Middle English verbs of fear:
What lexicographical evidence can(not) reveal about their impersonal usage
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Impersonal constructions which lack a nominative subject and consist of a dative/accusative Experiencer and a verb in the third person singular form, as illustrated in (1), flourished in the Old and Middle English periods.

(1) a. Hine ne lyst his willan wyrcean. [971 Blickl. Hom.; OED list, v.1 1.a.] ‘He does not like to do his (Lord’s) will.’
b. Hym thoughte þ his herte wolde breke. [c1405(c1385) CHAUCER Knight’s Tale; OED think, v.1 2.b] ‘It seemed to him that his heart would break.’

Verbs which were attested in these constructions are known to spread across wide semantic fields: ‘physical, emotional and mental experiences (hunger, thirst, chill, heat, pain; joy, grief, anger, shame; doubt, recollection etc.), but also needs and obligations, possession and sometimes perceptions and abilities, existence and happenstance’ (von Seefranz-Montag 1984: 524). However, not all the verbs that belong to these broad classes are known to have been attested in impersonal constructions: LUFIAN ‘love’ and HATIAN ‘hate’, for example, always occur with a nominative Experiencer (Allen 1995: 129 n.35), whereas LICIAN ‘please’ and LADIAN ‘loathe’ are exemplified in impersonal constructions. While there has been much discussion on the development and loss of impersonal constructions in the history of English, hardly any attention has been directed to their lexical semantics, i.e. why certain verbs participate in impersonal constructions and others do not, even though they appear almost synonymous to the modern eye.

In order to investigate into this neglected problem, this paper will examine the syntax-semantics interface of verbs of fear, some of which began to be used in impersonal constructions in Middle English, although the usage was not very productive. Using the data provided in the recently completed Historical Thesaurus of English (Kay et al. 2009) and illustrative quotations of the relevant entries in the Middle English Dictionary, I will examine to what extent these resources will enable us to identify factors that determine the presence and absence of Middle English verbs of fear in impersonal constructions.

References
Project website: http://libra.englang.arts.gla.ac.uk/WebThesHTML/homepage.html
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