

**CONCEPTUALIZATION OF EVENTS IN NEWSPAPER
DISCOURSE: MYSTIFICATION OF AGENCY AND DEGREE
OF IMPLICATION IN NEWS REPORTS**

Juana I. Marín Arrese (Ed.)

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@ Las autoras de cada capítulo: Juana Marín Arrese, M^a Luisa Blanco Gómez, Elena Martínez Caro, JoAnne Neff van Aertselaer, Soledad Pérez de Ayala Becerril

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IMPERSONALISATION AND REFERENCE IN ENGLISH AND SPANISH: EVIDENCE FROM NEWSPAPER DISCOURSE

Elena Martínez Caro
Universidad Complutense de Madrid
e.martinezcaro@filol.ucm.es

Abstract

In this chapter I investigate the use of impersonal pronouns and other non-specific NPs in semantically impersonal constructions in newspaper reports in English and Spanish. These linguistic strategies are used by the writer in order to hide and mitigate the agency or avoid culpability. In English the impersonal use of 'we' and 'they' often occur as "corporative" reference to non-specific groups of individuals. In Spanish their omission may perform the same function. Other impersonalisation strategies include the use of indefinite pronouns with a generic or 'vague' interpretation, other non-specific NPs ranging from generic ones, such as 'people', to more specific and modified NPs referring to a single individual or groups of individuals, whose identity is still not fully specified.

Keywords: impersonalisation, mystification of agency, newspaper discourse, personal pronouns, indefinite pronouns, non-specific NPs, impersonal infinitive clauses

1. INTRODUCTION

One general consideration that has been made in the discussion of impersonal constructions is the distinction between syntactically impersonal sentences (also called 'natural' impersonal sentences) and semantically impersonal sentences (or 'occasional' impersonal sentences) (cf. e.g. Gómez Torrego 1992 and Fernández Soriano & Táboas Baylín 1999). Whereas the former are impersonal on account of the lexical meaning of their verb, which lacks an agent argument (e.g. *Llueve* in Spanish and *It rains* in English), the latter are impersonal on account of the context in which they occur, and have a subject agent that is a non-specific referent (e.g. *Llaman a la puerta*).

In this chapter I investigate the use of impersonal pronouns and other non-specific NPs in semantically impersonal constructions, as a strategy for

impersonalisation and mitigation of agency and responsibility in our corpus of newspaper political discourse in English and Spanish.

2. IMPERSONALISATION AND REFERENCE

Let us first consider the following examples in English and Spanish:

- (1) a. Anyone who goes there, **they** shoot at him –civilian or soldier. (AEg01cm)
b. She added: “**We** believe that this is a racist practice...” (CEg05jm)
- (2) a. A él le **dispararon** cuatro balazos. A ella la **apuñalaron** con igual ensañamiento. (BSp05mb)
b. En este país todos sabemos... cuál es el peaje que **tienes** que pagar para que te **dejen** en paz... (CSp02jm)
c. Sólo si **uno** presta atención se da cuenta... (ASv02cmjm)

Personal pronouns *they* and *we* in examples (1a-b) describe non-specific agent referents which do not represent any particular nor identifiable person. In Spanish the omission of the subject and the explicit verbal inflection may perform the same function, as in (2a-b). In other cases in Spanish, an impersonal interpretation is achieved by the expression of personal pronoun *uno*, as in (2c). In section 3 I discuss this impersonal use of personal pronouns (and their omission) in the English and Spanish texts.

Another strategy found in the corpus which can lead to an impersonal or non-specific interpretation of the agent is the use of indefinite pronouns of the type of *many*, *some*, *everyone*, *no one* in English and its counterparts in Spanish: *alguien*, *algunos*, *nadie*, *todos*, etc. As in (3) and (4):

- (3) **Everyone** also knows that George W. Bush is a square peg in that round hole. (AEg05emc)
- (4) Fue entonces cuando **alguien** asesinó a Douglas R. Lawson, un antiguo compañero suyo, y a la novia de éste, Sherrie Mc Coy-Ward. (BSp05mb)

Section 4 discusses the presence in our corpus of indefinite pronouns of various types to hide or obscure the agent. Section 5 discusses the use of NPs whose subjects, which refer to an individual or group of individuals, are not fully specified by the writer of the news report, as in (5) and (6) in both languages. The data from the corpus point to a gradation or scale of specification ranging from very general and ‘vague’ agents to more highly modified ones:

- (5) This allows **officers** to subject certain nationalities or ethnic groups “to a more rigorous examination than other persons in the same circumstances”. (CEg05jm)
- (6) **Algunas fuentes** apuntaban que el ex-dictador pasaría estos primeros días en una cárcel holandesa para delincuentes comunes... (ASp01cmjm)

In semantically impersonal constructions the omission, concealment or “obscuring” of the agent is primarily based on pragmatic issues concerning the speaker/writer and/or addressee¹⁰ of the discourse or the nature of the agent itself. Thus the speaker/writer may *ignore* the identity of the agent, think it is unimportant, uninteresting for the addressee or easy to infer (Biber *et al.* 1999: 477), predictable on general grounds, i.e. stereotypical or universal and thus left unspecified, or, finally, the speaker/writer may wish to deliberately hide its identity in order to avoid culpability (cf. Givón 1993, vol. 2: 48). In the journalistic genre the writer¹¹ may be also motivated by a “desire to save space and maximise what is novel” (Biber *et al.* 1999: 477).

10 Being newspaper reports a type of written discourse, I will be using the terms ‘writer’ and ‘reader’ when referring directly to this type of discourse, in spite of the fact that they contain plenty of direct-speech quotes.

11 Givón (1993: 48) talks about the demotion of the agent “from its pragmatic role of topic, as well as its more normal role of grammatical subject”.

3. IMPERSONAL USES OF PERSONAL PRONOUNS

Personal pronouns do not always have a specific interpretation; sometimes they refer to a non-specific or generic agent leading to an impersonal interpretation of the sentence. Kitagawa & Lehrer (1990: 742) distinguish three uses of personal pronouns: (a) **Referential** uses identify specific individuals, (b) **impersonal** uses apply to anyone and/or everyone, potentially representing all humanity (also called 'generic'), and (c) **'vague'** uses which apply to specific individuals which are not identified, or identifiable, by the speaker, thus representing a subgroup (of the humanity). Impersonal or generic uses of personal pronouns are said to have a *universal* interpretation (and thus associated with a universal quantifier, cf. section 4 below), as opposed to the 'vague' uses which have an *existential* interpretation (associated with non-universal quantifiers) (cf. Kitagawa & Lehrer 1990; Fernández Soriano & Táboas Baylín 1999; Luján 1999). Here I will refer to these two uses as the 'generic' and the 'vague' use or interpretation¹². See the following examples in English which illustrate them:

- (7) *'Generic' use:*
El restaurante se llama Sole, y sólo si **uno** presta atención se da cuenta de que los camareros "italianos" del restaurante hablan albanés entre ellos. (ASV02cmjm)
- (8) *'Vague' use:*
(spoken by a European woman talking about American political and military policy in Europe to an American citizen)
You're –I don't mean you personally- **you're** going to destroy us all in a nuclear war (example taken from Kitagawa & Lehrer 1990: 743).

Whereas *uno* in (7) refers to any individual, potentially including everybody, including the addressee; *you* in (8) does not have that interpretation, representing a subgroup of individuals with the exclusion of the addressee. This 'vague' use of impersonality is

¹² The term 'impersonal' will be used for both (b) and (c).

very frequent in the corpus, and is usually represented by the use of *they* and *we* or their corresponding omission in Spanish.

In English, *one* –in its use as a personal pronoun¹³— is associated with an impersonal generic interpretation. The personal pronouns *we*, *they* and *you*, although mainly used to refer to a specific, identifiable referent, can be also used impersonally in certain contexts. Those impersonal pronouns with a higher occurrence in the English texts are, first, *we* occurring 64.34% of the total number of instances of personal pronouns with an impersonal use, followed by *they* with a frequency of 23.08%. Other pronouns such as *you*, *one* and *he* have frequencies of occurrence which represent less than 6% of the total number of cases. Notice that with the use of impersonal pronouns, the reference is still personal, that is to say human; they are merely not individualised. These pronouns all have “a generalised exophoric use in which the referent is treated as being as it were immanent in all contexts of situation” (Halliday & Hasan 1976: 53).

One difference between English and Spanish in this respect is that the agent may not have a pronominal expression in Spanish although it triggers verbal inflection. The omission of the personal pronoun may then function similarly to the use of impersonal pronouns in English. However, we should bear in mind that there are in Spanish sentences without an explicit subject which are not impersonal, and others with a subject which have an impersonal interpretation.

In our Spanish data the omission of an explicit personal-pronoun subject is a very common strategy for impersonalising the agent; it represents 88.07% of the total number of instances with an impersonal pronoun (or one omitted). Within the group of pronoun omissions, we find that the majority (64.58%) omit a first-person plural

13 See Halliday & Hasan (1976: 91-105) for a discussion on the different functions of *one* in English.

pronoun (*nosotros*), followed by that of the third-person plural (*ellos*, 25%). Notice that these results confirm the tendency described for English. Other person pronouns are also omitted but much less frequently (second-person singular and plural and third-person singular). When the personal pronoun does appear, items such as *uno*, *nosotros*, *usted/ustedes* and *tú* occur, all with lower frequency (each representing less than 4% of the cases).

3.1. First-person pronouns and their omission

As we said above, *we* is the most used impersonal pronoun in our data. This *we* includes the writer in the referential set of this argument; “the 1st person plural pronoun signifies in English an incompletely defined collectivity that includes the speaker and one or more others, without specifying who the others are” (Kitagawa & Lehrer 1990: 745). Because the impersonal use of *we* is restricted to a subgroup of people, not to all people, its interpretation is not generic but ‘vague’ and the addressee is normally excluded¹⁴:

- (9) Phil Willis, the Liberal Democrat education spokesman, told The Guardian: “... **We** should not be working towards polarisation or ghettoisation of the education system. **We** have no experience of unbridled faith-schooling and the divisions that that might cause in our society, but **we** have already seen children being excluded from their local school because they are of the wrong faith... This is the twenty-first century –**we** should be attempting to educate citizens of the world, not narrow-minded, parochial, sectarian citizens.” (CEg05jn)

In Spanish the corresponding construction omits the 1st person plural personal pronoun leaving the verbal inflection as a marker of number and person:

¹⁴ It might be argued, however, that the ‘we’ in “we have already seen children being excluded from their local school” has a generic interpretation, potentially referring to any individual. Because of the existence of “borderline cases” with ‘we’ (in which a generic or vague interpretation is difficult to choose), Kitagawa & Lehrer (1990: 745) talk about a “preferred interpretation” in examples containing this impersonal pronoun.

- (10) a. “Esto es América, **ponemos** el país por delante del partido” señaló... (Asv01emc)
 b. Uno de los líderes que encabeza el levantamiento indígena, Antonio Vargas, presidente de la Confederación Nacional de Indígenas del Ecuador..., manifestó que no teme a las medidas represivas del Gobierno. “No es la primera vez que **vivimos** esto; **hemos estado** en peores situaciones con gobiernos más represivos”, señaló. (ASp01emc)

This frequent use in the texts of the 1st person plural impersonal pronoun in English and its omission in Spanish is not surprising if we consider the nature of the texts analysed, which contain plenty of direct speech quotations of representatives of political and social groups and institutions. When putting their arguments forward, these individuals speak not in individual terms but as members and spokespersons of the group they belong to. Their words, on the other hand, are addressed to the general public, often the whole population of a country, and not specifically to the actual addressee of the utterance. It is what Fernández Soriano & Táboas Baylín (1999: 1729) call “corporative reference”.

3.2. *Third-person pronouns and their omission*

Impersonal *they* (and the omission of the corresponding pronoun in Spanish) is characterised by being exclusive –both speaker and addressee are excluded- and its interpretation is ‘vague’ rather than generic (cf. Moreno Cabrera 1990: 39). It frequently occurs with actions whose agent is ignored by the writer:

- (11) Anyone who goes there, **they** shoot at him –civilian or soldier. (AEg01cm)
 (12) A él le **dispararon** cuatro balazos. A ella la **apuñalaron** con igual ensañamiento. (BSp05mb)

Notice that, whereas *they* in (11) has a ‘vague’ use, *him* in the same example has generic interpretation, as can be seen from its anaphoric anchoring to *anyone* in the

same sentence. The occurrence of impersonal uses of the third person singular in our texts is relatively low.

In other contexts, the referent of the third-person plural pronoun may be considered unimportant or uninteresting by the writer:

- (13) “...Yo rezo por el general Pinochet... Y aunque me **critiquen** y me **digan** lo que **quieran**, lo considero un hermano...” (BSa01spa)

In some examples in Spanish, we may observe that the verbal inflections do not always agree with the subject expressed in the sentence; even though the reference is maintained, the form used may differ for person and number. This is referred to as “person shifts” by Kitagawa & Lehrer (1990: 741) who claim that although “stylistically innelegant, they do in fact occur frequently in spontaneous conversation, testifying to their informational equivalence”. In the type of text we are looking at, they may also be regarded as an impersonalisation strategy:

- (14) El presidente de la Asociación Nacional de Productores de Vacuno, Jesús González, aseguró que con esta protesta ... **piden** al Gobierno que **nos** escuche”. (CSa03jm)

3.3. *Second-person pronouns and their omission*

Personal pronoun *you* has two impersonal uses: one is the generic (cf. 15), the other the ‘vague’ or non-universal one (cf. 16). Instances of both interpretations were found in our corpus:

- (15) ...The continued presence of HMS Tireless in a dock on the Rock, and uncertainty about the state of its reactor cooling system, is causing consternation on both sides of the border... “No se puede con los ingleses,” (“**You** can’t outwit the English”), we often say here on the Rock. (BEg04spa)
- (16) He told the 100 Group of finance directors: “**You** already do a lot to influence the European agenda. But I would ask **you** do even more. **You** can bring pressure to bear in the parts the Government can’t reach”. (CEt08jm)

Likewise in Spanish, the two uses can be illustrated from examples from the texts:

- (17) En este país todos sabemos... cuál es el peaje que **tienes** que pagar para que te dejen en paz... (CSp02jm)
- (18) (chanted by immigrants in a protest in Spain)
...“En el sur nos **explotáis**”, en el norte nos **expulsáis**”. (CSa05jm)

3.4. Other persons

One in English is virtually restricted to the written registers and is perceived as formal and as a non-casual choice (Biber *et al.* 1999: 351). Both *one* in English and *uno/-a* in Spanish have exclusively a generic interpretation. Their occurrence is low in both languages (only 3.5% in English, and 1.9% in Spanish of the total number of impersonal pronouns). Examples found include the following:

- (19) “I told him that before being a credible alternative, **one** has to be a firm Opposition and before being a firm Opposition, **one** has to have a united party”, he said. (BEt03)
- (20) El restaurante se llama Sole, y sólo si **uno** presta atención se da cuenta de que los camareros “italianos” del restaurante hablan albanés entre ellos. (ASV02cmjm)

A further interpretation of impersonal pronouns that has been discussed in the literature and which has not been mentioned here so far is the *pragmatic concealment* (*encubrimiento pragmático*, cf. Gómez Torrego 1992: 58, Fernández Soriano & Táboas Baylín 1999: 1732). By using an impersonal pronoun or another type of referential impersonalisation with generalised reference which does not refer to the individual involved, the speaker or writer conceals his/her responsibility for some negative action by directing the addressee’s attention away from his/herself. Typical here is the *shift* from the 1st person singular (the *I*) to a more impersonal use, such as *one* or *you*. Thus consider the following example in Spanish:

- (21) “No van a conseguir nunca que **este ministro** dé un número de casos que pueda inducir a confusión”. (CSp04jm)

This sentence, uttered by the Spanish Defence Minister to journalists, refers to the number of cases of cancer disease among Spanish military soldiers that served in the Balkans. By referring to himself as “este ministro” (instead of using a 1st person singular form) the Minister distances himself from his possible responsibility in the issue. Similarly in English, *one* is chosen instead of *they* in referring to the Tories:

- (22) He [a Labour-party politician] said that the Tories needed to adopt a more rational tone when tackling the immigration debate. “There are big problems with the asylum system,” he said. “But it is quite clear that **one** must not say the whole system is a catastrophe...” (CEt11jm)

4. INDEFINITE PRONOUNS

Indefinite pronouns refer to entities which the writer cannot or does not want to specify more exactly (Biber *et al.* 1999: 351). They are presented as indefinite non-specific referents and contain a lexical component which refers to quantity in an imprecise or approximate way. On account of this, some authors include them in the general group of quantifiers (cf. e.g. Sánchez López 1999). The most ‘representative’ instances of the indefinite pronouns are those derived by compounding of *every*, *some*, *any* or *no* with *thing*, *one* or *body*: *everything*, *someone*, *anybody*, etc. The indefinite class also contains *many*, *much*, *several*, *few*, *all*, *both*, etc. (Huddleston 1984: 297-298)¹⁵. In Spanish instances include: *algo*, *alguien*, *alguno*, *nada*, *nadie*, *ninguno*, *cualquiera*; *todo*, *cada*, *ambos*; *varios*, *pocos*, *muchos*, *bastante*, etc. (23) and (24) illustrate their use in our corpus:

- (23) a. **Everyone** also knows that George W. Bush is a square peg in that round hole. (AEg05emc)
b. Mr. Blair said: “We have always said that the Taleban and bin Laden are working hand in glove and this proved it... **Anyone** who doubted the nature of our action in Afghanistan, I hope, has had their doubts removed.” (BEt06spa)

15 However, some of the ‘non-traditional’ grammarians claim a doubtful status for indefinite pronouns concerning their membership, name and further subdivisions within them (see Huddleston 1984: 298 and his discussion on the status of ‘many’ in pp. 284ff). Givón (1993, vol. 1), for example, considers them indefinite determiners.

- c. Until 20 years ago, when the Israel army invaded Lebanon and set off a war that **many** consider Israel's Vietnam... (AEg04cmjm)
- (24) a. Fue entonces cuando **alguien** asesinó a Douglas R. Lawson, un antiguo compañero suyo, y a la novia de éste, Sherrie Mc Coy-Ward. (BSp05mb)
 b. ...decidieron... que abandonaban la huelga –pese que luego **algunos pocos** la han mantenido a título personal (CSa05jm)
 c. Ya **nadie** duda en la comisión de investigación del Congreso de que los mecanismos de supervisión de este organismo fallaron estrepitosamente (CSa07jm)

These indefinites may occur as heads in their corresponding NPs or modifying a noun head of a NP as in (25) and (26):

- (25) **Algunas fuentes** apuntaban que el ex-dictador pasaría estos primeros días en una cárcel holandesa para delincuentes comunes... (ASp01cmjm)
- (26) Those sentiments could be echoed by **many** Albanians in Macedonia... (AEg02cmjm)

The discussion of indefinite pronouns is here relevant as they are closely related to impersonal uses of personal pronouns. More particularly, those indefinite pronouns which contain a universal quantifier variable (such as *todo*, *cada (uno)*, *ambos* in Spanish and *everything/-one/-body*, *all* in English) have a similar interpretation to personal pronouns of the generic type (referring (potentially) to all humanity); and those indefinite pronouns containing a non-universal quantifier variable (*algo*, *alguien*, *alguno*, *varios*, *pocos*, *muchos*, etc. in Spanish and *some*, *something/-one/-body*, *many*, *several*, etc) have a similar interpretation to 'vague' uses of personal pronouns, those referring to more specific individuals, though not completely identified (cf. Kitagawa & Lehrer 1990: 743; Sánchez López 1999: 1036ff).

5. OTHER NON-SPECIFIC NOMINAL PHRASES

Here we will consider other NPs referring to individuals (seen as such or as groups¹⁶) that are presented by the writer as non-specific, unidentifiable (if only to a certain extent) agents. Our corpus data concerning these non-specific NPs point to a gradation or scale of specification, ranging from generalised and ‘vague’ referents (thus less specific) to more highly modified ones (more specific but still not completely identifiable).

First of all there is the item *people* in English and *la gente* in Spanish¹⁷. These may represent the end of the continuum of specification as the least specific in this group, when occurring alone, as a single constituent, in which case their interpretation is always generic, referring to any potential individual or everyone. When pre- or postmodified, the interpretation is ‘vague’ as the reference is to a “more restricted or specific group of individuals” but still not completely identifiable nor fully specific¹⁸:

- (27) a. “When the market was going from 3,000 to 10,000, **people** were saying ‘Why not allow us to invest in the stock market?’ (AEt05emc)
b. “I think now it is more serious than ever before. **More people** do not want to take part in the occupation than in the previous intifada...” (AEg04cmjm)
- (28) a. En otra parte de su mensaje, el pontífice pintó un potencial panorama sombrío del mundo en el nuevo milenio, a menos que **la gente** aprenda a respetar el medio ambiente y a utilizar correctamente la ciencia. “Si **la gente** altera el balance de la creación, olvidando que son responsables por sus hermanos y hermanas y no les preocupa el medio ambiente que el Creador ha colocado en sus manos, entonces, un mundo determinado sólo por nuestros designios bien podría ser insoportable”, dijo. (ASa03emc)

16 Van Leeuwen (1996: 48) distinguishes between individualisation (in which social actors are referred to as individuals) and assimilation (in which they are referred to as groups).

17 With a similar interpretation to ‘la gente’ we have also found the non-specific NP ‘el mundo’ in Spanish.

18 The following is an interesting example where the agent is first presented as a non-specific, generic referent, impossible to identify, to be then further specified, restricting the referring set (“not all people but the women”):

(i) Había un Seat 1500 cerrando la calle y seis o siete policías que les rodeaban con metralletas en ristre, pero la gente, las señoras no veían nada, o no querían verlo. (CSp02jm)

Notice also the use of *querían*, which explicitly points to the potential responsibility of the agents as they ignore the action taking place in front of them.

- b. “Hay **un montón de gente en Euskadi** que aparta la vista, que no quieren darse cuenta de la situación que están viviendo muchos vecinos”. (CSp02jm)

With plural NPs denoting a particular collectivity of individuals (having then a ‘vague’ interpretation), the referent may be equally presented as general, non-specific and indefinite in English, when the noun head is not modified and has ‘zero article’¹⁹:

- (29) This allows **officers** to subject certain nationalities or ethnic groups “to a more rigorous examination than other persons in the same circumstances”. (CEg05jm)

From these type of NPs that consist of a single noun head in the plural we have progressively higher degrees of specification with NPs (some headed by indefinite pronouns) with some kind of modification: from the definite article *the*, to pre- or postmodification through adjectives, PPs and relative clauses. Instances of these agents include the following:

- Plural NPs denoting the set of the nationals of a country or continent: *los europeos, los americanos, los palestinos...*
- Plural NPs with the definite article or zero article referring to a type of social or political collectivity or their representatives: *the public sector workers, the responsible ministers, Senior Scotland Yard officers, los líderes de la sociedad, los políticos, los ganaderos, los responsables de las organizaciones convocantes...*
- Other plural NPs with zero article (or definite article) and whose noun head is modified: *los piadosos y temerosos de Dios, ...*
- NPs containing an indefinite pronoun as determiner (whose interpretation will be generic or ‘vague’ depending on whether the indefinite is universal or non-universal):

19 As Downing & Locke (1992: 429) remark, “although the term ‘indefinite’ might appear to be synonymous with ‘non-specific’, it can in fact be applied to both non-specific and specific entities.

Muchos consejeros de Clinton, algunos demócratas, todos los inmigrantes que están en el país...

· Singular NPs referring to an individual, presented as non-specific and which may be definite (with the article *the*) or indefinite (with *a*): *a member of the Shadow Cabinet, un veterano funcionario de la Casa Blanca próximo a Clinton, un portavoz de los encerrados...*

· NPs including the noun *source* (English) or *fuentes* (in Spanish) whose lexical meaning includes a component of non-specificity, and which occur normally modified: *a source close to Downing Street, una fuente próxima al vicepresidente...*

6. IMPERSONAL INFINITIVE CLAUSES

Clauses containing non-specific agents are not always finite simple clauses. Very often, we have found impersonalisation in non-finite clauses, mostly infinitive clauses, which are often subjectless. Sometimes the subject of these clauses may be recovered from the context; some other times they are used as an impersonalisation device, leaving the agent of the action implicit or altogether hidden. (30-31) illustrate their use in the texts:

- (30) Rather than **burn** carcasses, lorries capable of being sealed are being hired to take them to rendering plants. (CEg04jm)
- (31) a. En este país todos sabemos qué hacer para **librarnos** de la amenaza de ETA... (CSp02jm)
b. También está claro que el Cesid dependerá de la Moncloa, aunque falta **por definir** cómo se articulará esta dependencia. (CSp05jm)
c. “Ahora hay que **pasar** de las declaraciones a las votaciones”, concluyó. (CSp04jm)

Modalised expressions of the type of those found in (31b-c: *falta por, hay que...*) sometimes occur in the examples combined with this use of impersonal infinitive clauses. They also function as an impersonalisation strategy as they often lack a

subject. Through their use the speaker seems to imply that the modal obligation to do something is simply a kind of “generalised *must*” that everyone has to follow instead of there being someone who imposes that on someone else.

7. FURTHER FEATURES SHARED BY CONSTRUCTIONS WITH NON-SPECIFIC AGENTS

Within the general group of non-specific agent constructions discussed in this chapter, we have found a number of examples in both languages containing a verb that denotes a process typically associated with human beings, such as a verb of thinking (a mental, cognition process) or verb of saying (verbal process): *believe, think, know, say, announce*, etc. in English or *creer, pensar, decir, comunicar*, etc. in Spanish (cf. Fernández Soriano & Táboas Baylín 1999: 1742). This kind of verb was found in examples containing a first-person plural and third-person plural pronouns (and their omission), and indefinite pronouns and non-specific NPs as agents. (32) and (33) below illustrate this practice in English and Spanish:

- (32) a. She added: “We **believe** that this is a racist practice...” (CEg05jm)
b. “...We all **know** the consequences that followed”. (BEt11mb)
- (33) a. “...**Creemos** que, en este año, hemos cambiado a Austria en la dirección necesaria”. (ASa04emc)
b. “**estamos contra** el régimen islámico” (ASp10emc)
c. ...uno de los inmigrantes encerrados leyó un manifiesto, en el que agradeció a instituciones, entidades y asociaciones el apoyo que les han brindado durante toda la protesta. Igualmente **expresaron** su agradecimiento a las iglesias que les han acogido... (CSa05jm)

The unmarked interpretation of these sentences is the existential or ‘vague’ (Fernández Soriano & Táboas Baylín 1999: 1742): “Someone says/announces/think that... (or some say/announce/think that...)”.

Another feature that these constructions show in several of the examples is the inclusion of an adverbial element which favours the impersonal interpretation of the reference:

- (34) a. Sus biografías no serán escritas. Demasiado cortas, anónimas, vulgares para llamar la atención. **Aquí** presentamos la de Mohamed Jelef... (ASa01cmjm)
b. "...**En este país** todos sabemos qué es lo que tenemos que hacer para librarnos de la amenaza de ETA..." (CSp02jm)
c. "Porque **antes** combatíamos al fascismo y **ahora** también combatimos al fascismo". (CSp02jm)
- (35) a. "I think how we act **now** is how we have **always** acted..." (CEt01jm)
b. "No se puede con los ingleses," ("You can't outwit the English"), we **often** say **here on the Rock**. (BEg04spa)

The purpose of these adverbial elements is to locate the sentence within a temporal and spatial framework with universal or generic meaning ("it occurs in all cases –or in a repeated number of cases, in all places, to all of us/them...") (cf. Fernández Soriano & Táboas Baylín 1999: 1736)

8. CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have looked at various forms of generic, non-specific and non-identifiable reference as a means to hide or mitigate the responsibility of the agent in newspaper political reports in English and Spanish. Personal pronouns can be used impersonally to achieve a generic interpretation, referring to any individual, potentially representing all humanity, or a 'vague' one, referring to specific individuals which are not fully identified or identifiable. In our texts, the second interpretation occurred more often and it was mostly achieved in English through the use of personal pronouns *we* and, to a lesser extent, *they*. With the same purpose, Spanish showed a high frequency of omission of the same pronouns (*nosotros* and *ellos*), with similar percentages of occurrence.

A second linguistic strategy discussed was the use of indefinite pronouns in both languages, again referring to generic or more specific, though still unidentified, agents. The use of other non-specific NPs as agents showed the highest frequency in our texts, representing in English more than 48% and in Spanish more than 46% of all instances of impersonalisation discussed in this chapter. In comparison, the use (or omission) of personal pronouns represented the second strategy most used in the two languages, with a frequency of 44% in English and more than 41% in Spanish.

Our corpus data concerning the use of these (other) non-specific NPs pointed to a gradation or scale of specification, ranging from generalised and universal (thus less specific) referents to more specific ones, though still not fully recoverable. At one end of the continuum (the least specific) we may place the use of *people* (and *la gente* in Spanish), as a single constituent; at the other end, highly modified NPs referring to a more restricted or specific group of individuals or a single individual, such as *los responsables de las organizaciones convocantes* in Spanish or *a source close to Downing Street* in English.

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