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Basque impersonals in comparison

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Abstract: The Basque impersonal is a detransitivized construction that resembles middles, passives and impersonals. In this construction, the thematic object is the grammatical subject, which bears absolute case and triggers absolute agreement, and the auxiliary selected is *izan* ‘be’. At the same time, there is an implicit agent that is syntactically active even though it is not realized as an ergative argument with corresponding ergative agreement. In this article, we compare the Basque impersonal with the middle, the passive of languages like English, and subject-suppressing impersonals (as in Polish), and we show that it is more similar to the passive and subject-suppressing impersonals, given that (i) in the Basque impersonal, the event is instantiated, (ii) it can be used with more predicate classes, and (iii) it allows dative-marked second objects, among other properties. Similarly, like in English-type passives and subject-suppressing impersonals, the implicit agent of the Basque impersonal is syntactically active, as it can license agent-oriented modifiers and control adjunct purpose clauses. Nevertheless, there are other properties in which these constructions differ; for instance, the implicit agent must be interpreted as human, unlike in passives, and the grammatical subject cannot be other than 3rd person, something attested neither in passives nor in subject-suppressing impersonals. In light of this distribution, we consider the Basque impersonal to be located somewhere in between middles, passives and subject-suppressing impersonals as far as its syntactic properties are concerned.

Keywords: Basque; causative alternation; impersonal; middle; passive

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1 Introduction

The aim of this article is to provide an analysis of Basque impersonals (Albizu 1997, 2001; Ortiz de Urbina 1989, 1991, 2003, 2011–2019).¹ In using the term “impersonal” we refer to a detransitivized or valence decreased construction such as (1b), which alternates with a transitive counterpart as illustrated in (1a).

- (1) a. *Idazle-ek liburu-a-k erraz idaz-ten dituzte.*
 writer-DET.PL.ERG book-DET-PL[ABS] easily write-IPFV have.3PLABS.3PLERG
 ‘Writers write books easily.’
- b. *Liburu-a-k erraz idaz-ten dira.*
 book-DET-PL[ABS] easily write-IPFV be.3PLABS
 ‘Books are easily written.’

Several properties of the voice alternation in (1) deserve special attention. First of all, the transitive sentence in (1a) involves two arguments, agent and theme, marked by ergative and absolutive case respectively, whereas the impersonal in (1b) involves a sole argument marked by absolutive case. This argument is not the agent but the theme, as in (1a), the transitive counterpart of (1b). Second, Basque exhibiting a systematic auxiliary alternation, the auxiliary selected in (1a) is **edun* ‘have’,² i.e., the auxiliary attested in transitive clauses, whereas the auxiliary selected in (1b) is *izan* ‘be’, the auxiliary attested in intransitive clauses. Third, the inflected auxiliary form in (1a) agrees with both the ergative and the absolutive arguments, whereas the auxiliary form in (1b) shows only absolutive agreement.

Constructions similar to the one in (1b) have been described and analyzed in Basque under the label of “mediopassives” (Brettschneider 1979; de Rijk 2008; Ortiz de Urbina 2006; Rezac 2009) and “middles” (Berro and Fernández 2019;

1 The label “impersonal” has been attributed to four different constructions in Basque: active constructions with a non-referential or impersonal interpretation of personal verb markers, mainly in the third person and the second person singular (Ortiz de Urbina 2003: 572–576); weather expressions (Arteatx and Artiagoitia 2018; Ortiz de Urbina 2003: 577–579); detransitivized constructions like (1b) (Ortiz de Urbina 2003: 579–584); and tenseless clauses without overt subject arguments (Ortiz de Urbina 2003: 585–587). In this article, we only deal with the third case, i.e., detransitivized constructions. For these particular detransitivized constructions, alternative designations such as “mediopassives” have been used by Brettschneider (1979), Ortiz de Urbina (2006), de Rijk (2008) and Rezac (2009), among others. In this article, we are following Ortiz de Urbina (2003) and others in using the label “impersonal”, even though we are not fully convinced that it is the most appropriate one.

2 The asterisk preceding the transitive auxiliary **edun* is used here to indicate that it is a historically reconstructed participial form because it is unattested in nonfinite verbal forms – but see the Mitxelena and Sarasola (1989–2005) General Basque Dictionary (*OEH*) (VI: 386) and Mounole (2014 [2018]) for some historical exceptions.

Urrestarazu 2019). Actually, (1b) can be taken as an example of a Basque middle, as discussed by Berro and Fernández (2019). Nevertheless, this example is due not to a particular middle-voice mechanism, as in English, but to a more general mechanism that is not as restrictive as in English and English-like middles, i.e., ‘type I middles’ in Ackema and Schoorlemmer’s (2005) typology. In this typology, two types of middles are distinguished crosslinguistically, ‘type I’ and ‘type II’ middle, with the former being much more restrictive than the latter, both syntactically and semantically. As will be shown, Basque impersonals share some properties with type I middles, as the thematic object is the grammatical subject and the implied agent cannot be formally represented as an adjunct. However, many other properties exhibited by Basque impersonals are also attested in canonical passives, showing that Basque goes beyond the behavior of ‘type I middles’ in the abovementioned typology. Crucially, in Basque impersonals, as generally in passives, there is an implicit agent that is syntactically active. Hence, this syntactically active implicit argument can license i) the PRO subject of purpose clauses; ii) agent-oriented adverbial modifiers; iii) agent-oriented instrumental and comitative phrases; and iv) secondary predicates.

Still, Basque impersonals show a property that distinguishes them from canonical passives. Firstly, Basque impersonals lack the counterpart of an English *by*-phrase, i.e., a demoted agent expressed by a postposition (Zuñiga and Kittilä 2019). This being the case, Basque impersonals would be akin to agentless passives. Secondly, Basque impersonals show a person restriction on the subject, as 1st and 2nd person subjects are not allowed. Finally, the demoted agent must be interpreted as an indefinite human, another restriction that passives are not subject to. If canonical passives are subject to these restrictions, then contemporary Basque impersonals cannot be regarded as passives. Nevertheless, with respect to some other properties, Basque impersonals behave similarly to passives. Particularly, they are strikingly similar to Romance reflexive-marked passives (see Mendikoetxea 1999, 2012 for Spanish and Cabredo-Hofherr 2017 for an overview of other Romance languages). In any case, the same construction used to be more similar to canonical passives in previous stages of the language, given that demoted agents marked by postpositions were allowed and there was no person restriction on the theme, as shown by Iriyoyen (1992), Zulaika (1998) and Ortiz de Urbina (2006). This construction was termed “mediopassive” in Ortiz de Urbina’s (2006).

Last but not least, Basque impersonals seem to be similar to subject-suppressing impersonals (Blevins 2003), attested in Balto-Finnic and Balto-Slavic languages, among others. These impersonals have usually been analyzed under the “(impersonal) passive” label. However, as argued by Blevins, passives and impersonals must be distinguished from one another. First of all, impersonals can be built not only on transitive verbs but also on unergatives and unaccusatives.

Secondly, the suppressed subject is interpreted as indefinite and human. Thirdly, the subject cannot be expressed by an oblique phrase. As argued by Blevins (2003), Polish *-no/-to* constructions (Kibort 2004) are impersonals of this type (similar constructions are also attested in other Slavic languages (Siewierska 1988)). As shown by Kibort (2004), these apparently subjectless constructions show that the implicit subject is, paradoxically, syntactically active as it can: i) license a reflexive anaphor; ii) control on purpose clauses; and iii) license agent-oriented adverbial modifiers, among other things. As we will see, all these properties are met in Basque impersonals (although licensing of anaphors needs some discussion). However, there is a crucial distinction between subject-suppressing impersonals of the Polish type and Basque impersonals: the former are valence-preserving constructions (for instance, impersonals built on transitive verbs retain the direct object) whereas the latter are detransitivized constructions with a theme subject (apart from the implicit but syntactically active subject). In this regard, Basque is closer to English passives than to Polish impersonals.

The article is structured as follows. In Section 1.1 we present some background information on Basque, and in Section 1.2 we provide some definitions of the main constructions discussed in the study. In Section 2 Basque impersonals are compared to middles, particularly with regard to their aspectual interpretation and modality (Section 2.1), auxiliary selection (Section 2.2), compatible verb classes (Section 2.3) and the anti-double object condition (Section 2.4). In Section 2.5 we provide an interim summary. In Section 3 we present the properties of Basque impersonals that are shared by passives (Section 3.1) and those that are not (Section 3.2), and we provide a second interim summary (Section 3.3). In Section 4, we explore a non-standard strategy to circumvent a non-third person subject restriction. In Section 5 we present the properties of subject-suppressing impersonals and compare them to Basque impersonals. We start with the main distinction (Section 5.1) and continue with the shared properties (Section 5.2). Finally, a third interim summary is provided (Section 5.3). Section 6 discusses the main results of the study, and in Section 7 we present our main conclusions.

1.1 Some preliminaries regarding Basque

Basque is an ergative language in terms of both case and agreement marking (Dixon 1979, 1994). The subject of a transitive or unergative verb is marked by ergative case and agreement whereas the subject of an unaccusative verb and a transitive object is marked by absolutive case and agreement. In addition, Basque is a language with auxiliary alternation as it selects the intransitive auxiliary (*izan* ‘be’) with unaccusative verbs whereas it selects the transitive auxiliary (**edun* ‘have’)

with transitives, unergatives and ditransitives. Regarding case and agreement, it is a split-intransitive language (Laka 1993; Levin 1983; Ortiz de Urbina 1989; Pineda and Berro 2020). Hence, subjects of unergative verbs are marked by ergative case and agreement and not by absolutive. Unaccusative, unergative and transitive verbs and their corresponding arguments are exemplified in (2a), (2b) and (2c) respectively:

- (2) a. *Jon uretara eror-i da.*
 Jon_[ABS] water.into fall-PFV be_[3ABS]
 ‘Jon has fallen into the water.’
- b. *Jon-ek Mundaka-n surfea-tu du.*
 Jon-ERG Mundaka-INESS surf-PFV have_[3ABS.3ERG]
 ‘Jon has surfed in Mundaka.’
- c. *Jon-ek surf-ohol-a ekarr-i du.*
 Jon-ERG surfboard-DET_[ABS] carry-PFV have_[3ABS.3ERG]
 ‘Jon has carried the surfboard.’

As can be seen in (2b), the only argument of the unergative verb is marked by ergative case and agreement, thus being distinguished from the only argument of the unaccusative verb in (2a), which is marked by absolutive case and agreement instead. Note that the auxiliary selected in the sentence including the unergative verb is the transitive auxiliary **edun* ‘have’, also selected in the transitive sentence in (2c).

Additionally, Basque shows not only absolutive and ergative agreement but also dative agreement. In a construction including a dative-marked phrase, dative agreement is mandatory (leaving aside dialectal variation). In (3a) we present a sentence including an extra-thematic dative and a theme marked by absolutive. The intransitive auxiliary *izan* ‘be’ shows agreement with both the absolutive and the dative. (3b) shows a ditransitive construction involving a dative-marked goal. The transitive auxiliary contains dative agreement with this third argument.

- (3) a. *Jon-i surf-ohol-a eror-i zaio.*
 Jon-DAT surfboard-DET_[ABS] fall-PFV be_{[3ABS]3SGDAT}
 ‘Jon’s surfboard has fallen (and this has affected John).’
- b. *Jon-ek Amets-i surf-ohol-a ekarr-i*
 Jon-ERG Amets-DAT surfboard-DET_[ABS] carry-PFV
dio.
 have_{[3ABS]3SGDAT[3ERG]}
 ‘Jon has carried the surfboard for Amets.’

Although canonically considered a Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) language (de Rijk 1969; Ortiz de Urbina 1989, 2019; and others), Basque has a rather flexible word order at the clausal level. For instance, depending on the information structure, the

order of constituents may vary as exemplified in (4) for the canonical ditransitive sentence in (3b).

- (4) a. *Jon-ek surf-ohola Amets-i ekarr-i dio.*
 b. *Amets-i surf-ohola Jon-ek ekarr-i dio.*
 c. *Jon-ek surf-ohola ekarr-i dio Amets-i.*
 d. *Surf-ohola ekarr-i dio Jon-ek Amets-i. etc.*

Finally, Basque has been analyzed as a three-way pro-drop language, given that the ergative-, absolutive- and dative-marked arguments can be silent, as in (5) (see Duguine 2008, 2013 for an alternative analysis to the pro-drop approach).

- (5) *Ekarri dio.*
 carry-PFV have[3ABS]3SGDAT[3ERG]
 ‘She/he has carried it to her/him.’

1.2 Some definitions

This study deals with the alternation shown in the Basque examples in (1), repeated here as (6), focusing on the detransitivized construction in (1b). This construction is mainly known as “impersonal” in Basque linguistics.

- (6) a. *Idazle-ek liburu-a-k erraz idaz-ten dituzte.*
 writer-DET.PL.ERG book-DET-PL[ABS] easily write-IPFV have.3PLABS.3PLERG
 ‘Writers write books easily.’
 b. *Liburu-a-k erraz idaz-ten dira.*
 book-DET-PL[ABS] easily write-IPFV be.3PLABS
 ‘Books are easily written.’

We aim to compare the impersonal in (1b)/(6b) to three types of constructions: middles, passives and subject-suppressing impersonals. In this section we will briefly present and describe the main properties of each of these constructions.

Firstly, we will focus on the similarities and differences between Basque impersonals and middles. We regard as middles constructions where the patient is realized as a subject, the agent cannot be formally expressed and the sentence requires some kind of modal modification, such as an adverb.³ We are thus referring to constructions of the type illustrated in (7a) and (7b) (Keyser and Roeper 1984).

³ Here we use the term “middle” in the sense mainly employed by generative grammarians – for an overview of other characterizations of middles, see Zuñiga and Kittilä (2019: 168–177).

- (7) a. *Books read easily.*
 b. *Los libros se leen fácilmente.*
 DET books REFL.3 read.3PL easily
 ‘The books are read easily.’

The English middle in (7a) has three main properties. First, the logical object is the syntactic subject of the construction. Second, the logical subject is absent and has an arbitrary interpretation. Third, the proposition lacks a specific time reference and is usually accompanied by modal modifiers such as *easily* (Levin 1993). The English middle type has been classified as a “type I middle” by Ackema and Schoorlemmer (2005). As we will see, Basque impersonals share some properties with the English middle, but are nevertheless closer to the Romance middle type, classified as “type II middle” by the same authors and exemplified by the Spanish example in (7b). This middle type shares the first two properties just mentioned. However, it is not as restricted as the English middle in (7a). For instance, it does not require the presence of a modal modifier such as *fácilmente* ‘easily’, among other properties we will present in Section 2.1.

Secondly, the next construction under consideration are passives. An English passive construction is shown in (8b), which alternates with its active variant in (8a).

- (8) a. *Bill sank the ship.*
 b. *The ship was sunk (by Bill).*

In the active sentence in (8a), there is a transitive verb with two arguments, i.e., the subject (*Bill*) and the object (*ship*). Its passive counterpart in (8b) is a detransitivized construction in which the subject corresponds to the object of the active sentence. In this regard, the object of the active version is said to have been promoted to subject. Additionally, the subject of the active has been demoted to an oblique marked with the preposition *by*. These are the properties of prototypical passives for authors such as Kulikov (2010) or Zuñiga and Kittilä (2019: 83–84), among many others. However, for other authors, such as Keenan and Dryer (2007: 342), the presence of an agent phrase is not a definitional aspect of a passive, as many languages have passives that do not admit agent phrases. Thus, these authors make a distinction between the “non-basic passives” seen in English and “basic passives”, which do not allow agent phrases. Passives disallowing agent phrases have also been labeled “agentless passives”. As for the definitional properties of passives, some authors consider subject demotion (or just deletion) to be the a central property of passives, given that there are languages that have passives involving subject demotion without object promotion (Comrie 1977). We will return to this issue when discussing subject-suppressing impersonals.

Another property of passives relates to the particular morphology shown in the inflected verb. In English, for instance, the passive is formed by a periphrasis that involves the auxiliaries *be* or *get* along with the past participle form of the verb, i.e., it is a periphrastic passive, contrasting with strict morphological passives as in Latin or Ancient Greek (Keenan and Dryer 2007).

Basque impersonals behave similarly to passives in some respects. On the one hand, Basque impersonals are also detransitivized constructions, as the grammatical subject of the impersonal corresponds to the object of its transitive counterpart, and the auxiliary selected is *izan* ‘be’, rather than **edun* ‘have’. On the other hand, Basque impersonals cannot express the logical subject as an oblique. Thus, if Basque constructions such as (1b) or (6b) were considered passives, they would be of the basic type in Keenan and Dryer’s (2007) typology (agentless passives), or “non-prototypical passives” as in Zuñiga and Kittilä (2019).

As for dedicated morphological marking, Basque has neither a particular morphological passive voice marking nor a specific periphrasis. In this regard, Basque impersonals resemble intransitive constructions, as the lexical verb involved, whether transitive or intransitive, is accompanied by the same auxiliary that is attested in any analytic intransitive verbal form. Hence, an impersonal such as (9a), a form of the transitive verb *erosi* ‘buy’, shows the same morphological shape as that attested in an intransitive sentence involving an unaccusative verb such as *erori* ‘fall’ (9b).

- (9) a. *Sagarr-a-k eros-ten dira.*
 apple-DET-PL[ABS] buy-IPFV be.3PLABS
 ‘Apples are bought.’
- b. *Sagarr-a-k eror-tzen dira.*
 apple-DET-PL[ABS] fall-IPFV be.3PLABS
 ‘Apples fall down.’

If a dedicated morphology is needed for a construction to be a passive, as discussed in the literature – see for instance Haspelmath (1990) – then (9a) cannot be considered a passive. If no dedicated morphology is needed, most of the properties attributed to passives are also attested in Basque impersonals. It is worth noting that the absence of a morphological exponent does not seem to be restricted to impersonal constructions. Actually, Basque verbs manifesting the inchoative/causative alternation such as *hil* ‘kill, die’ – “lexical causatives” in Comrie’s (1989) terms – do not show any morphological exponent. We therefore briefly discuss this alternation, as it will be also discussed later in this study, along with the impersonals presented in (1b) and (9a).

- (10) a. *Unai-k armiarma-k hil ditu.* [Causative]
 Unai-ERG spider.DET-PL[ABS] kill.PFV have.3PLABS[3ERG]
 ‘Unai has killed the spiders.’
- b. *Armiarma-k hil dira.* [Inchoative]
 spider.DET-PL[ABS] die.PFV be.3PLABS
 ‘The spiders have died.’

Verbs of the type illustrated in (10) are also known as *labile* or *ambitransitive* verbs (Creissels 2014; Dixon 1994; Haspelmath 1993; Kulikov and Lavidas 2014). As defined by Kulikov and Lavidas (2014: 1), “the term ‘labile’ refers to verbs or verbal forms that can show valency alternation, i.e., changes in syntactic pattern, with no formal change in the verb. Very often (but not always), the term *labile* is only employed to refer to verbs or verbal forms that can be employed both transitively and intransitively.”

In particular, the lability shown by these verbs is patient-preserving lability, as in similar English instances such as *John broke the glass/The glass broke*. From this perspective, it could be said that the transitive verb *hil* ‘kill’ can be also used in an intransitive alternant meaning ‘die’ in which the agent is absent and the patient is preserved. As Creissels (2014: 919) points out, this alternation is “semantically comparable to causative and anticausative derivations”. In this study, we will use the terms “causative” and “inchoative” to refer to the transitive and intransitive alternants of these (labile) verbs, respectively. These are the terms favored by Basque grammarians when referring to the alternation attested in (10) – see for instance, Ortiz de Urbina (2003: 592), Oyharçabal (2003), Ormazabal (2008), Berro (2015) and Berro et al. (2018). For a brief discussion on the place that Basque occupies within the typology of causative/inchoative alternations, based on Haspelmath (1993) and Nichols et al. (2004), see Berro et al. (2018: 8–10); and regarding not only patient-preserving lability as in (10) but also agent-preserving lability, see Zuñiga and Fernández (2021: 636 and fn9).

Finally, the last construction explored in this study is the subject-suppressing impersonal in Blevins’ (2003) terms,⁴ exemplified here by Polish *-no/-to* constructions – see also Siewierska (1988), Kibort (2004) and Kulikov (2010).

- (11) *Gazetę (*była/*było) czytano (*przez dzieci)*
 newspaper.FEM.ACC was.FEM.SG/N.SG read.PST.IMPERS by children
 ‘One/they read the paper.’
 (Blevins 2003: 491)

⁴ We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this type of impersonal to our attention.

The Polish impersonal is a construction that suppresses the syntactic subject (Blevins 2003).⁵ In this regard, the subject is demoted as in passives. However, as we can see, the object retains its accusative marking and, moreover, does not trigger agreement (Blevins 2003: 491), as we would expect from subjects. Thus, this suggests that the object is not really promoted in Polish *-no/-to* constructions. In addition, according to Blevins, the verbal form used in this construction is transitive.

Subject-suppressing impersonals like the one in (11) are attested not only in Balto-Slavic but also in Balto-Finnic and Celtic languages. However, there is no consensus among researchers on the typological characterization of (11) and similar constructions. It has been considered both a variant of the passive (an impersonal passive, as it does not have a subject) and a non-passive construction with an indefinite human agent – see Kibort (2004: 245–255) for an overview and discussion. It is worth pointing out that constructions such as (11) have been discussed in the literature in order to determine whether the definitional properties of passives include object-to-subject promotion or are limited to subject-to-oblique demotion. For those who treat (11) as an impersonal passive, only subject-to-oblique demotion is definitional (Comrie 1977). On the other hand, these constructions have been regarded as non-prototypical passives by Zuñiga and Kittilä (2019: 84–85), in particular non-promotional passives, because they lack object-to-subject promotion, and impersonal passives, because they lack a subject.

Here we will follow Blevins (2003) in distinguishing subject-suppressing impersonals from passives. There are three properties relevant to that distinction. Firstly, these impersonal constructions are insensitive to the argument structure of the verb and can be formed not only with transitive verbs but also with unaccusatives and unergatives. Secondly, the suppressed subject is interpreted as an indefinite human. Thirdly, agent obliques are not licensed. As we will see, Basque impersonals share these three properties. However, they are not transitive constructions, as shown by, among other things, the intransitive verbal morphology; rather, they seem to be detransitivized constructions. Moreover, Basque impersonals do have a grammatical subject as long as the only (absolutive) argument of an intransitive construction can be considered a subject. Hence, unlike in Polish, in Basque impersonals there are two subjects: on the one hand, the subject of the intransitive construction (the logical object) and, on the other, the suppressed subject (the logical subject). In this regard, as we have noted, Basque impersonals

⁵ Although the presence of the agent as an oblique in Polish *-no/-to* constructions is considered ungrammatical for Blevins (2003), Kulikov (2010: 377) exemplifies the same construction including agent phrases.

are akin to agentless passives. Still, impersonals built on unergatives and unaccusatives do not show any subject, since the only argument, be it ergative or absolutive, is suppressed in those cases.

In a nutshell, the most significant property shared by Basque impersonals and subject-suppressing impersonals has to do with the indefinite human nature of the suppressed agent. That said, Basque impersonals contrast with prototypical passives in that animals and meteorological phenomena can be the agent in passives but not in Basque impersonals or Blevin's impersonals.

2 Basque impersonals in comparison to middles

In this section, we will explore the similarities and differences between Basque impersonals and middles of the type illustrated in (7). As we saw in Section 2.1, in Basque a given labile verb like *hil* 'kill/die' can occur in three different morpho-syntactic contexts: a causative construction (12a), an inchoative construction (12b) or an intransitive construction that is nonetheless interpreted agentively (12c), a construction we have termed "impersonal".

- (12) a. *Unai-k armiarma-k hil ditu.* [Causative]
 Unai-ERG spider.DET-PL[ABS] kill.PFV have.3PLABS[3ERG]
 'Unai has killed the spiders.'
- b. *Armiarma-k (berez) hil/hil-tzen dira.* [Inchoative]
 spider.DET-PL[ABS] by_themselves die.PFV/die-IPFV be.3PLABS
 'The spiders have died/die (by themselves).'
- c. *Armiarma-k (zapata honekin) hil/hil-tzen dira.* [Impersonal]
 spider.DET-PL[ABS] shoe this.COMIT die.PFV/die-IPFV be.3PLABS
 'The spiders have been killed/are killed (with this shoe).'

As we mentioned in Section 1.2, the inchoative and impersonal variants are morphologically similar. In fact, they would be ambiguous if the modifiers *berez* 'by themselves' and *zapata honekin* 'with this shoe' were not included. In both constructions, the grammatical subject – which corresponds to the logical object – has absolutive case and is cross-referenced by absolutive agreement markers in the auxiliary, in this case *izan* 'be' (cf. 12a). Additionally, no logical subject bearing ergative case is present, nor are there ergative agreement markers on the auxiliary (cf. 12a). The thematic interpretations of (12b) and (12c) are different, however. In (12b) no agent is implied, i.e., the spiders have died or die without the volitional

implication of an agent.⁶ In contrast, in (12c) it is understood that someone deliberately has killed or kills the spiders.⁷

The potential ambiguity of the examples in (12b) and (12c) only arises if the predicate in question is labile, i.e., if it allows both the causative and the inchoative variants. In other verbs that only accept the transitive variant, the intransitive variant can only be interpreted as an impersonal, that is, in such a way that an implicit arbitrary agent is understood to initiate the process undergone by the logical object.

- (13) a. *Unai-k pakete-a-k bidal-i ditu.*
 Unai-ERG package-DET-PL[ABS] send-PFV have.3PLABS[3ERG]
 ‘Unai has sent the packages.’
- b. *Pakete-a-k bidal-i / bidal-tzen dira.*
 package-DET-PL[ABS] send-PFV send-IPFV be.3PLABS
 ‘The packages have been sent/are sent.’

In modern Basque syntax this construction has been classified as impersonal (Albizu 1997, 2001; Berro et al. 2021; Ortiz de Urbina 1989, 1991, 2003, 2011–2019), and more recently as middle (Urrestarazu 2019; see also Berro and Fernández 2019). It would be easy to argue that sentences like (12c) or (13b) are really middles. Middles are often regarded as intransitive predicates with an implicit agent which – unlike passives – show no special morphology in English (e.g., Keyser and Roeper 1984) – although some other languages such as Greek show special middle morphology. (14b) is a pertinent example. Regarding the implicit agent, middles would be similar to passives, differing from them in not exhibiting special morphology (see Section 2.1).

- (14) a. *Someone bribed the bureaucrats.*
 b. *Bureaucrats bribe easily.*
 (Keyser and Roeper 1984: 381)

⁶ In (12b), it is understood that the spiders die without an external cause, mainly due to the presence of the modifier *berez* ‘by themselves’. Nevertheless, if this modifier were replaced by *beroarekin* ‘with the heat’, the heat would be understood as the external cause driving the process of the spiders’ dying. In any case, an agent would not be involved.

⁷ As noted by a reviewer, if the agent is implicit but still syntactically active, as we claim in this article, it might be expected to be morphologically referenced (i) in the choice of auxiliary, and (ii) in verbal agreement. Regarding the former, one could expect the transitive auxiliary **edun* ‘have’ to be selected instead of the intransitive *izan* ‘be’. As for the latter, we can conjecture that the implicit agent would trigger ergative agreement in the auxiliary. However, as shown in example (12c), this is not the case. As pointed out by the same reviewer, Basque shows that this implicit agent cannot be made visible. We thank the reviewer for bringing this critical point to our attention.

Sentences like (12c) and (13b) would naturally fit into the class of middles given that, as we have mentioned, they show no special morphology – thus apparently resembling inchoatives – but are interpreted agentively, like passives. In what follows, we will compare the Basque construction (12c) with middles, considering the tests and features often attributed to middles in the literature.

Middles have been defined as constructions that include a particular set of syntactic and semantic features. Schäfer (2006: 183) states that in middles (i) the grammatical subject corresponds to the thematic or internal object; (ii) the agent is demoted and has an arbitrary interpretation; and (iii) the aspectual interpretation of the sentence is non-episodic, that is, it has a generic or stative interpretation. Additionally, other properties of middles that have been reported are (iv) their necessary co-occurrence with a certain kind of modal adverb; (v) their restriction to particular verb classes; (vi) the impossibility of their occurring in the imperative or progressive; and in some languages (vii) their selection of the HAVE auxiliary (Ackema and Schoorlemmer 2005; Keyser and Roeper 1984). As can be seen, middles have sometimes been argued to be quite restrictive in terms of the syntactic and semantic environments licensing them. Nevertheless, the cross-linguistic picture seems to be rather complex, and in several languages the constructions giving rise to middles have been shown to be more permissive (Lekakou 2005). For instance, Ackema and Schoorlemmer (2005) draw a distinction between what they call “type I middles”, which fulfill all the conditions mentioned above, and “type II middles”, which fulfill some but not all of those conditions. English has type I middles, whereas Romance languages like Spanish and French have type II middles. As will be shown in the following subsections, Basque patterns with Romance languages in having what Ackema and Schoorlemmer term “type II middles”. On the basis of our scrutiny of those conditions in Basque, we will conclude that the middle is best regarded as a particular semantic notion – not a particular morphosyntactic construction – and that the impersonal is a construction that is more broadly used in the language.

2.1 Aspectual interpretation and modality

One of the core properties that is usually mentioned in the literature about middles is that they are generic sentences and do not describe a specific event (i.e., they are non-eventive or stative) (see, among others, Ackema and Schoorlemmer 2005; Keyser and Roeper 1984; Levin 1993). In fact, according to Lekakou (2005), middles are generic dispositional ascriptions that predicate of a subject a set of properties that are not necessarily instantiated in a particular event. As a consequence,

middles cannot normally be accompanied by temporal or spatial modifiers that locate the event at a particular time and place. Compare (15) and (16).

- (15) a. *Bureaucrats bribe easily.*
 b. *The wall paints easily.*
 (Keyser and Roeper 1984: 184)
- (16) a. *?Yesterday, the mayor bribed easily, according to the newspaper.*
 b. *?At yesterday's house party, the kitchen wall painted easily.*
 (Keyser and Roeper 1984: 184)

In Basque, generic sentences require imperfective aspectual morphology on the verb (the suffix *-ten*). If the verb shows perfective morphology, the sentence is interpreted episodically. As shown in (12c) and (13b), the impersonal construction analyzed in this article can occur with both imperfective and perfective morphology. Therefore, examples similar to (16a) and (16b) would be grammatical in Basque.⁸

- (17) a. *Burokrata-k* *erraz* *eros-i* *dira*
 bureaucrat.DET-PL[ABS] easily buy-PFV be.3PLABS
azken hauteskundeetan.
 last election.PL.DET.INESS
 'Bureaucrats have been easily bribed in the recent elections.'
- b. *Atzoko* *festa-n,* *horma* *oso* *erraz* *margo-tu*
 yesterday.REL party.DET-INESS wall.DET very easily paint-PFV
zen.
 be[3ABS].PST
 'At yesterday's party, the wall was painted very easily.'

In the examples in (17), the inflected verbal forms include the perfective marker (*-i* in (17a) and *-tu* in (17b)) and have a temporal (17a) or a spatial (17b) modifier. Thus, the interpretation is eventive. Contrary to what happens in the English middle, in Basque impersonals the event is actually instantiated.

Another property of middles that is often discussed concerns modality. In languages having type I middles, like English, German or Dutch, some sort of modification of modality facilitates or is even a necessary condition for a middle (Ackema and Schoorlemmer 2005).

⁸ Note that we have replaced the grammatical subject 'the mayor' with 'bureaucrats' in (17a). In fact, the impersonal construction is much better with (i) inanimate subjects and/or (ii) non-specific subjects (Berro and Fernández 2019). We will look at this aspect in Section 3.1.2.1.

- (18) a. *Bureaucrats bribe easily.*
 b. *The speech transcribes well.*
 c. *The car drives nicely.*
 d. *These toys assemble rapidly.*
 (Keyser and Roeper 1984: 384)

In this kind of middle, modification usually involves potentiality, that is, the ability of the implied subject to carry out or perform the action denoted by the verb. By contrast, in other languages having more permissive middles (i.e., type II middles) like French or Spanish, modal modification is not necessary at all, and if such modification is an option, the modality may be of another type, such as prescriptive (Fagan 1992). For instance, the examples in (20) can be interpreted as expressing either potential or prescriptive modality.⁹

- (19) a. *Ce papier se lave.*
 this paper REFL.3 wash
 'This paper is washable.'
 b. *Cette racine se mange.*
 this root REFL.3 eat
 'This root is edible.'
 c. *Cette solution se discute.*
 this solution REFL.3 discuss
 'This solution is debatable.'
 (Zribi-Hertz 1982: 348)

- (20) a. *Este papel se lava.*
 this paper REFL.3 wash
 'This paper is washable' or 'This paper must be washed.'
 b. *Esta raíz se come.*
 this root REFL.3 eat
 'This root is edible' or 'This root must be eaten.'
 c. *Esta solución se discute.*
 this solution REFL.3 discuss
 'This solution is debatable' or 'This solution must be discussed.'

In the prescriptive modality interpretation, the middle would express that everybody performs the action denoted by the predicate, and that it is something that should be done.

⁹ The modal interpretation seems to be subject to idiolectal variation, in both (20) and (21). For instance, a reviewer considers that the prescriptive interpretation is obtained if a modifier such as *a mano* 'by hand' is introduced in (20a), or alternatively, if all the examples are negated.

This is also the case with Basque. The impersonal in Basque does not necessarily require a modal adverb or a modal verb in order to have a generic stative interpretation, and when it has such an element the sentence can have either a potential, a prescriptive or even an epistemic interpretation. The prescriptive modal interpretation arises mainly, but not necessarily, in the context of deictic adverbs like *honela* ‘like this’. The potential and epistemic interpretations, on the other hand, are easily but not necessarily obtained with the adverb *erraz* ‘easily’.

- (21) a. *Paper hau (erraz/honela) garbi-tzen da.*
 paper this[ABS] easily/like_this wash-IPFV be[3ABS]
 ‘This paper is washed (easily/like this)’ or ‘This paper is washable.’
- b. *Sustrai hau (erraz/honela) ja-ten da.*
 root this[ABS] easily/like_this eat-IPFV be[3ABS]
 ‘This root is eaten (easily/like this)’ or ‘This root is edible.’
- c. *Irtenbide hau (erraz/honela) eztabaida-tzen da.*
 solution this[ABS] easily/like_this discuss-IPFV be[3ABS]
 ‘This solution is discussed (easily/like this)’ or ‘This solution is debatable.’

The epistemic interpretation focuses on the fact that the event denoted by the predicate occurs frequently and is therefore likely to take place.

2.2 Auxiliary selection

Another aspect that distinguishes Basque impersonals from middles in languages that have type I middles and auxiliary selection, such as Dutch and German, is that in Basque impersonals it is always the auxiliary *izan* ‘be’ that is selected.

As explained at the beginning of this section, examples like (12b) and (12c) are ambiguous without certain modifiers – recall the modifiers *berez* ‘by themselves’ and *zapata honekin* ‘with this shoe’. For instance, (22) shows that, in the presence of *erraz* ‘easily’, an intransitive sentence is ambiguous between an inchoative and an impersonal interpretation. Similarly, the English sentence in (22b) is ambiguous between a generic inchoative and a middle interpretation, as pointed out by Ackema and Schoorlemmer (2005: 137).

- (22) a. *Armiarma-k erraz hil / hiltzen dira.*
 spider.DET-PL[ABS] easily die.PFV die-IPFV be.3PLABS
 ‘The spiders have died/die (easily).’
- b. *Glass breaks easily.*

Nevertheless, not all languages have morphologically similar inchoatives and middles. For example, Dutch, a language that distinguishes unaccusatives and unergative verbs by means of the auxiliary selected (see, e.g., Ackema 1999; Hoekstra 1984; Hoekstra and Mulder 1990), has the auxiliary *hebben* ‘have’ in middles and the auxiliary *zijn* ‘be’ in inchoatives (23). In German too, as shown by Cabredo-Hofherr (1997) (see also Lekakou 2005), middles select *haben* ‘have’ and not *sein* ‘be’ (24). Thus, in both Dutch and German, middles pattern with unergatives in terms of auxiliary selection (Ackema and Schoorlemmer 1994, 2005: 161–162; Lekakou 2005: 38).

(23) Dutch

- a. *Vazen breken gemakkelijk.*
vases break easily
- b. *Dit soort stenen heeft/*is altijd gemakkelijk gebroken.*
this sort stones has/is always easily broken
‘Stones of this type always have had properties such that it is easy for people to break them’ (said by one stonecutter to another)
- c. *Dit soort glazen ??heeft/is altijd gauw gebroken.*
this sort glasses has/is always rather quickly broken
‘Glasses of this type have always had properties such that they break rather quickly.’

(24) German

- a. *John ist/*hat zur Schule gegangen.*
John is/has to-the.dat school gone
- b. *John hat/*ist gesungen.*
John has/is sung
- c. *Das Buch hat/*ist sich immer gut gelesen.*
the book has/is refl always well read-part
‘The book has always read well.’

The example in (23b) shows that the middle reading of the structure is compatible with the auxiliary *hebben* ‘have’ but ungrammatical with *zijn* ‘be’. Crucially, in (23b) the interpretation involves an implied logical subject. By contrast, (23c) requires *zijn* ‘be’ rather than *hebben* ‘have’, and its interpretation does not imply a logical subject. Ackema and Schoorlemmer (2005) argue that (23b) is actually a middle, whereas (23c) is a generic inchoative.

As mentioned in Section 1.1, Basque is also a language which distinguishes unaccusatives and unergatives by means of auxiliary selection: broadly speaking, unaccusatives select *izan* ‘be’ whereas transitives and unergatives select **edun*

‘have’ (see, e.g., Levin [1983], and for a more recent approach, Pineda and Berro [2020]). As in Dutch and German, Basque inchoatives behave both morphologically and syntactically like unaccusatives and combine with the same auxiliary, namely, *izan* ‘be’. However, Basque impersonals take *izan* ‘be’ and, thus, contrary to what happens in Dutch/German middles, they pattern not with unergatives but rather with unaccusatives and inchoatives.

- (25) a. *Kristal-a erraz apur-tzen da.* [Inchoative/Impersonal]
 glass-DET[ABS] easily break-IPFV be[3ABS]
 ‘Glass breaks easily.’
- b. **Kristal-a-k erraz apur-tzen du.*
 glass-DET-ERG easily break-IPFV have[3ERG]
 Intended: ‘Glass breaks easily.’

Note that the unaccusative and unergative distinction is even more marked in Basque than in Dutch, as it involves not only auxiliary selection but also case marking and agreement: subjects of unaccusatives are marked by absolutive case and show absolutive agreement on the auxiliary, whereas subjects of unergatives are marked by ergative case and are cross-referenced by ergative agreement on the auxiliary, as seen in (25a) above and (26a) below. The potential unergative-like impersonal structure shown in (26b) below, with an ergative subject, ergative agreement and the auxiliary *edun* ‘have’, is ungrammatical in Basque, with no dialectal exceptions. The Basque counterparts to Ackema and Schoorlemmer’s Dutch examples in (23b) and (23c) are shown in (26a) and (26b) respectively.

- (26) a. *Mota honetako harri-a-k erraz apur-tzen dira.*
 sort this.REL stone-DET-PL[ABS] easily break-IPFV be.3PLABS
 ‘Stones of this sort break easily.’
- b. **Mota honetako harri-ek erraz apur-tzen dute.*
 sort this.REL stone-DET.PL.ERG easily break-IPFV have[3ABS]3PLERG
 Intended: ‘Stones of this sort break easily.’

As will be shown in Section 4 and 5, in this and other respects, Basque impersonals pattern more with passives than with middles and/or subject-suppressing impersonals (Blevins 2003).

2.3 Compatible verb classes

In this section, we will consider the predicates that are compatible with the formation of impersonals in Basque. We will pay attention, on the one hand, to

the argument structure of the verbs (i.e., valency and logical subject theta role); and on the other, to the aspectual properties of the verb classes (i.e., whether they belong to the activity, accomplishment, achievement or stative class). Regarding the former, Basque impersonals are compatible with transitive verbs (see Berro and Fernández 2019), although they can also be formed with unergatives and unaccusatives (see Section 5). This includes verbs that only allow the causative variant such as *legeztatu* ‘legalize’, *atxilotu* ‘arrest’ (27), transfer of possession verbs like *saldu* ‘sell’, *erosi* ‘buy’, *bidali* ‘send’ and *banatu* ‘distribute’ (28), communication predicates like *irakurri* ‘read’, creation predicates like *pastela egin* ‘make a cake’ (29) and labile verbs that allow both the causative and the inchoative variants (30).

- (27) a. *Alderdi-a-k legezta-tu behar dira.*
 party-DET-PL[ABS] legalize-PFV must be.3PLABS
 ‘(Political) parties must be legalized.’
 (Berria, G. Izagirre, 2006-05-02)
- b. *Emakume trafiko-a-ren mafia-k legezta-tu dira,*
 woman traffic-DET-GEN mafia.DET-PL[ABS] legalize-PFV be.3PLABS
ez besterik.
 neg else
 ‘Trafficking in women has been legalized, nothing else.’
 (Berria, A. Iban, 2004-03-05)
- (28) a. *Liburu hau leku askotara bidal-i da.*
 book this[ABS] place many.ADL send-PFV be[3ABS]
 ‘This book has been sent to many places.’
- b. *Liburu hau atzoko aurkezpenean bana-tu zen.*
 book this[ABS] yesterday.REL presentation.DET.INESS distribute-PFV
 be.[3ABS]PST
 ‘This book was distributed at yesterday’s presentation.’
- (29) a. *Liburu hau erraz irakur-tzen da.*
 book this[ABS] easily read-IPFV be[3ABS]
 ‘This book reads easily.’
- b. *Azenario pastela erraz egi-ten da.*
 carrot cake.DET[ABS] easily do-IPFV be[3ABS]
 ‘Carrot cake is made easily.’

- (30) a. *Itsasontzi asko hondora-tu dira.*
 ship many[ABS] sink-PFV be.3PLABS
 ‘Many ships have been sunk.’
- b. *Leiho asko apur-tu dira.*
 window many[ABS] break-PFV be.3PLABS
 ‘Many windows have been broken.’

All predicates that express some type of change, such as activities (31a), accomplishments (31b) and achievements (31c) can freely form an impersonal in Basque.

- (31) a. *Piano-a erraz/honela jo-tzen da.* [Activity]
 piano-DET[ABS] easily/like_this play-IPFV be[3ABS]
 ‘The piano plays easily.’/‘The piano is played like this.’
- b. *Liburu hau erraz/honela irakur-tzen da.* [Accomplishment]
 book this[ABS] easily/like_this read-IPFV be[3ABS]
 ‘This book reads easily.’/‘This book is read like this.’
- c. *Muga hori askotan/erraz gurutza-tzen da.* [Achievement]
 frontier that[ABS] many_times/easily cross-IPFV
 be[3ABS]
 ‘That frontier is crossed many times/easily.’

In contrast, statives show more variation. Perception predicates, like *ikusi* ‘see’ (32), are compatible with this construction, but other kinds of stative verbs like those involving some sort of psychological or cognitive state seem to be more reluctant to allow the impersonal (33b). For instance, stative transitive predicates like *jakin* or *ezagutu* ‘know’ are not compatible with this construction.

- (32) *Iberdrola dorre-a urrunetik ikus-ten da.*
 Iberdrola tower-DET[ABS] far.ABL see-IPFV be[3SGABS]
 ‘The Iberdrola tower can be seen from afar.’
- (33) a. *Ume-ek horrelako istorio-a-k jaki-ten/ezagu-tzen dituzte.* [Personal]
 children-ERG like_that.REL story-DET-PL[ABS] know-IPFV
 have.3PLABS.3PLERG
 ‘Children know these kinds of stories.’
- b. *??Horrelako istorio-a-k jaki-ten/ezagu-tzen dira.* [Impersonal]
 like_that.REL story-DET-PL[ABS] know-IPFV
 be.3PLABS
 ‘These kinds of stories are known.’

Thus, the Basque impersonal allows more predicate classes than middles in languages like English and German (type I middles in Ackema and Schoorlemmer 2005), given that only activities and accomplishments are argued to be grammatical in the middles of those languages (Fagan 1992). Once again, Basque patterns with Romance languages like Spanish and French, and Greek (Lekakou 2005).

- (34) a. **Planets see easily.*
 b. *Los planetas se ven facilmente.*
 the planets REFL.3 see.3PL easily
 ‘The planets can be seen from afar.’
 (Hale and Keyser 1988: 51)
 c. *La Tour Eiffel se voit de loin.*
 the tower Eiffel REFL.3 see.3SG of far
 ‘The Eiffel Tower can be seen from afar.’
 (Hulk and Cornips 1998)

Basque impersonals also allows more interpretations than type I middles in terms of the thematic interpretation of the implicit logical subject. There is an agentivity condition in middles stating that the logical subject must be an agent (see Ackema and Schoorlemmer [2005: 174] and references cited there), like in the predicates seen in (35). As a consequence, predicates that have logical subjects with other roles, such as a perceiver or an experiencer (36), are not compatible with the middle.

- (35) a. *Bureaucrats bribe easily.*
 b. *That book reads well.*
 c. *Greek does not translate easily.*
- (36) a. **The Eiffel Tower sees easily.*
 b. **The answer knows easily.*
 c. **Spies don’t recognize easily.*
 (Ackema and Schoorlemmer 2005: 174)

Basque is more permissive than English in this regard. The Basque construction sometimes allows implicit logical subjects with an experiencer interpretation, such as in psychological change of state verbs like *ahaztu* ‘forget’ or *gogoratu* ‘remember’, where the logical subject is an experiencer and the logical object is interpreted as the stimulus.

- (37) a. *Ume-ek berehala ahaz-ten/gogora-tzen dituzte*
 children-ERG soon forget-IPFV/remember-IPFV have.3PLABS.3PLERG
horrelako istorio-a-k. [Personal]
 like_that.REL story-DET-PL[ABS]
 ‘Children soon forget/remember those kinds of stories.’

- b. *Horrelako istorio-a-k berehala ahaz-ten/gogora-tzen*
 like_that.REL story-DET-PL[ABS] soon forget-IPFV/remember-IPFV
dira. [Impersonal]
 be.3PLABS
 ‘Those kinds of stories are soon forgotten/remembered.’

Note that the external argument in the transitive personal construction in (37a) bears ergative case. This seems to be an important aspect, given that psychological predicates with an experiencer logical subject bearing any case other than ergative are not always accepted in the impersonal construction. For instance, stative psychological verbs that have a dative experiencer argument in the personal form do not form good impersonals.

- (38) a. *Ume-ei asko/erraz gusta-tzen zaizkie*
 child-DET.PL.DAT a_lot/easily like-IPFV be.3PLABS.3PLDAT
horrelako istorio-a-k. [Personal (DAT-ABS)]
 like_that.REL story-DET-PL[ABS]
 ‘Children like those kinds of stories a lot.’/‘Children easily like those kinds of stories.’
- b. **?Horrelako istorio-a-k asko/erraz gusta-tzen dira* [Impersonal]
 like_that.REL story-DET-PL[ABS] a_lot/easily like-IPFV be.3PLABS
 ‘Those kinds of stories are liked a lot.’/‘Those kinds of stories are easily liked.’

Nevertheless, exceptional examples can be found in corpora such as those compiled by Fernández and Ortiz de Urbina (2010: 80) (see also Ortiz de Urbina [2011–2019] for discussion).

- (39) a. *Kapitalismo-a akatu, espetxe-a-k akaatu, aita*
 capitalism-DET[ABS] kill prison-DET-PL[ABS] kill father.DET[ABS]
akabatu... gusta-tzen da akabatu hori.
 kill like-IPFV be[3ABS] kill this[ABS]
 ‘Kill capitalism, kill the prisons, kill the father... This *kill* is liked.’
 (*Hizlandia*, I. Aranbarri, p. 127)
- b. *Testuinguru bat, orain beharbada oso*
 context one[ABS] now maybe very
ulerterraza iruditu-ko
 easy-to-understand seem-PROS

ez dena, ekialde eta mendebal-a-ren
 not be[3ABS]COMP.DET[ABS] East and West-DET-GEN
kontrajarpen-a izan
 contrast-DET[ABS] be.PFV
da.
 be[3ABS]
 ‘A context which might not be considered too easy to
 understand is the contrast between East and West.’
 (*Euskal Herria krisian*, J. Azurmendi, p. 229)

The exceptionality of examples like (39) is not related to the stative nature of the predicate. In fact, stative psych verbs where the experiencer takes ergative case and the stimulus is absolutive, like *gorrotatu* ‘hate’ (40a), can form an impersonal (40b) (see Fernández et al. 2020 for a recent overview of psychological predicates in Basque).

- (40) a. *Ume-ek horrelako istorio-a-k gorrota-tzen*
 child-DET.PL.ERG like_that.REL story-DET-PL[ABS] hate-IPFV
dituzte. [Personal]
 have.3PLABS.3PLERG
 ‘Children hate those kinds of stories.’
- b. *Horrelako istorioak gorrota-tzen dira.* [Impersonal]
 like_that.REL story-DET-PL[ABS] hate-IPFV be.3PLABS
 ‘Those kinds of stories are hated.’

Thus, we can conclude that even though the Basque impersonal construction is more permissive than the middle in other languages like English, not every kind of predicate with any kind of logical subject is allowed. As has been shown, impersonals are better with verbs denoting a change – although some statives are also acceptable – and there is a restriction regarding the case of the implicit logical subject. To form an impersonal, the case that would be assigned to the implicit subject argument must be ergative. In predicates requiring a dative subject argument, the impersonal construction is not generally allowed.

2.4 The anti-double-object condition

Another important property of Basque impersonals is the possibility of including a second internal argument. In this regard, Basque impersonals do not seem to be subject to the anti-double-object condition observed in middles (Ackema and Schoorlemmer 2005). Compare the double object construction in (41a) to its middle counterpart in (41c).

- (41) a. *I sold (the linguists) the books.*
 b. *Such books sell well.*
 c. **Such books sell linguists well.*
 d. **Linguists sell such books well.*
 (Ackema and Schoorlemmer 2005: 39)

In (41c), the middle construction includes the theme as a subject and the goal as the second logical object. The sentence is ill-formed. Nor does the construction improve when the subject is the goal and not the theme (41d).

As can be seen in (42a), Basque also has double object constructions (Elordieta 2001). However, contrary to English middles, Basque impersonals can introduce the second internal argument without leading to ungrammaticality (42b).

- (42) a. *Ni-k hizkuntzalari-ei liburu-a-k sal-du*
 I-ERG linguist-DET.PLDAT book-DET-PL[ABS] sell-PFV
dizkiet.
 have.3PLABS.3PLDAT.1SGERG
 ‘I sold the linguists the books.’
- b. *Hizkuntzalari-ei liburu horiek erraz sal-tzen*
 linguist-DET.PLDAT book those[ABS] easily sell-IPFV
zaizkie.
 be.3PLABS.3PLDAT
 ‘These books are easily sold to the linguists.’

Note that in the impersonal, *izan* ‘be’ is the auxiliary selected and that the second logical subject retains its dative case and agreement.

2.5 Interim summary

As a summary we provide the properties of Basque impersonals in Table 1, contrasting them with the properties of type I middles.

As can be seen, Basque impersonals share with type I middles the fact that the grammatical subject corresponds to the logical subject of the verb and that the logical subject has an arbitrary interpretation. As for the other diagnostics, the Basque impersonal construction is much more permissive. Taking into account that the properties assigned to the middle form a subset of all the possible instances that can be built with the Basque impersonal, we will take the middle to be a particular semantic interpretation obtained in a syntactic structure – the impersonal – that is more broadly used in the language. In this sense, we agree with previous work on the topic, such as Lekakou (2005), Ackema and Schoorlemmer (2005) and Fábregas and Putnam (2014).

Table 1: Some properties of Basque impersonal in comparison to type I middles.

PROPERTIES	TYPE I MIDDLES	BASQUE IMPERSONAL
The subject is the internal argument	✓	✓
The external argument is formally absent and has an arbitrary interpretation	✓	✓
Only generic (stative) interpretation	✓	x
Necessary modal modification	✓	x
Only potential modality	✓	x
HAVE auxiliary selection in auxiliary alternation languages	✓ (in Dutch or German)	x
Very restricted verb classes	✓	x
Anti-double-object condition	✓	x

3 Basque impersonals in comparison to passives

Thus far we have shown that Basque impersonals cover a wider range of instances than English-type middles, i.e., type I middles in Ackema and Schoorlemmer's (2005) typology. In this section, we will explore some properties of Basque impersonals that seem to match up with those of passives, thus departing from the behavior of type I middles. In particular, the implicit agent of Basque impersonals is syntactically active and not inert, as in type I middles. In this respect, Basque impersonals behave like passives. Still, this behavior in itself does not allow us to consider them prototypical passives (Kulikov 2010; Zuñiga and Kittilä 2019). In fact, other properties exhibited by Basque impersonals depart from those of passives in languages like English, such as the impossibility for the agent to be overtly marked by an instrumental phrase (similar to a *by*-phrase). As explained in Section 1.2, in this respect Basque impersonals could be considered instances of agentless passives. However, there are two other properties that separate the constructions under consideration from passives of any kind, to wit, the person restrictions of the grammatical subject, as it can only be 3rd person, and the obligatory human interpretation of the implicit logical subject. In the latter respect, Basque impersonals are closer to subject-suppressing impersonals (Blevins 2003) (see Section 5).

We will start this section by discussing three properties of English-type passives that are not attested in Basque impersonals: (i) the potential overt realization of the agent in a *by*-phrase; (ii) the absence of a person restriction on the grammatical subject; and (iii) the absence of an obligatory human interpretation of the implicit logical subject. We will then explore the properties shared by English-type

passives and Basque impersonals, mainly those related to the syntactic behavior of the implicit argument (Ackema and Schoorlemmer 2005; Bhatt and Pancheva 2005 and references therein), namely (i) control of the subject of a rationale/purpose clause; (ii) licensing of the agent-oriented adverbs; (iii) licensing of agent-oriented secondary predicates; (iv) control of the subject of adjunct clauses; and (v) licensing of instrumental/comitative phrases.

3.1 Where Basque impersonals diverge from passives

3.1.1 Absence of an overt agent as an oblique

In English, inchoatives are distinguished from passives in the incompatibility of the former (43b) but not the latter (43a) with overt *by*-phrases (see, among others, Bhatt and Pancheva 2005; Keyser and Roeper 1984: 406; Roeper 1987).

- (43) a. *The ship was sunk by Bill*
 b. **The ship sank by Bill*
 (Roeper 1987: 268)

Basque inchoatives behave exactly the same as English inchoatives. This is exemplified in (44), a structure with the inchoative variant of the labile verb *hondoratu* ‘sink’ including an overt agent marked by an instrumental postposition is ungrammatical.

- (44) **Itsasontzi-a hondora-tu zen Billez*
 ship-DET_[ABS] sink-PFV be_[3ABS]_[PST] Bill._{INS}
 Intended: ‘The ship was sunk by Bill.’

The presence of an overt agent has been also explored in connection with impersonals. As pointed out by Ortiz de Urbina (2003: 611–612, 2006: 773), Basque impersonals do not allow overt agents to be present. Basque has both morphologically overt case marking and verbal agreement, so if an agent were present, it would appear as a nominal marked by ergative case and cross-referenced by ergative agreement. Also, the auxiliary used in such cases would be the transitive one (**edun* ‘have’). However, in the structures under scrutiny, neither ergative case nor ergative agreement is attested. In fact, as already mentioned in the introduction (Section 1), Basque impersonals show a detransitivized structure, or at least an intransitive structure, and are therefore accompanied by an intransitive auxiliary (*izan* ‘be’) that does not license ergative agreement morphology at all.

Moreover, an overt agent marked by an instrumental (or any other) postposition is equally ungrammatical. For instance, the sentence in (44) could also be

considered impersonal if there was an implicit agent. Nevertheless, even if interpreted as an impersonal, Example (44) would be ungrammatical because of the presence of the adpositional phrase. As Ortiz de Urbina (2003: 611–612) concludes, in Basque impersonals the agent argument must be implicit (see also Berro and Fernández 2019; Brettschneider 1979: 381; Urrestarazu 2019).

In earlier stages of the language, instances of an animate agent marked by an instrumental phrase such as (44) are attested (Ortiz de Urbina 2006: 773) (for a discussion of demoted agents, see particularly Section 3.2 of his article). As can be seen in (45a) and (45b) below, in such cases the agent is explicitly marked by an instrumental postposition. Both examples are from Leizarraga’s Basque translation of the New Testament (XVI. Century, Classical Basque).

- (45) a. *Tenta-tzen zela Satan-ez*
 tempt-IPFV be[3ABS].PST.as Satan-INS
 ‘While he was tempted by Satan...’
 (Lc Mt 1, 13)
- b. *eraman baitzedin Aingeru-ez Abraham-en bulharr-era*
 take was angel-DET.PL.INS Abraham-GEN bosom-ALL
 ‘...and he was carried by the angels into Abraham’s bosom.’
 (Lc 16, 22)

Thus, these examples presumably represent an earlier (prototypical) passive that is no longer available in Basque (see Section 6 for further discussion). As can be seen, (45a) and (45b) show overt agents marked by an instrumental (see Altuna 1987; Irigoyen 1992; Zulaika 1998: 780; also Ortiz de Urbina 2006, Section 3.2 and references therein for discussion). The expression of the agent by an optional adpositional phrase is significant crosslinguistically, as many languages with passives express it in such a way. As observed in the literature, the agent can be expressed by an instrumental, locative (as in English *by*) or genitive (for further details, see Kazenin 2001; Keenan 1985; Keenan and Dryer 2007; Siewierska 1984, 2013 and others). Thus, the marking of the agent by the instrumental postposition in earlier stages of the language, as in Classical Basque, seems to follow the typological tendency of those languages that allow the agent to be marked by an adposition. Considering Basque historical data, we can tentatively say that Basque has shifted from an earlier (prototypical) passive construction to a new construction that we have labeled “impersonal” and whose syntactic analysis departs from that of passives. In fact, two relevant properties of Basque impersonals are not attested in earlier Basque impersonals: the ban on the overt expression of the agent in an adpositional phrase, and the person restriction on the grammatical subject, as will be shown in Section 3.1.2. Even if the agent phrase were not essential in order to characterize a construction as passive, as claimed by Keenan and Dryer

(2007: 342–345) and others (see Section 1.2), Basque shows that the possibility of agent phrases to be expressed by an adposition existed in earlier stages of the language, but is no longer available.

3.1.2 Person restrictions

An important property that distinguishes Basque impersonals from passives of any type has to do with the nature of the subject: contemporary Basque impersonals do not allow first or second person subjects, whereas passives do. Hence, examples including first or second persons are necessarily inchoatives, as seen in (46).

- (46) *Ni hondora-tu nintzen.* [Inchoative/*Impersonal]
 I[ABS] sink-PFV be.1SGABS.PST
 ‘I sank.’

Here Basque impersonals clearly depart from passives in general, as the latter do not show any restriction in this respect. This does not hold for earlier stages of Basque, however, as detransitivized instances with a non-third person subject are attested starting in the earliest written documents, as seen, for instance, in texts by Bernard Etxepare (1545) (Altuna 1987); Lazarraga (1564–1567) (Mounole 2014 [2018]) or Joannes Leizarraga (1571) (Zulaika 1998: 779–784), among others (see Irigoyen 1992; Ortiz de Urbina 2006; Zulaika 1998 for more classical examples and discussion).

- (47) a. *Balinetan vide gabe acusa-tu baguira*
 if justice without accuse-PFV if.be.1PLABS
 ‘If we are unfairly accused...’
 Etxepare
 b. *Dirurren sal-du ninçan esclabea*
 money.for sell-PFV be.1SGABS.PST slave
 ‘I was sold for money as a slave.’
 (Laz. B17: 60) (Mounole 2014 [2018]: 149)

Another example including a non-third person subject is the proverb in (48), originally collected by the Souletin poet Arnault Oihenart (1657) (Irigoyen 1992: 277–288; Ortiz de Urbina 2006: 767).

- (48) *Hil adi, alaba aite.* (O Pr 235)
 die be.2SGABS praise be.2SGABS
 ‘Meurs, et après tu pourras être loué.’ (French translation by Oihenart)
 ‘Die, and you may be praised afterwards.’

Leaving aside historical data, we have not identified any instances of impersonals including a non-third person subject in corpora of contemporary Basque, in particular the *Contemporary Reference Prose (EPG)* corpus (Sarasola et al. 2001–2007) and the *Corpus of Contemporary Basque (ETC)* (Sarasola et al. 2016). As native speakers of Basque we ourselves do not accept impersonals of this sort as grammatical. Although Ortiz de Urbina (2003: 588–589) admits that non-third person subject impersonals are extremely scarce relative to third person subjects, he offers several examples, including the two reproduced ones in (49a) and (49b).¹⁰

- (49) a. ??*Hemen zu ez zara ondo ezagu-tzen.*
 here you not be.2ABS well know-IPFV
 ‘You are not well known here.’
 b. ??*Hortik (ni) ez naiz ikus-ten.*
 there.ABL I[ABS] no be.1SGABS see-IPFV
 ‘One does not see me from here.’

As Ortiz de Urbina points out, the first interpretation of these examples would be colloquial reflexive, i.e., ‘You don’t know yourself’ (49a) and ‘From there I can’t see myself’ (49b) (see also Ortiz de Urbina 1988). Two other examples provided by Ortiz de Urbina are from Irigoyen (1992) – (50a) and (50b) – while a third – (50c) – is from a poem by Txirrita, a beloved Basque improviser (Mujika 2016).

- (50) a. *Hainbat denpora-n ikus-ten zara kantari gure plazetan.*
 some time.here-INNESS see-IPFV be.2ABS singer our squares.INNESS
 ‘One has been able to see you as a singer in our villages for some time now.’
 b. *Ez zaree ikus-ten fiesta, plaza ta onelako olgantzeeetan.*
 not be.2ABS.PL see-IPFV fest square and this.kind.REL diversions.INNESS
 ‘One does not see you in this kind of diversion.’
 (Mogel BJEE: 151)
 c. *Pixka batean ez naiz ahaztu-ko sartuagatik*
 a_bit.one.INNESS not be.1SGABS forget-PROS put.DET.because
*lurpian.*¹¹
 ground-DET-INNESS
 ‘I am not being forgotten, even buried in the ground.’

¹⁰ As pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, these examples may be calques from Spanish.

¹¹ ‘Txirrita’ was the stage name of Joxe Manuel Lujanbio, who died in 1936. His recitation of this poem took place in 1931.

Notwithstanding these examples offered by Ortiz de Urbina, as far as we can tell, impersonals including non-third person subjects are considered grammatical in the literature only by Gaminde (2006: 95) when referring to Western Basque. He even claims that this structure is “commonly used” and “alive and well” in that dialect. He provides the examples reproduced in (51a)–(51d), here adapted to Standard Basque.

- (51) a. *Eroan-go zara gero etxe-ra.*
 bring-PROS be.2ABS then home-ALL
 ‘You will be brought home later.’
- b. *Aspaldian ez zara ikus-ten hemendik.*
 recently not be.2ABS see.IPFV here
 ‘You have not been seen here recently.’
- c. *Zoaz hemen ez zara behar eta.*
 go.2ABS here not be.2ABS need as
 ‘Go, as you are not needed.’
- d. *Ezagutu ere ez zara egi-ten daukazun itxuragaz.*
 Know too not be.2ABS do-IPFV have.2ERG.COMPL appearance.SOC
 ‘You are not known with this appearance you have.’

In our view, Gaminde’s claim should be taken with a grain of salt. The Western Basque speakers we have consulted, specifically from the localities of Getxo, Urduliz and Armintza (hence speakers of Uribe Kosta Basque), Leioa (Txorierrri Basque) and Lekeitio (Lea Artibai Basque), do not regard all or even most of Gaminde’s examples as grammatical. Furthermore, it is quite suspicious that there is no mention of this in any other dialectological work such as those by Zuazo (2004, 2008, 2013, 2015), among many others. According to Zuazo (p.c.), utterances like these would be rare in Western Basque or any other dialect.¹² Hence, their existence is questionable to say the least.

That said, there is a non-standard strategy that allows speakers to circumvent the non-third person restriction discussed here, that is, the dative marking of the subjects, as in *ikusten zait* ‘one can see me’ and *ikusten zaizu* ‘one can see you’ (Ortiz de Urbina 1988, 2003, 2011–2019). Although more research is needed in order to understand the nature and range of this strategy, we will present and discuss some provisional results regarding this in Section 4.

¹² We wish to thank Arantzazu Elordieta, Xabier Bilbao and Eneko Gilisasti, speakers of Lekeitio, Getxo and Urduliz Basque respectively, for sharing their Western Basque intuitions with us. We also thank Koldo Zuazo for feedback and for contacting some of his Western Basque informants from Armintza and Leioa in order to provide us with their intuitions.

3.1.2.1 A note on anti-animacy

As we have just shown, Basque impersonals require the grammatical subject to be third person, a feature that separates Basque impersonals from passives and makes them similar to middles. Apart from that, as reported by Berro and Fernández (2019), the impersonal construction is much more frequent in the corpora when the grammatical subject is inanimate, although inanimacy is not a necessary condition to form an impersonal. This is a tendency that generally affects all verbs forming the impersonal, and Basque does not seem to be alone in this regard. For instance, the lack of animacy has been observed to be a favoring factor in the spread of the Spanish reflexive-marked passive (over the periphrastic passive) in its diachronic evolution (Cabañas 2006).

Like in other languages, animacy has some special effects in Basque in certain predicates that allow the causative alternation. For example, in the verbs that require an agentive theme in the inchoative variant, such as in *ezkutatu* ‘hide’, the presence of an inanimate theme triggers the interpretation involving an implicit agent, that is, the reading that arises in an impersonal. This is illustrated in (52a)–(52c) below.

- (52) a. *Andereño-k ume-a-k ezkuta-tu ditu*
 teacher-ERG child-DET-PL[ABS] hide-PFV have.3PLABS[3ERG]
eskailera azpian. [Causative]
 stairs under.INESS
 ‘The teacher has hidden the children under the stairs.’
- b. *Ume-a-k eskailera azpian ezkuta-tu*
 child-DET-PL[ABS] stairs under.INESS hide-PFV
dira. [Inchoative/Impersonal]
 be.3PLABS
 ‘The children have hidden under the stairs’ or
 ‘The children have been hidden under the stairs.’
- c. *Dokumentu-a-k ezkuta-tu dira.* [*Inchoative/Impersonal]
 document-DET-PL[ABS] hide-PFV be.3PLABS
 ‘The documents have been hidden.’

As can be seen, *ezkutatu* ‘hide’ is a labile verb that allows both the causative and the inchoative variants. Crucially, to be inchoative, the theme must be animate (52b), given that the interpretation of the verb requires an agentive argument. If the theme is inanimate, as in (52c), the only interpretation available is one in which an implicit agent has performed the action denoted by the verb. Other

labile verbs that also show this effect are *sartu* ‘come in/put in, insert’ and *atera* ‘come out/take out’.¹³

3.1.3 Obligatory human logical subject

The second property distinguishing Basque impersonals from passives of any type is the obligatory human interpretation of the implicit logical subject. As shown by Rodet (1992) and more recently by Berro et al. (2021), the implicit subject of Basque impersonals must be interpreted as a human agent, even in those cases where the transitive (personal) variant of the verb allows an inanimate causer. For instance, a labile verb like *hondoratu* ‘sink’ can have an animate causer or an animate agent as a logical subject in its causative variant (53a). The impersonal variant (53b), in contrast, is only acceptable in a context where someone has caused the sinking; in a context where an inanimate force like a storm has caused the ship to sink it would not be acceptable (Berro et al. 2021)

- (53) a. *Ekaitz-a-k/Norbaitek itsasontzi-a hondora-tu*
 storm-DET-ERG/someone-ERG ship-DET[ABS] sink-PFV
du. [Causative]
 have[3ABS.3ERG]
 ‘The storm/Someone has sunk the ship.’
- b. *Itsasontzi-a-k hondora-tu dira.* [Impersonal]
 ship-DET-PL[ABS] sink-PFV be[3ABS]
 ‘The ships have been sunk (by someone/*by the storm).’

As briefly mentioned in Section 1.2, the obligatory human interpretation of the implicit logical subject is a property of subject-suppressing impersonals (Blevins 2003) (see Section 5.2.3). Thus, in this respect, Basque departs from passives and behaves more like subject-suppressing impersonals.

3.2 What Basque impersonals share with passives

3.2.1 Control into purpose clauses

A test widely debated in the literature of middles has to do with control into purpose clauses (Ackema and Schoorlemmer 2005; Baker et al. 1989; Bhatt and

¹³ Similar effects have been observed in Spanish reflexive-marked passives by Cabañas (2006) for verbs like *lavar* ‘wash’. When the grammatical subject is animate, the sentence can be interpreted either as an inchoative or as an impersonal, whereas with inanimate subjects, the impersonal interpretation (“passive interpretation” in Cabañas’ terms) is the only available one.

Pancheva 2005; Manzini 1983; Roeper 1987). Unlike in middles (54b), the implicit agent of the passive can control the subject of a purpose clause, as can be seen in (54a). By contrast, inchoatives like (54c) are pragmatically deviant, given that a ship cannot sink on purpose. Thus, neither the middle nor the inchoative can control PRO in the purpose clause.

- (54) a. *The boat was sunk* [PRO to collect the insurance] [Passive]
 b. **This ship sinks easily* [PRO to collect the insurance] [Middle]
 c. # *The boat sank* [PRO to collect the insurance] [Inchoative]
 Manzini (1983)

As Bhatt and Pancheva (2005: 4) point out, if PRO can only be controlled by a syntactically active agent, then there must be a syntactically agent in the passive. Therefore, this test has been used to differentiate passives, which are constructions with a syntactically active agent, from middles (and also inchoatives) in languages like English, which do not have such an implicit agent. Nevertheless, this test has been called into question (Lekakou 2005), as English, German and Dutch middles (i.e., type I middles) do allow control into some embedded clauses (Stroik 1992).

- (55) a. *Most physics books read poorly even after reading them several times.*
 b. *Bureaucrats bribe best after doing them a favor or two.*

In any case, turning to Basque, we see that the impersonal construction allows control into purpose clauses. Consider the example in (56).

- (56) *Itsasontzi-a hondora-tu zen aseguru-a kobratzeko.*
 ship-DET[ABS] sink-PFV be[3ABS].PST insurance-DET[ABS] collect.to
 ‘The ship was sunk to collect the insurance.’
 NOT: ‘The ship sank to collect the insurance.’

If (56) were interpreted as an inchoative, that is, without an implied agent, the purpose clause following it would be ruled out. Thus, Basque is similar to English in this respect (54c). It must be noted that the non-finite clause headed by *-tzeko* is not an obligatory control structure, since it also allows an explicit agent (see Artiagoitia 2003).

- (57) *Itsasontzi-a hondora-tu zen Jon-ek aseguru-a*
 ship-DET[ABS] sink-PFV be[3ABS].PST Jon-ERG insurance-DET[ABS]
kobratzeko.
 collect.to
 ‘The ship was sunk in order for John to collect the insurance.’

Nevertheless, in the impersonal reading of the structure, if no explicit agent is present in the purpose clause, the implicit agent of the impersonal is necessarily interpreted as the controller of the subject in the embedded clause. At this point, one conclusion to be drawn is that the Basque impersonal behaves like passives in English. In this respect, Basque impersonal patterns with French middles, which have been argued to be parasitic on the reflexive-marked passive (Lekakou 2005).

However, as has been shown for French, control into purpose clauses in Basque impersonals becomes impossible if we retain a stative interpretation. For instance, in an impersonal construction involving the verb *jan* ‘eat’ headed by the imperfective aspectual suffix, the meaning of potential modality is obtained (58a), as in prototypical middles (see Section 2.1). But if we include a non-finite *-tzeko* purpose clause where PRO is controlled by the implicit agent of the impersonal, the interpretation obtained is a habitual one (58b).

- (58) a. *Sustrai horiek ja-ten dira.*
 root those[ABS] eat-IPFV be.3PLABS
 ‘Those roots are edible.’ or ‘People eat those roots.’
- b. *Sustrai horiek argaltzeko ja-ten dira.*
 root those[ABS] become_thinner.to eat-IPFV be.3PLABS
 ‘Those roots are eaten in order to lose weight.’

As can be seen, the impersonal in itself is not incompatible with control into purpose clauses – even with imperfective morphology – but the stative (middle) interpretation of this construction seems to be in complementary distribution with it.

3.2.2 Licensing of agent-oriented adverbial modifiers

Basque impersonals show another property that is also shared by passives, namely the ability to license agent-oriented adverbial modifiers. This is illustrated for English with the adverb *deliberately* in (59a), (59b) and (60).

- (59) a. *The boat was sunk deliberately.* [Passive]
 b. # *The boat sank deliberately.* [Inchoative]
- (60) **This bureaucrat bribes deliberately.* [Middle]
 Baker et al. (1989)

The pair shows the asymmetry between a passive (59a) and an inchoative (59b): while the former is grammatical, the latter is considered deviant by Bhatt and Pancheva (2005). Middles are also ungrammatical in this context (60). Basque impersonals show a behavior similar to that seen in passives.

- (61) *Itsasontzi-a nahita/kontu handiz hondora-tu zen.* [Impersonal]
 ship-DET[ABS] deliberately/carefully sink-PFV be[3ABS].PST
 ‘The ship was sunk deliberately/carefully’.
 PRAGMATICALLY DEVIANT: ‘The boat sank deliberately.’

Note that (61) could also be read as an inchoative, but in that case the interpretation obtained would be pragmatically deviant, as in English.

The licensing of agent-oriented adverbial modifiers shows that Basque impersonals have an implicit agent that is syntactically active, as in canonical passives, a property that is not shared by type-I middles. With regards to this property, Basque impersonals and Spanish reflexive-marked passives behave alike.

- (62) *El barco se hundió deliberadamente/con sumo cuidado.*
 DET ship[NOM] REFL.3 sink.PST deliberately/with great care
 ‘The ship was sunk deliberately/with great care.’

Similarly, as shown by Lekakou (2005), French reflexive-marked passives and Greek middles share the same property, that is, they allow agent-oriented modifiers of this sort.

3.2.3 Licensing of instrumental or comitative phrases

In Section 3.1.1 we showed that Basque impersonals do not allow the presence of an overt agent marked by an instrumental phrase. In this regard, Basque impersonals and English-like middles behave alike, as exemplified in (63a) and (63b), and the former diverge from canonical passives.

- (63) a. **Such texts translate easily by an experienced translator.*
 (Ackema and Schoorlemmer 2005)
 b. **Testu horiek erraz itzul-tzen dira*
 text those[ABS] easily translate-IPFV be.3PLABS
itzultzaile eskarmentudun batez.
 translator experienced one.INS
 Intended: ‘Those texts are easily translated by an experienced translator.’

However, Basque impersonals allow instrumental or comitative phrases licensed by an implicit agent, with the nominal denoting the instrument that the agent has used to perform the action denoted by the verb.

- (64) *Karramarro-a-k erraz harrapa-tzen dira esku-ekin/*
 crab-DET-PL[ABS] easily catch-IPFV be[3PLABS] hand-DET.PL.COMIT/
salabardo-a-rekin.
 trap-DET-COMIT
 ‘Crabs are easily caught by hand.’ Lit. ‘Crabs are easily caught with
 hands/a trap.’

In this sentence, the implicit agent is the one who catches crabs with their hands or with a trap manipulated by them. Note that in a version of the example that includes *eskuekin* lit. ‘with hands’, there is a relation of inalienable possession between the implicit agent and the instrument. In such instances, there is an implicit agent that is syntactically present.

Instances involving instrumental or comitative phrases behave like the agent-oriented adverbial modifiers explored in Section 3.2.2. Hence, the idea that Basque impersonals involve a syntactically active implicit agent is once again confirmed.

3.2.4 Licensing of secondary predicates

The licensing of secondary predicates is considered another test for the syntactic presence of implied arguments (Collins 2005), although not all syntactically active implied arguments seem to be able to do this. The implied agents of Basque impersonals can naturally be attributed properties by adjectives.

- (65) a. *Ibai-a erraz zeharka-tzen da oinutsik.*
 river-DET[ABS] easily cross-IPFV be[3ABS] barefoot
 ‘The river is easily crossed barefoot.’
 b. *Herri-ko ereserki-a zutunik kanta-tzen da.*
 town-REL hymn-DET[ABS] standing_up sing-IPFV be[3ABS]
 ‘The town’s hymn is sung when standing up.’
 c. *Kanta hori mozkortuta kanta-tzen da.*
 song that[ABS] drunk sing-IPFV be[3ABS]
 ‘That song is sung when drunk.’

Whether passives allow such depictives in English is a matter of debate. According to Collins (2005), English passives license secondary predicates (66), and he regards this fact as evidence for the syntactic presence of the agent argument.

- (66) a. *The book is written drunk.*
 b. *At the commune, breakfast is usually eaten nude.*
 c. *The song must not be sung drunk.*
 Baker et al. (1989)

However, secondary predicates are not always accepted in this type of configuration, and Landau (2010) proposes that their absence is a consequence of the implicit agent of passives being a weak implicit argument. According to him, secondary predicates must be licensed by strong implied arguments, namely DPs. Thus, the implicit agent of passives cannot license a secondary predicate because it is a weak implicit argument.

- (67) a. **The issue was decided unassisted.*
 b. **The game was played shoeless.*

Nevertheless, the situation is not the same across languages. For instance, passives in German can license secondary predicates, as shown by Alexiadou et al. (2015: 132).

- (68) *Der Raum wurde wütend verlassen.*
 the room became angry left
 ‘The room was left in an angry mood.’

If Landau (2010) is right, the implied agent argument of Basque would be a strong implied argument. In fact, Berro et al. (2021) (see also Section 5) show that the implied subject in Basque impersonals can bind reciprocal anaphors as well as a certain type of reflexive anaphor (see also Ortiz de Urbina 2003).

3.3 Interim summary

In Table 2, we summarize the main properties of Basque impersonals in comparison to English-like passives.

Table 2: Some properties of Basque impersonals in comparison to passives.

PROPERTIES	ENGLISH-TYPE PASSIVE	BASQUE IMPERSONAL
<i>By</i> -phrase and alike	✓	✗
Person restriction on grammatical subject	✗	✓
Obligatory human logical subject	✗	✓
Control into purpose clauses	✓	✓
Licensing of agent-oriented adverbs	✓	✓
Licensing of instrumental phrases	✓	✓
Control of secondary predicates	✓/✗	✓

As can be seen, the implicit agent of both Basque impersonals and passives can allow control into purpose clauses, and license agent-oriented modifiers and instrumental phrases. Another test – the ability to license secondary predicates – seems to be more problematic in English, as authors do not agree about its grammaticality. In Basque impersonals, on the other hand, secondary predicates are perfectly grammatical. Finally, there are three diagnostics that distinguish English-type passives from Basque impersonals: the presence of an explicit agent argument as an adjunct, the person restriction on the grammatical subject and the obligatory human interpretation of the logical subject. As we have shown, Basque impersonals do not allow instrumental phrases denoting the agent, but in this respect they could be considered agentless passives. Nevertheless, the person restriction on the grammatical subject and the human nature of the logical subject are not properties attested in passives of any type. Regarding the person restriction, we will see in the next section that there is a non-standard strategy that is used by some Basque speakers as a way to overcome the person restriction.

4 Circumventing person restrictions: impersonals with a dative subject

In Section 3.1.2, we showed that Basque impersonals can only be formed if the grammatical subject (thematic object) is in the 3rd person. Leaving aside examples from earlier language stages like those shown in (47) and (48) and some exceptional and controversial contemporary examples as shown in (50) and (51), the impersonal construction is assumed to be ungrammatical with 1st or 2nd person grammatical subjects. As discussed, this is a feature that Basque impersonal shares with English middles and that sets them apart from English-type passives. In this connection, there is one strategy that allows the person restriction to be circumvented: the shift to a dative subject (Ortiz de Urbina 1988, 2003, 2011–2019). In the examples below we can see a transitive personal sentence (69a), its impersonal ungrammatical counterpart (69b) and an alternative impersonal with the dative theme (69c).

- (69) a. *Guraso-ek etxe-ra eramán-go zaituzte gero.* [Transitive]
 parent-ERG.PL home-ADL bring-PROS have.2ABS.3PLERG later
 ‘Your parents will take you home later.’
- b. **/?Etxe-ra eramán-go zara gero.* [Impersonal]
 home-ADL bring-PROS be.2ABS later
 Intended: ‘You will be taken home later.’

- c. *Etxe-ra eramango zaizu gero (zuri)*
 home-ADL bring-PROS be.2SGDAT[3ABS] later you.DAT
 ‘You will be taken home later.’ [Impersonal with a dative theme]

In the ungrammatical impersonal construction in (69b), the thematic object becomes the grammatical subject, bearing both absolutive case and showing absolutive agreement. As shown in Section 3.1.2, this impersonal is ungrammatical because the grammatical subject is 2nd person. Nevertheless, if the 2nd person theme is marked dative and a corresponding dative agreement marker is included in the auxiliary, as in (69c), the result becomes grammatical for many speakers.

- (70) a. *Aspaldian ez zaitugu ikus-i.* [Transitive]
 a_long_time_ago not have.2ABS.1PLERG see-PFV
 ‘We have not seen you since a long time ago.’
- b. **Aspaldian ez zara ikus-i.* [Impersonal]
 a_long_time_ago not be.2ABS bring-PFV
 Intended: ‘You have not been seen since a long time ago.’
- c. *Aspaldian ez zaizu ikus-i (zuri)*
 a_long_time_ago not be.2SGDAT[3ABS] see-PFV you.DAT
 ‘You have not been seen since a long time ago.’
 [Impersonal with a dative theme]
- (71) a. *Ezagutu ere ez zaitugu egi-ten daukazu-n*
 recognize also not have.2ABS.1ERG do-IPFV have.2ERG[3ABS]-COMP
itxura-rekin. [Transitive]
 appearance.DET-COMIT
 ‘We don’t even recognize you with this appearance.’
- b. **Ezagutu ere ez zara egi-ten daukazu-n*
 recognize also not be.2ABS do-IPFV have.2ERG[3ABS]-COMP
itxura-rekin. [Impersonal]
 appearance.DET-COMIT
 Intended: ‘You cannot be recognized with this appearance.’
- c. *Ezagutu ere ez zaizu egi-ten*
 recognize also not be.2SGDAT[3ABS] do-IPFV
daukazu-n itxura-rekin. [Impersonal with a dative theme]
 have.2ERG[3ABS]-COMP appearance.DET-COMIT
 ‘You cannot be recognized with this appearance.’

Much research is still needed to fully understand the nature of impersonals with dative theme. Nonetheless, we can share some preliminary thoughts. First of all, the strategy seems to be restricted to the spoken language, given that no written

examples can be found in the *Contemporary Reference Prose* or *Contemporary Dynamic Prose* corpora of Basque. Second, this is unquestionably not a standard strategy and it does not seem to belong to a particular dialect of Basque. Specifically, it does not seem to be restricted to Western Basque, although the speakers we informally consulted are all from this dialectal area.¹⁴ Third, the strategy is reminiscent of differential object marking (DOM) (for Basque, see Fernández and Rezac 2010, 2016; Odria 2012, 2014, 2017), although, as pointed out by Ortiz de Urbina (2011–2019), the speakers that accept and produce these impersonal constructions do not necessarily accept DOM in the transitive structure, such as *zuri ikusi dizut* ‘I have seen you’, with a 2nd person dative object instead of the canonical absolutive. Dative themes of impersonals are also available with 3rd person subjects, though only if they are [+human].

Apart from dative themes, other dative arguments can be present in impersonal constructions. In fact, Example (69c), repeated here for convenience, can have another interpretation involving an indirect object.

- (72) *Etxe-ra eraman-go zaizu gero (zuri).*
 home-ADL bring-PROS be.2SGDAT[3ABS] later 2SGDAT
 ‘It will be taken to your home later.’ Lit. ‘It will be taken to you to home later.’

[Impersonal with a dative IO]

This example can be interpreted not only as an impersonal including a 2nd person dative theme (69c) but also as an impersonal based on a ditransitive verb such as *eraman* ‘take’, like the example (73) (see Section 2.4 for the anti-double-object condition).

- (73) *Guraso-ek etxe-ra eraman-go dizute gero (zuri).*
 parent-PL.ERG home-ALL bring-PROS have.2SGDAT.3PLERG later you.DAT
 ‘Your parents will take it to your home later.’ Lit. ‘It will be taken to you to home later.’

In this ditransitive construction, the 2nd person dative agreement marker corresponds to the covert indirect object (*zuri* ‘to you’). Similarly, in its impersonal counterpart (72), the dative argument is an indirect object and not a theme. In this second reading, there is a covert absolutive theme that could also appear overtly, such as *gutuna* ‘the letter’. Note that the auxiliary form is apparently the same, namely *zaizu* be.2SGDAT[3ABS], in both the impersonal involving the dative theme in (69c) and the impersonal involving the dative indirect object in (73). However, the

¹⁴ These data were given to us when we asked for impersonals involving non-third person subjects.

former, unlike the latter, shows 3rd person dummy agreement that cross-references no absolutive argument.

The dative arguments occurring in both constructions are not syntactically similar. The dative theme of the impersonal licenses secondary predicates (74a), just like absolutive themes (74b).

- (74) a. *Argazki honetan pozik_i ikus-ten zaizu (zuri_i).*
 picture this.INESS happy see-IPFV be.2SGDAT[3ABS] you.DAT
 ‘In this picture, you seem happy.’ Lit. ‘In this picture, you are seen happy.’
- b. *Argazki honetan Jon_i pozik_i ikus-ten da.*
 picture this.INESS J.[ABS] happy see-IPFV be.3ABS
 ‘In this picture, John seems happy.’ Lit. ‘In this picture, John is seen happy.’

In contrast, secondary predicates in impersonals involving a dative indirect object cannot be controlled by the dative. In (75), the predicates *pozik* ‘happy’ cannot be predicated of the dative argument *zuri* ‘you’ – it can only be predicated of the implicit agent (indexed as *i*).

- (75) *Gutun-a pozik_{i/*j} eramango zaizu gero (zuri_j).*
 letter-DET[ABS] happy bring-PROS be.2SGDAT[3ABS] later you.DAT
 ‘The letter will be taken to you.’ (with the implicit agent being ‘happy’)

Thus, the dative theme of impersonals seems to be syntactically similar to the absolutive theme, at least with regard to the licensing of secondary predicates. This is reminiscent of the contrast found with DOM objects and indirect objects. In fact, DOM objects license secondary predicates even though they are marked dative, whereas indirect objects do not (Fernández and Rezac 2010, 2016; Odria 2012, 2014, 2017; Ortiz de Urbina and Fernández 2016). For a formal analysis of impersonals including dative themes, see Berro et al. (2021).

5 Basque impersonals and subject-suppressing impersonals

In the preceding section, we compared Basque impersonals to English-like passives. As we have seen, there are some striking similarities between the two languages regarding the syntactic behavior of the implicit subject. However, unlike English, Basque cannot express the logical subject by means of an oblique of the *by*-phrase type. This can be interpreted as meaning that Basque impersonals are

agentless passives or, alternatively, that they are subject-suppressing impersonals (Blevins 2003). This particular instance of impersonal constructions has been observed and analyzed by Blevins in Balto-Finnic languages such as Estonian, Balto-Slavic languages such as Polish and Celtic languages such as Welsh. Blevins identifies three main features that distinguish these impersonals from passives. First of all, not only transitive verbs but also unaccusative and unergative verbs may participate in impersonal constructions. Secondly, the suppressed subject is interpreted as human and non-human subjects are not allowed. Third and lastly, agentive obliques of the *by*-phrase type analyzed above (Section 3.1.1) are either less acceptable or unacceptable altogether. As we will see, these three characteristics are shared by Basque impersonals. However, unlike the subject-suppressing impersonals analyzed by Blevins, Basque impersonals are detransitivized constructions. In this section, we will focus on one of the many constructions analyzed by Blevins under the label “impersonal”. In particular, we will compare Basque impersonals to Polish *no/to*-constructions (Blevins 2003; Kibort 2004; Siewierska 1988). As we will see, Basque impersonals share many characteristics with Polish *no/to*-constructions, such as the three general properties listed above, as well as other properties explored by Kibort (2004), e.g. concerning syntactic control and the binding of reflexive anaphora.

5.1 Where Basque impersonal diverge from Polish *no/to*-constructions: detransitivization

Polish *no/to*-constructions are impersonals that suppress the realization of a syntactic subject (Blevins 2003). These impersonal constructions, exemplified in (76b), contrast with personal passives as illustrated in (76a). Example (76a) is a detransitivized construction with an object promoted to subject, and a demoted subject marked by an oblique phrase. In the passive construction, the passive auxiliary *być* agrees in person and number with the subject. In contrast, the impersonal in (76b) is an active construction: the object in (76b) retains its accusative case and *czytano* is transitive. Moreover, the object does not trigger agreement (Blevins 2003: 491).

- (76) a. *Gazeta* *była* *czytana* (*przez dzieci*)
 newspaper.FEM.SG.NOM be.FEM.SG read.FEM.SG by children
 ‘The paper was read by children.’

- b. *Gazetę* (*była/*było) *czytano*
 newspaper.FEM.ACC was. FEM.SG/N.SG read.PST.IMPERS
 (*przez dzieci)
 by children
 ‘One/they read the paper.’
 (Blevins 2003: 491)

As Blevins (2003: fn 17) points out, *gazetę* ‘the paper’ is actually the object of the impersonal construction, as it appears in the genitive under negation – see also Siewierska (1988: 274). Hence, although the subject is suppressed, the impersonal remains transitive: neither is the subject demoted, nor is the object promoted. Crucially, Basque impersonals are detransitivized constructions, as has been repeatedly pointed out in the literature – see for instance, Ortiz de Urbina (2003: 579–581). We show the Basque counterpart of (76b) in (77).

- (77) *Egunkari-a irakurr-i zen (*umeez)*
 newspaper-DET[ABS] read-PFV be[3ABS]PST children.INS
 ‘One/they read the paper/The paper was read.’

In the Basque impersonal, the logical subject has been suppressed, as in Polish. Actually, there is no argument marked with ergative case in (77). As we have seen above, the only argument available in this construction is the logical object marked by absolutive case, i.e., *egunkaria* ‘the paper’. Additionally, there is no ergative agreement in the verbal inflection. Basque being an ergative language, both the subject of an intransitive verb and the object of a transitive verb are marked by absolutive case. Thus, we do not observe the theme alternating between nominative and accusative marking in the passive and the impersonal respectively, like in accusative languages such as Polish. Still, Basque does not only show a logical object marked by absolutive case in the impersonal construction; it also shows an intransitive auxiliary, a characteristic which suggests that the construction should be regarded as being detransitivized, with the only absolutive argument being the grammatical subject. It is worth pointing out that this intransitive auxiliary cannot agree with any ergative argument but agrees with the absolutive argument instead.

5.2 What Basque impersonals share with Polish *no/to-* constructions

5.2.1 Verb types

One of the properties mentioned by Blevins (2003) in order to distinguish passives from impersonals has to do with the nature of the verbs involved in the construction. The Basque example in (77), as well as many others presented above, have shown that transitive verbs can participate in this construction in Basque (see Section 2.3 of this article for a review of the verb types that can appear in Basque impersonals). This is also true for Polish impersonals, as we saw in (76b) above, for example. However, not only transitive verbs but also intransitive verbs can appear in Polish impersonals (Blevins 2003). For instance, (78) is a Polish impersonal construction involving an unergative verb (Kibort 2004: 48).

- (78) *Tutaj tańczono.*
 here danced.IMPERS
 ‘There was dancing here/The dancing was done here.’

This property is also attested in Estonian impersonals. The examples in (79) show a personal form (79a) and its impersonal counterpart (79b) (Erelt et al. 1995:73 apud Blevins 2003: 483–484).

- (79) a. *Poisid kaklesid õues.*
 boys fight.PST.3PL outside
 ‘The boys were fighting outside.’
 b. *Õues kakeldi.*
 outside fight.PST.3IMPERS
 ‘People were fighting outside.’

Similar examples based on unergative verbs such as *dantzatu* ‘dance’ or *borrokatu* ‘fight’ are also attested in Basque. Compare (80) to the Polish example in (78) and (81a) and (81b) to the Estonian examples in (79a) and (79b) respectively.

- (80) *Hemen dantza-tzen zen.*
 here dance-IPFV be[3ABS]PST
 ‘There was dancing here.’
- (81) a. *Mutil-ek kanpoan borroka-tzen zuten.*
 boy-PL.ERG outside fight-IPFV have[3ABS]3PL.ERG
 ‘Boys fought outside.’

- b. *Kanpoan borroka-tzen zen.*
 outside fight-IPFV be[3ABS]PST
 ‘People were fighting outside.’

As observed by Ortiz de Urbina (2003: 580), if impersonals involve unergative verbs, no argument is available to serve as the subject of the impersonal, and the verb appears in a third person singular form, i.e., the unmarked one.

Impersonals can also be formed from unaccusative verbs (Blevins 2003), as shown in the following Estonian example given by Tuldava (1994: 273) and cited by Blevins (2003: 484).

- (82) *Tullakse ja minnakse.*
 come.PRES.IMPERS and go.PRES.IMPERS
 ‘They [people] come and go.’

Basque unaccusative motion verbs such as *etorri* ‘come’ and *joan* ‘go’ are also attested in impersonals – see Ortiz de Urbina (2003: 582–583).

- (83) *Hemendik joa-ten da Bilbora.*
 here.ABL go-IMPERS be.3ABS go.ALL
 ‘One can go to Bilbao this way.’

Unaccusative verbs other than motion verbs are also found, as in the following example from Ortiz de Urbina (2003: 582).

- (84) *Gaur egun, ez da normalean etxean jaiio-tzen,*
 today day not be.3ABS usually home.INESS be.born-IPFV
ospitalean baizik
 hospital.INESS but
 ‘Nowadays, one is usually born not at home but in the hospital.’

However, unaccusatives are more restricted than unergative and transitive verbs in Basque impersonals, as they are mainly available in the impersonal with a generic imperfective aspectual – thus, non-episodic – interpretation (Ortiz de Urbina 2003), and the verb classes are restricted (Rodet 1992).

5.2.2 Suppressed subjects

The impersonals explored by Blevins are characterized as subject-suppressing constructions. In Blevins’ words (2003: 485), the subject is “not demoted but unexpressed”. As a result, instances including an explicit subject are ungrammatical. This can be seen in the following example from Kibort (2004: 49) related to the impersonal *no/to*-construction in (78).

- (85) **Uczniowie* *tutaj tańczono.*
 pupils(VIR)¹⁵.NOM here danced.IMPERS
 Intended: ‘Pupils were dancing here/The dancing was done here by the pupils.’

Basque impersonals reveal a more nuanced picture with regard to subjects. To begin with, impersonals based on transitive verbs such as *irakurri* ‘read’ in (77), repeated here as (86), do not overtly encode the logical subject. Thus at first glance it would seem that the logical subject is suppressed in Basque impersonals, like in Polish.

- (86) *Egunkari-a* *irakurr-i* *zen.*
 newspaper-DET[ABS] read-PFV be[3ABS]PST
 ‘One/they read the paper/The paper was read.’

However, unlike Polish impersonals, Basque impersonals are detransitivized constructions in which the absolutive argument is preserved. The syntactic status of this absolutive argument merits some discussion, in particular, concerning the question of whether it remains an object or, alternatively, is promoted to a grammatical subject. Recall that in an ergative language like Basque we will not see the logical object changing its case marking from accusative to nominative whenever it is promoted to subject. Instead, the logical object is marked absolutive in both the personal transitive form and the impersonal form. Thus, based on case marking, we cannot state that the logical object has been promoted. Still, the presence of the intransitive auxiliary suggests that the only absolutive argument in (86) is actually the (derived) subject of the impersonal construction. If a transitive auxiliary were available in the Basque impersonal, then the absolutive argument could be considered a grammatical object. However, with a detransitivized structure, as the intransitive auxiliary shows, the most plausible scenario is that the only absolutive argument is a grammatical subject and not an object – see Ortiz de Urbina (2003: 581) for impersonals that include both an absolutive argument, the logical object, and a dative goal. Summing up, Polish and Basque impersonals suppress the (logical) subject, but Basque shows a (derived) subject completely absent in Polish.

The similarities between Polish and Basque impersonals are more evident when the predicate involved is intransitive. In these instances, there is no subject at all, as in the Basque impersonal example in (80), repeated here as (87a), including the unergative verb *dantzatu* ‘dance’. The intended impersonal

15 We follow Kibort (2004: fn3) in using the term *virile* (VIR) to refer to the plural gender attributed to masculine human vs. non-virile (other than masculine human).

construction including an overt subject in (87b) is ungrammatical, so the only reading available for this sentence is the personal interpretation.

- (87) a. *Hemen dantza-tzen zen.*
 here dance-IPFV be[3ABS]PST
 ‘There was dancing here.’
- b. **/✓ Jendea hemen dantza-tzen zen.¹⁶*
 people.[ABS] here dance-IPFV be[3ABS]PST
 ‘There was dancing here/People danced here.’

To conclude, Polish and Basque impersonals suppress the logical subject. However, Polish preserves the transitive nature of the impersonal and retains the object whereas Basque impersonals are detransitivized constructions that feature a (derived) subject when based on a transitive verb.

5.2.3 On the human nature of the suppressed (logical) subject

It has been noted in the literature on subject-suppressing impersonals that the logical subject must be interpreted as human. Thus, the following example (88a) from Siewierska (1988: 263), adapted by Kibort (2004: 50, 282), can be only interpreted as involving a human logical subject. As shown in Section 3.1.3, Basque behaves the same in this respect (88b).

- (88) Polish
- a. *Gniazda budowano wysoko.*
 nests(NVIR).ACC built.IMPERS high-up
 ‘(They/One) built nests high up.’
- Basque
- b. *Kabi-a-k zuhaitzetan gora egi-ten dira.*
 nest-DET-PL[ABS] trees.INESS high make-IPFV be.3PLABS
 ‘They/One build(s) nests high up in the trees.’

Even if the action expressed by the verb is attributed to an animal, the impersonal implies a human subject, as in the Estonian example (89), from Torn (2002: 95), apud Blevins (2003: 484). Its Basque counterpart in (89b) must also performe be interpreted as involving a human subject – see also Kibort (2004: 282) for similar examples in Polish.

¹⁶ The personal interpretation of *dantzatu* ‘dance’ in combination with the auxiliary *izan* ‘be’ is mainly acceptable in north-eastern Basque dialects (Aldai 2009; Berro 2010; Oyharçabal 1992).

- (89) Estonian
- a. *Õues haugutakse.*
 outside bark.PRES.IMP
 ‘One barks outside’.
- Basque
- b. *Kanpoan zaunka egi-ten da.*
 outside bark make-IPFV be[3ABS]
 ‘They/one bark(s) outside.’

Additionally, non-natural phenomena can be interpreted as the suppressed subjects of impersonals, as noted by Blevins (2003) for this construction in general, and by Kibort (2004: 282) for Polish (90a). Thus, the suppressed subject of the Polish construction is necessarily human.

- (90) Polish
- a. *Podczas suszy wypalono całe pole.*
 during drought burnt_out.IMPERS whole field(N).ACC
 ‘During the drought [they] burnt out the whole field.’
 (Kibort 2004)
- Basque
- b. *Lehortean zelai oso-a erre zen.*
 drought.INESS field whole-DET[ABS] burn_out.PFV be[3ABS]PST
 ‘During the drought they/one burnt out the whole field.’

Regarding the Basque counterpart in (90b), since the verb *erre* ‘burn out’ is a labile verb in Basque, it participates in the inchoative/causative alternation. As explained in Section 1.1, the intransitive form of such labile verbs is ambiguous. On the one hand, it can instantiate the impersonal construction of the causative, as in (90b). On the other, it can be interpreted as the inchoative variant, with the interpretation ‘the whole field burnt’. In the former reading, the implicit subject is necessarily human.

5.2.4 Oblique phrases

Subject-suppressing constructions are characterized by the impossibility of (or resistance to) the subject’s being expressed by an oblique phrase of the *by*-type (Blevins 2003). As reported by Blevins (2003: 485, 489), citing Matthews (1955: 370) and Tuldava (1994: 273), among others, this is true for Estonian (barring a few exceptions). In other languages such as Polish, the expression of the subject in the

impersonal by means of an oblique phrase is ungrammatical (91) – see also Example (76b) above, in comparison to the passive (76a).

- (91) **Tutaj tańczono przez uczniów.*
 here danced.IMPERS by pupils
 Intended: ‘Pupils danced here/The dancing was done here by pupils.’
 (Kibort 2004: 49)

As already discussed in Section 3.1.1., Basque impersonals exhibit the same restriction.

5.2.5 A suppressed but active subject: a brief overview

Although the impersonals under discussion are subject-suppressing constructions in Blevins’ terms, at least in *no/to*-impersonals, there is an active covert subject (Kibort 2004: 49). This active covert subject i) binds reflexive pronouns, ii) controls into purpose clauses, and iii) licenses agent-oriented adverbs. In this respect, the covert subject of the Polish impersonal behaves similarly to English passives and Basque impersonals. In what follows we present relevant data and refer the reader to Kibort (2004) for more information on control and raising.

5.2.5.1 Binding of reflexive anaphors

The suppressed subject of the impersonal can bind a reflexive anaphor (Blevins 2003: 475). This has been observed for Estonian (Blevins 2003: 485 citing Vihman 2001) and Polish (Kibort 2004: 50), as exemplified below.

- (92) *Oglądano się/siebie w lustrze.*
 looked_at.IMPERS REFL/self.ACC in mirror
 ‘One looked at oneself in the mirror.’

This seems to contrast with Basque, as reflexive anaphors are not acceptable in Basque impersonals, as observed by Albizu (1997) and Ortiz de Urbina (2003), see (93).

- (93) **bere buru-a engaina-tzen denean, ...*
 3PS head-DET[ABS] deceive-IPFV be[3ABS].when
 ‘When oneself is deceived...’
 (Ortiz de Urbina 2003: 588)

However, as observed by Berro et al. (2021), if the reflexive anaphor is *norbere burua* [oneself’s head] ‘oneself’, which lacks a person specification, then the covert subject can bind the anaphor and the construction is grammatical.

- (94) *norbere buru-a engaina-tzen denean, ...*
 oneself.PS head-DET[ABS] deceive-IPFV be[3ABS].when
 ‘When oneself is deceived...’

Berro et al. (2021) argue that the logical subject of impersonals requires the reflexive anaphor *norbere burua* [oneself’s head] ‘oneself’ rather than *bere burua* [his/her head] ‘himself/herself’, because the latter is third person, but the logical subject in impersonals has an unspecified person feature and therefore cannot be co-indexed with a third person form.

5.2.5.2 Control into purpose clauses

The syntactic activity of the logical subject in Polish *no/to*-impersonal is further supported by the fact that it can control the unexpressed subject of a purpose clause.

- (95) *Zatopiono ten statek po to aby*
 sank.IMPERS this.MASC.ACC ship (MASC).ACC for this.N.ACC COMPL
uzyskać odszkodowanie.
 obtain.INF insurance(N).ACC
 ‘They sank the ship to collect the insurance.’
 (Kibort 2004: 276)

As seen in Section 3.2.1, the implicit subject of Basque impersonals can also control the subject of a purpose clause.

5.2.5.3 Licensing of agent-oriented adverbs

Finally, the logical subject of *no/to*-impersonals in Polish can also license agent-oriented adverbials, as shown by Kibort (2004: 275–276).

- (96) *Zatopiono ten statek celowo*
 sank.IMPERS this.MASC.ACC ship (MASC).ACC on purpose
 ‘They sank the ship on purpose.’

Again, Basque patterns with Polish impersonals in this respect too, given that, as explained in Section 3.2.2, the logical subject in Basque impersonals can also license such adverbs.

5.3 Interim summary

In Table 3, we summarize the main properties of Basque impersonals in comparison to Polish *no/to*-impersonals.

Table 3: Some properties of Basque impersonals in comparison to Polish -no/-to impersonals.

PROPERTIES	POLISH -NO/-TO IMPERSONALS	BASQUE IMPERSONALS
Detransitivization of the verbal form	X	✓
Verbs involved: transitives, unergatives and unaccusatives	✓	✓
(Suppressed) (logical) subject	✓	✓
(Suppressed) Human indefinite subject	✓	✓
Oblique phrases	X	X
Biding of reflexive anaphora	✓	X/✓
Control into purpose clauses	✓	✓
Licensing of agent-oriented adverbs	✓	✓

6 Discussion

In this section, we will discuss some of the outcomes of the present study, considering the status of Basque impersonals within the typological framework of middles, passives and subject-suppressing impersonals. On the one hand, middles and passives are similar in that in both cases the logic object is realized as the grammatical subject, and the agent or logical subject, although not formally present, is semantically implied. The latter is also true for subject-suppressing impersonals. On the other hand, these three constructions are different with regard to a number of other morphosyntactic properties, some of them discussed in this study. As shown in the previous sections, the Basque impersonal construction shares some properties with middles (of type I as classified in Ackema and Schoorlemmer 2005) and many properties with passives and subject-suppressing impersonals. Specifically, the Basque impersonal resembles middles and subject-suppressing impersonals in that the implicit external argument cannot be overtly expressed in an adpositional phrase and, particularly, it patterns with middles in that the grammatical (absolute) subject must be 3rd person (Urrestarazu 2019).¹⁷ Nevertheless, Basque impersonals differ from the middle in languages such as English in that the event is actually instantiated, it allows more aspectual and modal interpretations, and it can be formed with more classes of verbs. In terms of

¹⁷ Middles may not have a person restriction on their grammatical subject in English. As pointed out by Comrie (p.c.), middles involving 1st and 2nd person subjects (e.g. ‘I (don’t) bribe easily’, ‘we bribe easily’, ‘you don’t bribe easily’) are grammatical and can in fact be found by means of a Google search of the Internet. Thus, Basque impersonals would not pattern with English-type middles in this respect.

all those properties, the Basque impersonal seems to be closer to the passive and the subject-suppressing impersonals than to middles. In fact, even though the implicit agent argument of impersonals is not reflected in auxiliary choice or verbal agreement, it is syntactically active, as can be concluded from the tests presented in Section 3.2: it can control purpose/rationale clauses and it can license agent-oriented adverbs, secondary predicates and instrumental phrases. Thus, in Basque impersonals, the implicit agent argument is both semantically and syntactically present, like in passives and subject-suppressing impersonals, and unlike in middles, which have semantically, but not syntactically, active agents. Moreover, Basque impersonals pattern with subject-suppressing impersonals in having a logical subject that is necessarily interpreted as human, but resemble passives in showing detransitivized verbal morphology.

Thus, attending to the syntactic contribution of the implicit agent in Basque impersonals and the detransitivized verbal morphology, one could consider the Basque impersonal construction to be in reality a sort of agentless passive. In fact, Ackema and Schoorlemmer (2005) suggest that type II middles – a group in which Basque impersonals could be classified – should be analyzed as passives. In a similar fashion, Lekakou (2005) argues that Greek and French middles, which according to her have a syntactically active implicit agent, are syntactically indistinguishable from passives. Nevertheless, the Basque impersonal exhibits a person restriction on the grammatical subject, a feature that significantly limits the use of the impersonal in comparison to the passive in other languages such as English or Spanish. Moreover, it also requires a human implicit agent, a property not attested in passives of any type. Therefore, Basque impersonals can be thought of as an intermediate construction which does not completely coincide with middles, passives or subject-suppressing impersonals, thus lying somewhere in the middle.

Whether Basque has a real passive construction or not is a topic that has been much debated in the literature. As already pointed out in the introduction to this article, Basque grammarians have attributed the term “passive” to some structures that do not fit the traditional typological definition. In fact, Saltarelli et al. (1988: 219) consider the construction involving the adjectival participle (ending in *-a*, see Berro 2019; Eguzkitza 1981; Ortiz de Urbina and Uribe-Etxebarria 1991) to be a passive (see also Alberdi and Sarasola 2001: 44–45, 160–164; Bollebacher 1977; Euskaltzaindia 1991: 294–296, 1993: 16–19; Rebuschi 1984; and others).

- (97) a. *Gutun-a bidal-i-a da/dago*
 letter-DET[ABS] send-PFV-RES be[3ABS]/locative_be[3ABS]
 ‘The letter is sent.’

- b. *Gutun-a-k bidal-i-a-k dira/daude*
 letter-DET-PL[ABS] send-PFV-RES-PL be.3PLABS/locative_be.3PLABS
 ‘The letters are sent.’

As can be seen in (97a) and (97b), in this construction the perfective participle is headed by *-a* and agrees in number with the theme *gutuna/gutunak* ‘letter/letters’, i.e., the direct object of the lexical verb *bidali* ‘send’.¹⁸ On the other hand, the implied ergative-marked agent is missing, although it could be introduced in a fixed position preceding the participle, as can be seen in (98).

- (98) *Gutun-a Jon-ek bidal-i-a da/dago*
 letter-DET[ABS] Jon-ERG send-PFV-RES be[3ABS]/locative_be[3ABS]
 ‘The letter is sent by Jon.’

Even in this case, the ergative agent does not trigger agreement, just like in (97). Thus, the inflected element is an intransitive copula (*izan* ‘be’ or the locative copula *egon* ‘be’), even though the verb *bidali* ‘send’ is (di)transitive and is interpreted agentively.

Given that in this construction the thematic object behaves like a grammatical subject and the agent is usually not overtly realized, it has been considered a passive by some authors (Alberdi and Sarasola 2001: 44–45, 160–164; Euskaltzaindia 1991: 294–296, 1993: 16–19; Rebuschi 1984; Saltarelli 1988; and others).¹⁹ However, as argued by Ortiz de Urbina and Uribe-Etxebarria (1991), there are many reasons not to regard it as a passive. In fact, the following evidence supports a biclausal analysis of the construction, where the inflected element, the copula, takes the participial clause – with subject/object gap – as a complement. First of all, the agent of the event denoted by the verb embedded in the participle is not demoted, as we have already shown in (98). This is particularly relevant when it comes to considering (97) a passive, i.e., a detransitized construction in which the direct object becomes the subject (or in other words,

¹⁸ Alternatively, the perfective participle can be headed by the participial suffixes *-ta* or *-rik*. Broadly speaking, the three suffixes are distributed differently in dialects of Basque. The participles formed with *-ta* or *-rik* differ from those built with *-a*, since they do not agree in number with the subject and cannot act as an adnominal modifier. Nevertheless, apart from these differences, the three suffixes can be generally characterized as having the same syntactic properties.

¹⁹ In fact, Ortiz de Urbina (2006) labels it as ‘passive’ when comparing it with the impersonal construction analyzed in this article. He shows that there are systematic morphosyntactic differences between the two constructions, and crucially, he casts doubts on the structural passive nature of the participial construction, suggesting that they could be viewed as active clauses with subject/object gaps. This hypothesis is developed in Ortiz de Urbina and Uribe-Etxebarria (1991) and more recently in Berro (2019).

the direct object is promoted) and the subject becomes an adjunct (i.e., it is demoted) and thus can be omitted. Second, there are some word-order constraints that are surprising in a free word order language such as Basque. For instance, the agent marked by ergative cannot precede the theme, a consequence of the fact that the agent is inside the participial clause and therefore not in the sphere of verbal inflection.

- (99) (*Jon-ek) *gutun-a* (Jon-ek) *bidal-i-a*
 Jon-ERG letter-DET[ABS] Jon-ERG send-PFV-RES
 da/dago (*Jon-ek)
 be[3ABS]/locative_be[3ABS] Jon-ERG
 ‘The letter is sent by Jon.’

If this construction were monoclausal, the agent would be expected to appear either before the theme or after the inflected element, without causing ungrammaticality. Compare (99) with (100), a monoclausal transitive sentence where the agent is in the same clause as the inflected verb.

- (100) (Jon-ek) *gutun-a* (Jon-ek) *bidal-i* *du*
 Jon-ERG letter-DET[ABS] Jon-ERG send-PFV have[3ABS.3ERG]
 (Jon-ek)
 Jon-ERG
 ‘Jon has sent the letter.’

Third, in the presence of an indirect object marked by dative, dative agreement is not obligatory in the copula, a surprising fact taking into account that dative arguments must generally agree with the auxiliary.

- (101) *Gutun-a-k* *zu-ri* *bidal-i-a-k*
 letter-DET-PL[ABS] ZU-DAT send-PFV-RES-PL
 dira/daude
 be.[3PLABS]/locative_be[3PLABS]
 ‘The letters are sent to you.’

These facts and other evidence suggest, as proposed by Ortiz de Urbina and Uribe-Etxebarria (1991), that the construction in (97) is really biclausal, and not an instance of a monoclausal passive (see Berro 2019 for a syntactic and semantic analysis).

On the other hand, in analyzing classical texts, some authors such as Altuna (1987: 232, 234) and Zulaika (1998: 779–784) use the label ‘passive’ not only for constructions like those in (97) but also for those instances of impersonals that can be found in previous stages of the language, where 1st and 2nd person subjects

were allowed (Examples (47), (48) and (50)). We repeat Example (50c) as (102) here for convenience.

- (102) *Pixka batean ez naiz ahaztu-ko sartuagatik*
 a bit.one.INESS NEG be.1SGABS forget-PROS put.DET.because
lurpi-a-n.
 ground-DET-INESS
 ‘I am not being forgotten, even buried in the ground.’

With regard to these two constructions, that is, the one including the *-a* headed participle in (97) and the one in (102), only the latter can be considered a true passive. Unlike the *-a* participial construction, the old impersonal construction is monoclausal, and has no person restrictions. In relation to this, it must be noted that the person restriction is one of the main criteria distinguishing Basque impersonals from passives cross-linguistically. Thus, the old impersonal fulfills almost all the conditions to be considered a real passive.

Last but not least, Urrestarazu (2019) refers to Basque impersonals as middles. This designation can be also misleading, as Basque impersonals behave in a way that is much more similar to passives and impersonals than to middles, at least to type I middles in Ackema and Schoorlemmer’s (2005) typology. As shown in Section 2, the Basque impersonal construction seems to be broader than this kind of middle. Given this, we claim that in Basque the middle is best regarded as a semantic interpretation, parasitic on an impersonal construction that can be used in more contexts than the middle (see Lekakou 2005 for a similar approach but defending a passive analysis). As we have shown, the impersonal has some properties that are usually attributed to passives, and in all these features, the Basque impersonal seems to be very close to the reflexive-marked passives of Romance languages, particularly those of Spanish. However, this line of analysis merits more detailed research.

All in all, the comparison of Basque impersonals with middles, passives and impersonals cross-linguistically, as well as with reflexive-marked passives in Spanish, reveals that it is very difficult to propose a single syntactic definition for passives, middles or impersonals that will hold cross-linguistically. In fact, all three constructions seem to be subject to variation across languages, presumably due to the morphosyntactic requirements of each language. For instance, regarding passives, Alexiadou (2014) and Alexiadou et al. (2015) have proposed two syntactic ways of forming passives: one is present in languages such as English or German, and the other is present in languages like Greek. Without going into the detail, the most important consequences of having two configurations is that the English- or German-type passive is much more productive and systematic than the Greek one, which, for instance, only accepts a subset of verbs (some

agentive verbs) and exhibits some restrictions regarding the introduction of *apo* 'by' phrases. On the other hand, middles have also been shown to vary across languages (as we have also demonstrated in this article). In fact, Ackema and Schoorlemmer (2005) distinguish between type I and type II middles, with both of them having quite different morphosyntactic properties. Moreover, Lekakou (2005) argues that middles ascribe a dispositional property to the understood object, where dispositional ascriptions are subject-oriented generic sentences. According to her, languages differ in terms of the choice of the structure that gives rise to such an interpretation. Along the same lines, Fábregas and Putnam (2014) and Alexiadou (2014) propose that the middle is better defined as a semantic interpretation that can be obtained with different syntactic constructions across languages. In a different but similar direction, Kemmer (1993) suggested that the middle must be regarded as an expressive strategy with the particular function of signaling "a departure from the canonical transitive event type in the direction of an intransitive event type" (Kemmer 1993: 209), a definition that served better to account for the various realizations of the middle across languages. In conclusion, the morphosyntactic shape of middles varies across languages, and to a certain extent, the same is true of passives and impersonals. In fact, as we have seen, even though Basque impersonals share many properties with subject-suppressing impersonals as described by Blevins (2003), they are also different in the arrangement of verbal morphology and the type of grammatical subject permitted. Thus, as far as English-type middles, passives and subject-suppressing impersonals are concerned, Basque impersonals seem to share properties with all of these constructions, but do not fully coincide with any of them.

7 Conclusions

In this article, we have presented and analyzed Basque impersonals, comparing them in particular with English-type middles, English-type passives, and Polish subject-suppressing impersonals. We have concluded that, though Basque impersonals seem to be closer to the passive and the subject-suppressing impersonal, they cannot be fully categorized as either. First, Basque impersonals share with middles the inability to have the implicit agent realized as an adjunct, and the person restriction on the grammatical subject. Second, Basque impersonals are similar to the passive in that the subject is syntactically active: it allows agent-oriented modifiers, instrumental/comitative phrases, control of purpose clauses and secondary predicates co-indexed with the implicit agent. Finally, we have shown that Basque impersonals resemble subject-suppressing impersonals to a considerable degree, but differ from them in their detransitivized verbal

morphology, and the person restriction on the grammatical subject. Thus, Basque impersonals have a syntactically active implicit agent, unlike English-type middles, but they cannot be considered either passives or subject-suppressing impersonals, as the person restriction on the grammatical subject considerably limits their distribution.

Abbreviations

ABS	absolute
ABL	ablative
ATTR	attributivizer
COMIT	comitative
COMP	comparative
DAT	dative
DET	determiner
ERG	ergative
IMPERSONAL	impersonal
INESS	inessive
INS	instrumental
IPFV	imperfective
NEG	negation
N	neuter
NMLZ	nominalizer
NVIR	non-virile
PFV	perfective
PL	plural
PRES	present
PRF	prefix
PROS	prospective
PSR	possessor
PTCP	participle
PTCL	particle
PTV	partitive
PST	past
REL	relational
REFL	reflexive
SG	singular
SOC	sociative
SUBR	subordinator
SUP	superlative
VIR	virile

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