

## SOME MODELS OF “UNDEFINED-PERSONAL” SENTENCES IN FORMAL LETTERS WRITTEN IN ANCIENT SPANISH

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### Abstract

Formal letters have always formed a significant part of the royal, ecclesiastical and notarial chancellery. Such letters in Medieval Spain played the role not only of the official written messages but also the role of the ancient mass media: the matter is that many royal and Inquisitional orders, decrees, edicts and other documents written in the form of letters were predestined to be read publicly. The formal letter is a document that has certain power and officiality. That is why we can consider it as a reliable and legislative source of knowledge about life in the earliest times. The study of ancient documents allows us to approach the problems of the past. Through the content of formal letters we can get into the different spheres, for example: the lineage of the kings, the daily life of the population, the thinking and mentality of simple men and women. Besides, formal letters conserve a real language demonstrating medieval spelling, lexical, morphological and syntactic structure of the written national language of Medieval Spain. The present paper considers the main characteristic features and structural models of the so called “*undefined-personal sentences*” in formal letters written in the ancient Spanish language or Castilian Romance. The investigative material refers to the period when the normative syntax of formal language began to form within the emerging national language. The author reconstructs, describes and systematizes some models of Spanish sentences with a verb in the third person in Indicative and Subjunctive mood that can be found in the texts of formal letters dated by the XIII<sup>th</sup> - the beginning of the XVI<sup>th</sup> centuries.

**Keywords:** Formal letter, document, formal language, subject, predicate, “undefined-personal” sentences, the third person, the ancient Spanish language, the Castilian language, national language, Medieval Spain.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

According to the nature of the subject of the sentence in Russian linguistic tradition we distinguish personal sentences, “undefined-personal” sentences and impersonal sentences.

The subject in personal sentences is clearly defined. The subject in “undefined-personal” sentences is unknown or indifferent, i.e. the agent can only be meant but not expressed with a special part of the sentence, it can be kept silent purposely, it can be turned into anonymous with the help of special linguistic means (indefinite, negative, relative pronouns, generalized words (in Spanish: *fulano*, *mengano*, *zutano*; in English: *people*, *one*), etc.). In impersonal sentences there is no agent and it cannot be restored. The subject in such sentences has the meaning of the natural element, not people (*It is warm*).

The list of meanings of “undefined-personal” sentences is quite limited. They can express 1) actions perceived on hearing when the agent cannot be seen; 2) public reactions carried by the collective body; 3) actions of the state machine; 4) actions of a certain group of people.

Spanish (and other European) philologists as a rule unite “undefined-personal” and impersonal sentences and call all of them **impersonal**. In spite of this almost all scientists admit “*el carácter indeterminado del sujeto*” (Gili y Gaya, 1975, pp. 75-76) – the undetermined character of the subject (the translation from Spanish into English here and further is mine – S.B.) – in some types of sentences (for example: *Llaman a la puerta* – Somebody’s knocking at the door. *Me han regalado un reloj* – They (?) have given me a watch ≈ I was given a watch).

Let’s compare the so called **impersonal sentences** described in the investigations of the Spanish authors:

*Hace frío aquí* – It is cold here. *Ayer nevó mucho en Soria* – Yesterday it snowed very much in Soria. *Había muchos alumnos en el patio* – There were many pupils in the yard. *Dicen cosas raras del amigo de tu vecino* –

They say strange things about your neighbor's friend (Benito Mozas, 2008, p.129). It is obviously that the first three sentences don't mean any agent (active executor). The agent in the fourth sentence is kept in mind but it is not named (in the English version the subject is expressed by the generalized personal pronoun "they", in Spanish version it is omitted). The subjects of the first and the second sentences refer to the natural forces. The third sentence is not connected neither with natural element nor people.

The collective of authors of the "New Grammar of Spanish" also include different sentences in the paragraph *Types of impersonal sentences: Llueve a cántaros* – It is raining cats and dogs. *Dicen que va a mejorar la economía* – They say that the economy will improve. *Se duerma bien en esta cama* – It is nice to sleep in this bed (Nueva Gramática, 2009, p. 3058). It is necessary to note that the authors precise however that the term IMPERSONAL is used in generalized meaning.

A verb in "undefined-personal" sentences unlike in impersonal sentences without fail implies the subject-person not any subject. The subject in "undefined-personal" sentences doesn't refer to the mystical creature, for example, or animal. The question is that it refers only to the PERSON that is undetermined.

There are different ways to express undetermined subject in Spanish. Thus, the contemporaneous Russian philologist M. Zelikov distinguishes 12 models of "undefined-personal" models in modern Ibero-Roman languages (in Spanish and in Portuguese) (Zelikov, 2013, p. 50). All these models can be classified into two groups: 1) with explicit subject expression and 2) with implicit subject expression:

- 1) "Undefined-personal" models with explicit subject expression:
  - Uno (una) + Verb 3<sup>d</sup> person Singular
  - Indefinite/negative pronoun + Verb 3<sup>d</sup> person Singular/Plural
  - Verb 3<sup>d</sup> person Plural + cuantos/-as
  - Noun (meaning "somebody") + Verb 3<sup>d</sup> person Singular
  - ¡Quien + Subjuntivo Verb 3<sup>d</sup> person Singular!
  - Como quien + Verb 3<sup>d</sup> person Singular
- 2) "Undefined-personal" models with implicit subject expression:
  - Verb 3<sup>d</sup> person Plural
  - Se + Verb 3<sup>d</sup> person Singular
  - Se (meaning "people") + Verb 3<sup>d</sup> person Singular/Plural
  - ¿Cómo + Verb 3<sup>d</sup> person Singular?
  - Verb 1<sup>st</sup> person Plural
  - Verb 2<sup>d</sup> person Singular

The objective of our paper is to analyze the models of "undefined-personal" sentences functioning in the texts of formal letters of Medieval Spain dated by the XIII<sup>th</sup> - the beginning of the XVI<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is this period when the Royal administration refused the Latin language in home documentation and began to write in the national language – the so called Castilian Romance.

## 2. "UNDEFINED-PERSONAL" MODELS IN FORMAL LETTERS

### 2.1. Explicit subject expression

On the one hand we can suppose that formal letters are not characterized by indetermination because from the juridical point of view all persons in formal/business situations are quite concrete and should be clearly determined. In such situations it is necessary to avoid ambiguity and misunderstanding. It is interesting but when the agent is not named and it is possible to use an active "undefined-personal" construction (for example, *they have informed me*) the author of a formal letter prefers a passive personal construction. Let's compare: "*Sepades que yo soy informado...*" (CODEA, № 0264) – The letter of the Castilian King Enrique IV of the 7<sup>th</sup> of June of 1471. – Let it be known to everybody that I was informed... .

Nevertheless we have found several models of "undefined-personal" sentences in formal letters written in ancient Spanish.

One of the most frequent models of "undefined-personal" sentences with explicit subject expression is **Verb 3<sup>d</sup> person Plural + cuantos/-as**. "*Coñocida cosa sea a quantos esta carta vieren*" – Let it be known to all (people) who could see this letter – is the usual formula of the initial/introductory part of the letter. In this model the component "*tantos*" is omitted: *Coñocida cosa sea a tantos (hombres) quantos esta carta vieren* – Let it be known to **as many (people) as** could see this letter.

The other model of "undefined-personal" sentences is **Indefinite/negative pronoun + Verb 3<sup>d</sup> person Singular**. As a rule this model can be found in the final part of the letter. Let's examine:

- “Se **alguno** fur que contra esto que nós fazemos **quisier** ir caya ena ira de Pater et Filius et Spirite Sancte...” (CODEA, № 1232). – Private formal letter of November of 1243. – If there is **someone** who wants to be against this letter (what is written in this letter), so let it draw wrath of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit on him. *Alguno* – indefinite pronoun; *quisier* – Verb 3<sup>d</sup> person Singular, Indicative mood (ancient form).

- “... mandamos otrossí que **ninguno** non les **ampare** los freires que de su casa salieren...” (CODEA, № 0676). – The letter of the Castilian King Fernando IV of the 27<sup>th</sup> of May of 1297. – We order **no one** to guard these monks who will go out of their homes. *Ninguno* – negative pronoun; *ampare* – Verb 3<sup>d</sup> person Singular, Subjunctive mood.

Besides the models with pronominal forms of subject expression there are models with nominal and pronominal-nominal forms of expression of undetermined subject. Let's compare:

- “E se por aventura yo don Pedro Ponz, o **omne por mí o de mia parte o de estraña**, contra este mio firmamiento **quisier** venir, sea maldito e descomungado...” (CODEA, № 0415). – The private letter of the 24<sup>th</sup> of September of 1235. – And if casually I, Don Pedro Ponz, or **anyone on my behalf, or a foreigner** wants to be against my letter, he will be accursed and excommunicated.

- “Este ofiçio de las guardas de la costa ... es cargo que **pocos lo sabrán seruir**” (Moreno Trujillo, 2010, p. 186). – The private letter of the 6<sup>th</sup> of July of 1505. – There are **few (people)** who could fulfil the duties of the Cost Guard.

- “Sepan **todos los omnes** que esta carta **vidieren e oyeren** ...” – Let it be known to **all men** who could see this letter or could hear about it.

- “... **algunos omes malfechores** dela su tierra **andan robando**...” (González Gallego, p. 296) – The letter of the Castilian King Alfonso XI of the 15<sup>th</sup> of June of 1327. – ... **some evil people** of this area earn their living by robbery... .

Thus, we can deduce a new “undefined-personal” model: **Indefinite/negative pronoun + (de) + noun (meaning “anybody”) + Verb 3<sup>d</sup> person Singular/Plural.**

There are no models **Uno (una) + Verb 3<sup>d</sup> person Singular**, **¡Quien + Subjuntivo Verb 3<sup>d</sup> person Singular!** and **Como quien + Verb 3<sup>d</sup> person Singular** in formal letters of Medieval Spain. It can be explained: two last models are more colloquial than formal.

As for the model **Verb 1<sup>st</sup> person Plural** (with the so called *majestic plural*), it can be found in royal letters but always with the pronoun not omitted (We would remind that it is a usual thing to omit personal pronouns in Spanish, because the endings of the verbs clearly indicate the person.):

- “... **nos don ALFONSO**, por la gracia de Dios rey de Castiella, de Toledo, de Leon, de Gallizia, de Seuilla, de Cordoua, de Murcia, de Jahen e de Algarue, **damos e otorgamos**...” (Ostos Salcedo, Sanz Fuentes, p. 252). – The letter of the Castilian King Alfonso X of the 15<sup>th</sup> of July of 1264. – We, don Alfonso, thanks to God the King of Castile, etc. ..., grant ... .

- “... **nos don Sancho**, por la gracia de Dios, Rey de Castiella, de Leon (etc.) ... **otorgamos vos e confirmamos** vos las cartas e los privilegios ...” (Galende Díaz, p. 64). – The letter of the Castilian King Sancho IV of the 19<sup>th</sup> of September of 1291. – We, don Sancho, thanks to God the King of Castile, etc. ... grant you and confirm the letters and privileges... .

Such sentences are also qualified as “undefined-personal” models because the *grammatical plural* (*nos* = we; *damos*, *otorgamos*, *confirmamos* = we (not I, you, they) give, grant, confirm) does not coincide with the *logical singular* (the King don Alfonso, the King don Sancho). Thus, the model **Verb 1<sup>st</sup> person Plural** broadens in formal (royal) letters: **Personal pronoun 1<sup>st</sup> person Plural + nominal component Singular (name, title) + Verb 1<sup>st</sup> person Plural.**

## 2.2. Implicit subject expression

As for the “undefined-personal” models with implicit subject expression or with the so called “**3<sup>d</sup> person zero-subject**” (Paducheva, 2012, p. 28) there are less of them than the models with explicit subject expression. (NB: In English version it is impossible to demonstrate the “3<sup>d</sup> person zero-subject” in the sentence. If the agent is unknown or unimportant, “they” or “one” are used in the position of the subject (*They say...*, *One can do it*). If there is no agent, the impersonal subject “it” is used (*It snows*).)

The only “undefined-personal” model whose status is beyond any doubt is the model **Verb 3<sup>d</sup> person Plural**. This model is found in medieval formal letters of different periods. Let's compare:

- “*Porque el conçeio de Maydrit me mostraron cartas del Rey don Ferrando, mio visavuelo, e del Rey don Alfonso, mio avuelo, e del Rey don Sancho, mio padre...*” (Galende Díaz, p. 64). – The letter of the Castilian King Fernando IV of the 15<sup>th</sup> of October of 1303. – Because (people from) the Council of Madrid have shown me (not ~~has shown~~) some letters of the King don Fernando, my great-grandfather, and (letters) of the King don Alfonso, my grandfather, and (letters) of the King don Sancho, my father... . Formally the subject of this sentence is the 3<sup>d</sup> person singular (*el conçeio de Maydrit*), but the verb form is the 3<sup>d</sup> person plural (*mostraron*). Thus, we can qualify this sentence as “undefined-personal” model because the logical subject “people”, which refers to the plural of the verb, is omitted.

- “... *yo frey Joán de Odíaz, prior del monesterio de Santo Toribio de Liévana, con acuerdo e consejo de los monjes e convento del dicho monesterio, otorgo e cognosco que dó a vós Alonso, fijo de María Varó, vezino de Torieno, un solar que dizen de don Gregorio ...*” (CODEA, № 0725). – The ecclesiastical letter of the 8<sup>th</sup> of July of 1479. – ... I, monk Joan de Odiaz, Father Superior of the monastery San Toribio de Lievana, by consent and on advice of the monks of the above mentioned monastery, grant and realize that I grant a plot that is (as they (people) say) of don Gregorio to you, Alfonso, the son of Maria Varo, the neighbor of Torieno... .

- “*Aqy me traxeron de Jahen un traslado de una carta que el rey nuestro señor enbyo a aquella çibdad y otra tal me dizen que traxeron a Guadix...*” (Szmolka Clares, p. 50). – The letter of the count of Tendilla to the Council of Alcala la Real of the 7<sup>th</sup> of December of 1504. – They (people) have brought me a copy of the letter that our king sent to this town, and another (copy), as people say, has been brought to Cadiz (word for word: they (people) have brought another copy to Cadiz).

The status of “undefined-personal” models with the particle **SE** (“... *y porque en las Cortes se avya suplicado asy a su alteza...*” (Szmolka Clares, p. 50). – The letter of the count of Tendilla to the Council of Almeria of the 5<sup>th</sup> of December of 1504. – ... and because His Highness has been asked so... (word for word: they (?) have asked His Highness).) requires further analysis.

Other “undefined-personal” models (*¿Cómo + Verb 3<sup>d</sup> person Singular?, Verb 2<sup>d</sup> person Singular*) with implicit subject expression were not found in the texts of Medieval formal letters in ancient Spanish.

### 3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion we would like to say that the syntactic models of “undefined-personal” sentences functioning in the texts of Medieval formal letters in ancient Spanish are quite various in spite of the official, conservative and pattern/template language of the documents.

“Undefined-personal” models (especially with explicit subject expression) appear in the written ancient Spanish from the very beginning: in Medieval Spain the first documents written in national language refer to the boundary of the centuries XII<sup>th</sup>-XIII<sup>th</sup>.

In general all ways of subject expression in “undefined-personal” sentences can be demonstrated in the following scheme (Fig. 1):

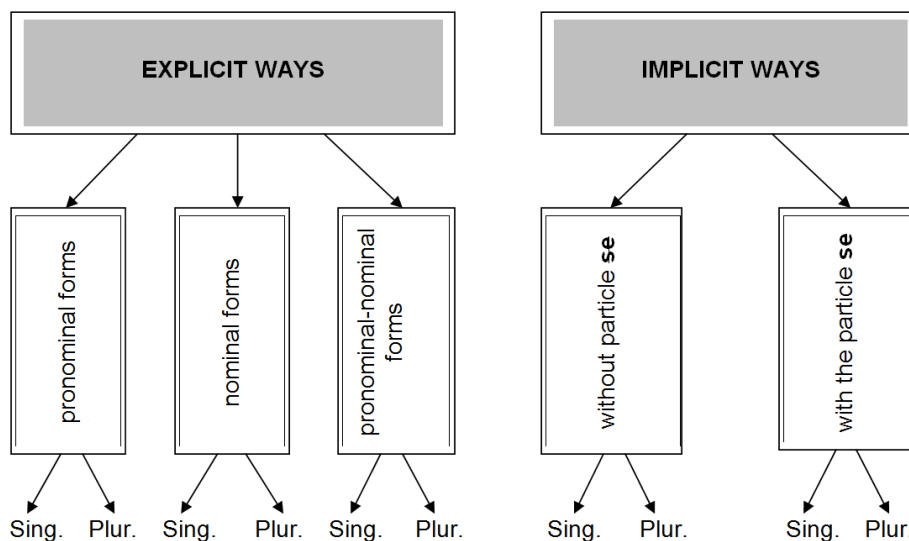


Fig. 1. Manner of subject expression in “undefined-personal” sentences in Spanish.

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