

ARTICLE

What We Can Learn from Using a Visual Questionnaire to Investigate Dutch and Afrikaans Impersonal Strategies

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Abstract

The topic of impersonalization has received a lot of attention in the literature, but the focus has mostly been on a limited number of strategies, such as the use of personal and indefinite pronouns and passive constructions. Impersonal strategies have thus far been examined using: (i) grammars, (ii) corpora, and (iii) language-based questionnaires. These methods suffer from several shortcomings if one wants to study the range of impersonal strategies. The present article aims to argue for a new way of investigating impersonal strategies that complements the other approaches, by reporting on the results of a visual questionnaire. More precisely, it discusses a visual questionnaire completed by speakers of Dutch and Afrikaans to determine whether this method is a satisfactory way of studying impersonal strategies and to also examine and compare the impersonal strategies of the two languages.*

Keywords: impersonal; impersonalization; impersonal strategies; visual questionnaire; human impersonal pronouns; universal; existential

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1. Contextualization

Impersonal strategies¹ are strategies in which the first argument is not grammatically expressed or performs a pleonastic function only.² It is, in truth, semantically empty, whether marked or unmarked (compare Siewierska 2008). In other words, impersonal strategies can be defined as strategies that contain no referential first argument (Malchukov & Siewierska 2015:20). Mazzitelli (2019:32) refers to these kinds of strategy as “agent-defocusing constructions.” From the literature (e.g., Gast & van der Auwera 2013, Siewierska & Papastathi 2011), we know that there are two main types of contexts that such strategies can be used for. Universal contexts, such as *one only lives once*, involve a generic first argument that can be paraphrased as ‘everyone, anyone’. Existential ones, like *my car has been stolen*, have a specific but unidentified (group of) individual(s) as their first argument, which can be paraphrased as ‘someone, some people’. Further distinctions within these types can be made but they will be discussed in more detail in section 2.

Much recent research has been concerned with impersonal strategies (e.g., Kitagawa & Lehrer 1990, Luukka & Markkanen 1997, Egerland 2003, Hoekstra 2010, Primus 2011, Siewierska & Papastathi 2011, Gast & van der Auwera 2013, Kirsten 2016, Van Olmen & Breed 2018a, 2018b, Mazzitelli 2019, Van Olmen et al. 2019, Schlund 2018, 2020, Breed & Van Olmen 2021a, Prenner & Bunčić 2021, Bauer 2021, Groenen 2021). It has, however, mainly focused on a fairly limited number of strategies such as pronominal ones (e.g., *one*) and passives (e.g., *has been stolen*). Few studies have tried to examine the range of impersonal strategies that are available to speakers and/or determine which of the strategies they prefer in different impersonal contexts. Two exceptions to this gap in the research are Siewierska’s (2008) investigation into pronominal versus verbal impersonal strategies, although her work is primarily based on grammatical descriptions and input from a small set of informants, and Bauer’s (2021) investigation of the impersonal strategies in six Slavic languages, based on a parallel corpus. Bauer identifies no less than eighteen distinguishable strategies for impersonalization in these six Slavic languages. However, to the best of our knowledge, there has been no systematic analysis of the variety of impersonal strategies in extensive West-Germanic language data.

Impersonal strategies have thus far been examined using: (i) grammars, often in combination with first-language-speaker judgments (e.g., Siewierska & Papastathi 2011, Gast & van der Auwera 2013); (ii) corpora (e.g., Marin-Arrese et al. 2001, Primus 2011, Coussé & van der Auwera 2012, Schlund 2020, Bauer 2021); and (iii) language-based questionnaires (e.g., Siewierska 2008; Garcia et al. 2018, Prenner & Bunčić 2021). These methods suffer from a number of shortcomings if one wants to study the range of impersonal strategies in a language (see Breed & Van Olmen 2021a). They are, for one, generally deductive in that they take a predetermined set of strategies as their

¹ The first sections of this article show a strong similarity with the contextualizations and theoretical descriptions in Breed & Van Olmen 2021a, 2021b. This overlap is inevitable, however, since the present publication forms part of the same research project, reports the results of the questionnaire discussed in Breed & Van Olmen 2021a, and also partially involves the data discussed in Breed & Van Olmen 2021b.

² For the purpose of this article, we adopt a broad definition of “impersonal strategies,” including any strategy employed by a language user that lacks a referential subject. Thus, we classify any strategy used by a speaker to avoid explicitly naming or referring to an agent as an impersonal strategy in this article.

point of departure (e.g., a questionnaire then asking for acceptability judgments about them). Admittedly, parallel corpora do not have this drawback: a trigger in the source language (e.g., German *man* ‘one/they’ in Gast 2015 and Bauer 2021) may be rendered in the target language(s) in a non-predetermined variety of ways. Still, results may be affected by interference from the source language and/or the translation process (see Schlund 2020:56, Bauer 2021:153-156). Moreover, parallel corpus studies share the problem with corpus research in particular that some impersonal contexts are quite rare³ in text collections (e.g., those tied to the here and now of the situation; see section 2) – making it difficult to find out which strategies are used in them. Questionnaires in turn often have the disadvantage that they limit the replies that participants can give (e.g., a completion task where the subject slot in ... *has/have stolen my car* allows *someone* and *they* but not a passive).

The present article aims to argue for a new way of investigating impersonal strategies that would make it possible to identify their variety in different impersonal contexts and demonstrate which ones are preferred in these contexts and that thus complements the other approaches. More precisely, it discusses a visual questionnaire completed by speakers of Dutch and Afrikaans and thus seeks to (i) determine whether this method is a satisfactory way of studying impersonal strategies and (ii) examine and compare the impersonal strategies of Dutch and Afrikaans. The rest of the article is structured as follows. Section 2 briefly introduces the impersonal contexts distinguished in the questionnaire. In section 3, we explain the method and the design of the visual questionnaire in more detail and, in section 4, we discuss its results for Dutch and Afrikaans. Section 5, finally, is the conclusion.

2. Impersonal Contexts

The visual questionnaire distinguishes twelve different impersonal contexts. They are based on Van Olmen & Breed’s (2018b) semantic map, which itself combines criteria that feature in Siewierska & Papastathi’s (2011) and Gast & van der Auwera’s (2013) semantic maps. As can be expected from semantic maps, all distinctions are motivated by cross-linguistic variation (e.g., the context in *they say that the house is haunted* differs from that in *they have stolen my car* since some languages accept the third person plural in the one but not the other). An in-depth discussion of this evidence is beyond the scope of the present article but can be found in the aforementioned sources.

The twelve contexts, which are exemplified below, can be distinguished from each other based on seven parameters: (i) quantification; (ii) perspective; (iii) veridicality; (iv) modality; (v) (un)knownness; (vi) number; and (vii) speech act. These parameters will now be discussed one by one, with reference to the examples.

³ One of the reviewers of our article emphasized that the issues and challenges related to corpus investigations that we discussed are primarily relevant to the current state of available corpora. However, as spoken language face-to-face interaction corpora become increasingly accessible, many of these problems may be mitigated. Such corpora may contain examples of language use that are not frequently encountered in written language, thereby filling gaps in existing corpora. Nevertheless, for certain underresourced languages like Afrikaans, developing these corpora may take more time. As a consequence, researchers investigating such languages may still encounter some of the gaps and challenges that are typical of traditional corpus investigation.

Table 1. Twelve distinguishable impersonal contexts

Impersonal context	English example
1 UNI-INT-NVER-NMOD	(1) But what happens when you get laid off?
2 UNI-INT-NVER-MOD	(2) One should not be ungrateful.
3 UNI-INT-VER	(3) You only live once.
4 UNI-EXT	(4) In Belgium, they are proud of their fries.
5 EXI-COR	(5) Tunnel users should be aware of the various speed cameras that they have installed in the tunnel.
6 EXI-VAG-PL	(6) A leopard has been spotted in several places in the village.
7 EXI-VAG-NN	(7) Someone has stolen his clothes.
8 EXI-INF-PL	(8) If we look at the archeological evidence, we see that they built a settlement here.
9 EXI-INF-NN	(9) He points to trampled leaves. Someone has already walked here.
10 EXI-SPE-PL	(10) We heard them coming in from the back door and the front door at the same time.
11 EXI-SPE-NN	(11) I have to go. Someone is waiting for me in the lobby.
12 SAV	(12) They say there is evidence that corporal punishment creates a culture of violence.

Quantification involves the distinction introduced in section 1 between universal (UNI) and existential (EXI) uses. The former apply to everyone contextually relevant, as in (1) to (4) in table 1, while the latter concern one or more particular but unidentified individuals, as in (5) to (12).

Perspective is a parameter that differentiates universal uses and centers, in essence, around the (non)inclusion of the speaker and the addressee in the set. A universal use that applies to speaker and addressee too, as in (1) to (3), has an internal (INT) perspective. One with an external (EXT) perspective excludes them, as in (4). This sentence is a statement about all people in Belgium, but the speaker and the addressee clearly do not belong to this group (cf. *we/you are proud of our/your fries in Belgium*).

Veridicality distinguishes universal-internal uses from each other and involves the presentation of the state of affairs as real or not. Example (3) is veridical (VER) since only living once is given as a fact (of life). Examples (1) and (2), however, are nonveridical (NVER): getting laid off is presented as being in the realm of the hypothetical and being ungrateful as being in the realm of the undesirable.

Modality further differentiates nonveridical universal-internal uses. If nonveridicality is expressed by some overt modal element, the use is modal (MOD). The auxiliary *should* in (2) is a case in point. If nonveridicality is conveyed by other means (e.g., the interrogative nature of the sentence), the use is nonmodal (NMOD). In (1), for instance, the nonveridicality comes not from a modal element but from the conditional character of the subordinate *if*-clause.

(Un)knownness is a parameter that pertains to existential uses. It has to do with the amount and type of information that is available about the particular but unidentified (set of) individual(s). Four distinctions are made here. First, in partially known or so-called corporate (COR) uses, it is relatively clear in a way from the state of affairs itself who is responsible for it, even if they are not explicitly named. Typically, they are some kind of institutional entity – hence, the term “corporate.” In (5), for example, the state of affairs of installing speed cameras is something that can only really be realized by the police and/or the agency in charge of road signs and the like. Second, in vague (VAG) uses such as (6) and (7), the speaker really knows about the event being described but is not able or willing to identify the particular person or people responsible for it. Third, in inferred (INF) uses like (8) and (9), the speaker does not have any actual direct knowledge of the event. They deduce its existence from other evidence available to them and then also assume that some unknown person or people must be behind it. In (8), for instance, the speaker infers from the archeological data that there was at some point a settlement where they are and thus also that some community building it must have existed. Fourth, SPE uses refer to a specific point in time (see Siewierska & Papastathi 2011:582). In examples such as (10) and (11), the speaker is in the same place and time as the individual(s) realizing some event there and then and may thus have strong suspicions about who they are but is still not explicitly identifying them. In (11), for example, there is a person currently waiting for the speaker, who probably knows who this individual is but chooses not to name them in their utterance.

Number as a parameter intersects with the vague, inferred, and specific existential uses (not with the corporate ones, though, since they are inherently plural, involving entities like the government, the hospital and so forth). In each of these three contexts, we can have a state of affairs that necessarily involves more than one person – as in (6), (8), and (10). These examples are, in other words, plural (PL). We can, however, also have a state of affairs in each context that may be realized by one or more than one individual – as in (7), (9), and (11). These examples are thus number-neutral (NN).

Speech act verb (SAV), lastly, sets apart one particular impersonal context from all others. It involves the presence of a speech act verb that fulfils an evidential function in the sentence, like *say* in (12). The speaker here attributes a claim to an unspecified set of people.

3. Methodology

3.1. Questionnaire

As discussed in section 1, current methods may not be entirely suitable for identifying the full range of impersonal strategies in a language, or for determining the preferred strategies in different impersonal contexts. Let us illustrate this point here in more depth, with a look at Van Olmen & Breed’s (2018a, 2018b) methodology. They adopted a “double questionnaire-based approach” to study impersonal strategies in West Germanic. A first group of first language speakers of English, Dutch, and Afrikaans were given an acceptability judgment questionnaire (see figure 1), and a second group a completion task questionnaire (see figure 2).

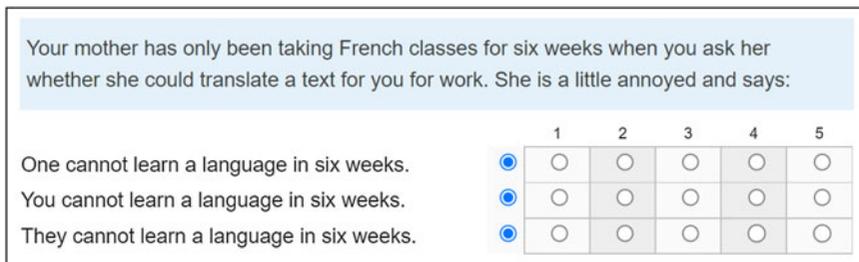


Figure 1. Acceptability judgment stimulus for UNI-INT-NVER-MOD (Van Olmen & Breed 2018b).

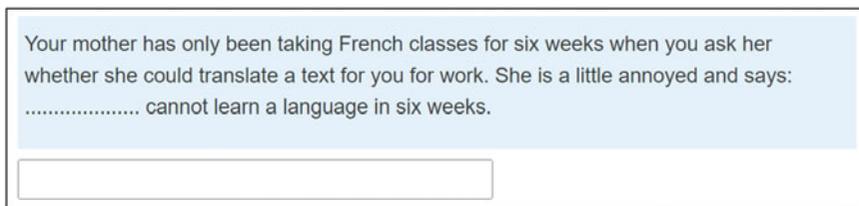
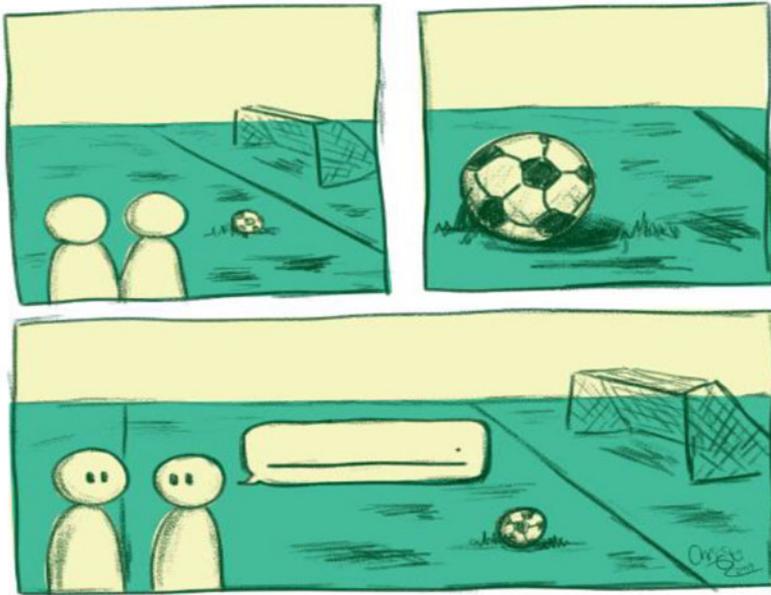


Figure 2. Completion task stimulus for UNI-INT-NVER-MOD (Van Olmen & Breed 2018b).

Both questionnaires contained twenty-four stimuli (in an arbitrary order), two for each of the twelve impersonal uses distinguished in section 2. Figures 1 and 2, for instance, present one of the two universal-internal nonveridical-modal stimuli. The first questionnaire invited the respondents to assess the acceptability of a number of impersonal strategies as a way to complete the scenario described above, on a five-point scale where one stands for very unacceptable and five for very acceptable. The list of impersonal strategies to be judged only contained a limited set of pronominal ones, however (see *one*, *you*, and *they* in figure 1). As a result, we do not know how their acceptability would compare to other potential “solutions” like *people cannot learn a language in six weeks*. The second questionnaire was intended to address this issue and asked respondents to fill in the subject slot of the final sentence of each stimulus themselves. As figure 2 shows, this approach did allow respondents to use not only *one* and *you* but also *people* for UNI-INT-NVER-MOD contexts. The sentence with the blank excluded a whole range of other conceivable answers, though – like negative indefinite *nobody can learn a language in six weeks*, nonfinite *learning a language in six weeks is impossible* or passive *a language cannot be learnt in six weeks*. In fact, one respondent seemed to feel so strongly about the passive for one of the stimuli in the completion task that they simply ignored the structure of the sentence to be completed.

Despite the problems with the above methods, a questionnaire-based approach still has considerable promise for a study of the variety of impersonal strategies in a language. The reason is that, unlike corpus research, for example, it enables us to examine, through targeted stimuli, impersonal contexts that do not occur very often in usage. The method adopted in the present article therefore sticks with presenting respondents with a scenario for all twelve impersonal uses that prompts them to



[0.765] Geef een passende uitspraak voor in het tekstballonnetje. Gebruik in je antwoord alsjeblieft een vorm van het werkwoord "spelen" (bv. speel - speelt - spelen - gespeeld) en het woord "voetbal". *

Lang antwoord-tekst

Figure 3. Visual questionnaire stimulus for EXI-INF-PL ("Give an appropriate utterance for the speech bubble. Please use a form of the verb 'play' (e.g., play, plays, played, playing) and the word "football" in your answer.")

complete it with an impersonal strategy. The scenarios are, however, given not as descriptions, as in figures 1 and 2, but as visual representations, as in figure 3.⁴

To obtain as many useful answers as possible, we instructed the participants to provide a specific type of response on the opening page of the questionnaire. The instructions explicitly stated that their answer should be focused on people in general or individuals that they do not know or cannot identify. Therefore, responses that were only related to the participant themselves, or to a specific person or group, were discouraged.

In addition to these instructions, we also incorporated visual cues and prompts to further guide the respondents towards providing useful answers. These visual stimuli were accompanied by indications of the type of response that was expected. They mostly constitute requests that respondents use a specific verb or sometimes also a specific

⁴ The stimuli were created through a collaborative, interdisciplinary project based in linguistic theory about impersonalization and visual communication theory about wordless visual narratives (e.g., Nodelman 1990, Horwat 2018:176, Arif & Hashim 2008:121). The collaborators consisted of two linguists, one lecturer in graphic design, and fifteen students in graphic design. The questionnaire was developed as a practice-based research project, with the aim of training students in graphic design to navigate the constraints and interactions of a client assignment. The linguists were the client and their commission brief stated that the students, under their lecturer's guidance, had to produce visual representations, of the various impersonal uses, that could function as "visual questions or directions" for a questionnaire. See Breed & Van Olmen 2021a for more information and an evaluation of the method.

adverb or noun to complete a scenario, as can be seen in figure 3 with *spelen* ‘play’ and *voetbal* ‘football’ and in the rest of the questionnaires, which are accessible online.⁵ Even with such indications, however, the stimuli for the speech act verb use (e.g., ‘it is said that this house is haunted’) have proven to be inadequate, with too many irrelevant answers, and are therefore not discussed in the remainder of this article. For the other eleven uses, examples (13) to (34) in table 2 illustrate suitable answers actually offered by our respondents.

3.2. Dataset

The visual questions in the Dutch and Afrikaans questionnaires were identical, but the textual explanation for each question was translated into the language of the questionnaire. The questionnaires were distributed via social media. Participation was anonymous and voluntary. A total of 83 first language speakers of Dutch ended up completing the questionnaire for their language. For the Afrikaans questionnaire, we managed to get no less than 454 first language speakers to fill it out. Because of this discrepancy between the two languages and the amount of data for the latter in particular (more than 10,000 data points), we analyzed all of the data for Dutch but only the responses for one visual stimulus for each impersonal use for Afrikaans. The Afrikaans data has been reported on already, in Breed & Van Olmen 2021b, but is included here nonetheless as a basis for comparison with the results for Dutch. An overview of the data is given in table 3. It presents, for each impersonal context (see the leftmost column): (i) the number of stimuli taken into consideration here (e.g., for Afrikaans, always just one); (ii) the number of irrelevant answers; (iii) the number of relevant answers; and (iv) the total number of answers.

A few comments are in order here. First, the totals do not always add up to the same number, since not all respondents completed all questions and some impersonal uses were tested more than two times for Dutch. The higher numbers of stimuli for certain uses are an artifact of the questionnaire development (see footnote 4). Each designer was asked to create a stimulus for at least one existential context – with eight to choose from – and at least one universal context – with just four to choose from. As a result, more stimuli were produced for universal uses. Second, the so-called irrelevant answers include not only those that cannot be considered as impersonal in any way but also those that may be impersonal but do not actually fit the impersonal use that the stimulus sought to test. An example would be an Afrikaans clause with *mens* ‘one’, which is exclusively universal-internal (see Van Olmen et al. 2019), for a stimulus looking for existential impersonal strategies). Third, for the relevant answers, we did not exclude those possibly ambiguous between an impersonal and a nonimpersonal reading. Dutch clauses with the pronouns *ze* ‘they’ or *je* ‘you’, for instance, could be taken to refer to a known group of people or an addressee respectively, but they can have an impersonal interpretation too and are thus taken into account as relevant here. Fourth, given the open-ended nature of the questionnaires and the complexity of the domain under investigation, it is not unsurprising that there are so many irrelevant answers. Still, we

⁵ An anonymized version of the Dutch visual questionnaire is available at <https://forms.gle/TgUQzYfDFnDMV8QE7>; an anonymized version of the Afrikaans visual questionnaire is available at <https://forms.gle/qQUkx8gx5m8u6GbT6>

Table 2. Examples of responses for each impersonal context from the Dutch and Afrikaans questionnaires

Impersonal context	Suitable examples from answers of Dutch visual questionnaire	Suitable examples from answers of Afrikaans visual questionnaire
1 EXI-COR	(13) Kijk schat, er wordt aan de weg gewerkt. 'Look darling, the road is being worked on.'	(14) Hulle werk alweer aan die pad. 'They are working on the road again.'
2 EXI-INF-NN	(15) Kijk nou wat voor slipspoor ze hebben gemaakt. 'Just look at the sort of skid mark that they have made.'	(16) Hulle het natuurlik gister hier gedrink en nie skoon gemaak nie. 'They were obviously drinking here yesterday and didn't clean up.'
3 EXI-INF-PL ⁶	(17) Iemand heeft gisteravond een vuurtje gestookt. 'Someone lit a fire here yesterday evening.'	(18) Lyk of iemand gister hier sokker gespeel het. 'Looks like someone played football here yesterday.'
4 EXI-SPE-NN	(19) Iemand probeert in te breken! 'Someone is trying to break in!'	(20) O gats! Iemand het my gehoor! 'O no! Someone heard me!'
5 EXI-SPE-PL	(21) Ze hebben de hele taart opgegeten! 'They have eaten the whole tart.'	(22) Iemand het sowaar al die koek opgeëet! 'Someone has, can you believe it, eaten the whole cake!'
6 EXI-VAG-NN	(23) Jouw zoon wordt gepest op school! 'Your son is being bullied at school.'	(24) Iemand het al die appels gepluk terwyl jy geslaap het! 'Someone picked all the apples while you were asleep!'
7 EXI-VAG-PL	(25) Alle computers werden gestolen. 'All computers were stolen.'	(26) Hulle het terreuraanvalle op 'n paar plekke in die stad uitgevoer. 'They have carried out terrorist attacks at a couple of places in the city.'
8 UNI-EXT	(27) In de woestijn rijden ze op kamelen. 'In the desert, they ride on camels.'	(28) Mensen in China eet baie rys. 'People in China eat a lot of rice.'
9 UNI-INT-NVER-MOD	(29) Als je gaat rijden, moet je een auto-gordel omdoen. 'If you are going to drive, you have to put on a seatbelt.'	(30) 'n Mens moet altyd jou sitplekgordel vasmaak as jy motor bestuur. 'One should always fasten one's seatbelt when one drives.'
10 UNI-INT-NVER-NMOD	(31) Kun je doodgaan van een bijensteek? 'Can you die from a bee sting?'	(32) Wat gebeur as mens dié rooi knoppie druk? 'What happens if one presses that red button?'
11 UNI-INT-VER	(33) In de winter krijgen we het koud. 'In winter, we get cold.'	(34) Almal kry koud in die winter. 'Everyone gets cold in winter.'

have a sufficient amount of relevant ones for both languages and all impersonal contexts to study their variety in impersonal strategies in Section 4. Fifth, and finally, the quantitative differences in the answers between Dutch and Afrikaans pose no significant problem, since we do not explicitly seek to compare the frequencies of impersonal strategies in the two languages.

⁶ One of the reviewers has raised a concern that the EXI-SPE-PL context in our questionnaire may be perceived by participants as EXI-SPE-NN, as starting a fire can be a task performed by a single individual. While we acknowledge that this is a possibility, we would like to emphasize that the stimulus includes multiple seats around the fire, which indicates a group activity. Furthermore, it is possible that the potential for misinterpretation exists for all visual questions in the questionnaire. However, we believe that one of the strengths of our questionnaire design is that each illustration is carefully crafted to visually depict the specific criteria of the question, while also using the principles of visual narrative theory to eliminate potential misinterpretations.

Table 3. Overview of the visual questionnaire data for Dutch and Afrikaans

Context	Dutch dataset				Afrikaans dataset			
	Amount of questions included	Usable answers per context	Not usable answers per context	Total	Amount of questions included	Usable answers per context	Not usable answers per context	Total
SAV	Not included in analysis				Not included in the analysis			
EXI-COR	2	122	42	164	1	362	77	439
EXI-INF-NN	2	122	120	242	1	368	78	449
EXI-INF-PL	2	94	67	161	1	220	227	448
EXI-SPE-NN	2	149	15	164	1	187	224	411
EXI-SPE-PL	2	116	48	164	1	245	206	451
EXI-VAG-NN	2	141	25	166	1	343	107	450
EXI-VAG-PL	2	149	16	165	1	424	25	449
UNI-EXT	3	168	79	247	1	288	165	453
UNI-INT-NVER-MOD	4	280	49	329	1	360	92	452
UNI-INT-NEVER-NMOD	4	281	11	292	1	382	68	450
UNI-INT-VER	3	206	45	251	1	119	335	454
TOTAL		1828	517	2345	1	3298	1604	4906

4. Results

In this section, we first offer an overall picture of the findings of our visual questionnaires for Dutch and Afrikaans, focusing on the most frequent types of impersonal strategies (section 4.1). We then move on to a discussion of the other strategies that can be distinguished in the data (section 4.2). We end with a survey of all distinct impersonal uses and the strategies that are used for them (section 4.3).

4.1. Overall Results and Main Impersonal Strategies

Table 4 and figure 4 provide an overview of our findings for Dutch and Afrikaans by singling out the most common impersonal strategies in the data. They are: personal pronouns (PN.PRS), indefinite pronouns (PN.INDF), nouns meaning ‘human being’ or pronouns originating from such nouns (NP_{HUMAN}), and passives (PASS) (the remaining relevant answers are included as ‘other’). The term “main strategies” is appropriate for referring to these particular techniques, as they are frequently employed by participants and are also widely recognized as the central impersonal strategies in existing linguistic literature. In addition to these main strategies, our results also presented other impersonal strategies that have not been previously documented in existing linguistic literature. For the purposes of table 4, we will refer to these novel strategies as “other strategies,” but we will provide a detailed discussion of each of these strategies in the subsequent section. The table makes further distinctions for the first three categories (see the second column) and gives the raw (#) and relative (%) frequencies of all (sub) categories. Figure 4 presents the proportions of the main categories in graph form.

A first thing to observe is that personal pronouns are the most frequent type of impersonal strategy in both Dutch (43%) and Afrikaans (31%), as in (35) to (38) and (39) to (43) respectively.

- (35) Du Wat zou gebeuren als ik een kauwgomballon té groot zal oplazen?
‘What would happen if I blow up a chewing gum balloon too big?’
- (36) Du Je mag hier roken blijkbaar.
‘Apparently, you are allowed to smoke here.’
- (37) Du We krijgen het koud in de winter omdat de zon niet schijnt.
‘We get cold in winter because the sun doesn’t shine.’
- (38) Du Ze hebben alle appels geplukt terwijl je sliep.
‘They picked all the apples while you were asleep.’
- (39) Afr Ek maak altyd my sitplekgordel vas
‘I always fasten my seatbelt.’
- (40) Afr Wat gebeur as jy die knoppie druk?
‘What happens if you press the button?’
- (41) Afr In die winter kry ons koud.
‘In winter, we get cold.’
- (42) Afr Maak seker dat julle sitplekgordels vasgemaak is wanneer julle ry.
‘Make sure that your seatbelts are fastened when you drive.’
- (43) Afri Hulle werk alweer aan die pad.
‘They are working on the road again.’

Admittedly, their proportions may be somewhat inflated: strictly speaking, we do not know whether respondents intended ‘you’, ‘we’, or ‘they’ as impersonal or as referring

Table 4. Impersonal strategies in Dutch and Afrikaans

Strategy		Dutch		Afrikaans	
		#	%	#	%
PN.PRS	'I'	96	5%	306	9%
	'you'	387	21%	127	4%
	'we'	78	4%	16	0%
	'you all'	0	0%	3	0%
	'they'	232	13%	554	17%
	Total	793	43%	1006	31%
PN.INDF	<i>iemand</i> 'someone'	158	9%	473	14%
	<i>allemaal</i> (D) <i>almal</i> (A) 'all'	13	1%	40	1%
	<i>iedereen</i> (D), <i>elkeen</i> (A) 'each one'	85	5%	2	0%
	Total	256	14%	515	16%
NP _{HUMAN}	<i>men</i> (D) 'one/they', (<i>'n mens</i> (A) 'one'	49	3%	123	4%
	(<i>de mense</i> (D), (<i>die mense</i> (A) 'the people'	83	5%	189	6%
	Total	132	7%	312	9%
PASS		413	23%	955	29%
Other impersonal strategies		234	13%	510	15%
Total		1828	100%	3298	100%

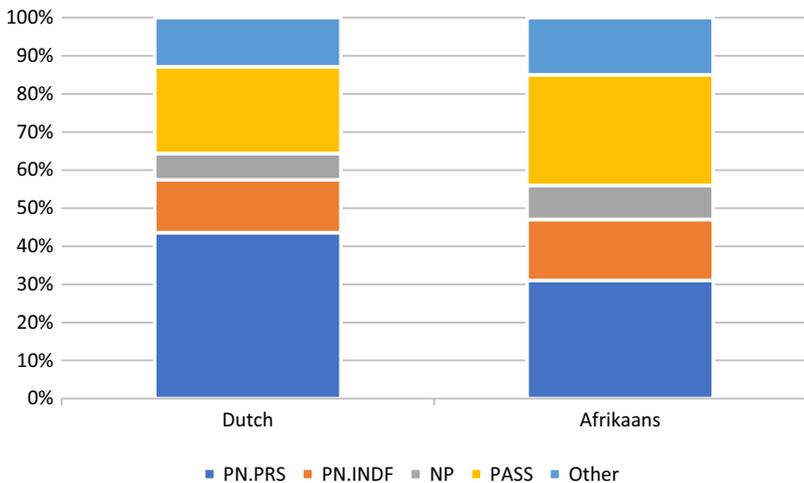


Figure 4. Main impersonal strategies in Dutch and Afrikaans

to particular people. This ambiguity⁷ is especially pertinent for 'I'. The first-person singular is known to be able to function impersonally (e.g., Zobel 2015) but it is not unlikely that respondents actually used it to refer to the speaker.⁸ Such qualifications notwithstanding, it is evident from the data that Dutch and Afrikaans are very partial to employing personal pronouns for impersonal contexts. This finding of our visual questionnaire can be seen as an independent justification and perhaps also as an explanation for much of the research's focus on the impersonal use of pronouns such as 'you' and 'they' in Dutch and Afrikaans (e.g., Van Olmen & Breed 2018a, 2018b, Groenen 2021).

The passive comes out as a very common impersonal strategy too, in Dutch (23%) and in Afrikaans (29%). For respective examples, consider (44) and (45).

- (44) Du In de woestijn wordt er op kamelen gereden
'In the desert, camels are ridden on.'
- (45) Afr Terwyl jy geslaap het is al die appels gepluk.
'While you were asleep, all the apples were picked.'

The passive might even prove to be more frequent than personal pronouns,⁹ if we were able to identify and discard those cases in which 'they' and the like were not meant as impersonal. In view of its rate of occurrence in our data, it is quite interesting that the passive has received comparatively less attention in the literature on impersonal strategies than personal pronouns (but see Breed & Van Olmen 2021 on the impersonal passive in Dutch and Afrikaans, and Primus 2011 on the impersonal passive in German and Dutch).

Indefinite pronouns make up the third largest category in Dutch (14%) and Afrikaans (16%). The questionnaire answers in (46) to (50) are cases in point.

⁷ Although it was not always possible to determine whether a respondent in these cases intended the answers as impersonal, we counted all cases of ambiguity (in other words the answer can be considered personal or impersonal) as impersonal. The reason for this is that the ambiguity in itself is an indication that the particular strategy may be a strategy to express impersonal meaning. Secondly, the respondents – as already mentioned – received a general instruction at the beginning of the questionnaire which says that their impersonal answers should be focused on people in general or individuals that they do not know or cannot identify.

⁸ One of our reviewers rightly pointed out that the fact that the questionnaires can also yield ambiguous answers means that, in this respect, this method still has the same limitation as corpus studies. This is, of course, true. However, a questionnaire approach has two advantages over corpus investigations in this case. First, the questionnaire designer can include instructions in the questionnaire that ask the respondent in advance not to offer ambiguous answers (as was also the case with this questionnaire). A second potential advantage of a questionnaire approach (one that we did not utilize in the design of this questionnaire) is to ask respondents follow-up questions as part of the questionnaire design – to clarify the meaning of their answers. Therefore, if the questionnaire were not a closed/anonymous questionnaire process, we would ask all respondents who gave personal pronouns as an answer if they intended an impersonal or personal reference.

⁹ One of our reviewers noted that this is an intriguing finding from the questionnaire since passive constructions are often considered to be only a feature of formal writing. The results demonstrate that passives are also frequently used in informal everyday language (cf. Prenner & Bunčić 2021:217 on the *-no/-to* impersonal construction in Polish).

- (46) Du Iemand heeft alle computers gestolen.
'Someone stole all computers.'
- (47) Du Iedereen moet een autogordel omdoen, klein en groot.
'Everyone should put on a seatbelt, whether they are young or old.'
- (48) Afr Ek dink iemand het my gehoor
'I think someone heard me.'
- (49) Afr Almal moet hulle sitplekgordel vasmaak.
'All should fasten their seatbelts.'
- (50) Afr Elkeen moet hul sitplekgordel vasmaak.
'Everyone should fasten their seatbelts.'

Nouns meaning 'human being' and pronouns deriving from such nouns, finally, account for 7% of the Dutch answers and 9% of the Afrikaans ones. Some examples are provided in (51) to (54).

- (51) Du In Frankrijk eet men croissants.
'In France, they eat croissants.'
- (52) Du Als mensen uit hun mond stinken, poetsen ze hun tanden en sommigen ook hun tong.
'If people have a smelly mouth, they brush their teeth and some also their tongues.'
- (53) Afr In die winter kry mens koud.
'In winter, one gets cold.'
- (54) Afr Mense in China eet baie rys.
'People in China eat a lot of rice.'

The frequency of Afrikaans (*'n mens* 'one', compared to that of *jy* 'you', in table 4 is noteworthy. Previous research, in particular Van Olmen & Breed (2018a), suggests that speakers of Afrikaans strongly prefer the NP_{HUMAN} option to the second-person singular. In our visual questionnaire, however, (*'n mens* essentially occurs as often (123 times, 3.73%) as *jy* (127 times, 3.85%). The specific stimuli may have played a role here and the choice between the two clearly deserves to be studied in more detail (Dutch behaves as expected in table 4 when it comes to *men* 'one/they' versus *je* 'you' and *ze* 'they': the NP_{HUMAN} is much less frequent, with just 49 cases, than the second-person singular, with 329 instances, and the third-person plural, with 221 hits).

After the above overview of the most frequent types of impersonal strategies in Dutch and Afrikaans, which are also the most well-established ones in the literature, we now turn to the answers labeled as 'other' in table 4.

4.2. Other Strategies

Table 5 summarizes the 'other' strategies. Examples and a description of each one will be presented in the following subsections. The frequencies of the various impersonal strategies used in different contexts are presented and discussed in detail in section 4.3.

Table 5. 'Other' impersonal strategies in Dutch and Afrikaans

Strategy	Dutch		Afrikaans	
	Total	% of total	Total	% of total
Specified NP	99	42.49%	221	43.33%
Imperative	17	7.30%	124	24.31%
Relativization	7	3.00%	81	15.88%
Infinitive	28	12.02%	38	7.45%
Nominalization	10	4.29%	12	2.35%
Agentive NP	31	13.30%	18	3.53%
Subjective questions	7	3.00%	8	1.57%
Free-choice items	0	0.00%	3	0.59%
Quantifier + NP	18	7.73%	4	0.78%
'the others'	3	1.29%	0	0.00%
Species-generic use	8	3.43%	0	0.00%
Demonstrative strategies	1	0.43%	0	0.00%
'one'	1	0.43%	0	0.00%
'person'	1	0.43%	1	0.20%
Elliptical strategies	3	1.29%	0	0.00%
TOTAL	234	100.00%	510	100.00%

Specified nouns

Our Dutch and Afrikaans respondents frequently used nouns that denote a type¹⁰ of individual but do not refer to a particular person or particular people. Moreover, these types tie in closely with the state of affairs expressed (e.g., 'vandals' with the act of stealing apples, 'drivers' with the obligation to wear a seatbelt) and, therefore, they cannot really be said to identify anyone in any more precise way. As (55) to (58) make clear, we find such nouns in universal as well as existential uses in our data.

- (55) Du: **Vandalen** hebben alle appels geplukt terwijl je sliep! (EXI-VAG-NN)
'Vandals picked all the apples while you were asleep.'
- (56) Du: Alleen **een formule 1 racer** kan zo'n slipspoor maken, zeg! (EXI-INF-NN)
'Only a formula one driver can have made such a skid mark, you know!'
- (57) Afr: **Kwajongens** het sowaar al die appels gepluk terwyl jy geslaap het.
 (EXI-VAG-NN)
'Rascals actually picked all the apples while you were asleep.'

¹⁰ One of our reviewers suggested that this strategy should not be classified as an impersonal strategy. While we understand their perspective, for the purpose of this study, we take a broad approach to what we consider to be impersonal strategies. We include all strategies that a speaker uses to avoid referring to a specific person or group of people. The lexical meaning of these types of noun phrases makes it a possible strategy that speakers use to refer categorically to a group of people without specifying it.

- (58) Afr: **Alle motorbestuurders** moet ten alle tye hulle sitplekgordel vasmaak.
(UNI-INT-NVER-MOD)
'All drivers should fasten their seatbelts at all times.'

Imperative

Imperatives¹¹ may typically be used to issue directives to specific addressees. However, as (59) to (61) show, they can serve to express obligations, prohibitions, permissions, and recommendations of a more generic type too, that is, ones with which anyone who somehow feels that they apply to them may comply (or not). Unsurprisingly, imperatives only occur in nonveridical universal contexts in our data and, more specifically, mostly modal ones.

- (59) Du: **Poets je tanden**, anders stink je de hele dag uit je mond.
(UNI-INT-NVER-MOD)
'Brush your teeth, otherwise your mouth will stink all day.'
- (60) Afr: Maak nie saak wie jy is nie, **maak** altyd jou sitplekgordel **vas**!
(UNI-INT-NVER-MOD)
'No matter who you are, always fasten your seatbelt!'
- (61) DU: **Druk** niet op die knop, want die is gevaarlijk! (UNI-INT-NVER-NMOD)
'Don't press that button, because it is dangerous!'

Relativization

Our Afrikaans respondents sometimes combined a definite noun with the meaning 'human being', like *die mense* 'the people' in (62), or closely related semantics, like *die ou* 'the guy' in (63), with a postmodifying relative clause that describes the state of affairs that the individual(s) is(/are) assumed to be responsible. Within the entire sentence, this subordinate clause can be argued to identify the referent(s) to some extent, but they are, in essence, still unknown. We only find this pattern in existential uses, since it refers to a particular (group of) individual(s) with certain characteristics.

- (62) Afr: **Die mense wat** gister hier gedrink het, het hulle gemors net hier gelos.
(EXI-INF-NN)
'The people who were drinking here yesterday just left their garbage here.'
- (63) Afr: Ek gaan **die ou wat** al die koek opgeëet het nou 'n koekhou slaan!
(EXI-SPE-PL)
'I am going to hit the guy who ate all the cake.'

In such cases, our Dutch respondents consistently made use of free relative clauses instead, as in (64).

¹¹ One of the reviewers correctly noted that the presence of imperatives in our data may be an artefact of our questionnaire design. As participants were presented with a bubble to fill in with a possible utterance, they may have been more likely to choose an imperative expression than they would have in other methods, such as describing a picture. However, we maintain that imperatives can still be considered impersonal strategies, as we instructed participants at the beginning of the questionnaire to provide answers that do not refer to any specific person or group of people.

- (64) Du: **Wie** dit slipspoor maakte, reed veel te bruut!
 [*The person/people*] who made this skid mark was driving way too aggressively!

Infinitive

As nonfinite verb forms, infinitives¹² do not require speakers to convey a first argument. They can therefore be used, not unlike passives, to present a state of affairs as impersonal by leaving it out altogether. As (65) and (66) show, the infinitive can serve this purpose in both universal and existential contexts in both languages.

- (65) Du: Het is nodig **om** meerdere soorten voedsel **te eten** (UNI-INT-VER)
 'It is necessary to eat different types of food.'
 (66) Afr: Dink hoe gevaarlik dit is **om** só langs die pad **te werk!** (EXI-COR)
 'Just think how dangerous it is to work on the side of the road like that.'

Nominalization

Our respondents used nominalized verbs, which do not need the first argument to be expressed either, in the same way as infinitives. They too occur in universal uses, like *het eten van rijst* 'the eating of rice' in (67), as well as existential ones, like *die gewerk aan die pad* 'the working on the road' in (68) in both languages.

- (67) Du: Ik denk dat **het eten van rijst** in China op het dagelijks menu staat.
 (UNI-EXI)
 'I think that the eating of rice is part of the daily menu in China.'
 (68) Afr: **Die gewerk aan die pad** mors my tyd! (EXI-COR)
 'The working on the road wastes my time.'

Agentive NPs

Another way that our respondents avoided an explicit impersonal first argument is by assigning a certain agency to one of the other entities involved. By utilizing this type of strategy in impersonal contexts, the respondents are able to refrain from explicitly identifying the agent of the predicate. Consequently, according to our approach, these results can also be classified as an impersonal strategy. In (69), for instance, the car may be the instrument but is portrayed as the doer of the action and, hence, the actual (unknown) doer need not be expressed. Likewise, the button in (70) is arguably the instrument ('doing something with it') or the patient ('pressing it') but is presented here as causing something itself, removing the real doer from the picture. A closely related strategy is the use of noun phrases that directly or indirectly imply the involvement of one or more human beings. For example, in (71), there can only have been a campfire if someone/some people lit it. In the same vein, the terror attacks in (72) cannot have happened without actual terrorists. As is clear from (69) to (72), we find such cases again in both universal and existential contexts.

¹² One of the reviewers noted that the use of infinitives is also very common in east Slavic languages (Russian, Ukrainian) as an impersonal strategy.

- (69) Du: **Een auto** heeft een flink slipspoor gemaakt. (EXI-INF-NN)
'A car has made a serious skid mark.'
- (70) Afr: Wat doen **die knoppie**? (UNI-INT-NVER-NMOD)
'What does the button do?'
- (71) Du: Nou, dat moet **een flink vuurtje** zijn geweest gisteravond (UNI-INF-PL)
'Well, that must have been a nice little campfire yesterday.'
- (72) Afr: Daar was **terreuraanvalle** op 'n paar plekke in die stad gewees (EXI-VAG-PL)
'There had been terror attacks at a couple of places in the city.'

Subjective questions

Some of our visual stimuli depicted situations to which the respondents could formulate negative reactions (e.g., a reproach, an accusation, shock). For such cases, they occasionally used what may be described as “subjective questions”: they ask which specific but unknown person or people did something while evaluating them or the entire situation as negative, through the use of negatively evaluative nouns and/or expletives. These questions were limited in our data to existential uses such as (73) and (74).

- (73) Du: **Welke druiloor** heeft onze computers gestolen? (EXI-VAG-NN)
'Which numbskull has stolen our computers?'
- (74) Afr: **Wie de fok** het al die koek opgeëet?! (EXI-SPE-PL)
'Who the fuck has eaten all the cake?!'

Free-choice items

Our Afrikaans respondents sporadically employed free choice items for impersonal purposes. Such items signal here that the interlocutors are at liberty to select who is intended: ‘no matter who you choose from among ...’ (see Vendler 1967:80). With them, speakers can indicate that they do not know or, in a sense, care which particular individual(s) is(/are) responsible, as in existential (75), or that what they are saying applies to any person that you can think of, as in universal (76). We did not come across any free choice items in our Dutch data but it is perfectly possible to produce utterances such as (75) and (76) in the language.

- (75) Afr: **Wie ookal** gister hier gesit en drink het, het 'n groot gemors agtergelaat. (EXI-INF-NN)
'Whoever was sat drinking here yesterday left a big mess.'
- (76) Afr: **Enige iemand** wat'n motor wil bestuur, moet hul vasmaak met 'n sitplekgordel. (UNI-INT-NVER-MOD)
'Anyone whatsoever who wants to drive a car should fasten their seatbelt.'

This set of strategies does not constitute a distinct impersonal strategy, as it closely aligns with the strategy of employing indefinite pronouns in impersonal contexts (see section 4.1). However, we have chosen to still categorize these results under “other strategies” since it appears to generate a less marked response when the FCI is incorporated, in contrast to its omission. As such, we consider it a highly specific method of utilizing indefinite pronouns alongside an FCI in certain impersonal

contexts. We acknowledge that additional research is necessary to gain a better comprehension of the interplay between indefinite pronouns and FCIs as impersonal strategies.

Quantifier combined with human noun phrase

Some respondents chose to make the parameter of quantification (see section 2) explicit while using a noun phrase with the meaning ‘human being(s)’. Such explication manifests itself in our data through determiners like *sommige* ‘certain’ for existential uses and *alle* ‘all’ for universal uses. Consider the respective examples in (77) and (78). Note that we only came across universal quantifiers for Afrikaans but that existential ones are an option too in the language.

- (77) Du: waarom gooien **sommige mensen** hun afval naast de prullenbak!
(EXI-INF-NN)
‘Why do certain people throw their garbage next to the trash can!’
- (78) Afr: **Alle mense** moet te alle tye hulle veiligheidsgordel dra wanneer hulle bestuur. (UNI-INT-NVER-MOD)
‘All people should wear their seatbelts at all times when they drive.’

This strategy is also closely related to another main impersonal strategy highlighted in section 4.1, namely NP_{HUMAN}. However, the addition of a quantifier delineates the intended (albeit unspecified) individual or group of individuals to which the respondent is referring. As this represents an additional strategy that requires the respondent to specify the applicability of the unspecified reference, we view it as a distinct technique that warrants separate discussion.

‘Person’

The noun *persoon* ‘person’ denotes a human being.¹³ Intuitively, it would therefore be a suitable way to express an impersonal first argument – just like *mens* ‘human being’. *Persoon* is, however, only found once in Dutch (79) and once in Afrikaans (80). The relative formality of the noun may play a role here.

- (79) Du: Zo, deze **persoon** weet wel hoe je een slipspoor maakt! (EXI-INF-NN)
‘So, this person does know how you make a skid mark!’
- (80) Afr: Daar het sekerlik meer as 3 **persone** hier gedrink gister. (EXI-INF-NN)
‘More than 3 persons must have been drinking here yesterday.’

‘The others’

A (very) small number of Dutch respondents employed *de anderen* ‘the others’ for specific-existential contexts. As mentioned in section 2, such uses are tied to the here

¹³ One of the reviewers questioned why we treat the use of *persoon* as a distinct strategy, rather than categorizing it under the “NP_{HUMAN}” strategy. We distinguish *persoon* as a separate strategy because the “NP_{HUMAN}” category specifically encompasses nouns whose lexical meaning of ‘HUMAN’ has become grammaticalized to the point of being used as a pronoun. In contrast, the noun *persoon* or *persone* lexically refers to an unspecified individual, making it a construction with inherent impersonal meaning.

and now of the speech event and, as a result, the speaker may have certain ideas about who is responsible but they are still not willing or able to identify this person or these people explicitly. *De anderen* in (81) suggests that the speaker indeed has suspicions about who ate the tart but they cannot or will not say more than that a particular group of people not including themselves did it. Although we did not find any cases of ‘the others’ in Afrikaans, it seems perfectly acceptable in specific-existential contexts in this language too.

- (81) Du: Ik had zo'n zin in taart en nu hebben **de anderen** de hele taart al opgegeten. (EXI-SPE-PL)
 ‘I was so looking forward to pie and now the others have already eaten the entire pie.’

Species-generic use

For veridical universal-internal contexts, the Dutch respondents occasionally used nouns that refer to the human species in general, like *de mensheid* ‘humanity’ in (82) and *de mens* ‘man’ (lit. ‘the human’) in (83). It is important to distinguish this type of noun from the main impersonal strategy of NP_{HUMAN} (see section 4.1). The strategy we distinguish here does not concern a grammaticalized impersonal pronoun or an indefinite set of people. Rather, the respondents are attributing something to the whole of mankind. The two strategies are obviously related, since nouns with the meaning ‘human being’ are known to start their grammaticalization process into impersonal pronouns in contexts where they have a species-generic meaning and refer to all human beings (see Giacalone Ramat & Sansò 2007). Dutch *men* has this origin, coming from *man* ‘man, human being’, and so does Afrikaans *mens*, which is in the process of developing into a full-fledged impersonal pronoun (see Van Olmen et al. 2019) but for which it is therefore not always clear whether it has a species-generic or a truly impersonal interpretation. We therefore just included it under NP_{HUMAN}.

- (82) Du: **De mensheid** heeft meer water nodig. (UNI-INT-VER)
 ‘Humanity needs more water.’
 (83) Du: **De mens** heeft water nodig. (UNI-INT-VER)
 ‘Man needs water.’

Demonstrative strategies

An at first sight peculiar answer by one of our Dutch respondents, in (84), features demonstrative *die* ‘those (ones)’. This item seems incompatible with impersonal contexts since its typical function is to point to a particular known rather than unknown set of referents. It is not coincidental, though, that this demonstrative is employed for an inferred-existential use. What appears to be happening here is that the speaker uses it to indicate the individuals whose inevitable existence they have deduced from the available evidence. *Die* in (84) can be said to point to the unknown group of people that the speaker assumes must have been there to light the fire of which the remnants are still visible. The argument that demonstratives actually fit inferred-existential contexts quite well is supported by the fact that, for those uses,

our Dutch data also contains a small number of general nouns referring to humans with a demonstrative determiner, as in (85). No demonstratives were found in our Afrikaans data. The direct translations of (84) and (85) are, however, possible in this language too for inferred-existential purposes.

- (84) Du **Die** hebben gisteravond een lekker vuurtje gestookt. (EXI-INF-PL)
'Those lit a nice little campfire yesterday evening.'
- (85) Du Waarom gooien **die mensen** hun zoi naast de prullenbak? (EXI-INF-NN)
'Why do those people throw their garbage next to the trash can?'

Elliptical strategies

Another (infrequent) set of answers restricted to our Dutch data is probably best described as involving ellipsis. In (86), for instance, only the past participles *gemaakt* 'made' and *geparkeerd* 'parked' are present and no subject or auxiliary is included. The result, which may very well be intended, is that it could be elliptical for a variety of other, often slightly more explicit impersonal strategies: impersonal passive (*er is*) *een slipspoor gemaakt* (lit. '(there is) a skid mark made'), number-neutral (*iemand heeft*) *een slipspoor gemaakt* '(someone has) made a skid mark', third-person plural (*ze hebben*) *een slipspoor gemaakt* '(they have) made a skid mark'. Interestingly, like demonstratives, such elliptical strategies were also only found for inferred-existential uses. A very tentative hypothesis for this fact is that speakers use them to convey the inferred state of affairs – such as having a barbecue and lighting a campfire in (86) – without going as far as also explicitly indicating – through, say, *mensen* 'people' – the inferred existence of any individual(s) responsible for it. The reason, finally, why Afrikaans does not allow the patterns in (86) and (87) in our view may have something to do with more general constraints in the language for ellipsis, but this is, at present, unclear to us.

- (86) Du: zo'n slipspoor **gemaakt** en toch goed **ingeparkeerd** (EXI-INF-NN)
'made such a skid mark and still parked well'
- (87) Du: Barbecue gisteravond, vuurtje **gestookt** en niet **gedoofd** (EXI-INF-PL)
'Barbecue yesterday evening, campfire lit and not extinguished.'

'One'

We know from English (and other languages) that the numeral 'one' can grammaticalize into a full-fledged impersonal pronoun. No such change has taken place in Dutch or in Afrikaans, however. We nonetheless have one answer in our data (88), where Dutch *een* 'one' seems to occupy the subject slot of a conditional clause. *Een* may also be the indefinite article 'a(n)', of course (numeral [en] and determiner [ən] are not distinguished in spelling), which we suspect is the case here: the respondent must have forgotten to type the noun that was supposed to follow 'a(n)'. Yet we do not want to exclude the possibility of impersonal *een* 'one' altogether. It is a common phenomenon crosslinguistically and English influence, for instance, should also not be written off completely as a potential factor. It is interesting to note in this regard that, in Van Olmen & Breed's (2018a) completion task, one of the Afrikaans respondents filled in *een* 'one' too (the determiner is spelt differently, as 'n 'a(n)').

- (88) Du: Als een een appel met wormen eet, groeit er dan een plant uit je oren?
 (UNI-INT-NVER-NMOD)
 'If one eats an apple with worms, does a plant grow out of your ears?'

Summary

The overview in section 4.2 shows that impersonal contexts can be and are, in fact, expressed not only through established strategies like passives, personal pronouns, nouns meaning (or deriving from) 'human being', and indefinite pronouns but also through a whole range of other strategies. Most of them (e.g., infinitives, nominalizations) are found in both Dutch and Afrikaans. Moreover, even if they only occur in the data for one of these languages (e.g., 'the others', free-choice items), it is nevertheless evident that they are an option in the other one too. This overlap is obviously due the fact that Dutch and Afrikaans are closely related. There are, however, also exceptions to this tendency, such as the use of elliptical strategies in inferred-existential contents.

4.3. Discussion of the Preferred Strategies Per Context

Tables 6 and 7 provide a summary, for Dutch and Afrikaans respectively, of all the strategies used in the different impersonal contexts. The results are also presented in Figures 5 and 6.

We will limit ourselves here to a few general observations about the strategies that Dutch and Afrikaans prefer for different impersonal contexts. A more in-depth discussion would require more space than the present article allows and it would also only be really appropriate, especially for any comparisons between the two languages, if we took into account the Afrikaans data for all visual stimuli (see section 3.2).

A first observation concerns the use of personal pronouns. They are, by far, the dominant strategy across all universal-internal contexts in Dutch and Afrikaans but figure less prominently across the other impersonal contexts. This finding is in line with earlier ones for these two languages (and others): Van Olmen & Breed's (2018:839) completion questionnaire, for instance, also suggests that "the universal-internal domain has a much stronger preference for pronominal forms of impersonalisation than the non-universal-internal one." In addition, Afrikaans makes frequent use of imperatives in nonveridical-modal contexts and of (*n*) *mens* particularly in veridical contexts, where it may still have its original species-generic meaning (see Giacalone Ramat & Sansò 2007). For veridical uses, Dutch also appears to be partial to universal indefinite pronouns such as *iedereen* 'everyone'.

Turning to the "semi-impersonal" contexts of universal-external and existential-corporate (both contain clues that make identification more or less possible), we can note that the first one exhibits considerable variation in both Dutch and Afrikaans. What they share is the frequent use of *mense(n)* 'people', which tends to be marginal for most other uses. This result suggests that Haas's (2018) findings for English *people* may apply to its Dutch and Afrikaans equivalents too: it specializes in generic readings (e.g., *in China, people eat a lot of rice*) – compared to the third-person plural, which is more characteristic of episodic ones (e.g., *they have stolen all the computers*). *Ze* and *hulle* 'they' still occur quite often for our universal-external stimuli, however. A perhaps

Table 6. Impersonal strategies in Dutch per context

DUTCH IMPERSONALIZATION STRATEGIES																			
	PN.PRS	PN.INDF	men/men-sen	Passive	Specified noun	Imperative	Infinitive	Subjective question phrases	Relativization	Agentive NP	Nominalization	Quantifier + NP	'others'	Species generic use	Demonstrative pronoun	'one'	'person(s)'	Elliptical	TOTAL
EXI-COR	36%	0%	2%	57%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	5%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
EXI-INF-NN	22%	21%	17%	8%	11%	0%	3%	5%	1%	7%	2%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	2%	100%
EXI-INF-PL	26%	31%	13%	18%	4%	0%	1%	0%	2%	3%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%	1%	100%
EXI-SPE-NN	13%	39%	0%	30%	10%	0%	0%	0%	0%	7%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
EXI-SPE-PL	51%	17%	1%	16%	10%	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%	2%	3%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
EXI-VAG-NN	8%	14%	1%	62%	13%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
EXI-VAG-PL	5%	9%	0%	79%	5%	0%	0%	1%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
UNI-EXT	41%	18%	29%	7%	4%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
UNI-INT-NVER-MOD	63%	8%	4%	11%	1%	5%	6%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
UNI-INT-NEVER-NMOD	88%	1%	2%	1%	5%	1%	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
UNI-INT-VER	53%	16%	15%	0%	1%	0%	2%	0%	0%	2%	0%	7%	0%	4%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%

Table 7. Impersonal strategies in Afrikaans per context

	AFRIKAANS IMPERSONALIZATION STRATEGIES																		
	PN.PRS	PN.INDF	<i>men/ mensen</i>	Passive	Specified noun	Imperative	Infinitive	Subjective ques- tion phrases	Relativization	Agentive NP	Nominalization	Quantifier + NP	'others'	Species generic use	Demonstrative pronoun	'one'	'Person(s)'	Elliptical	TOTAL
EXI-COR	55%	1%	3%	33%	0%	0%	4%	0%	1%	2%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
EXI-INF-NN	8%	15%	20%	24%	15%	0%	0%	0%	17%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
EXI-INF-PL	19%	40%	1%	22%	11%	0%	0%	0%	5%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	100%
EXI-SPE-NN	39%	56%	3%	3%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
EXI-SPE-PL	34%	18%	1%	43%	1%	0%	0%	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	34%
EXI-VAG-NN	11%	48%	0%	18%	21%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
EXI-VAG-PL	6%	2%	0%	83%	7%	0%	0%	0%	0%	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
UNI-EXT	23%	2%	30%	37%	5%	0%	1%	0%	0%	1%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
UNI-INT- NVER- MOD	32%	7%	6%	11%	7%	36%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
UNI-INT- NEVER- NMOD	79%	2%	1%	7%	12%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
UNI-INT-VER	34%	8%	50%	4%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	3%	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%

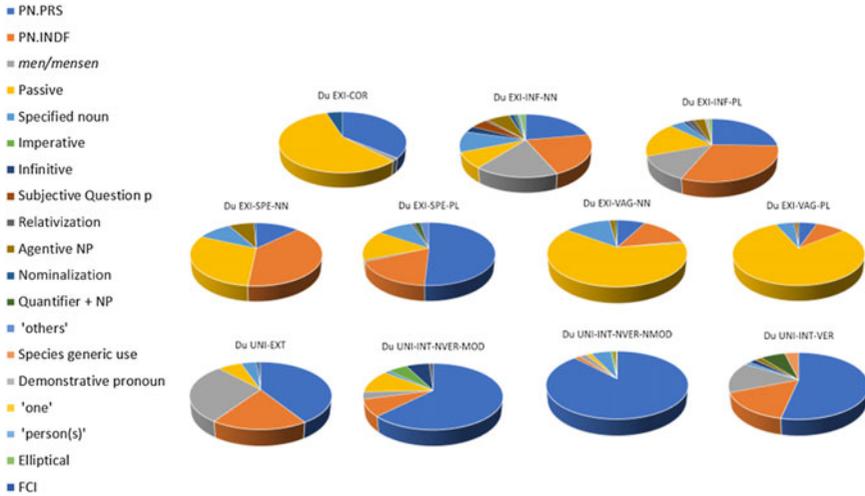


Figure 5. Impersonal strategies in Dutch per context

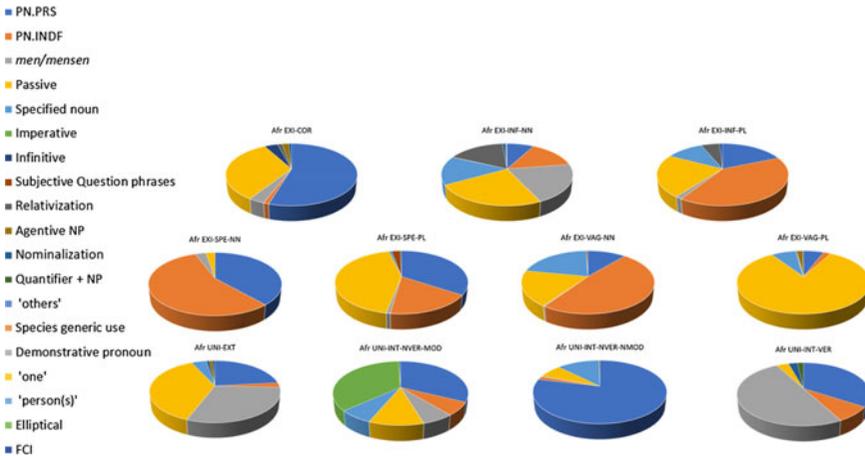


Figure 6. Impersonal strategies in Afrikaans per context.

somewhat remarkable result (cf. Breed & Van Olmen 2021a:196) for such contexts is the relatively high number of passives in Afrikaans. They are not found very frequently in our Dutch data and, crucially, lack the explicit external perspective that ‘people’ and ‘they’ possess: ‘rice is eaten a lot in China’ can, in principle, include or exclude speaker and addressee. For existential-corporate uses, then, we can note that they have the same two dominant strategies in both languages, namely the passive and the third-person plural, even though Dutch seems to favor the former and Afrikaans the latter. The passive arguably works well in such contexts because it simply presents the state of affairs that itself already points to the entity responsible for it. At the same time, ‘they’ fits very well too. The corporate character of the

referent is compatible with its original plurality as a proper personal pronoun and their semi-identifiability with its original definiteness.

As regards the other existential uses, we can first of all observe that Dutch and Afrikaans are both partial to the passive for vague ones. Yet, for number-neutral instances, the indefinite pronoun *iemand* ‘someone’ is very common as well in Afrikaans. This finding suggests that, if speakers assume that one unidentifiable person is responsible for something, they can (but need not) signal this with their choice of strategy. The relative infrequency of ‘they’ in vague contexts in the two languages may be somewhat surprising, given its prominence in the literature on impersonalization. It might be taken to indicate that the third-person plural’s original definiteness (as well as plurality) is still felt to be present by a significant number of speakers of Dutch and Afrikaans, who would then prefer not to use it to refer to unidentified (groups of) individuals (see Van Olmen & Breed 2018). That said, ‘they’ does appear as a widespread strategy for existential-specific contexts, in plural ones only for Dutch but in plural as well as number-neutral ones in Afrikaans. An explanation for this phenomenon may be that respondents are actually using the third-person plural in a nonimpersonal way here, to refer directly to the people present in the here and now of the situation. Existential-specific uses also regularly feature passives in Dutch and Afrikaans and, for number-neutral ones in particular, *iemand* stands out in the two languages. Gast & van der Auwera (2013:129) offer a reason for this indefinite pronoun’s occurrence here: “[In existential-specific uses, t] here is a ‘physically present’ and thus situationally accessible (singular or plural) agent, and a clearly perceptible event. Situationally known/specific uses of impersonal pronouns are most similar to (quantifying) indefinite pronouns like *someone*.” Existential-inferred contexts, finally, are generally the contexts in Dutch and Afrikaans with the least clear preference for particular strategies. We find substantial numbers of passives, third person plurals, *mense(n)*, indefinite pronouns, specified nouns and relative strategies. Dutch especially exhibits a lot of variation there, with many “minor” strategies. Why the existential-inferred domain is so diverse is not immediately clear to us but its comparative complexity (the referents are not simply unknown, their existence is based on an inference and a state of affairs that itself is inferred) probably plays a role.

5. Conclusion

The main aim of this article was to determine what we can learn from using a visual questionnaire to investigate impersonal strategies in Dutch and Afrikaans (see section 1).

In the first instance we learned or confirmed a number of things about the impersonal strategies of Afrikaans and Dutch. We hope to have shown that, on the whole, the two languages have a similar range of more established strategies (see section 4.1) as well as less established ones (see section 4.2) at their disposal – although strategies unique to one of the two languages exist too (e.g., elliptical strategies). We also hope to have shown that Dutch and Afrikaans share certain preferences for specific strategies in particular impersonal contexts (e.g., favoring pronominal forms of impersonalization in universal-internal uses) but may also differ (e.g. universal-external passives in Afrikaans but not in Dutch) (see section 4.3).

Furthermore, our study revealed that a visual questionnaire can be an effective method for exploring language phenomena that are not frequently encountered in existing corpora. We have discussed some weaknesses, including the not inconsiderable amount of unusable data – due to the complexity of the functional domain under investigation – and the impossibility of knowing whether personal pronouns are indeed intended impersonally – shared, at least to some extent, with corpus studies (see sections 3.2 and 4.1).

We nonetheless hope to have shown too that the open-ended, nondeductive character of the method: (i) enables researchers to uncover a variety of strategies that languages use for impersonalization (e.g., not only more “expected” ones like nominalizations but also less “expected” ones like assigning agency to a nonfirst argument; see section 4.2), which would be hard, if not impossible, to identify with other approaches; and, at the same time, (ii) confirms, from an unbiased perspective, that the strategies studied most in the literature are also the most frequent ones (see section 4.1).

Of course, we do not wish to claim that corpus or questionnaire-based research is not necessary. However, we believe that our deductive approach produces results that can then be the input for other types of approach which rely on predetermined sets of impersonal strategies. An acceptability judgments questionnaire based on data like ours could, for instance, subsequently determine whether strategies are unacceptable in certain impersonal contexts, which is something that a corpus study or a visual questionnaire cannot do. In the same vein, a corpus study could investigate how frequent the different strategies revealed by a study like ours are in actual language usage.

To conclude, there are several ways in which the design and use of the visual questionnaire could be further improved. One such way is to involve the respondents in a follow-up phase to clarify any unclear or ambiguous answers. This can help to ensure that the data collected is as accurate as possible. Additionally, as a questionnaire is designed based on the objectives of the study, researchers have the opportunity to structure the questions and instructions in a way that purposefully obtains the necessary answers. With these improvements, the use of visual questionnaires can provide valuable insights into language phenomena that may not be easily identified or investigated through other approaches.

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