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The Uses of Impersonals in Spoken Estonian¹

Abstract

This paper analyses impersonal constructions in spoken Estonian. The impersonal constructions found in two spoken corpora differing in levels of formality are examined and classified according to five readings of the implicit argument: universal, vague and specific existential, corporate and a future-hypothetical reading. The analysis focuses on the implicit impersonal actor referent, investigating differences in its interpretation as well as overt expressions of the implicit argument. We account for the diverse readings of the implicit actor as being derived through pragmatic means. The impersonal construction is taken to bear a unified semantics, which specifies only that the implicit argument has the default semantic features of human, plural, and actor. The argument receives its full interpretation through pragmatics and the surrounding discourse context.

1. Introduction

This paper examines the functions of the Estonian impersonal construction as used in spoken language. Cross-linguistic impersonal constructions have become an area of considerable attention in recent years (see, for instance, Siewierska 2008; Solstad & Lyngfelt 2006, for studies on various languages). The Estonian impersonal voice has also been included in cross-linguistic comparisons (e.g. Blevins 2003; Kaiser & Vihman 2007) and has attracted much attention in recent Estonian linguistics (e.g. Lindström 2010; Torn 2002, 2006a, 2006b; Torn-Leesik 2007, 2009; Vihman 2004; Viitso 2005). However, the research has not focussed on spoken data. In

¹ The names of the authors are in alphabetical order.

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this study, we investigate the use of impersonals in spoken language. Our analysis rests on the interpretation of the implicit impersonal actor referent, rather than the event denoted by the impersonal construction. We account for the diverse readings of the impersonal referent as taking place on the level of pragmatics; we take the impersonal construction to bear a unified semantics which gives the impersonal actor referent certain canonical semantic features but leaves it open to specification by the discourse context.

The paper investigates the use of the impersonal construction in two corpora of spoken language, one more informal than the other. The results support existing descriptions of the functions of the impersonal, with some key differences. Chief among these is the finding that the impersonal is used relatively often in spoken language for salient or identifiable (even identified) referents, in addition to its more canonical uses to refer to unidentified or generalised actors. In the cases where the referent is known, the impersonal cannot be seen to be employed to either mask the agent or generalise its referent. Rather, these uses seem to have various motivations, from echoing impersonal constructions used earlier in the discourse to politeness and stylistic nuances. Hence, the variation in readings of the impersonal actor arises not from the semantics of the construction, but rather from contextual effects and discourse pragmatics.

The paper first briefly introduces some background to the impersonal construction in Estonian and our approach in section 2 and describes the data examined in section 3. In section 4, the data are discussed and classified according to five readings of the implicit actor – universal, vague and specific existential, corporate, and hypothetical – as well as with respect to agentive phrases used with impersonals. Section 5 discusses the findings and concludes the paper.

2. Theoretical background

Descriptions of grammatical voice typically focus on the opposition between the active and passive voice, most likely due to the influence of English and other Indo-European languages (cf. Langacker & Munro 1975; Siewierska 1984). Another voice distinction, however, attested in Balto-Finnic, Celtic, some Slavic languages and elsewhere beyond Europe, is better described in terms of the opposition between personal and impersonal voice. Although passive and impersonal voice may appear similar in communicative function, in fact they are different constructions

with different morphosyntactic constraints. While the passive is a valency-reducing operation that demotes the subject of the active transitive clause, impersonalization merely constrains argument realization and does not affect the valency of the verb (see Blevins 2003; Torn-Leesik 2009). Moreover, impersonals can be formed from unaccusative verbs, which lack passive counterparts (see Perlmutter 1978).

The Estonian voice system includes both of these oppositions. The active impersonal (example 1a) takes as input verbs both transitives and intransitives, as well as modals and unaccusatives, unlike the personal passive (see Torn-Leesik 2007, 2009). The impersonal is often regarded as the more basic voice construction in Estonian (and in Finnic generally, Viitso 1998). The periphrastic “resultative” passive (1b), which can be formed only with transitive verbs, appears to be an innovation based on the participial passives of Indo-European languages (see Haspelmath 1990: 49; Vihman 2007: 169–170).

- (1) a. *Kadunud auto lei-ti kraavist.*²
 lost.APP car.NOM found-IMPERS.PST ditch.ELA
 ‘**They found** the lost car in the ditch.’ / ‘The lost car **was found** in the ditch.’
- b. *Auto on üles lei-tud.*
 car.NOM be.PRS.3 up found-PPP
 ‘The car **has been found**.’

The simple present and past impersonal are formed with verbal inflections (as in example 1a). The perfect forms of the impersonal paradigm are formed with the verb *olema* ‘be’ and the past passive participle, resulting in a formal overlap with the simple forms of the personal passive (as in 1b, a resultative passive). This isomorphism between the periphrastic elements of the two paradigms has led to disagreement about whether Estonian manifests two discrete voice constructions (e.g. Blevins 2003; Pihlak 1993; Rajandi 1999/1968; Torn 2002, 2006a, 2009; Vihman 2004), or a more general construction that subsumes both the impersonal and the personal passive (e.g. Erelt 1989; Erelt et al. 1993; Tauli 1980). We regard impersonals and passives as two distinct constructions,³ and this paper focuses only on the impersonal construction. In order to avoid ambiguity, we have taken as our object of scrutiny only synthetic impersonals, which

² *Postimees* 27.05.99.

³ Arguments explaining why we follow this approach can be found in e.g. Rajandi (1999/1968); Torn (2002, 2006a); Torn-Leesik (2009); Vihman (2004).

do not coincide with the periphrastic passive and hence belong uncontroversially to the impersonal paradigm.

The Estonian impersonal has no overt syntactic subject and is marked with distinct morphology, namely a synthetic verbal affix in the simple present and past. In order for a verb to be accessible for impersonalisation, it must have a minimum of one argument, and the highest argument must be able to refer to a human referent (Torn 2002). The object of the transitive impersonal verb is marked just as objects in other subjectless constructions are marked in Estonian, such as imperatives: partial objects remain partitive, whereas total objects take nominative case (Erelt et al. 1993; Rajandi 1999/1968). However, the nominative objects do not trigger verb agreement, and they take partitive case under negation; hence, the Estonian impersonal does not involve promotion to subject, despite a tradition of labelling the construction a passive (see Rajandi 1999/1968: 104–105).

The semantics of the Finnish impersonal have been explored by Shore (1988), whose analysis is also illuminating for the Estonian impersonal. She notes that the Finnish impersonal has a generalised exophoric referent. Setting up two semantic prototypes for the uses of the impersonal, Shore compares her Prototype I with the English use of the indefinite 3PL pronoun *they*. The actor has generalised reference and is plural in number. The scope of the indefinite actor referent can be delimited by location or temporal adverbs. This type is exemplified by examples such as (2a).

- (2) a. *Yleensä viete-tään viikonloput maalla.*
 generally spend-IMPERS.PRS weekends country.ADE
 ‘**People** generally **spend** the weekends in the country.’
- b. *Nigeriassa teh-tiin sotilasvallankaappaus.*
 Nigeria.INE do-IMPERS.PRS military.coup
 ‘A military coup **was carried out** in Nigeria.’

(Shore 1988: 164–165)

Shore’s Prototype II, exemplified in (2b), is more similar to the English agentless passive. The “indefinite” actor refers to a specific person or group who performs the action, but the identity of this actor is left unspecified. In this case, the actor “would not be interpreted as having generalised exophoric reference, but as referring to an unspecified group of people (...). As the participant is textually unimportant, its precise identity remains unspecified” (Shore 1988: 166).

This paper shows that these two prototypes can be found among typical examples of the Estonian impersonal as well. Contrary to textbook descriptions of the impersonals, however, the spoken language data also include a surprising number of impersonals which might be classified as Prototype II, but where the identity of the actor is in fact not unspecified, but entirely clear and specific to both discourse participants – sometimes even overtly stated. We discuss these in section 4, under specific existential referents. We argue that these distinctions are not in fact part of the semantics inherent to the impersonal construction, but rather they derive from the discourse context and the pragmatics involved in interpreting the impersonal. Both of Shore's prototypes, as well as the unexpected examples where the impersonal actor referent is known, are derived from a unified basic semantics associated with the impersonal, which is given different readings based on the discourse context and pragmatics.

The implicit argument associated with the Estonian impersonal also picks out a generalised exophoric referent, which has the default semantic properties of being human, plural, and agentive (Vihman 2004). The impersonal referent occupies an argument position without actually being available for cross-sentential anaphoric reference (see Kaiser & Vihman 2007). The referent of the impersonal implicit actor is unspecified and open to various interpretations. As the data presented in this paper show, the impersonal most commonly does not refer to a generalised, universal referent, but rather a referent with narrower scope. The impersonal actor referent, then, necessarily receives its more detailed content from the discourse context.

Discourse Representation Theory (e.g. Kamp & Reyle 1993) holds that semantic representations contain two types of information, discourse markers and predicative conditions. This distinction is useful in understanding the effect of impersonals in discourse: the impersonal referent bears certain semantic information but depends on the discourse context (or exophoric knowledge) for its full interpretation. Koenig & Mauner (2000) have shown that "a-definites" (French impersonal *on*, or indeed Estonian impersonal verb endings, see Kaiser & Vihman 2007) satisfy an argument position without introducing a discourse marker into the Discourse Representation Structure. Their argument is based on availability of the implicit argument for anaphoric reference: because "a-definites" do not introduce a discourse marker, the referent is unavailable for further reference, although the argument position is satisfied. This argument is also in line with our claim that the only semantic

content attached to the impersonal implicit argument is that its default reading is a generalised human actor. This actor receives different readings, however, which derive not from the impersonal construction itself but from the discourse surrounding it. Because the implicit argument referent is unspecified and not linked to a discourse marker, it is open to various types of readings. Koenig & Mauner discuss inferencing, the process which accommodates certain types of anaphoric reference. We see this inferencing taking part in most uses of the impersonal construction, where the preceding (and subsequent) discourse provides the semantic content of the implicit actor.

The discourse context and pragmatics provide the information for fleshing out that argument referent with more specific content or with the reading of a generalised, unspecified human group. Cabredo Hofherr (2003) has proposed a five-way distinction for readings of 3PL arbitrary pronouns. These include existential readings (specific, vague and inferred existential), a corporate reading and a universal reading. Her scheme reads the semantics directly from overt linguistic cues, whereas our data show a less exact mapping between structure and function.

However, we make use of the distinction between readings with existential, universal, and corporate actor referents, and subdivide existential impersonals into those with specific and vague actors. While the impersonal actor is semantically present in the sense that its argument slot is filled and unavailable for any other referent, its interpretation depends on the predicate, the broader discourse context and pragmatics.

3. Data

Data for the analysis were taken from two sources of spoken language: the Corpus of Spoken Estonian⁴ and the unedited minutes of the *Riigikogu*, or Estonian Parliamentary sittings.⁵ This choice was prompted by our aim of obtaining a representative sample of the use of impersonals from spoken language data and our interest in further comparing these data with written language data.

Minutes of the *Riigikogu* sittings, recorded by a stenographer but not edited, were chosen for analysis because the language used in them bears elements of both spontaneous spoken speech and more formal, written

⁴ <http://www.cl.ut.ee/suuline>

⁵ <http://www.riigikogu.ee/?op=steno&stcommand=calendar&year=2009&month=01>

Estonian. People appearing before the Parliament are often given the questions they will be asked in advance, and hence their answers are also often pre-prepared, and show signs of being closer in style to written language. However, the minutes also include spontaneous questions and answers. The language of the minutes is noticeably more formal in style than the data from the Corpus of Spoken Estonian, and it also represents institutionalised language and formal relationships, often including politically diplomatic repartee. The content of the minutes of the *Riigikogu* is also quite different from that of the spoken language corpus, affecting the context in which the impersonal constructions are used and, in turn, their readings.

We were also interested in the use of agentive phrases in spoken language. Here, too, the choice of two data sources, reflecting more and less formal speech, was important. As the optional expression of the agent has not previously been analysed in spoken Estonian (with the exception of Lindström & Tragel 2007, who examine adessive agents used with impersonals but not agentive expression more generally), we wished to determine to what extent the agentive phrases claimed to be used with impersonals in Estonian are restricted to written and formal registers. We expected the more formal *Riigikogu* sittings to contain more examples of agentive phrases than the spoken language corpus, especially agentive phrases using *poolt*, or *by*-phrases.

We analysed 117 transcribed everyday conversation files from the Corpus of Spoken Estonian. Most of the files contain dialogues and everyday conversations, but some monologues and interviews are also included. Altogether, this amounts to 113,516 lexemes in the Corpus of Spoken Estonian, in which we found 268 impersonals. The second source of data comes from the unedited minutes of the *Riigikogu* sittings of January 2009. The month of January was chosen at random. The file includes a total of 101 809 lexemes. A total of 623 impersonals were found in the *Riigikogu* minutes. Only synthetic forms of simple present and past-tense impersonals and their corresponding negative forms were included in the analysis. A summary of the data can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Data Sources

	Spoken Corpus	<i>Riigikogu</i> minutes
Total number of lexemes	113,516	101,809
Total number of impersonals	268	623

4. Data analysis: Readings of impersonal constructions

This section discusses in turn each of the five readings which arise from the impersonals used in the data included in this study. The categorisation of impersonal predicates can be based on either the type of event (e.g. generic or episodic) or the referent of the actor of the predicate. Our categorisation rests on the interpretation of the impersonal actor referent. While certain associations of a particular reading with a particular tense, for instance, are evident (see Table 2, below), these remain but tendencies, not rules, and the readings cannot be related directly to any overt elements in the construction itself, but are, rather, derived from the context within which the impersonal construction is used. The centrality of the implicit actor referent and differences in its interpretation – including examples where the referent is identified and salient – belies the assumption that the sole function of the impersonal is to background the agent.

As can be seen from Table 2, the two sets of data present different distributions of the various readings of the impersonal. It is noteworthy that the total number of impersonals culled from the *Riigikogu* data is more than twice that of the spoken corpus data, and it is also important to note the overwhelming majority of corporate referents among the impersonals used in the *Riigikogu* minutes (amounting to three quarters of the total). The spoken corpus displays a more even distribution, with the most impersonals indicating vague existential referents (42.2%), but also including sizable groups of universal (19%) and corporate (27%) referents.

Also noteworthy is the relationship between present and past tenses, particularly in universal and existential categories. In the spoken data, the temporal relation has an effect on the interpretation, as universal impersonals are twice as likely to be expressed in present as past tense, whereas the reverse is true for existentials, with both vague and specific referents. This tendency, however, is not borne out by the *Riigikogu* data,

where both universals and existentials are much more frequently used in the present tense.

The final category of hypothetical referents also needs to be introduced here, as it has not been discussed in the literature. This category emerges in both datasets in a minority of examples which do not fit well in other categories. It comprises constructions which refer to future or *irrealis* events coded in the present tense but not referring to any potential referent, and so falling outside the category of vague referents whose existence is predicated with the impersonal construction. The hypothetical impersonals contain referents which are not left unidentified or backgrounded, but which are, rather, nonexistent.

Table 2. Analysis of impersonal forms in the two corpora

Reading of Impersonal Actor Ref.	Spoken Corpus						Riigikogu Minutes					
	Present		Past		Total	%	Present		Past		Total	%
	Aff	Neg	Aff	Neg			Aff	Neg	Aff	Neg		
Universal	31	4	14	2	51	19	21	1	6	0	28	4.5
Existential, Vague	35	6	66	6	113	42.2	55	8	30	2	95	15.2
Existential, Specific	7	0	14	0	21	7.8	11	10 ⁶	6	1	28	4.5
Corporate	38	3	31	0	72	26.9	279	25	153	7	464	74.5
Hypothetical	10	1			11	4.1	8	0			8	1.3
Total					268	100					623	100

4.1 Universal reading

Impersonal constructions can prompt a universal reading, applying to all referents within the relevant context. We use the term *universal* to represent a referent that picks out a maximally generalised referent, applying to *all x...*, *x* denoting human actors within the relevant context. The core features associated with the impersonal referent by virtue of the semantics of the construction are [+human], [+agentive], and [+plural] (Vihman 2004). Hence, the impersonal is well-suited for the universal interpretation, maximising the plurality and generalising to all humans within a specified domain. A typical usage of the impersonal cross-

⁶ The unusually high proportion of negatives to affirmatives in the existential specific category, in the *Riigikogu* data, is a result of question-answer pairs repeated throughout the minutes (e.g. example 23).

b. *aga`millest see tuleb, kas see tulene:b kodusest`kasvatusest vői*

elementaarset`viisakusest, et vastu-`vastutulijale öel-dakse
that passer-by.ALL say-IMPERS.PRS

kodurajoonis`tere näiteks
home-area.INE hello for.example

‘but what does it come from, does it come from upbringing or basic politeness, that **people say** hello to a passer-by in their neighbourhood for instance’

Universal generic impersonals are also used to describe a habit or custom that people follow. Here again, reference is made to a more general group of actors, where the scope of the actor referent is bounded by the context, either within the same sentence or in the discourse. The impersonal construction refers to a general human actor by default, and the interpretation of a universal actor is derived from the discourse context – often from a temporal or location adverbial, or else from the broader context, as in (3) above, where the implication of applying to all Americans comes from the discourse context beyond the impersonal clause. Universal impersonal constructions may describe current customs or traditions which people used to follow. These tend to delimit the domain of the referent with time adverbs such as *vanasti* or *ennemalt* ‘in the old days’. Descriptions of old customs are illustrated by example (4), in which the speaker talks about how people used to decorate Christmas trees, again not referring to any specific actor, but rather a generalised group from the past.

(4) *ennemalt ei old ju neid (.) niisuguseid kuuse`ehteid nagu`praegu on. (0.3)*

`siis pan-di kuuse külge nimodi =et eehe ((ohkab)) õige tilluksed
then put-IMPERS.PST fir-tree.GENon so that really tiny.PL

`õunad (0.5) ... sis pan-di vati (0.5) ee`vatti valget
apples.NOM then put-IMPERS.PST cotton.GEN cotton.PART white.PART

[vatti nagu oleks] lumi`sadand,
cotton.PART as be.COND snow.NOM rain.APP

‘in the old days there weren’t these kinds of Christmas tree ornaments like there are now. Back then **they put** like this, uh, (sighs) really tiny apples on the trees... then **they put** cotton, uh white cotton [cotton as if] snow had fallen,’

Impersonals with a universal, generic interpretation appear often in sayings and proverbs, which are seen as applying to everyone, as in example (5). Here the saying *vigadest õpitakse* ‘people learn from their mistakes’ is a

generalisation that is deemed to apply universally – a general truth, which in this particular example ought to apply to Eve.

- (5) *Eve`ise ka ei saa=`aru, (.) miks ta: `niimodi `tegi, miks selline (0.8) `hea `inimese \$ tunne talle järsku `peale tuli \$ ja ta selle raha `välja `andis, aga `vigadest*
but mistakes.ELA

`õpi-takse=ja ja tema \$ praegu siis arvatavasti `õpib
learn-IMPERS.PRS

‘Eve herself doesn’t understand why she acted like that, why such a good-person feeling came over her and she gave the money away, but **people learn** from their mistakes and and so now she’ll probably learn’

The spoken corpus also contains numerous utterances using the impersonal verbs *räägitakse* and *öeldakse* ‘it is said / people say’. These verbs often seem to be used in order to evoke a universal reading, even where perhaps only a few people may have said what is reported. As the identity of the one having reported the statement is not important – or is intentionally veiled – the impersonal is a convenient way to convey a general belief without directly claiming that it is general. This is illustrated by example (6):

- (6) *`see mh (0.4) aa (0.6) täendab `Raudla (0.4) räägi-takse ju=et (0.4) pidi: (.)*
say-IMPERS.PRS

`esimese kooli `direktoriks saama.

‘this, mh, uh I mean Raudla, **they say**, was supposed to become the first school director.’

In the *Riigikogu* minutes we found few examples of impersonals with universal interpretations. Of the 623 impersonal verbs analysed in the *Riigikogu* data, only 28 instances contained a clearly universal referent. This is closely linked to the political issues under discussion and the action-oriented content of the minutes. Impersonal constructions in the minutes include (7), an example of a core, wide-scope impersonal referent with intended application to the whole culture, and example (8), again with the impersonal verb *öeldakse*, to introduce a proverb.

- (7) *Meid on maast-madalast, põlvest-põlve õpeta-tud,*
et kõigi pereliikmete vajadustega arvesta-takse, et
 that all.GEN family-members.GEN needs.COM consider-IMPERS.PRS that
hooli-takse nende eest, kes abi vajavad, hooli-takse
 care-IMPERS.PRS 3PL.GEN for who help.PART need.PRS.3PL care-IMPERS.PRS
perekonna nõrgemate liikmete eest.
 family.GEN weaker.PL.GEN members.GEN for
 ‘We’ve been taught from the very beginning, from generation to generation, that the needs of all members of the family **are considered**, that **people care** for those who need help, **people care** for the weaker members of the family.’
- (8) *Teadupärast öel-dakse seda, et kapten lahku*
 as.we.know say-IMPERS.PRS this.PART that captain.NOM leave.PRS.3SG
laevalt viimasena.
 ship.ABL last.ESS
 ‘As we know, **they say** that the captain is the last to leave the ship.’

The impersonals with universal interpretation do not dominate the data from either source, despite seeming to capitalise so well on the semantic features of the impersonal.

4.2 Existential readings

Across all the spoken data examined here, by far the most common use of the impersonal gives rise to an existential interpretation. Indeed, the existential category was also the category which accommodated most unclear cases: where universal readings are ruled out, the impersonal referent can usually be understood as referring to a smaller unidentified group of actors. *Existential* here implies a referent with narrower scope than the universal reading. The existential implicit argument can be paraphrased with existential quantification, although this is only truth-conditionally adequate, not taking into account the implicit argument’s actual contribution to discourse. The existential examples do not imply maximally broad scope nor generalised reference, referring to a smaller group or even singular individuals. The [+plural] feature usually applies, but with a narrow-scope referent. A surprising number of examples, however, override even the [+plural] feature. In those cases, there must be another motivation for the use of the impersonal, as a singular referent is a

Pihlak 1993), this is a crucial piece of evidence that the function of the impersonal, at least in spoken Estonian, is broader than has been assumed. In this section, we examine both the vague and specific impersonals.

Corporate referents comprise a final category which, at least in part, belongs under the existential umbrella in its broadest sense, in that they refer to a corporate actor that is identifiable and not universal (e.g. a particular company, a government committee, or a generalised group such as shopkeepers). We devote a separate section (4.3 below) to the corporate reading.

4.2.1 Vague existential referents

The cases of vague referents include those where the speaker does not know the identity of the actor as well as those where the speaker knows the identity and leaves it unspecified – whether because of relevance or politeness considerations. Whatever the motivation, the identity of the impersonal referent is not recoverable from the discourse, nor is it intended to be resolved.

In this section, we examine examples of vague existential impersonals from our data. In the spoken language corpus, we classified 113 impersonal examples as vague existential, proportionally far more than any other category (42%). In the *Riigikogu* minutes, there were proportionally fewer vague existentials, 95 instances, or 15%.

Example (9a–b) shows a series of impersonal verbs used within one narrative. The first one (a) is temporally unanchored, in the present tense, and refers to a generalised event type with a vague actor referent; the verbs in (b) all refer to a specific event, introduced by the initial temporal word *suvel* ‘in the summer’, and are in the past tense. Note that no specific actor referent exists here, as the identity of the actor is unknown.

- (9) a. *on* `sissemurdmisi= ja (.) `väljastpoolt **lõhu-takse** *mõnikord*
 be.PRS.3 break-ins.PART and from.outside break-IMPERS.PRS sometimes
 =*mõnikord* `haknad *ära*.
 sometimes windows.NOM away
 ‘there are break-ins and sometimes **they break** windows from the outside.’

- b. *alles`suvel siin käi-di mul korteris`sees=ja*
 just summer.ADE here go-IMPERS.PST 1SG.ADE apartment.INE in
 (0.5) *ku ma`remonti tegin, (0.8)käi-di`sees=ja: (0.5) kõige*
 go-IMPERS.PRS in
`hämmastavam oli`see et ei puudu-tud¹⁰ =õõ (1.2) mitte`midagi:
 that not touch-PPP not something
kodu`tehnikast ei: triik`raudasid=ega ega`kosmeetikat mitte`midagi,
ära ainult`varasta-ti minu`seelikud= ja: (2.2) ja= sis
 away only steal-IMPERS.PST my skirts.NOM and and then
mu elukaaslasel ühed(.)\$`lühikesed`püksid
 my partner.ADE one.PL short.PL trousers.NOM

‘just this summer my apartment **was entered** when I was refurbishing, **they entered** and the most shocking was that **they didn’t touch** anything: of the household appliances, not irons, nor cosmetics, nothing, only **they stole** my skirts and and then a pair of my partner’s shorts’

Example (10) contains vague existentials referring to actors that are not identified, because they are not known to the speaker, inconvenient to mention (not easily identifiable), or irrelevant to the discourse.

- (10) a. *noh`päris kummitused. ega se Transil- (.)`Transilvaanias või kuskohas se oli,*
see mõel-di`välja ju. ja see krahv [`Draakula (seal) on`lihtsalt mingi:
 this think-IMPERS.PST out
`vend.]
 ‘well real ghosts. in Transylvania or wherever it was, that **was made up** and that count Dracula (there) is just some guy.’
- b. *`Aabram`abiellus (.)`teist=korda`uuesti (1.5) ja (1.0) nad`surid (.) mõlemad*
ühel`ööl. (1.2)`lapsed`jaota-ti (.) küla= päle`laili, (1.0)
 children.NOM divide-IMPERS.PST village on.ALL around
`enamus neist said endale`uued`nimed, (1.5)`Eljale`an-ti`üks
 Elja.ALL give-IMPERS.PST one
`laps,
 child.NOM

¹⁰ The negative past impersonal is formed with the negative word *ei* ‘not’ and the past passive participle.

‘Aabram got married again for the second time and they both died in one night. the children **were distributed** around the village, most of them got new names, **they gave** Elja a child.’

In the *Riigikogu* minutes, 95 of the impersonal constructions analysed give rise to readings with vague existential referents. Example (11) refers to a group of people who may have sent incomplete or incorrect documents to the Pension Insurance Agency, without identifying these people. In example (12), Prime Minister Andrus Ansip describes the reactions of the media (the unidentified impersonal actor) to his words at a press conference.

- (11) *Kas viivitus on tingitud sellepärast, et dokumendid, mis esita-ti*
that documents.NOM which submit-IMPERS.PST

pensionikindlustusametisse olid vigased?
pension.insurance.agency.ILL be.PST.3PL faulty.PL

‘Does the delay result from the documents, which **were submitted** to the Pension Insurance Agency, being faulty?’

- (12) *Kui mina kolm aastat tagasi pressikonverentsil rääkisin sellest, et vabaturumajanduse tingimustes on kinnisvara krahh möödapääsmatu ja paratamatu, siis pee-ti*
then consider-IMPERS.PST

mind tulnukaks. Ega mind väga ei usu-tud, küsi-ti,
1SG.PART alien.TRANS and.not 1SG.PART very not believe-PPP ask-IMPERS.PST

miks ta järsku sellest räägib.
why 3SG suddenly this.ELA talk.PRS.3SG

‘Three years ago, when I spoke at a press conference about a real estate crash being unavoidable and inevitable in free market conditions, then I **was considered** an alien. I **was not** really **believed**, **they asked** why is he suddenly talking about that.’

While the reference in examples (11–12) can be interpreted as implying several unspecified actors, it can also be read as pointing to one person whose identity is unclear. This is illustrated more clearly in example (13), which refers to a telephone conversation, implying that the impersonal referent is one person on the other end of the line.

(13) *Küsis, et miks ei ole näiteks Kuressaares kedagi vastamas,*

siis väga nipsakalt vasta-ti teisel pool toru otsas,
 then very curtly answer-IMPERS.PST other.ADE side on.the.phone

et selleks ei peagi nad seal vastama, et nad saaksid tööd teha.

‘[S/he] asked why for example there’s no one answering in Kuressaare, then **they answered** very curtly on the other end of the line, that they don’t have to answer in order to do their job.’

As Shore (1988) and others have shown, the implicit impersonal arguments (where they are not further specified in the text) receive their referent interpretation exophorically. Even the implicit arguments in two impersonals in successive clauses do not necessarily pick out the same referent, as shown in example (14). Each impersonal stands on its own, and introduces no discourse marker, hence cannot be semantically equated with another. There is no contradiction in using two successive impersonals which point to different referents. This is most evident with existential impersonals, where the referents do not overlap as they may seem to do with universal, generalised actors.

(14) *`nõugude ajal ehita-ti mingi: `uus maja, (.)*
 Soviet time.ADE build-IMPERS.PST some new.NOM house.NOM

nüüd=nüüd `hiljuti teh-ti mingi `uus `juurdeehitus. (0.5)
 now now recently make-IMPERS.PST some new.NOM addition.NOM

‘during Soviet times some new house **was built**, now recently an addition **was made**.’

4.2.2 Specific existential referents

Impersonal constructions with specific and identifiable referents are the least expected, considering the importance which has been placed on the agent-demoting function of impersonals in the literature. The spoken data analysed here, however, contain a total of 49 impersonal constructions which unquestionably refer to specific referents. These raise the question of why the speakers use impersonals in these contexts despite the fact that the referent is salient or recoverable, sometimes present – even, on occasion, one of the discourse participants. Because our data present a nontrivial number of impersonals with referents with specific semantic content recoverable from the context (7.8% of the spoken corpus impersonals,

4.5% of those from the *Riigikogu* minutes), we classify these separately as specific existential impersonals.

Some examples of specific existentials from the Corpus of Spoken Estonian are given below. The actor referent in (15a) is clearly identifiable to all discourse participants – indeed, the impersonal refers to a person who is present, among the hearers, and has just committed the act referred to in the utterance. The remark seems to use the impersonal for dramatic effect, to achieve a distancing, commentator-like position with respect to the event described. The referent in (15b) is identified in the immediately preceding discourse, marked in the example in bold, with no italics. The impersonal here is not existential-presentational, and it is not the actor referent but the predicate itself which is in focus and presents new information.

- (15) a. [vaadake kus mul **visa-ti** praegu `jootraha
look.IMP.2PL where 1SG.ADE throw-IMPERS.PST now tip

allatulemise eest. (.)
coming.down for

‘look how I **was thrown** a tip just now for coming downstairs.’

- b. *ja=sis lugesin head artiklit.* (.) \$ *vist Pere ja Kodu ajakirjast, kus oli ka \$* (.)

*`loed ja noh nagu täielik `idüll tundub kõik, et **perel** on mingisugune oma*

`maja=ja (.) *ja tuleb välja=et* (.) *`iga reede **teh-akse***
every Friday do-IMPERS.PRS

`suurkoristus ja ja `mees ka koristab [jõle `hoolega
big.clean-up.NOM and and man.NOM also clean.PRS.3SG awful care.COM

ja kõik on väga ilus
and all.NOM be.PRS.3 very beautiful

‘and then I read a good article from the magazine Family and Home, I think, where you read and it just seems like a complete idyll, where **the family** has their own house and it turns out that every Friday **they do** a big clean-up and and the man also cleans up awfully carefully and everything’s so nice’

Both examples raise the question of why the speakers choose an impersonal construction. In (15a), the impersonal creates a humorous, dramatic effect. In (15b), immediately after introducing a new discourse referent *pere* ‘family’, the speaker suppresses the identity of that same referent with the impersonal. If not for suppressing the actor, then what is the function here of the impersonal? In this example, it seems the impersonal serves to

highlight the generalisation, not in this case to a broader group of people, but rather to a weekly routine that takes place in this family every Friday. We will return to the question of referents already present in the immediately preceding discourse in section 4.2.2.1. However, the discourse in example (15b) continues with the following (16), which describes a particular event in the course of this routine.

- (16) *siuke probleem on= et, no jõu-takse: riidekapi*
 such problem.NOM be.PRS.3 that well reach-IMPERS.PRS wardrobe
koristamiseni=ja=sis naine avastab et kule et sul on sin umbes kolgend kaks
 clean-up.TERM
siidsärki, mida sa ei `kanna, (.) need on `moest läind, ja igasugused imelikud=et
äkki me viskaksime nad `ära=või paneks `kaltsuks või: (.) midagi sellist.

‘so the problem is, well **they arrive** at the wardrobe clean-up and then the woman discovers that hey, you have about thirty silk shirts here that you don’t wear, they’re out of fashion, and all kinds of weird ones and maybe we could throw these away or make rags out of them or something’

Here the use of the impersonal may come from parallelism with the preceding impersonal rather than any canonical impersonal function. This does not appear to describe a routine in itself, but merely continues the already established usage of the impersonal construction in the text.¹¹

Example (17) provides counter-evidence to the notion that impersonals exclude specific, first and second-person discourse participants (see also Helasvuo 2006). In this dialogue, the two participants (E and P) discuss what to do with the baby, who is also present (T), when they go to a school show. E then turns and reports to the baby that s/he is “being talked about”, i.e. that the speakers themselves are talking about the baby (i.e. *sinust räägitakse* ‘one is speaking about you’ can be paraphrased as ‘we are speaking about you’):¹²

¹¹ Note, too, that the impersonal verb in (16) is unaccusative. As discussed in Blevins (2003), Torn (2002, 2006a), Torn-Leesik (2009), and Vihman (2004), the Estonian impersonal takes unaccusative verbs, and here we can see that unaccusative impersonals occur in naturally occurring spoken language. This has been appealed to as one argument against analysing the Estonian impersonal as a passive.

¹² This is an example of “motherese”, as pointed out by a reviewer. We note that impersonals are often used in the same way the 1PL forms may be used in English motherese (e.g. *We’re getting a little sleepy, aren’t we?*). Nevertheless, this impersonal

- (17) E: *a mis me selle `selliga teeme. (0.3)*
 ‘but what’ll we do with this guy.’
- P: *midagi. (0.3) \$ võtame `kaasa. \$ (0.7)*
 ‘nothing. we’ll take him along.’
- T: *mqm*
- P: *laseme `lava peale. (2.2) mhemhe (1.2)*
 ‘we’ll let him go up on the stage. haha’
- E: *jaa, `sinust räägi-takse. (4.4)*
 yes 2SG.ELA talk-IMPERS.PRS
 ‘yes, **one is talking** about you.’

The examples of impersonals with existential interpretation provide plenty of referents that are not only specific, but also singular, contrary to the strong expectation that impersonals tend to be plural. The following is an example of a presumably singular impersonal actor referent.

- (18) *`onkel (.) oli `ka (.) ä bussipeatuses. (.) rohkem rahvast ei olnud. mina `mõtlen seal omi `mõtteid=ja (.) vaatan et mingisugune (.) `auto peatub, (.) ei tee sellest autost `väljagi, mutkui: seisan=edasi. (.) siis see (.) `onkel küsib minu käest et=õ (.) kas `teid hõiga-takse. (.)*
 Q 2PL.PART yell-IMPERS.PRS
- mina vaatan, ei sellist autot ma (.) `küll ei tea, ühtegi \$ tuttavat sellisega ei `sõida. \$ (0.5) ütlesin et `vaevalt. (0.5) tema vaatas mind väga `kahtlustavalt. [noh (.) ja (.)] ja=siss teh-ti sealit `kõvemat häält.*
 and and then make-IMPERS.PST there.ELA louder.PART noise.PART
- (.) ja=s siis tuli=välja=et hoopis seda meest `ennast*
 that.PART man.PART himself.PART
- hõiga-ti.***
 yell-IMPERS.PST

‘there was an uncle at the bus stop, there weren’t any other people. I’m there thinking my own thoughts and I see some car stop and don’t pay any attention to it, just keep standing there and then the uncle asks me **are you being called**. I look and see that I sure don’t know any car like that, I don’t know anyone who drives a car like that. I said hardly. He looked at me very suspiciously. well and then **they made** a louder noise and then it turned out the man himself **was being yelled at**.’

use should be classified as a specific referent, as Estonian does not otherwise employ impersonal verb forms with a 1PL meaning, unlike Finnish.

In (19), the actor refers to a small possible set of people. Indeed, (19) may be an example of discretion, wherein the impersonal is used to avoid overt self-reference, or it may be a rhetorical device in this reported speech for exaggerating the nerviness of the original questioner, who arrives and immediately asks whether s/he will be fed:

- (19) *Sis ta küsis kohe väga resoluutseltet noh kas süia ka ikka*
 then 3SG ask.PST.3SGright very resolutely that well Q food also still

ant-akse

give-IMPERS.PRS

‘Then s/he asked very resolutely: well, **will food also be given**’

The *Riigikogu* minutes also contain examples of existential impersonals with specific referents (28 instances altogether). In example (20), Member of Parliament Marek Strandberg talks about a survey conducted by Georg Tamm. While in the first sentence he specifies the person who conducted the survey, Strandberg subsequently switches to the impersonal form when describing how the survey was carried out. The use of the impersonal here leads the hearer to assume that Georg Tamm is not the only one who questioned the respondents, but that he led a group conducting the survey.

- (20) *Kunagi aastate eest Tallinna Ülikoolis ühte olulist uuringut tehes selline
 sotsioloog nagu Georg Tamm tuvastas väga huvitava asja.*

Kui küsitle-ti ettevõtjaid ja küsitle-ti inimesi
 when survey-IMPERS.PST entrepreneurs.PART and survey-IMPERS.PST people.PART

sel teemal, et kas nad on valmis olema säästlikud
 this.ADE topic.ADE

*oma tehnoloogiavalikutes jne, jne, tuli välja üks oluline kriteerium ja nimelt see,
 et kõik olid nad seda valmis, kuid ainult ühel juhul – kui kõigile kehtivad samad
 reeglid.*

‘One time years ago while conducting an important study a sociologist by the name of Georg Tamm discovered a very interesting thing. When entrepreneurs **were surveyed** and people **were surveyed** on the topic of whether they were ready to economise in their technological choices, etc., etc., an interesting criterion came out, namely that everyone was ready for it, but only on one condition – that the same rules apply to everyone.’

In examples (21–22) the impersonal form clearly refers to a specific person. While in (21) the Prime Minister uses the impersonal to refer specifically to Toomas Varek, the Member of Parliament who put the questions to the Prime Minister, in (22) MP Vilja Savisaar clearly refers to the Speaker Ene Ergma, who has the authority to allocate time to Members of Parliament to ask questions.

- (21) *Head arupärijad! Kuna küsimused loe-ti kõik ette,*
 dear.PL questioners.NOM since questions.NOM read-IMPERS.PST all aloud
siis ei ole mul mingit tarvidust neid uuesti kordama
 then not be 1SG.ADE any.PART need.PART these.PART again repeat.INF
hakata.
 begin.INF

‘Dear questioners! Because all the questions **were read** out loud, there is no need for me to repeat them again.’

- (22) Ergma: *Head kolleegid! Palun üks küsimus korraga! Ja palun nüüd küsimus, kolleeg Vilja Savisaar!*

‘Dear colleagues! One question at a time, please! And now your question please, colleague Vilja Savisaar!’

- Savisaar: *Kas mulle aega ka an-takse või?*
 Q 1SG.ALL time.PART also give-IMPERS.PRS or

‘**Will I be given** time as well?’

- Ergma: *An-takse, an-takse! Palun uuesti, Vilja Savisaar.*
 give-IMPERS.PRS give-IMPERS.PRS

‘**One gives / you will be given** time! Again, please, Vilja Savisaar.’

Example (22) is particularly curious, in that Speaker Ergma picks up on the impersonal and echoes it, in effect using the impersonal to refer to none other than herself. The use of impersonal forms in these examples can be regarded as a politeness strategy. The speakers do not want to refer to their interlocutors (let alone themselves) directly and hence opt for the impersonal form, which satisfies an argument slot whose referent must be filled through interpretation of the context on the part of the hearer. Referring to Brown and Levinson (1978), Hakulinen (1987) addresses the notion that languages differ in politeness strategies regarding reference to the addressee. While in English it is polite to mention the name of the addressee, the opposite strategy is used in Finnish (Hakulinen 1987: 142)

and Estonian (Erelt 1990, Lindström 2010). Hakulinen claims that avoiding explicit reference to human agents is very common in Finnish and one of these avoidance strategies is the use of the Finnish “impersonal passive” construction. Moreover, she claims that “one of the motivations behind the development of an impersonal passive has been politeness: to avoid referring to the participants too explicitly when uttering a face-threatening act” (1987: 146). Lindström (2010) has recently analysed various politeness strategies used in Estonian to avoid reference to the participants as well, including the impersonal. The following example (23) again shows use of the impersonal to refer to second-person discourse participants, presumably an effect of both the formal register used in the Parliament sittings and more generally used politeness strategies.

- (23) *Kas soovi-takse avada läbirääkimisi? Läbirääkimisi*
 Q wish-IMPERS.PRS open.INF negotiations.PART negotiations.PART
*avada ei soovi-ta*¹³
 open.INF not wish-IMPERS
 ‘Does one wish to open negotiations? No one wishes to open negotiations’

4.2.2.1 Further specifying the actor: Overt mention

Contrary to what is commonly taken to be the canonical function of the Estonian impersonal, the corpus reveals a number of examples of the impersonal used where the referent is not only salient or known to both speaker and hearer, but even occurs with antecedent pronouns or NPs in the immediately adjoining discourse. Here we examine some further examples which are not in accordance with the prototypical descriptions of impersonal constructions as actor-suppressing or backgrounding devices.

The following examples all have overt reference to the actor in the discourse preceding the impersonal construction. The impersonal merely recodes that known and salient referent. Hence these are all examples of specific existential referents. Example (24) shows a 3SG pronoun recoded in the subsequent turn with an impersonal; (25) contains reference to two people by name, referred to in the subsequent clause by impersonal morphology.

¹³ The negative present impersonal is formed with the negative *ei* ‘not’ and the impersonal stem ending in *-ta*.

- (24) M: *mis ta kirjutab seal.* (0.8)
 what 3SG write.PRS.3SG there
 ‘what does **he** write there.’
- K: *kultuuril on `eeslikõrvad.* (.) ***kirjuta-takse*** (2.0)
 culture.ADE be.PRS.3 donkey’s.ears.NOM write-IMPERS.PRS
 ‘culture has donkey’s ears (.) **is written**’
- M: ((*loeb ajalehest*)) ***Ka:rlo Funk.*** (.)
 ‘((reading from the newspaper)) **Karlo Funk** [a journalist].’
- (25) *ja= sis* (.) ***Heiki*** *ja* ***Olev*** *ja=tantsivad* *`puntratantsu.* (.)
 and then Heiki and Olev and dance.PRS.3PL huddle.dance.PART
loomulikult sis ***haara-ti*** *mind* *`ka* *ja= sis* (.) *no=* *`keegi*
 naturally then grab-IMPERS.PST 1SG.PART also and then well someone
peab *ju* *`nalja* *tegema*
 must.PRS.3SG well joke.PART make.INF
 ‘and then **Heiki and Olev** and they’re dancing a huddle dance naturally then **they grabbed** me too and then well someone has to be funny’

In (25), the shift from personal reference with proper names to impersonal reference is also accompanied by a shift in tense, from present to past. What seems to have invoked the use of the impersonal here is the participation of the narrator; the impersonal has the effect of distancing the event from the speaker, although the narrator is not the actor, but rather the undergoer, coded as a direct object.

The examples in (26) show a personal verb (shown without italics) followed by an impersonal verb (in bold), sharing the same actor referent. (26a) involves self-correction or interruption in the move from a personal to impersonal verb form, whereas in (26b), the shift from a first person plural verb (no italics, *läksime* ‘we went’) to impersonal (*[h]akati* ‘one started/it was begun’) is more subtle. Here the shift seems to result from the speaker’s desire to remove him or herself from the event described, which evolved into drunken revelry.

- (26) a. *lähed* *välja`käiku* *no* *`ükski asi* *ei* *`seisa.* (.) *panime*
 go.PRS.2SG outhouse.ILL well one thing not stand put.PST.1PL
`uued *noh* *uued* *`kaaned* ***pan-di.*** *`minema* *vii-di.*
 new.PL well new.PL lids.NOM put-IMPERS.PST away take-IMPERS.PST
 ‘you go to the outhouse, well not one thing is standing up, *we put* new, well, new lids **were put.** they were taken away.’

- b. *s=läksime `koju. (0.5) sis **aka-ti** `tähistama seda, (0.8)*
 go.PST.1PL home then start-IMPERS.PST celebrate.INF that
ja=s=`Pohlakas=sai mingid ee ekspeditsiooni `rahad (.) ja `selle eest ta=ostis
`puhtalt `viina=noh. (...) ((lauanõude kolin, köhatust)) sis nad (.) kammisid
ennast nii `segi=ja

‘then we went home then **one started** to celebrate it and then Pohlakas got some expedition funds and he just bought vodka with the money, well ((sounds of dishes clattering, a cough)) then they got drunk and’

It is also not uncommon in the spoken language data to find specifications of the impersonal referent following the use of impersonals. In (27), the topic of discussion is the temperature, and how cold it has to be (‘20 degrees below zero’) for a school event to be cancelled. The impersonal may be intended to be read with a corporate meaning (i.e. ‘school officials said’), but when the mother (E) asks for identification of the impersonal actor, then P specifies the actor with a singular referent, ‘the teacher’ (in bold).

- (27) P: *`kaks`kiimmend `öel-di.= ((veendunult))*
 twenty say-IMPERS.PST
 ‘twenty **it was said.** ((with conviction))’
 E: *= `kes `ütles. ((nõudlikult))*
 ‘who said. ((demandingly))’ (1.1)
 P: *`õpetaja `ütles.= ((veendunult))*
 teacher.NOM say.PST.3SG
 ‘**the teacher** said. ((with conviction))’

In (28), however, no specification is asked for, yet the actor is identified nevertheless. In this example, it seems that the impersonal is used as convenient shorthand where the actor is not judged to be relevant at first. The effect of what was said is judged to be more important than who said it, and the speaker may also be unsure about who said it. However, as this involves blaming someone for having said something wrong, the speaker eventually feels the need to specify (adding the hesitant ‘probably’), again producing a singular actor (‘the coach’, in bold) for the previously impersonal referent.

- (28) A: \$ ehhei \$ (.) `ei, [seal oli vist mingi niuke] noh
 no no there be.PST.3SG probably some kind well
 `rattaülekande, (.) noh `see, (1.0) talle **öel-di** `valesti, (.)
 bike.drivetrain well this 3SG.ALL tell-IMPERS.PST wrong
 ‘no there was some kind of a bike drivetrain but well he **was told** wrong.’

M: [(---)]

A: selle (1.5) kellele ta `kaotas, (.)
 ‘the one he lost to,’

M: `ameeriklasele [niikuinii.]
 ‘an American of course.’

A: [nono] ameeriklasele jah, sellele `Jangile=et, (0.5) et ee (3.0) noh kuidagi
 mingi ratta selle ee ketiülekande ee `valeinfo oli noh.
 ‘well, yeah, an American, to that Jang that uh, well somehow there was some
 bike – uh chain transfer, um, and it was the wrong information.’

M: *mhmh*

A: et **öel-di** talle `ühtepidi, aga tegelikult oli
 that tell-IMPERS.PST 3SG.ALL one.way but actually be.PST.3SG
 `teistpidi, ja=sis=ta (1.0) ee noh ei suutnud ei `saanud enam ü- ümber (.)
 another.way
 `orienteeruda=noh [liiga vähe] `aega oli.

‘he **was told** one thing but actually it was the other way around and then well
 he wasn’t able to – he couldn’t reorient himself, there was too little time.’

M: [*mhmh*] *hehe*

A: `sõidu ajal **öel-di** talle seda, noh `treener
 drive.GEN during tell-IMPERS.PST 3SG.ALL this.PART well coach.NOM
 ütles vist, ta (.) `rääkis kuskil= vä.
 tell.PST.3SG probably 3SG say.PST.3SG somewhere or
 ‘during the race **he was told** that, well, **the coach** I think said somewhere,
 or.’

Finding a number of specific impersonal referents among the examples culled from spoken data, we must reexamine what the impersonal construction is used for. Certainly impersonalisation, or backgrounding the actor, remains an important motivating factor, but the impersonal seems to have other pragmatic effects as well, such as distancing the speaker from the event (25, 26b), drawing attention to some unexpected element in a

situation (15a, 19), and framing the utterance in a pragmatically marked way (17, 22).

4.3 Corporate readings

Another frequent use of impersonal constructions is to give rise to a corporate reading.¹⁴ The corporate reading applies when the impersonal referent is a socially designated group of people, such as the government, committees, or institutions and authorities such as the school, the police, and others. Utterances with corporate readings form a type of sub-class of existentials, yet they form a large group distinct from either specific or vague referent existentials. In most cases, if not explicitly expressed, the discourse context makes the corporate referent clear and distinguishable from ordinary specific and vague referents; alternatively, the corporate impersonal is used when the exact identity or name of institutional agents is not known or not considered relevant, or indeed when the agents involved in some institutional action are too diverse and distant for the speakers to track. In the spoken language corpus, we found 72 instances of corporate impersonals, compared to a very high proportion of corporate impersonals in the minutes of the *Riigikogu* (a total of 464 instances), due to stylistic and content factors we discuss below. The identity of corporate referents is often easy to identify, but it is not usually overtly mentioned.

Examples (29–30) illustrate sentences with corporate readings from the spoken corpus. In example (29) the speaker refers to the Ministry of Education, which issues education certificates, and in example (30) to the school authorities who made it possible for teachers to attend psychology courses. In both examples a reference to the corporate body (*ministeerium* and *kool*) appears either in the same clause as the impersonal, as in (29), or in the subsequent clause, as in (30), which rules out a vague reading of the impersonal referent.

¹⁴ It is noteworthy that the *poolt* agentive phrases in written Estonian impersonal sentences often receive a corporate reading (see Torn 2006b).

- (29) A: [*@ MIS `VAHE= ON `HARIJDUSE `TASEMEL KUI `PABER*
 what difference be.PRS.3 education.GEN level.ADE if paper.NOM
 ``*SAADE-TAKSE MINISTEERIUMIST.@=)*
 send-IMPERS.PRS ministry.ELA
 ‘what difference does the level of education make if the paper **is sent** from **the ministry**.’
- (30) *meile vői- õpetajatele võimalda-ti minna (.)*
 1PL.ALL or teachers.ALL enable-IMPERS.PST go.INF
psühholoogiakursustele kahepäevastele kool maksis selle
 psychology.courses.ALL two-day.PL.ALL school.NOM pay.PST.3SG this
`kinni= ja.
 for and
 ‘**it was made possible** for us – or teachers – to attend two-day psychology courses, **the school** paid for it and.’

Examples in which no explicit reference is made to the designated actor referent are more commonly attested. For instance, in example (31) speakers discuss student loans and benefits in Finland and Estonia but do not mention who releases the loans and disburses the benefits (and most likely could not name the responsible bodies). It is usually possible to infer a probable referent of the corresponding impersonal actor from the context or real-world knowledge. These utterances cannot be attributed a universal meaning because the use of impersonal forms here does not imply ‘everyone/someone does something’ but rather that there are certain designated bodies with the authority to do something; the procedure is in place, and it is irrelevant who is formally responsible.

- (31) E: =*Soomes ja igal=`pool an-takse üliõpilastele*
 Finland.INE and everywhere.ADE give-IMPERS.PRS students.ALL
`soodustusi ja `stipendiumeid maks-takse, (0.5)
 benefits.PART and stipends.PART pay-IMPERS.PRS
 ‘in Finland and everywhere **they give** benefits to students and **they pay** stipends.’
- M: *ja `meil ei maks-ta.*
 and 1PL.ADE not pay-IMPERS
 ‘and with us (here), **they don’t pay**.’

E: `meil ei (.) maks-ta `midagi
 1PL.ADE not pay-IMPERS nothing
 ‘here **they don’t pay** anything’

Example (32) gives a slightly different type of corporate referent. Here the actor of the impersonal verb is not the government but weather forecasters, another socially designated group with authority in a certain realm.

(32) E: nüüd *luba-takse* `külma `küll aga ma=i=tea kas `piisavalt külma.
 now promise-IMPERS.PRS cold
 ‘now **they forecast** cold but I don’t know if it’s cold enough.’

P: .hh `kahäkümne `kraadiga me=võime `koju jääda, sest siis ei `tule seda `ketti.
 (1.5)
 ‘with twenty degrees we can stay home, because then the chain won’t happen.’

The impersonals used in the minutes of the *Riigikogu* most often refer to a corporate agent. There were 464 instances of corporate impersonals, amounting to 74.5% of the total impersonals culled from the Parliamentary minutes, as compared to 27% of the spoken language data. These results reflect the authors’ expectations, as the parliamentary setting is conducive to an array of corporate actors, making the impersonal an unusually frequent construction, specifically with the corporate reading.

In most cases, matters discussed in the minutes involve the actions of socially designated agents, i.e. ministries, committees of the *Riigikogu*, the Cabinet, etc. Examples (33–34) illustrate corporate readings of impersonals in the *Riigikogu* data. While in example (33), reference is made to the Ministry of Social Affairs, example (34) refers to a commission convened by the Cabinet. The corporate referents can clearly be inferred from the discourse, as in this context the body who prepares a law or takes a decision is socially or legally designated.

(33) *Kui valmista-ti ette puuetega inimeste sotsiaaltoetuste*
 when prepare-IMPERS.PST disabled.PL.COM people.GEN social.support.PL.GEN
seaduse muudatusi, siis oli meil väga pikalt arutlusel ka Eesti Puuetega
 law.GEN amendments.PART
Inimeste Kojas, millal seadus peaks jõustuma.

‘When the amendments to the disabled persons welfare benefits act were **being prepared**, then we also had long discussions in the Estonian Chamber of Disabled People regarding when the law should go into effect.’

- (34) *Koosolekul otsusta-ti moodustada töögrupp, et välja töötada*
 meeting.ADE decide-IMPERS.PST form.INF work.group.NOM

meetmed kütuse valdkonnas toimuvate maksupettuste ärahoidmiseks.

‘**It was decided** at the meeting to form a work group to develop measures to prevent ongoing tax fraud in the area of fuel.’

Example (35) presents an interesting case, and is emblematic of the highly formal register used in the *Riigikogu* setting. Kristiina Ojuland is the Vice Speaker chairing the *Riigikogu* sitting at the time. She says that she has accepted two parliamentary questions and then uses the impersonal form to say that these will be replied to in accordance with the Parliamentary Procedure Act. According to this statute, the Board of the *Riigikogu* has the power to make procedural rulings in parliamentary matters. Ojuland, as a member of the Board, first uses the personal and then the impersonal form to refer to the power that is vested in her – thus the whole impersonal sentence can be given a corporate reading.

- (35) *Olen juhatuse poolt vastu võtnud kaks arupärimist. Vastavalt Riigikogu*
 according.to Parliament.GEN

kodu- ja töökorrasedusele võe-takse need menetlusse.
 home and work.procedure.act.ALL take-IMPERS.PRS these processing.ILL

‘I have accepted two queries on behalf of the board. According to the Parliament’s Rules of Procedure Act these **will be processed**.’

The corporate reading of impersonals and similar constructions has been discussed in the literature, and is in line with what we know about impersonals. The next section, however, introduces a new functional type, which emerges partially from particularities of the Estonian grammatical system.

4.4 Hypothetical impersonals

Among the Estonian spoken language examples, certain predicates resist analysis according to the categories previously described. Certain *irrealis* predicates (predicates referring to nonfactual events or with nonactual referents) are not easily subsumed under either existential or universal labels: cases where the predicate refers to an event which is not generalised in either its frequency of occurrence or the scope of its agent, and where the impersonal voice seems to be chosen precisely because of the

indeterminacy of its actor and its occurrence. These predicates refer to a hypothetical or future event and involve reference to an abstract or nonexistent potential actor. Hence, the actor here is not vague and unspecified, but rather unspecifiable. The motivation for using the impersonal is therefore different from vague existential examples.

Because Estonian has no fully grammatical expression of a future tense category, the present-tense form of verbs is used to project events in the future. One common, and partially grammaticalised (Erelt, Erelt & Ross 2000: 396–397) overt means of expressing future events in Estonian is the verb *hakkama* ‘start’ used with the lexical verb, and this is attested among our future-hypothetical examples, as shown in example (36).

- (36) *mis: ta: `lassoga haka-takse `hambaid välja tõmba[ma= võ.]*
 what 3SG lasso.COM begin-IMPERS.PRS teeth.PART out pull.INF or
 ‘what she... **they’re going to start** pulling out teeth with a lasso.’

This example derives from a simple misunderstanding between interlocutors – the speaker of example (36) mishears the verb used by the previous speaker (*lass aga hambad erituvad* ‘let the teeth come out’), and repeats the misheard utterance in confusion. Hence, the impersonal actor has minimal semantic content. The utterance is a repetition of a misheard phrase, but the use of the impersonal form of the verb phrase, *hakatakse välja tõmbama* ‘one will start to pull out’, shows that the impersonal is convenient when no conceptual agent is referred to. In this example, the impersonal is employed in order to avoid reference to an incomprehensible agent with null semantic content – the focus is on the predicate.

In example (37), the speaker describes a new system in the school where she teaches, according to which the teacher designated as hall monitor during breaks between classes is responsible if the fire alarm is mishandled. The conditional clause makes use of an impersonal verb to refer to a hypothetical event which has not occurred and therefore designates no particular agent:

- (37) *Ja ku korrapidaja õpetaja ei nää ja tema korrapidamise ajal*
 and if teacher.on.duty not see and 3SG.GEN duty.GEN during
katki teh-akse siis maksab ise trahvi
 broken make-IMPERS.PRS then pay.PRS.3SG self fine.PART

‘And if the teacher on duty doesn’t see and **it’s broken** during his/her duty then s/he pays the fine him/herself’

Negative sentences often describe non-occurrence, and so contain either a referent who is not actualised as an actor or else a referent who remains unspecified, unfilled with semantic detail. Especially with reference to a future event, the use of a negative predicate may be associated with a particular actor, but often lends itself to the use of an impersonal or unmarked verb form. In the interchange in (38), the speaker P amends E's reference to a possible future event of the schoolhouse burning down with an impersonal causative 'someone burning it down':

- (38) P: [{-} `kool] *saab vanaks.* [`kolgend=viis.]
 'the school is going to get old [thirty-five].'
 E: [ei `tea.] (0.7)
 '[don't know.]'
 E: *kui ta enne `maha ei põle.*
 'if it doesn't burn down first.'
 P: `ei `põleta-ta.
 not burn(causative)-IMPERS
 'it isn't burnt down.'

Finally, generalisations which refer not to a specific event but to hypothetical future events are best categorised along with the above examples. Example (39) refers not to a universal actor, but to a purely hypothetical event with an indeterminate (though potentially specific) actor.

- (39) *no= aga `keegi ütleb kunagi `ikkagi on esimene*
 well but someone say.PRS.3SG sometime still be.PRS.3 first
kord ku talle üteldakse
 time when 3SG.ALL say-IMPERS.PRS
 'well but someone will say sometime there will have to be a first time when **it is said** to her'

Koenig & Mauner (2000) discuss the difference in meaning in French between *quelqu'un* 'someone' and the impersonal pronoun *on*. Here, the speaker begins with *keegi* 'someone', and finishes with *üteldakse* 'it is said', moving away from a semantically filled indefinite pronoun (which introduces a discourse marker) to a focus on the event itself (with the argument position satisfied but no discourse marker introduced), leaving the actor semantically unspecified. Anyone could be the first, but when it

happens, it will be a referent with narrow scope. Likewise, example (40) refers to a counterfactual event, an ironic comment on the etiquette of the host. This example again employs the impersonal as a rhetorical device for underlining a point as well as avoiding self-reference:

- (40) *panid hirmuga nii `kaugele=et `ära süü-asse =*
 put.PST.2SG fear.COM so far that away eat-IMPERS.PRS
 ‘you put it so far out of fear that **it’ll get eaten** up’

A final example of a hypothetical future event is an idiom which serves to illustrate the use of impersonals for hypothetical reference to irrealis events.

- (41) *ema naeris= et enne pee-takse noor*
 mother.NOM laugh.PST.3SG that before hold-IMPERS.PRS young.NOM
`sõda maha kui meie isa ükskord oma `püssi kätte
 war.NOM down than 1PL.GEN father.NOM once his gun.GEN hand.ILL
[saab.]
 get.PRS.3SG
 ‘mother laughed that first a young war **will be fought** before father finally gets his gun.’

Here, no agent is intended as really waging war, but the figure of speech is invoked to describe an unlikely event (akin to *over my dead body*). The impersonal is used, as the actor referent may refer to a generalised group of people, an unidentified group of people, an easily identified group, or it may represent an intentionally unfilled slot.

The hypothetical category is suggested strongly by the use of these marked impersonals which neither refer to a generalised actor nor to an unidentified but existing actor. These nonexistent actors seem to provide a distinct motivation for use of the impersonal. This category needs to be furnished with more examples in order to enable further analysis and research, but this is beyond the scope of the current paper.

4.5 Agentive phrases

Our analysis rests on the interpretation of the implicit actor referent. It is also pertinent, then, how freely the referent may be expressed alongside the impersonal construction. In addition to the explicit mention of the specific

referents in the impersonal as discussed in 4.2.2.1, Estonian voice constructions also accept various types of agentive phrases (see Lindström & Tragel 2007; Rajandi 1999/1968; Torn 2006b). Each type tends to display a preference for particular constructions and for either written or spoken language. The most frequent agentive phrase in written Estonian is the *poolt* agentive (the agent expressed in a *by*-phrase), followed by agents in oblique cases, particularly adessive and sometimes elative case. Although *poolt* agentive phrases occur with impersonal constructions, they are subject to several restrictions. Torn (2006b), examining written Estonian, shows that *poolt* agentive phrases typically include a collective noun that refers to a corporate group of people such as the police, the government, a jury, etc. When a singular noun or personal name is used, it generally refers to an authority or institution (e.g. the Prime Minister). Differences are also shown between synthetic and periphrastic impersonal forms, the latter being used with *poolt* agentive phrases more frequently. This difference is likely to be a result of language contact (Nemvalts 1998). As the periphrastic forms can be interpreted as personal passives, they are more likely to take *by*-phrases in analogy with English and other passives.

Lindström & Tragel (2007) investigate the use of adessive arguments and their semantic roles in impersonal and passive constructions in spoken Estonian. They find that in synthetic impersonals, an adessive argument does not tend to express an agent but realises rather location, addressee or possessor roles. In periphrastic impersonals, the adessive argument is more frequently used in an agentive capacity, yet here too it fulfills other semantic roles as well. The adessive argument is most often realized as the agent in passives and impersonals with a total object. A preliminary conclusion that may be drawn on the basis of these studies is that periphrastic impersonal and passive constructions accept agentive phrases in general more readily than synthetic impersonal forms.

One aim of this study was to investigate the use of agentive phrases in spoken impersonal utterances. Analysis of the material, however, turned up only one instance of the *poolt* agentive phrase used with an impersonal construction through all the data included from the Corpus of Spoken Estonian. This indicates that *poolt* agentive phrases are uncommon in ordinary spoken language. Echoing the findings of Torn (2006b), the only *poolt* phrase in the data does not refer to a specific person but to an institution (*haridusministeerium*, ‘Ministry of Education’).

- (42) *ja= siis* (.) *too-di* (.) *haridusminis`teeriumi* *poolt* *koolile*
 and then bring-IMPERS.PST education.ministry.GEN by/from school.ALL
\$`kingituseks \$ (1.0) tehnika`ime.
 present.TRANS technology.wonder.NOM
 ‘and then a technological miracle **was brought** to the school as a present **by/from**
the ministry of education.’

The *Riigikogu* data contain four instances of *poolt* agentive phrases used with synthetic impersonal forms. All of these phrases refer to a corporate body such as the Ministry of Finance, the police, or the public:

- (43) *Me teame, et möödunud aasta septembrikuus lahvatas niinimetatud*
spiooniskandaal, kus kaitsepolitsei poolt pee-ti kinni
 where security.police.GEN by hold-IMPERS.PST closed
Herman Simm ja Heete Simm, keda kahtlustati riigireetmisele kaasa aitamisel.
 Herman Simm and Heete Simm
 ‘We know that last year in September the so-called spy scandal erupted, where
 Herman Simm and Heete Simm, who were suspected of being accessories to
 treason, **were arrested by the intelligence service.**’

Regarding *poolt* agentive phrases in periphrastic ‘be’ + *-tud* (past passive participle) constructions in the corpora studied, the spoken language corpus does not include a single instance of such phrases, while the *Riigikogu* corpus contains 48 instances, 29 of which were used by the Vice-Speaker Jüri Ratas within the same utterance. These 29 instances represent a listing of proposed amendments that were presented by Erika Salumäe (19), the legal affairs committee (1), the bill’s lead committee (8) and the Centre Party (1).

Compared to the use of *poolt* agentive phrases, the use of adessive phrases is slightly more frequent in the spoken language corpus. Data from the corpus contains nine instances of adessive phrases in the synthetic impersonals and eight in ‘be’ + *-tud* constructions. However, analysis shows that only one of these phrases in synthetic impersonal forms could be considered an agentive phrase proper, as illustrated in (44). It is worth noting that while *poolt* phrases used as agentives generally receive an explicit agentive interpretation, adessive phrases may often be open to various interpretations. In (44), we could assume that it is we who are killing the rabbits, but the utterance can also be read to mean something like ‘rabbits are being killed at our place’ (i.e. we ourselves do not have to

be the agents involved). The latter reading would be analogous to *meil ei maksta* ‘here they don’t pay’ in example (31) above, where the agentive reading is ruled out.

- (44) *Jälle meil tape-takse jäneseid*
 again 1PL.ADE kill-IMPERS.PRS rabbits.PART
 ‘Rabbits **are being killed by us/at our place** again’

Periphrastic constructions in our data show seven instances of agentive adessives. Other adessive arguments fulfill other roles. There are only two adessive agentive phrases in the *Riigikogu* corpus. Such a scarcity of instances of adessives in this corpus may be explained by the more formal nature of the corpus; the use of adessives and *poolt* phrases is in almost complementary distribution through the two registers.

Rajandi (1999/1968) suggests that elative agentive phrases can also be used in impersonal and passive constructions. Our corpora reveal no explicitly agentive elative examples. Yet some elative phrases found in the data refer to a location that can be seen to create a frame for the referent fulfilling the agentive role. In example (29), repeated in (45), for instance, the elative *ministeeriumist* ‘from the ministry’ sets the context for the unspecified agent, an individual exercising the authority of the Ministry of Education.

- (45) A: [@ MIS `VAHE= ON `HARI]DUSE `TASEMEL KUI `PABER
 what difference be.PRS.3 education.GEN level.ADE if paper.NOM
 ``SAADE-TAKSE MINISTEERIUMIST.@ =)
 send-IMPERS.PRS ministry.ELA
 ‘what difference does the level of education make if the paper **is sent** from **the ministry**.’

We also found instances of other locative phrases that do not explicitly refer to the agent but help set a frame for possible agents. This is illustrated in (46), where the potential agents are people living in the East.

- (46) *ta ei tea kas idamaal seda süü-akse et tema*
 3SG not know whether east.land.ADE this.PART eat-IMPERS.PRS that 3SG
võib mulgi putru teile pakkuda.
 may.PRS.3SG Mulgi porridge.PART 2PL.ALL offer.INF
 ‘s/he doesn’t know if in the east this is eaten, s/he can offer you Mulgi porridge.’

In summary, overt agentive phrases are very infrequent in both of our spoken corpora, contrasting with higher frequency in written texts. When used, they tend to appear more frequently with periphrastic ‘be’ + *-tud* constructions, which may often be ambiguous between impersonal and personal passive readings. Adessive phrases are more common in ordinary spoken language, while *poolt* phrases tend to occur in more formal contexts.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

As impersonals are widely used in spoken language but have not been previously studied in Estonian spoken data, this paper’s contribution in mapping out their interpretations sheds new light on the semantics of the Estonian impersonal construction. The spoken-language impersonals examined here generally support existing analyses, but new data call into question some of the reigning assumptions. The very multiplicity of readings of the impersonal is problematic if we attempt to read the semantics directly from the overt linguistic cues, but can be accommodated quite naturally with the hypothesis that the interpretation of the actor is derived from context, overlaid on the unspecified semantics.

The finding that the Estonian impersonal is used in spoken language for well-known, salient referents is problematic for the backgrounding theory of impersonal semantics. We do not see the backgrounding of the actor as the sole primary function of the impersonal. Rather, in our view the basic semantics of the impersonal construction attributes the core semantic features of plurality, humanness and agentivity to the unspecified actor argument referent. Because it is unspecified, the actor is also often backgrounded, but this is not part of the core semantics. The rest of the interpretation, and the interpretational differences, derive from discourse context.

The fact that the implicit actor argument usually refers to a generalised group or unspecified actor has the effect of de-emphasising the actor argument, and often results in a focus on the predicate rather than the argument. The fact that the impersonal can be used to describe situations without specifying the actor leads to its usage as an actor-backgrounding device, as well as a politeness strategy, allowing the speaker to avoid mention of either the discourse participants or any overt actor and serving as a face-saving mechanism in Estonian (Lindström 2010).

In general, the universal and vague existential referents are most prominent in the spoken data, and these are best matched to the impersonal construction, in which the actor is not overtly marked. The impersonal verbal inflection satisfies the actor argument without contributing a discourse marker and leaving its content unspecified. In general, this is most commonly interpreted as an unspecified and generic or intentionally vague actor referent, but the existence of specific existential referents in the spoken data makes it clear that factors other than the veiling of the identity of the actor also motivate the use of the impersonal. These factors may include rhetorical style, pragmatic emphasis on an unusual aspect of the situation, or politeness considerations.

The corporate reading of impersonals is not new in cross-linguistic analyses, but analyses of the Estonian impersonal have not explicitly mentioned the corporate referent as a distinct reading (though Torn 2006b discusses the corporate nature of many of the referents of agentive *poolt* phrases). The *Riigikogu* data show that the corporate reading holds an important place in impersonal semantics. In these examples, the identity of the actor is usually not masked, but instead it is taken to be either irrelevant or obvious. The emphasis is on the predicate and the event denoted by it, not the implicit actor. The actor is interpreted as the corporate body whose responsibility it is to carry out the action in question. The hypothetical reading additionally highlights some usages of impersonals which have not been examined, particularly the use of the impersonal to form predicates which have semantically empty actor referents. In these cases, the impersonal may indeed be employed to mask the actor referent, implying that some actor may fill the role of carrying out the action, but that this actor does not currently exist or the status of the action is nonactual, relegated to an unspecified and maybe questionable future time.

The very infrequent use of agentive adverbials or any other overtly specified agents in the spoken data may support the view that the impersonal construction is used to deflect attention from the actor, yet it also shows that the implicit actor fills the argument slot it occupies. If it is to be specified or identified, that takes place on the level of discourse pragmatics, but not within the semantics that is read directly from the utterance, and typically not through an adverbial linked to the implicit argument. The more frequent use of agentive adverbials in written language is most probably a result of influence from Indo-European languages with personal passives, and these examples are often judged to be awkward by many native speakers.

As impersonals in written Estonian have not been classified according to the readings discussed in this paper, it is as yet unclear to what extent our findings are particular to spoken language. It is clear, however, from the comparison of the two datasets analysed here, that differences exist between registers and levels of formality. Because of attributes particular to the spoken and written registers, the specific existential category may not prove to be highly relevant in written Estonian, whereas it is unavoidable in analysing spoken Estonian. The interactional nature of spoken language, and the salient factor of common knowledge and common discourse context allows the interpretation of implicit actors as pointing to specific and identifiable referents. This is achieved through the discourse context, and pragmatic considerations also account for why speakers may choose the impersonal construction when the aim is not to background the actor, but rather to mark the utterance in some way. This may serve as a reminder of the importance of including spoken data in linguistic analysis to ensure a complete picture.

Abbreviations

ABL	ablative	NEG	negative
ADE	adessive	NOM	nominative
AFF	affirmative	PART	partitive
ALL	allative	PL	plural
APP	active past participle	PPP	passive past participle
COM	comitative	PRS	present
COND	conditional	PST	past
ELA	elative	Q	question marker
ESS	essive	SG	singular
GEN	genitive	TERM	terminative
ILL	illative	TRANS	translative
IMP	imperative	1	first person
IMPERS	impersonal	2	second person
INE	inessive	3	third person
INF	infinitive		

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