

## A Cognitive Grammar Analysis of French Impersonal Constructions

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In the syntactic literature, impersonals are determined by the syntactic nature of the subject of the predicate. More specifically, the impersonal label is restricted to the constructions which contain a semantically empty dummy or pleonastic pronoun, which, in the case of French, solely reduces the focus to the *il* constructions. By contrast, functional and typological analyses have observed that all impersonals “lack a definite human agent as subject”, and “may all be seen as a means of agent backgrounding or defocusing” Siewierska (2008: note 3), and that consequently, any construction which shares these characteristics can rightfully be called impersonal. In French, this stance broadens the investigative focus to (at least) the *ce/ça* constructions, the *on* indefinites, and the middles (*se*). Both types of analyses are problematic. The syntactic view is too narrow because the structural distinction between impersonal pronouns and other possible alternatives (*ce* and *ça* in particular) is unfounded (Achard 2010). On the other hand, functional solutions merely define the impersonal category as a “set of features” rather than a “coherent concept” (Helasvuo and Vilkuna 2008: 242), which has led certain researchers to question its usefulness to the analysis of individual languages. For example, Helasvuo and Vilkuna (2008: 242) state that: “impersonality may be a useful tool for cross-linguistic comparison because it directs the analyst’s attention to a broad field of phenomena that share the same properties; but it does not seem to us to be a necessary notion in the description of individual languages.”

This presentation challenges the pessimism of Helasvuo and Vilkuna’s position. Conducted in Cognitive Grammar, the analysis shows that it is possible to define a class of French impersonals positively, and that the impersonal class constitutes a useful tool to describe French grammar because the constructions which compose it impose a coherent construal on the scene they describe. This presentation argues that a structure is impersonal if i) it defocuses or backgrounds the agent of the profiled process, and ii) its profiled process exhibits a degree of generality which makes it available to a generalized conceptualizer. Importantly, except for the *il* constructions that are always impersonal, the *ça*, indefinites, and middle only represent small subsections of their respective morphosyntactic categories. For example, the middle in (1) could not be considered impersonal because its profiled process lacks the degree of generality to satisfy the second condition. Consequently, the difficulty consists in precisely determining the conditions under which a given structure deserves the impersonal label. Interestingly, the evaluation of the two criteria within specific structures, and thus the treatment of these structures as impersonals, is greatly facilitated by the clustering of closely related senses into specific constructions. Given the fluid nature of the proposed criteria, constructions provide islands of regularity within which impersonals can reliably be identified, and therefore constitute one of the main organizing principles of French impersonals.

- (1) *Il serrait son verre dans sa main, le verre se casse*  
‘He was holding his glass in his hand, the glass breaks.’

### References

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