



Three impersonal constructions in Muscogee

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Abstract. The term “impersonal” typically refers to sentence types with null or dummy subjects (Siewierska 2008, Creissels 2008). Muscogee has three different impersonal constructions in which an affix on a verb leads to an impersonal sentence type. This paper describes the impersonal passive in Muscogee as well as two distinct agentive and nonagentive impersonal affixes with arbitrary human reference. The description is based on narrative texts, elicitation, and 14 hours of conversation.

Keywords. impersonal, impersonal passive, historical linguistics, Muskogean, Muscogee, incorporation, indefinites, agency

1. Background. Muscogee (or Mvskoke, Maskoke, Muskogee, Creek) has a split alignment system. Case marking distinguishes between subjects and nonsubjects (used for objects, locations, and adverbs) (1–2).

- (1) Efv̄t wohkes.¹
 ifá-t wo:hk-ís
 dog-S bark.L-IND
 ‘The dog is barking.’ (Martin 2011:21)
- (2) Efv̄t pose lvstēn assēces.
 ifá-t pó:si lást-i:-n á:ssi:c-ís
 dog-S cat black-DUR-NS chase.L-IND
 ‘The dog is chasing a black cat.’ (Martin 2011:22)

Person marking on verbs operates on an agentive vs. nonagentive basis (Martin 2011:171ff). The agent person markers are suffixed (3), while the patient person markers are prefixed (4).

- (3) a. Ēskis.
 i:sk-éy-s
 drink.L-1SG.A-IND
 ‘I’m drinking.’
- b. Opanis.
 opa:n-éy-s
 dance.L-1SG.A-IND
 ‘I’m dancing.’

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¹ The Muscogee alphabet is used in line 1 of examples, with a phonemic transcription in line 2. In the phonemic transcription, nasal vowels are followed by superscript /ⁿ/, /c/ = IPA /tʃ/, and /y/ = IPA /j/.

- (4) a. Cvhekokkes.
ca-híko:kk-ís
 1SG.P-hiccup.L-IND
 ‘I’m hiccupping.’
- b. Cvfekēkes.
ca-fiki:k-ís
 1SG.P-shake.L-IND
 ‘I’m shaking.’

The phonemic forms of agent and patient series of person markers are shown in Tables 1–2.

	Singular	Plural
First person	-ay (-ey)	-iy
Second person	-íck	-á:ck
Third person	(no mark)	

Table 1. Agent person markers

	Singular	Plural
First person	ca-	po-
Second person	ci-	ci-
Third person	(no mark)	

Table 2. Patient person markers

In this paper I describe three impersonal constructions:²

- impersonal passive *-ho-*
- impersonal agent *-ak*
- impersonal patient *isti-*

This research was inspired by questions I received from advanced learners of Muscogee. I will argue that *-ak* and *isti-* could be included in the agent and patient person marker series.

2. Impersonal passive *-ho-*. Muscogee *-ho-* is used when the identity of an agent is unimportant. One use is for a generalized human agent of a transitive (5) or intransitive (6) verb:

- (5) “Hēcetv tokot owēs” mahokvtēt onkv...
 hĩ:ⁿc-itá tó:ko:-t ô:ⁿw-i:-s má:ho:k-atí:-t ôn-ka
 see.N-INF be.not-DUR-SS be.F-DUR-IND say.IMPL.L-P5-SS be.F-so
 “‘You’re not supposed to stare at it,” **they/people** used to say, so...’ (1992a)

² The term “impersonal” typically refers to sentence types with null or dummy subjects (Siewierska 2008, Creissels 2008).

- (6) Hiyowat tat ēkvnv kerreseko fakv vpeyephoyat...
 hayyô:ʰwa:t =ta:t i:kaná kíŋ-i-siko-: fá:ka apiy-í**ho**:y-â:t
 now =ATN land know-I-without-DUR hunting go.TPL-SPN.IMPL.L-REL
 ‘But now, **they/people** go hunting on unfamiliar lands...’ (1992c)

Muscogee *-ho-* can also be used for human agents that are more specific, but unimportant:

- (7) “Hompicvkēs” mahket efv tat hompihohcen...
 hompeyc-ak-í:-s máhk-it, ifá =ta:t hompey**hó**hc-in
 feed-IMPL.A-DUR-IND say.H-SS dog =ATN feed.IMPL.H-DS
 ‘Saying “Let’s feed him,” **they** [two minor characters] fed the dog...’ (1992c)

- (8) Cufen vkvlvranet ’soh-vpehoyan...
 cofí-n akál-ała:n-ít s-ohh-apí**ho**:y-â:n
 rabbit-NS pour-PROSP.L-SS INST-LOC-go.TPL.IMPL.L-REL.DS
 ‘When **he/they** [a minor character] went up to pour it on Rabbit...’ (1939b)

When used with a transitive verb, Muscogee *-ho-* leads to greater emphasis on an object and is close in meaning to the English passive:

- (9) Momis este sossihocof...
 mô:meys ísti sosséy**ho**:c-ô:f
 but people cast.out.TPL.IMPL.L-when
 ‘But when the people were put forth...’ (Matthew 9:25)

The object in an impersonal passive in Muscogee does not become a subject, however: Objects continue to be marked as objects, taking nonsubject *-n*:

- (10) Ue-morken yvhvn vkvlhoyen
 oy-mó:łk-i-**n** yahá-**n** akál**ho**:y-ín
 water-boil-I-NS wolf-NS pour.on.IMPL.L-DS
 ‘...water was poured on Wolf...’ / ‘...**they** poured boiling water on Wolf...’ (1939b)

The foregrounded object is also not treated as a subject for switch-reference:

- (11) Vketēcvlke este nvcomusēn vpeyecihocen fullof...
 akiti:c-álki ísti nacóm-os-i:-n apiyicey**hó**:c-in foll-ô:f
 guard-GPL person several-DIM-DUR-NS send.TPL.IMPL.F-DS be.about.TPL.L-when
 ‘When several guards had been sent and were about...’ (ca. 1940b)

In (11), the noun phrase *akiti:c-álki ísti nacóm-os-i:-n* ‘several guards’ is highlighted, but marked as a nonsubject. The use of different-subject *-in* at the end of the first clause shows that it is also treated as a nonsubject for switch-reference.

Overt subjects are generally not accepted in impersonal passive clauses:

- (12) a. Sukcvn uewvn vcvnhoyes.
 sókca-n óywa-n acánho:y-ís
 bag-NS water-NS pour.in.IMPL.L-IND
 ‘**They/people** are pouring water into bags.’ / ‘Water is being poured into bags.’
- b. *Este sukcvn uewvn vcvnhoyes.
ísti sókca-n óywa-n acánho:y-ís
 person bag-NS water-NS pour.in.IMPL.L-IND
 ‘**People** are pouring water into bags.’

Key points about impersonal passive *-ho-* in Muscogee:

- similar in form and placement to plural *-ho-*, always grammatically plural (used with plural suppletive verbs)
- backgrounds the role of the subject (translating as an English passive)
- used for a general human subject (often with plural sense)
- also used for actions by specific, insignificant characters with singular sense
- overt subjects are generally not accepted with impersonal passives
- may be used with intransitive verbs
- objects continue to be marked for case as objects and do not count as subjects for switch-reference

3. Impersonal agent *-ak*. Impersonal agent *-ak* is usually translated as ‘one’ or ‘you (indefinite)’.³ Where *-ho-* is usually for people in general, *-ak* is usually used for some or any random person (often with a singular sense).

- (13) Naket cecket on owat
 nâ:ki-t cí-cki-t ô-n o:w-â:t
 what-S 2P-mother-S be.F-DS be.L-REL

mvn vcak-ayvkēt ont o[s].
 má-n acákk-a:y-**ak**-í:-t ôn-t ó:-s
 that-NS after-go.SG.L-IMPL.A-DUR-SS be.F-SS be.L-IND
 ‘Whatever [clan] your mother was, that’s what **you** follow.’ (16046)

- (14) Uewv remhusēt vcvnken omat, cafkusēt os
 óywa límh-os-i:-t acánk-in o:m-â:t cá:fk-os-i:-t ô:-s
 water clear-DIM-DUR-SS filled-DS be.L-REL shallow-DIM-DUR-SS be.F-IND

komē wiktvkēs.
 ko:m-í: wēyt-**ak**-i:-s
 think.L-DUR might.F-IMPL.A-DUR-IND
 ‘When water [in a creek] is very clear, **one** might think that it’s very shallow.’ (MM)

³ Impersonal agent *-ak* is easily confused with plural *-ak*. The two suffixes appear in different positions in the verb: plural *-ak* is part of the verb stem and is affected by grades; impersonal agent *-ak* is outside the stem (in the same slot as the agent person markers).

- (15) Fo-tenētkv omē aren hēcvkēs.
fo:-tiní:tka ó:m-i: a:l-ín hi:c-**ak**-í:-s
bee-thunder like-DUR be.about.SG.L-DS see.L-IMPL.A-DUR-IND
‘**You**’ll see something that looks like a bumblebee.’ (MM)

The following examples were constructed by Margaret Mauldin to contrast impersonal passive *-ho-* (16a) and impersonal agent *-ak* (16b) using the verb *ma:k-* ‘say’.

- (16) a. Vwqlusēt os mahokēs.
awö:ᵐl-os-i:-t ô:-s má:**ho**:k-í:-s
close.N-DIM-DUR-SS be.F-IND say.IMPL.L-DUR-IND
‘**It could be** said it’s very close.’ (MM)
- b. Vwqlusēt os makvkēs.
awö:ᵐl-os-i:-t ô:-s ma:k-**ak**-í:-s
close.N-DIM-DUR-SS be.F-IND say.L-IMPL.A-DUR-IND
‘**One** could say it’s very close.’ / ‘**You** might say it’s very close.’ (MM)

Key properties of impersonal agent *-ak*:

- it translates as ‘one’ or ‘you (indefinite)’, usually with an arbitrary meaning
- it can appear with singular or plural verbs
- it is only used for the subject of agentive verbs

4. Impersonal patient *isti-*. Muscogee *isti* ‘person, people, someone’ is often incorporated into verbs. In older materials it usually translates as ‘someone’. In modern conversation it is used:

- to mean ‘you (indefinite)’ or ‘we’
- for singular or plural reference
- for the subjects of nonagentive verbs, the objects of agentive verbs, and the possessors of nouns

I did not give a clear description of this construction in Martin (2011). It was only after working on conversational data that I began to understand its use. Examples (17–20) show it translated as ‘you’ in an indefinite, arbitrary sense.

- (17) ’Tem vrahrvkvt ’sestvwoskekot ont owat...
(i)ti-m-ałahłaká-t (i)s-**ist**-awósk-íko-t ón-t o:w-â:t
RCP-D-different-SS INST-IMPL.P-used.to-NEG-SS be.L-SS be.L-REL
‘[Seminole speech] is different. When **you**’re not used to it.’ (16036)
- (18) ’Stehosekot tayet onko?
(**i**)st-ihós-íko-: tâ:y-it ón-ko-:
IMPL.P-forget-NEG-DUR be.able.F-SS be-NEG-DUR
‘**You** can’t ever forget, can you?’ (16046)

- (19) Onkv mv 'stehos'n owat...
 ôn-ka ma (i)st-ihó:s-n o:w-â:t
 be.F-SO that IMPL.P-forget.L-DS be.L-REL
 'So if **you** get lost...' (16041)
- (20) Ohwen mv enfēkakhoyat onkat 'stenfēhoken owat
 óhw-in ma in-fí:k-akho:y-â:t ón-k-a:t, (i)st-in-fí:ho:k-ín o:w-â:t,
 be.H-DS that D-pay-PL.IMPL.L-REL be-NEG-REL IMPL.P-D-pay.IMPL.L-DS be.L-REL
 'stehēret owvhanes.
 (i)st-in-hí:ʰ-it ów-aha:n-ís
 IMPL.P-D-good.N-SS be-PROSP.L-IND
 'And when they get paid, or when **you**'re paid, **you**'ll feel really good about yourself.'
 (16019)

Examples (21–23) show impersonal patient *isti-* used for the subject of stative verbs (21), for objects (22), for nonagentive subjects (23) and even for possessors (23).⁴ In these examples, it was translated by a bilingual speaker as 'we', 'us', or 'our' (referring to people in general).

- (21) 'Res en sulkusēn nak vpayen owat
 'l-is-in-sólk-os-i:-n nâ:k-ʔapa:y-ín o:w-â:t
 DIR-INST-D-many-DIM-DUR-DS thing-add.L-DS be.L-REL
 hompetv nak 'stelvwēt owēt onkv...
 homp-itá nâ:k (i)st-iláw-i:-t ô:w-i:-t on-ká
 eat-INF thing IMPL.P-hungry-DUR-SS be.F-DUR-SS be.L-SO
 'She would add to it to have plenty of food, because **we** were hungry so...' (16042)
- (22) Hiyowat 'stem apohicetv 'yacvkeko.
 hayyô:w-a:t (i)st-im-a:poheyc-itá (i)ya:c-ak-íko-:
 be.now-REL IMPL.P-D-listen-INF want-PL-NEG-DUR
 'Now they don't want to listen to **us**.' (16038)
- (23) Mv mēkusvkv enyvhiketv mvn 'mapohicet 'stvcolemvt ok.
 ma mi:kosáp-ka in-yaheyk-itá má-n (i)ma:pohěⁿyc-it (i)st-aco:l-imát-o:k
 that pray-GER D-sing-INF that-NS listen.N-SS IMPL.P-grow.up.L-P3-FOR
 Mvo 'stefēke ofv mv estōfis 'stenlikēt ont on...
 ma-ó (i)sti-fí:ki ó:fa ma istō:ʰf-eyes (i)st-in-léyk-i:-t ôn-t ó-n
 that-also IMPL.P-heart in that always.N-EVEN IMPL.P-D-sit.SG-DUR-SS be.F-SS be-DS
 'We all grew up listening to the church songs. It stays forever in **our** hearts.' (16045)

I have argued that impersonal agent *-ak* and impersonal patient *isti-* are close in meaning. That view is supported by examples that include both affixes on different verbs (24).

⁴ Note that (20) uses *isti-* as a possessor for arbitrary reference, while in (13), we see *ci-* 'your' used for an arbitrary possessor. The latter may reflect English influence.

- (24) 'tenuckēlus't owisen
 (is)ti-nockí:ⁿl-os-t o:w-êys-in,
 IMPL.P-sleepy.N-DIM-SS be.L-EVEN-DS
- alihket ayvkēt owemvts.
 a:-léyhk-it a:y-**ak**-í:-t ô:w-imát-s
 DIR-sit.SG.H-SS go.SG.L-IMPL.A-DUR-SS be.F-P3-IND
 'even though **we** [patient] were sleepy, [we] got up and **we** [agent] went.' (16038)

In (24), *isti-* is used for the subject of a nonagentive verb, while *-ak* is used in the same context and sense for an agentive verb. Both verbs in this passage refer to how children used to behave.

To support the idea that *-ak* is used for agents and *isti-* is used for nonagents, I did a brief survey of verbs appearing with each affix (25–26).

- (25) Verbs taking impersonal *-ak* for a subject
 acimk- 'climb (sg.)', ay- 'go (sg.)', itita:ki:c- 'prepare', itiwilapk- 'cross (a path)'
- (26) a. Verbs taking impersonal *isti-* for a subject
 acol- 'grow up', a:fack- 'be happy', ihos- 'forget, get lost', ilaw- 'get hungry', in-
 hił- 'feel good', nockil- 'get sleepy', 's-awosk- 'get used to'
- b. Verbs taking impersonal *isti-* for an object
 in-fí:k- 'pay (someone)', ma:poheyc- 'listen to'

The number of verbs found so far is small but is consistent with the description.

5. Conclusion.

Muscogee has three constructions that could be called impersonals.

- An impersonal passive is expressed with an infix *-ho-* that appears to derive from a plural marker. The impersonal passive deemphasizes the importance of the subject (also highlighting an object, if present).
- An impersonal agent is expressed with a suffix *-ak*. Its origin is uncertain, but it appears in the same "slot" as the other agent markers. It generally indicates an arbitrary human agent.
- An impersonal patient marker *isti-* may be newer. It seems to be an incorporated indefinite noun. It generally indicates an arbitrary human that is not an agent (e.g., a patient, a possessor, etc.).

Viewed in this way, we can consider revising Tables 1–2 as Tables 3–4 to include the impersonal agent and patient affixes with the person markers.

	Singular	Plural
First person	-ay (-ey)	-iy
Second person	-íck	-á:ck
Third person	(no mark)	
Impersonal	-ak	

Table 3. Agent person markers (revised from Table 1)

	Singular	Plural
First person	ca-	po-
Second person	ci-	ci-
Third person	(no mark)	
Impersonal	isti-	

Table 4. Patient person markers (revised from Table 2)

If correct, the development of impersonals in Muscogee reveals several points:

- The agent impersonal marker in this case appears to have developed first. The corresponding patient impersonal marker is transparently related to the word *ísti* ‘person’ and would appear to be newer. It remains to be seen whether incorporation of indefinites is a common source of impersonals and whether agentive impersonals tend to emerge first.
- Narrative texts can be useful for studying impersonal passives, but for the impersonal agent and patient affixes, conversational data turned out to be crucial.
- Our descriptions will be better if we listen carefully to questions that second language learners ask.

References

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