, the passive si-construction appears to be much more infused with generic nuances than it was in Old Italian (recall examples (10) and (11)). As will be argued in §5, this is the result of a long-lasting process in which (i) the impersonal si-construction has progressively emerged and spread, and (ii) the existence of an impersonal construction formed with the same building blocks has fostered to some extent the (semantic, if not syntactic) “impersonalization” of the passive si-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 impersonal *si*-construction in Italian has not replaced the passive *si*-construction and is less widespread than it. From a semantic point of view, however, the reinterpretation of *si* as a marker of generic human agency has gone a step further. Such an interpretation holds in most cases in which there is agreement between the patient and the verb, as in examples (42)–(46).

In this 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 (§ 4.1);
ii. the development of impersonal *si*-constructions with transitive verbs (§ 4.2);
iii. the emergence and establishing of the inclusive *si*-construction (§ 4.3).

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 14th century, and there are no differences between unergative and unaccusative predicates. In (69) and (70) the verbs are unergative, while in (71)–(73) they are unaccusative:18

(69) *cioè sacrifici de’ quali si raccontò di sopra*

that is sacrifices of which it was 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)

(70) *Ma molto si ragionò a quello mangiare de-l’ opere*

but much *si* talked about that dinner of the deeds

di *Merlino*

of M. (Paolino Pieri, *La Storia di Merlino*, 34, 15; between 1310 and 1330)

‘at that dinner people talked a lot about Merlin’s deeds’

18. *Si raccontò* in (69) is not to 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.
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On the contrary, there is an important difference between unergative and unaccusative intransitive verbs with regard to the possibility of appearing with compound tenses in the si-construction.19 While unergative verbs appear quite early with compound tenses (see examples (74)–(75); (74) has an inclusive interpretation), the earliest instances of the compound tenses of the si-construction with unaccusative verbs are as late as the 16th century (see examples (76)–(78)). In all these instances, unlike in present-day Italian, the past participle displays singular agreement:

19. The passive si-construction could be used with compound tenses already at the beginning of the 14th century, given examples such as (ix):

(ix) e ben si sarebbe auta la terra
and well si be:COND.3SG have:PTCP.F.SG the land

(Cronica fiorentina, p. 135; beginning of the 14th century)

‘and that land would have been easily conquered’
From passive to impersonal

(74) *benché di lui e de’ suoi compagni assai *ragionato although of him and of his fellows much discussed

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

(76) *dove quando l’ esercito era stato meno potente non si* where when the army *was[AUX] been less mighty NEG si*

(77) *Stanno-si a–l presente pacifiche e servon* [...] *a-gli* stay:3PL-*si at-the present peaceful and serve:3PL to-the

(78) *immediate si è venuto a conoscere che ’l detto* immediately *si* *is[AUX] come:PPT to know:INF that the mentioned*
In the 16th century, the earliest examples of the *si*-construction with the verb *essere* ‘be’ are also attested, apparently only with prepositional phrases, as in (79)–(80):

(79) *Si era* insino a ora *stato* in ambiguo quale dovessi 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’

(80) *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 cavalrymen 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 18th century. In example (81), 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 (82) 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 (83) and (84)):

(81) *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’

(82) *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* than.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’
Finally, in the early 19th century the earliest examples of the si-construction with the periphrastic passive are attested:

(85) Quando si tratta d’ uomini che camminano in cadenza e gestiscono invece di parlare, si è portati in un altro mondo

‘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 13th 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 14th century, lack of agreement is attested also with definite patients (both
uniquely identifiable referents as in (87) and patients that have been mentioned before, as in (86) and (88)):

(86) Ne la terza parte si pone l’ armi le quali il Segnore prese, e in the third part si posits the arms which the God took and con 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’

(87) Sopra la detta porta si è lavorato, d’ opera musica, over the said door si is[AUX] worked:M.SG of work mosaic santa Maria co-l suo Figliuolo in braccio holy 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’

(88) Ne-lla detta chiesa si è figurato per ordine tutta in-the said church si is[AUX] represented:M.SG through order all:F.SG questa storia di Moisè this:F.SG 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 3rd person accusative clitics are also found in the early 14th century (see Wehr 1995:116):

(89) ke ’l mi debbie sotterare, si che no-l si sappia that he me should bury so that neg-it:obj si know:sbjv:3s

(Volgarizzamento di un frammento della Disciplina Clericalis di Pietro di Alfonso; 1300)

‘He should bury me so that nobody will know it’

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 14th and 15th century, as the following examples show. In (90), (91) and (92), for instance, the *si*-construction alternates, respectively, with a 1st person plural pronoun (*noi*), with a 1st person plural possessive (*nostra eletta*), and with a first person plural verb form (*abbiamo ricevuto*), whereas in (93) and (94) 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:

(90) *quest’ ultima preghiera, segnor 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’

(91) “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 poet I fear perhaps that too.much will.have of delay
nostra eletta” our 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.”

(92) *e se meno si ne fosse ricevuto di fior. 3200 d’ oro per anno si gli ci dèe fare aconpiere d’ gold per year EMPH to.him to.us must:*INF make:*INF fulfil:*INF from altre sue rendite […] sicchè in capo de l’ anno […] abiamo other his incomes so.that in the end of the year we have received entirely the aforementioned pay of fiorini
3200 d’ oro
3200 of gold  *(Libro delle rede di messer Niccholò Gianfigliazzi*, 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’
(93) *Questo di *si* comperornono 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’

(94) *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 if non si pagava el Comune 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 (90) and (93)–(94), in examples (91) and (92) 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 generic human agency 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 1st person plural reference.

Salvi (2008: 140) also tentatively proposes that the use of the construction to express 1st person plural might have influenced the plural agreement pattern of adjectives and past participles discussed above and exemplified in (81) and (84). In our view, the availability of the inclusive reading is not directly responsible for the emergence of the plural agreement pattern in the 18th 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:

(95) *Confrontando una pittura ed un ballo, questo ha lo svantaggio comparing a painting and a dance this has the disadvantage di non offrire forme ideali, giacché *si* è costretti a of *NEG* offer:inf forms ideal because *si* is forced:m.pl to
servirsì 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’

(96) 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’

(97) Ma ne-lla casetta 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
father from.it was[AUX] left NEG si was[AUX] been:M.PL
in 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

On the syntactic side, the passive-to-impersonal development sketched in this paper 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. Table 1 summarizes the main stages of the passive-to-impersonal development described in the previous sections.
Table 1. The main stages of the passive-to-impersonal construction reanalysis of the *si*-construction in Italian

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>13th century</th>
<th>14th century</th>
<th>16th century</th>
<th>18th–19th centuries</th>
<th>present-day Italian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Impersonal <em>si</em>-construction:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Impersonal <em>si</em>-construction:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Impersonal <em>si</em>-construction:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Impersonal <em>si</em>-construction:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Impersonal <em>si</em>-construction:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– possible with unergative and unaccusative intransitive verbs (present tense, or other tenses/moods inducing generic-time reference)</td>
<td>– possible with unergative and unaccusative intransitive verbs (past tense and other tenses/moods inducing specific-time reference)</td>
<td>– possible with compound tenses of unaccusative intransitives (the past participle shows singular agreement)</td>
<td>– possible with compound tenses of unaccusative intransitives (the past participle shows singular agreement)</td>
<td>– possible with compound tenses of unaccusative intransitives (the past participle shows singular agreement)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– possible with a small subset of non-referential patients, generally indefinite and appearing postverbally</td>
<td>– possible with definite and referential patients</td>
<td>– possible with 3rd person accusative clitics</td>
<td>– possible with reflexive verbs and with the periphrastic passive (19th century)</td>
<td>– plural agreement of the past participle (with unaccusative verbs) and the N or Adj (with <em>essere</em> + AP/NP) is obligatory</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Passive *si*-construction:**
impossible with compound tenses

**Earliest attestations of the inclusive *si*-construction** (with both specific and generic time reference)
As shown in §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:

(98) Veramente per diversi filosofi de-lla differenza de-lle nostre anime fue diversamente ragionato

‘Different philosophers, it is true, have held different opinions regarding the difference of our souls’

(99) quella provincia nel-la quale prima fu andato da’ Romani

‘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 resultative 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 13th century Italian (as the data discussed in §2 seem to suggest; see also Sansò 2011), 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 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 | 1st, 2nd, 3rd person | M | masculine |
| ACC | accusative | NEG | negation |
| ADJ | adjective | NEUT | neuter |
| AUX | auxiliary | NOM | nominative |
| COMP | comparative | OBJ | object |
| COND | conditional | PL | plural |
| DAT | dative | PST | past |
| EMPH | emphatic particle | PPT | past participle |
| EXPL | expletive | PTCP | participle |
| F | feminine | RECIP | reciprocal |
| FUT | future | REFL | reflexive |
| IMP | imperative | SBJV | subjunctive |
| IMPF | imperfective | SG | singular |
| INF | infinitive | |

Appendix

Corpora

13th and 14th 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.

1200–1900 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 (12th century) and ending with Italo Svevo’s Coscienza di Zeno (20th 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 texts (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. The corpus is tokenized, pos-tagged, lemmatized, and categorized in terms of genre and topic.

References


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