

Impersonals in Ndebele

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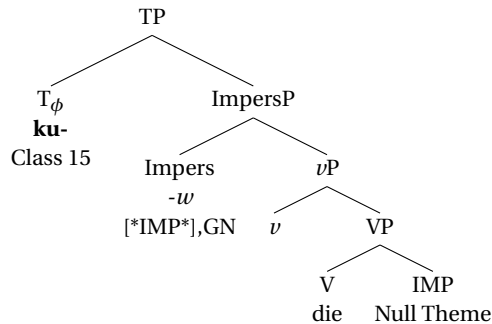
1 Introduction

- This study examines the syntax of impersonal constructions in Zimbabwean Ndebele (S44) as in (1).
- In (1), the unaccusative verb takes passive morphology, *-w*. The theme is not overly expressed and has a generic reading similar to *people in general/English one*.

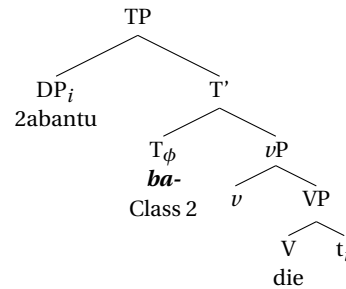
- (1) (E-Zimbabwe) *ku-ya-f-**iw**-a*.
 LOC-Zimbabwe 15SBJ-PRS-die-PASS-FV
 ‘(In Zimbabwe) there is dying/people die.’ *Impersonal*
- (2) *Abantu_i ba-ya-f-a* *t_i*.
 2people 2SBJ-PRS-die-FV
 ‘People are dying.’ ‘People die.’ *Canonical Unaccusative*

- Instances like (1) have been viewed as **passives of locative inversion** with a demoted theme (Khumalo 2010).

(3) The structure of (1)



(4) The structure of (2)



My proposal:

- I argue that (1) is not a passive, but **an impersonal construction with a syntactically present null impersonal pronoun (IMP)** generated in argument position as in (3) (see Zerbian 2006 for Northern Sotho impersonals; Creissels 2011 for Tswana impersonals).
- Building on Legate et al. 2020 and Šereikaitė 2022, I propose that impersonals have an ImpersP headed by the passive morpheme *-w*. The Impers originates above a *vP* with an [*IMP*] feature, which licenses the null impersonal pronoun, and a Generic Operator (GN), which allows for a generic reading.
- The optional locative phrase in (1) is not a grammatical subject in SpecTP, but rather is an adjunct that semantically behaves like a restrictor (Chierchia 1995). There is no subject in SpecTP (cf. 1-4), and thus *ku-* is the default subject marker (Class 15).
- This study supports an analysis of the impersonal that does not involve argument demotion (McCloskey 2007; Legate 2014; Legate et al. 2020), despite it sharing the same morphology with the passive, which in many languages involves argument demotion.

Roadmap:

- Section 2: Background on Ndebele Unaccusatives
- Section 3: Impersonals vs. passives
- Section 4: Null Impersonal Pronoun *in situ*
- Section 5: *Ku-* is the default subject marker
- Section 6: Impersonal Projection and Concluding Remarks

2 Background on Ndebele Unaccusatives

Basic Properties of Unaccusatives

- In unaccusatives, the theme can become a subject: it raises to SpecTP and triggers agreement as in (5).
- The theme can stay in situ and no agreement takes place as in (6). *Ku-* is the default (Class 15) marker (Pietraszko 2023).

- (5) Abantu_i b-a-f-a t_i. (6) Kw-a-f-a abantu.
2people 2SBJ-PST-die-FV 15SBJ-PST-die-FV 2people
'People died.'

- Unaccusative predicates can take passive morphology in the language (Khumalo 2010), see Appendix for a full list. The null theme can be either an animate or an inanimate entity e.g., (7c).

- (7) *Impersonal*
- a. 'E-Zimbabwe ku-ya-f-iw-a.
LOC-Zimbabwe 15SBJ-PRS-**die**-PASS-FV
'People die in Zimbabwe.' Lit. 'In Zimbabwe, there is dying.'¹
- b. Ku-khul-w-a kokuphela.
15SBJ-**grow**-PASS-FV always
'Always growing.'²
- c. Kw-a-w-iw-a e-gang-eni.
15SBJ-PST-**fall**-PASS-FV LOC-jungle-LOC
'Some people/something were/was falling in the jungle.' Lit. 'There was falling in the jungle.'
- d. Ngesikathi somqando ku-ya-gul-a.
time coldness 15SBJ-PRS-**sick**-FV
'People get sick in the wintertime.'

- The instances in (7a-7d) behave like unaccusative constructions because, given an appropriate context, they are incompatible with *agent-oriented adverbs* as in (8) or *purpose clauses* as in (9) (also see Khumalo 2007).
- Thus, they lack the type of thematic Voice associated with agentive semantics (Kratzer 1996; Bruening 2013; Legate 2014; Alexiadou et al. 2015 a.o.).

Context: people often get sick and die in the wintertime because it is very cold outside.

- (8) #Ngesikathi somqando ku-ya-gul-w-a/ku-ya-f-iw-a **ngabomo.**
time coldness 15SBJ-PRS-sick-PASS-FV/15SBJ-PRS-die-PASS-FV deliberately
'In the winter time, there is being sick/dying deliberately.' *Impersonal*
- (9) #Ngesikathi somqando ku-ya-gul-w-a. [ukuyenzela ukuthola imali].
time coldness 15SBJ-PRS-sick-PASS-FV in.order.to to.get 9money
Lit. 'In the winter time, there is being sick in order to get money.' *Impersonal*

¹This can also be used as an expression that people are going through complicated things.

²A famous phrase from a TV show meaning that people are always growing, learning new things.

What are impersonal constructions?

- In many languages, impersonal constructions are formed with impersonal pronouns like *one/you* (see Šereikaitė and Zanuttini 2026 for the most recent analysis of *you*). They have an impersonal/generic reading, which describes habits, dispositions, routines, or laws.

(10) In England, *you/one* drive/drives on the left side of the street.

- In some languages, impersonals can have both a generic and an existential reading e.g., Dutch (Fenger 2018).

(11) a. Wanneer **men** in Italië is, eet *men* pasta.

when IMP in Italy is, eat IMP pasta

‘When people are in Italy, they have the habit of eating pasta.’

Generic Reading

b. **Men** heeft voor je gebeld, maar ik weet niet waar het over ging.

IMP has for you called, but I know not what it about went

‘Someone has called for you, but I don’t know what it was about.’

Existential Reading

- Ndebele impersonals also have two readings: i) a generic reading (12) and ii) an existential reading (13).

(12) E-Zimbabwe ku-ya-f-iw-a.

LOC-Zimbabwe 15SBJ-PRS-die-PASS-FV

‘People die in Zimbabwe.’

Generic reading

(13) Izolo ngofo emini ku-f-iw-e.

Yesterday at.four afternoon 15SBJ-die-PASS-FV.RPST

‘Yesterday at 4pm, someone/some people died.’

Existential Reading

3 Passives vs. Impersonals

Impersonals and passives are distinct constructions.

- In the passive, the agent is demoted and realized as an optional adjunct. The theme can:
 - raise to SpecTP and show agreement with the verb, (14b)
 - stay in situ, and no agreement takes place with the verb, *ku-* is the default subject marker, (14c)³

(14) a. UThabani u-za-phek-a inyama.

1Thabani 1SBJ-FUT-cook-FV 9meat

‘Thabani will cook the meat.’

(Pietraszko 2023:2)

b. Inyama_i y-za-phek-w-a t_i (ng-uThabani).

9meat 9SBJ-FUT-cook-PASS-FV by-1Thabani

‘The meat will be cooked by Thabani.’

Passive

c. Ku-za-phek-w-a inyama (ng-uThabani).

15SBJ-FUT-cook-PASS-FV 9meat by-1Thabani

‘The meat will be cooked by Thabani.’

Passive

- Unergative predicates, whose sole argument is an agent, can be passivized:

(15) a. Abantwana b-a-gid-a.

2children 2SBJ-PST-dance-FV

‘The children danced.’

b. Kw-a-gid-w-a (ng-abantwana).

15SBJ-PST-dance-PASS-FV by-2children

‘It was danced (by the children).’

Passive

³See Pietraszko 2023 for passives in Ndebele.

- **Argument 1** No *by*-phrase in the impersonal as in (16), whereas it is possible in the passive as in (14b-14c).

(16) E-Zimbabwe iminyaka leminyaka kw-a-f-iw-a *ng-abantu / *y-inyamazana.
 LOC-Zimbabwe year year 15SBJ-PST-die-PASS-FV by-2people / by-9animals
 Lit. 'In Zimbabwe, every year there is dying by people/animals.' *Impersonal*

- **Argument 2** the theme in the impersonal cannot be expressed by an overt noun phrase as in (17), whereas it can be overtly expressed in the passive (14b-14c).

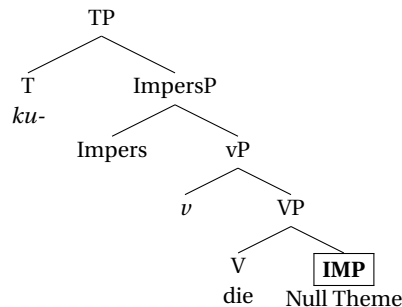
(17) E-Zimbabwe iminyaka leminyaka kw-a-f-iw-a *abantu/*abantwana.
 LOC-Zimbabwe every year 15SBJ-PST-die-PASS-FV 2people/2children
 Lit. 'In Zimbabwe, every year there was dying people/children.' *Impersonal*

- **To sum up:** The theme is always **null** in the impersonal. The impersonal with unaccusative predicates does not involve the demotion of the theme.⁴

4 Null Impersonal Pronoun *in situ*

- (19) is an impersonal with a theme that is a **null impersonal pronoun (IMP)** syntactically present in argument position (Section 4.1).⁵
- The null theme is introduced as a complement of V as in (18). It does not raise to SpecTP (Section 4.2).

(18) The structure of (19)



(19) (E-Zimbabwe) ku-ya-f-iw-a IMP.
 LOC-Zimbabwe 15S-PRS-die-PASS-FV
 '(In Zimbabwe) there is dying/people die.'

4.1 Projected Null Impersonal Pronoun

- **Argument 1 Depictives.** They typically agree with their controller in terms of noun class. The controller can either be in SpecTP as in (20a) or remain in its original position as in (20b).

(20) Class 2

- Abantu_i** b-a-f-a ekhaya [**be-dakiwe_i**].
 2people 2SBJ-PST-die-FV home 2PTCP-drunken
 'People_i died at home drunk_i.'
- Kw-a-f-a **abantu_i** ekhaya [**be-dakiwe_i**].
 15SBJ-PST-die-FV 2people home 2PTCP-drunken
 'People_i died at home drunk_i.'

⁴The language disallows the demotion of a theme in canonical passives.

(i) *Kw-a-phek-w-a yi-nyama ng-uThabani.
 [15SBJ]-PST-cook-PASS-FV BY-9meat BY-1Thabani

Lit. 'It will be cooked by the meat by Thabani.'

Passive of Passive

⁵For various types of tests diagnosing the presence of implicit arguments in Bantu and beyond, see e.g., Ndapo 2026 for Oshingandjera (Oshiwambo); Sulemana 2025 for Büli; Gotah 2025 for Ewe; Collins 2024, a.o.

- (28) is grammatical because here the reciprocal combines with the impersonal, which has a projected null argument. The impersonal is formed with the type of construction, namely the reciprocal, which cannot be passivized (27).

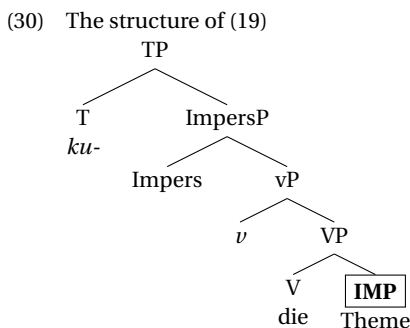
- (28) a. Kw-a-nced-an-w-a IMP.
 15SBJ-PST-help-RECP-PASS-FV
 ‘There was helping of each other.’ *Reciprocal + Impersonal*
- b. *Kw-a-nced-an-w-a abantu.
 15SBJ-PST-help-RECP-PASS-FV 2people
 Lit. ‘There was helping of each other people.’

- (29) Ku-ya-f-el-an-w-a IMP.
 15SBJ-PRS-die-APPL-RECP-PASS-FV
 ‘People die for each other.’ *Reciprocal + Impersonal*

- **To sum up:** The null theme in the impersonal is syntactically projected. This null argument belongs to Cl. 2.

4.2 The null impersonal pronoun is not in SpecTP

- The implicit argument in the impersonal does **not raise to SpecTP to become a subject** as in (30).



- Argument I the theme in the impersonal **does not trigger subject agreement**.
- In Ndebele, subject agreement is allowed only under A-movement as in (31) (Pietraszko 2023). When the theme stays *in situ*, it does not trigger agreement.⁷

(31) *Canonical Unaccusatives*

- a. Abantu_i b-a-f-a t_i
 2people 2SBJ-PST-die-FV
 ‘People died.’ Subject Agreement/A-movement
- b. Kw-a-f-a abantu.
 15SBJ-PST-die-FV 2people
 ‘People died.’ No Subject Agreement/No A-movement

- The theme in the impersonal can trigger Class 2 agreement on the depictive in (21). However, no Class 2 subject agreement is possible on the main verb as in (32). Thus, **the theme must stay in its original position**.⁸

⁷Null arguments like little *pro* can undergo A-movement (see Pietraszko 2026).

⁸As expected, the theme also does not show raising to object with predicates like *want* (for R-to-O in Ndebele see Pietraszko 2026, also see Halpert and Zeller 2015 for Zulu).

(i) *Ngi-**ba**-fun-a IMP_i [ukuthi t_i ku-gul-w-e].
 15SBJ-2OBJ-want-FV COMP 15SBJ-sick-PASS-SBJV
 Lit. ‘I want them that there be sickness.’

- **Caveat:** *ku-* subject marker is syncretic in the language: it can belong either to Class 15 or to Class 17.
- Can the impersonal in (35) be an instance of locative inversion? The subject is the locative phrase that agrees with the verb, resulting in *ku-* (Class 17). **I suggest that (37) is NOT the structure of (35).**

5.1 Formal Locative Inversion in Ndebele

- Ndebele exhibits formal locative inversion (Khumalo 2010 for Ndebele; for other languages see Bresnan and Kanerva 1989; Buell 2007; Zeller 2013; Bresnan and Kanerva 1989, a.o.).⁹
- Locative phrases can appear with different noun classes (see Dube et al. 2024), but the verb always appears with the *ku-* subject marker in this construction.

(38) **Phandle/ng-e-mva** **kw-e-n-dlu/e-sikolo** *ku-lal-a* *amankazana*.
 16outside/LOC-LOC-behind 17-POS-9-house/LOC-school 17SBJ/15SBJ -sleep-FV 6girls
 ‘Outside/behind the house/in school sleep girls.’

- The pattern introduced in (38) exists in other languages like Tswana or Lozi (Marten et al. 2007), as well as Zulu (Buell 2007) where *ku-* is treated as an expletive, and the locative phrase is an adjunct.¹⁰

5.2 No Subject in SpecTP in the Impersonal

I argue that the impersonal construction **lacks a true subject in SpecTP**.

- **Argument 1** Regardless of the type of locative phrase (whether or not it belongs to Class 17), the verb is always realized with the subject marker *ku-* in the impersonal (39).
- These locative phrases are **optional**. Impersonals do **not have to include a location** as in (40-41) (also see Buell 2007 for Zulu), which suggests that these locative phrases function more like adjuncts.

(39) (E-Zimbabwe/phandle/ku-de) *ku-ya-f-iw-a* IMP.
 LOC-Zimbabwe/16outside/17-far.away 15SBJ-PRS-sick-PASS-FV
 ‘In Zimbabwe/outside/far away, people die.’ *Impersonal*

(40) *kw-a-f-iw-a* [be-si-dla]
 15SBJ-PST-die-PASS-FV 2PTCP-PROG-eat
 ‘People died while eating.’ *Impersonal*

(41) *ku-ya-f-iw-a* [be-dakiwe].
 15S-PRS-die-PASS-FV 2PTCP-drunk
 ‘People die drunk.’ *Impersonal*

- **Argument 2** Object agreement is possible only when the subject raises to SpecTP and triggers verbal agreement (Pietraszko 2023). The null theme does not trigger object agreement in the impersonal suggesting that there is no subject in SpecTP as in (42).

(42) (E-Zimbabwe/phandle/ku-de) *ku-ya>(*ba/*ku)-f-iw-a* IMP.
 LOC-Zimbabwe/16outside/17-far.away 15SBJ-PRS-2OBJ/15SBJ-die-PASS-FV
 ‘In Zimbabwe/outside/far away, there is dying/people die.’ *Impersonal*

⁹Ndebele also exhibits semantic locative inversion, which is different from the impersonal, see Appendix.

¹⁰For the same facts in Lozi (S30) Marten et al. 2007, fn.227 via Salzmann 2011:5. Here *ku-* is also realized with all predicates despite the fact that the noun class of the locative phrase differs.

(i) Fa-tafule <i>ku-ins-i</i> <i>li-tapi</i> . 16-table 17-be/sit-TNS 5-fish ‘On the table there is a/the fish’	(ii) Mwa-ndu <i>ne-ku-ken-i</i> <i>ma-sholi</i> . 18-house TNS-17-enter-TNS 6-thieves ‘Into the house entered the thieves’	(iii) Kwa-kota <i>ku-opel-a</i> <i>li-njoko</i> . 17-tree 17-sing-FV 10-monkeys ‘The monkeys are singing at the tree’
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- **Argument 3** There is no raising to object from the embedded impersonal, which again suggests that this construction lacks a true subject.

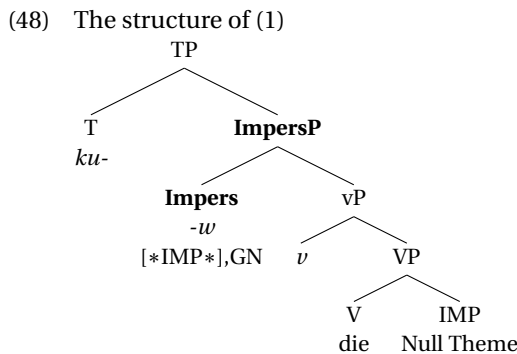
- (43) Ngi-funa [ukuthi ku-gul-w-e].
 1SBJ-want COMP 15SBJ-sick-PASS-SBJV
 Lit. 'I want there to be sickness.' 'I want people to get sick.'
- (44) *Ngi-ku-funa pro_i [ukuthi t_i ku-gul-w-e].
 1SBJ-15OBJ-want COMP 15SBJ-sick-PASS-SBJV
 Lit. 'I want there to be sickness.' 'I want people to get sick.'

- **My proposal:** I suggest that the locative phrases, including time adverbials, are **restrictors** (see Chierchia 1995; Boneh and Doron 2013; Kirkpatrick and Knobe 2024; Zobel 2021), which provide information on how the domain over which the variable, namely the impersonal pronoun, ranges should be restricted. Restrictors are supplied by a locative phrase, a temporal/habitual phrase, a modal, etc.

- (45) **In a church**, *one* often speaks softly.
 (46) **As a cancer survivor**, *one* has a heightened appreciation of life.
 (47) **When** one is tired, one drinks coffee.

6 Impersonal Projection and Concluding Remarks

- Building on Legate et al. 2020, Akkuş 2021, and Šereikaitė 2022, I propose that the passive morpheme in (48) is a head of an ImpersP above a *v*P: this morpheme appears outside the applicative and the reciprocal extensions (see ex. 29).¹¹



- Crosslinguistically, impersonals and passives share the same type of morphology because they occur in similar discourse situations (Malchukov and Siewierska 2011), see Turkish Impersonals (Legate et al. 2020) and Lithuanian Impersonals (Šereikaitė 2022).
- This projection bears an [*IMP*] feature, which licenses the null impersonal pronoun through an agreement relation (also see McCloskey 2007 on Irish for a similar implementation).¹²
- This head also includes a Generic Operator (GN), which allows for a generic/impersonal reading (Cinque 1988; Moltmann 2006; Sigurðsson and Egerland 2009; Zobel 2014, a.o.). The operator binds the variable in the complement. Canonical unaccusative constructions lack this head; this allows a referential DP argument that is not an impersonal pronoun.

¹¹There are no impersonals of passives in Ndebele, which suggests that this head itself may be a type of Voice.

¹²I follow Müller 2010's notation when it comes to [*IMP*]. This type of feature would trigger an Agree relation. Also see Pietraszko and Šereikaitė submitted for a similar system proposed for Ndebele reciprocal constructions.

- What prevents the theme from moving to SpecTP position? Recall that movement to SpecTP triggers agreement.
 - Impersonal pronouns often do not trigger verbal agreement (e.g., see Finnish Little 2024; Lithuanian Šereikaitė 2017) because they are deficient i.e., they are not full DPs.
 - Pietraszko (2023, 2026) develops a phase-based analysis of Verb-Subject order in Ndebele, suggesting that in-situ subjects are inaccessible to T because of an intervening phasal projection above a ν P. Perhaps impersonals include this projection above ImpersP, but it lacks an EPP, and thus the theme is trapped in the ν P domain.
- To conclude, I have argued that Ndebele has an impersonal construction with a projected implicit argument mostly using unaccusative predicates, which cannot be passivized (see Table 1).
- Unergatives can be used to form the impersonal as well, as confirmed by impersonals with reciprocals in (29).

	Transitive	Unergative	Unaccusative
Canonical Passives	✓	✓	*
Impersonals		✓	✓

Table 1: Ndebele passives and impersonals with different predicates

- I have not been able to clearly distinguish passives of transitives from impersonals of transitives in the language yet. I leave this for further research.

Thanks for listening!¹³

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7 Appendix

	Allow Passive Morphology
Canonical Unaccusatives <i>uku-gula</i> ‘to be sick’, <i>uku-fa</i> ‘to die’ <i>uku-wa</i> ‘to fall’, <i>uku-tshabalala</i> ‘to disappear’ <i>uku-swaba</i> ‘to wilt’ <i>uku-galula</i> ‘to drown’, <i>uku-bola</i> ‘to rot’, <i>uku-hluma</i> ‘to sprout’	✓
Double Unaccusatives <i>ukuswela</i> ‘to lack’, <i>uku-qede</i> ‘to last’	✓
Inchoatives <i>uku-tshona</i> ‘to sink’ <i>uku-khula</i> ‘to grow’, ‘to get bigger’ (animate and inanimate)	✓
Raising Predicates + verbal complement <i>uku-bonakala</i> ‘to seem/appear’	✓

Table 2: Unaccusative verbs that allow passive morphology

Ndebele allows semantic locative inversion (also see Zeller 2013 for this type of inversion in Zulu):

(49) *Semantic Locative Inversion*

- a. Abantu **ba-f-a** **e-mzi-ni** **lo**.
2people 2SBJ-PST-die-FV LOC-village-LOC this
‘People died in this village.’
- b. **Umuzi lo** **wa-f-el-a** abantu.
3village this 3SBJ-die-APPL-FV 2people
‘This village is where people died.’
- c. **Umuzi lo** **wa-f-el-w-a** ng-abantu.
3village this 3.SBJ-die-APPL-PASS-FV by-2people
‘The village itself had people dying in it.’ Lit. ‘The village had died by people.’

While the impersonal does allow a locative phrase as in (50), it cannot be treated as a type of semantic locative inversion in (49c) because:

- i) it does not allow an overt DP theme nor a theme in the *by*-phrase,
- ii) no applicative extension is added when a locative phrase is present¹⁴
- iii) the subject marker is always *ku*-

- (50) (E-Zimbabwe) **ku-ya-f-*iw*-a**.
LOC-Zimbabwe 15S-PRS-die-PASS-FV
‘(In Zimbabwe) there is dying/people die.’

Impersonal

¹⁴The applicative extension can be added when the reciprocal extension is added. This is not related to the locative phrase. My consultant accepts the following examples:

- (i) (E-Zimbabwe) **ku-ya-f-el-w-an-a** - ‘There is dying for each other.’
(ii) (E-Zimbabwe) **ku-ya-f-el-an-w-a** - ‘There is dying for each other.’