



**HAL**  
open science

## Review of Achard, Michel (2015) Impersonals and other Agent Defocusing Constructions in French

Machteld Meulleman

► **To cite this version:**

Machteld Meulleman. Review of Achard, Michel (2015) Impersonals and other Agent Defocusing Constructions in French. *Constructions and Frames*, 2017, pp.321-328. 10.1075/cf.00007.meu . hal-02347883

**HAL Id: hal-02347883**

**<https://hal.science/hal-02347883>**

Submitted on 3 Nov 2020

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

**Michel Achard. (2015) *Impersonals and other Agent Defocusing Constructions in French*. Amsterdam / Philadelphia: John Benjamins. 372 pp.**

**Reviewed by Machteld Meulleman (Université de Reims Champagne-Ardenne, CIRLEP EA, 4299)**

Michel Achard's monograph "Impersonals and other Agent Defocusing Constructions in French" is the fiftieth volume of John Benjamin's book series "Human Cognitive Processing". It consists of nine chapters. The first two define the scope of analysis and provide an introduction to the theoretical approach adopted to study French impersonals. Chapters three to five explore several aspects of the impersonal *il* construction, while chapters six to eight extend the analysis to three other constructions of which some subsets are claimed to be functionally equivalent to *il* constructions and therefore deserve the label 'impersonal'. Chapter nine offers a general conclusion integrating a brief recapitulation of the main claims and insists on the advantages of the proposed framework also anticipating some potential criticisms. Finally, the book includes a list of bibliographical references and an index.

The opening chapter outlines the monograph's claim that French impersonal constructions cannot be adequately represented by accounts that merely restrict this category to the morpho-syntactic *il* construction in which this pronoun is considered to be a semantically vacuous placeholder with a strictly structural function. Considering that several analyses have pointed out that *il* is a meaningful expression representing an abstract setting, comparable to the demonstrative pronoun *ça*, Achard argues that there is no reason to treat both constructions as strictly distinct classes. The book proposes a broader functional account of French impersonals expanding the impersonal domain to include not only some occurrences of demonstrative *ça* constructions, but also a subset of two other morpho-syntactic constructions, middles and indefinite *on* constructions. The remainder of the book aims at providing justification for this claim investigating the semantico-pragmatic conditions under which this group of constructions deserves the impersonal label. On the basis of the analysis of a considerable variety of corpus resources (the FRANTEXT database of literary French, journalistic prose from the *Agence France Press* (AFP) news agency and a parallel corpus of European Union parliament deliberations), it is claimed that it is possible to delineate a class of French impersonals based on two scalar functional criteria: first, the defocusing of the agent of the verbal process, and second, the presentation of this process as a highly general and predictable event that cannot be imputed to a well-delineated cause and that is available to any conceptualizer in the appropriate circumstances.

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework of Cognitive Grammar within which the analysis of French impersonals is carried out, starting with the Langackerian claim that all areas of linguistic representation, including clause structure, have a symbolic character. Where for instance transitive clauses profile transitive events, impersonal constructions describe current states of affairs. In this vein French impersonal constructions systematically adopt one out of the two following strategies to defocus the agent. They either select an alternative entity with very low intrinsic salience as focal figure in the profiled relation, i.e., an element of the setting in the case of *il* and *ça* or another participant in the case of middles, or they increase the level of generality of the profiled process by selecting a minimally delimited subject such as the indefinite pronoun *on*. These four constructions (*il*, *ça*, middle construction, and *on*) are functionally equivalent, but each one structures their common conceptual base differently. In agreement with the usage-based model, these structures are assumed to arise from individual constructional islands, which cluster instances that share specific morpho-syntactic or pragmatic properties.

Chapter 3 deals with the semantic contribution of the impersonal *il* construction with a nominal following its predicate (as in *il reste des pommes*, p. 79). It is argued that such simple *il* impersonals are presentational constructions, whose semantic function consists of identifying or locating a given entity with respect to a specific domain. It is claimed that the different components of the construction combined contribute to this semantic function. Firstly, impersonal *il* is argued not to be a dummy subject, but instead a meaningful pronoun which profiles the “field”, i.e. the speaker’s conceptual base (or scope of awareness) that allows him/her to assess the status of the post-verbal entity and locate it in some domain. Secondly, the predicate necessarily invokes the setting in its scope of predication. Indeed, corpus data shows that stative and inherently directed motion predicates (such as *exister* ‘exist’ and *arriver* ‘arrive’ respectively), which both saliently include the setting in their lexical semantic structure, are overwhelmingly present in the simple impersonal construction. If these verbs are thus naturally compatible with the impersonal construction, predicates that saliently focus on participants, such as physical activity predicates (e.g. *voler* ‘fly’), can occasionally be attested in the construction under specific conditions. These conditions are a decrease of the participant’s salience (through an indefinite subject constraint for instance), and the presentation of the activities they encode as characteristic of the scene in which they occur, thus increasing the prominence of the setting. In accounting for the high frequency of some (often intransitive) predicate classes as well as for the possible presence of other verbs under appropriate conditions, this construction-centered account, based on the semantic overlap between *il* and its predicates, provides a more convincing explanation of the predicate distribution than current morpho-syntactic accounts do.

In complement to the previous chapter, Chapter 4 offers a predicate-centered analysis of *il* impersonals which are followed by a nominal. It investigates the specific usage patterns of *il y a* ‘there is’ and six other frequently attested predicates in the simple *il* construction, namely *exister*, *rester* ‘remain’, *manquer* ‘lack’, *arriver*, *venir* ‘come’ and *passer* ‘pass’. The in-depth comparison of these six predicates’ personal and impersonal uses shows that when used in the simple impersonal construction they have undergone a process of conventionalization with various degrees of flexibility or idiomaticity. Although the core impersonal predicates *exister*, *rester* and *manquer* do not impose strict semantic restrictions on their postverbal NP, these existential verbs systematically occur in the simple impersonal construction in (at least) one of their specific meanings. The verb *exister*, for instance, is used impersonally when it has a discovery sense, i.e. when it refers to the introduction of a given entity with respect to its presence in reality, while it is used in a personal construction when it has a confirmation sense, i.e. an already familiar presence whose status demands confirmation. These three existential verbs thus tend to constitute semi-assembled symbolic structures that specialize in the description of the state of a given scene, available to anyone present to observe. In more peripheral simple *il* impersonals, the motion verbs *arriver*, *venir* and *passer* are so heavily constrained that they appear in almost formulaic expressions, such as *quoi qu’il arrive* ‘whatever the case may be’. Although these predicates are more dynamic, they still tend to focus on the global quality of the described scene (due to the habitual nature of the profiled process for instance). Such a functional definition of the impersonal category also entails that the small minority of morpho-syntactic impersonals that describe punctual events, only available to immediate witnesses, fall outside the impersonal category.

Chapter 5 argues that complex impersonals, i.e. impersonal *il* constructions followed by a clausal complement (*il* + PREDICATE + COMPLEMENT CLAUSE / INFINITIVE), are fundamentally presentational constructions, similar to simple impersonals, but while the latter assert the existence of entities, the former assess the likelihood of occurrence of events in reality. The clausal complements can be infinitival, subjunctive or indicative clauses. Each of

these three types corresponds to a different conceptual import: infinitival and subjunctive complements basically assess the occurrence of “events”, which hence do not need full grounding, while indicative complements profile “propositions”, which require full grounding as they are considered epistemically. Based on rich corpus data, it is shown that individual predicates appearing in complex impersonal constructions manifest specific complement distributions, which reflect the semantic overlap between their respective semantic import and the inflections. The author distinguishes between four semantic predicate classes. (a) Deontic predicates, such as *il faut* ‘it is necessary’, are only felicitous with infinitival and subjunctive complements, as they are concerned with the effective realization of the event in the complement and not with the epistemic evaluation of propositions. (b) Evaluative predicates, such as *il est charmant* ‘it is charming’, also tend to select infinitival or subjunctive inflections in their usual function of evaluating real situations, although they are not fully incompatible with a finite clause, and might receive an epistemic reading. (c) Epistemic predicates, such as *il est certain* ‘it is certain’, select indicative complements, when they profile explicit content assessment on the conceptualizer’s part, while they will be marked in the subjunctive when the conceptualizer does not recognize the reality of the complement content. Finally, (d) occurrence predicates possess an idiosyncratic distribution, as some predicates, such as *il ressort* ‘it comes out’, follow an epistemic pattern selecting indicative complements, while others, such as *il arrive* ‘it happens’, tend to display a deontic pattern selecting an infinitive or subjunctive complement clause.

Chapter 6 explores the conditions under which the demonstrative pronoun *ça/ce* appears in functionally impersonal constructions. It is argued that this is consistently the case in the copular complement construction (*être* + ADJECTIVE + COMPLEMENT CLAUSE), where both *il* and *ça* are argued to function as impersonal pronouns and thus produce impersonal constructions. Although both pronouns are argued to represent some kind of abstract setting, they slightly differ with respect to the nature of this setting: *il* profiles the field, i.e. the conceptualizer’s mental reach or scope of assessment, whereas *ça* is more context-bound as it refers to a section of the immediate discourse context from which the post-verbal complement is extracted. Just as in other (non-impersonal) constructions, impersonal *ça* is characterized by the symbiotic character of its anaphoric and cataphoric uses as it never merely refers forward to a subsequent complement but also refers back to the preceding discourse context. In addition, demonstrative *ça* imposes a subjective construal of the scene. This might explain why *ça* is much more frequent than *il* in the copular complement constructions in Simone de Beauvoir’s *Les mandarins*, as *ça*’s subjectivity appears to be in line with the novel’s overall interactive and conversational tone. In general, the analysis of a more varied corpus of twentieth-century documents from the FRANTEXT database reveals that *il* outnumbers *ça* in written French. The in-depth analysis of the distribution of both pronouns with the epistemic predicate *être vrai* ‘be true’ in this corpus confirms that this predicate takes on an argumentative sense with *il*, whereas *ça* is more associated with an evaluative sense.

In Chapter 7 the analysis focuses on the impersonal use of a specific subset of middle *se* constructions. First it demonstrates that the traditional distinction between *constructions neutres* and *moyennes* is untenable as many occurrences combine properties of both classes. Inspired by Kemmer’s (1993) proposal to situate middles on a continuum of generality, Achard then makes the claim that those middles which exhibit a very high level of generality and predictability fundamentally function as impersonals. Once again, such semantic and pragmatic properties are mainly found in two constructional clusters: (a) middles with a definitional reading, such as *le saucisson d’Arles se fait avec de la viande de mulet* ‘the Arles sausage is made with mule meat’ (p. 288), in which the profiled process is an inherent characteristic of the affected entity, and (b) middles with a deontic reading, such as *cette*

*promenade devrait se faire à pied* ‘this hike should be done on foot’ (p. 290), in which the profiled process is available to any conceptualizer because its occurrence is required by a set of social norms or conventions. As illustrated in the two examples cited, most predicates in middle impersonals refer to inherently human activities, which easily acquire impersonal status if the human agent they necessarily involve could be virtually anyone so that the process becomes fully predictable. Spontaneous event predicates (e.g. *se briser* ‘to break’) generally describe punctual events without a precise cause whose lack of predictability is barely compatible with an impersonal reading. Nevertheless, when the profiled process becomes predictable, they can acquire impersonal status as in *les machines se dérèglent toujours* ‘machines always lose their settings’ (p. 284). Independently of the semantic predicate type involved, all impersonal middles share the property that the affected entity bears at least some responsibility for the occurrence of the profiled process, which therefore becomes accessible to a generalized conceptualizer.

Chapter 8 explores the impersonal use of the indefinite *on*-construction. It is shown that impersonal *on* represents the endpoint on a continuum of generalization of *on*’s referent. At the opposite endpoint of this continuum, personal *on* is characterized by both the identifiability of its referent and that referent’s exclusive responsibility for the realization of the event coded by the predicate. When the indefinite pronoun’s referent is not identified but remains responsible for the event, *on* can be considered passive. Impersonal *on* emerges then when the referent is not identifiable and when any potential conceptualizer holds equal responsibility for the profiled process. Just as with middles, there are no set formal criteria which allow the exact identification of such indefinite impersonals. However, once again, impersonal *on* can be identified semantically, as those instances of indefinite *on* that possess the lowest possible degree of delimitation. A corpus analysis of 500 random examples of *on* shows that this minimal delimitation tends to be accomplished in two alternative constructional clusters. Firstly, it can be achieved through a process of “homogenization”, as in *on allait rentrer dans l’hiver* ‘one was about to enter winter’ (p. 326), where all members of the community in question are treated as a homogeneous mass and the event is thus highly predictable. This high degree of homogenization can also be observed when a prototypical generalization is made about a specific group, as in *en Italie on sait préparer les pâtes* ‘in Italy one knows how to prepare pasta’ (p. 330). Secondly, the minimal delimitation of *on* can be achieved through a shift from individual experience to universal assessment, i.e. when the experience of a specific conceptualizer is presented to be representative for that of anyone in the same circumstances through a process of “virtualization”, suggesting that there is a predictable cause-and-effect relation between a trigger and a resulting event. This trigger is often represented by a perception or cognition predicate. In a construction as *on y voyait* ‘one could see’, for example, *on*’s referent is a virtual observer whose experience is generalized by presenting it as if it were identical to any observer in the same position, thus focusing on the inherent properties of the scene rather than on the observer’s individual viewing experience.

The final chapter starts by recapitulating the monograph’s main goal, arguments and conclusions and then offers some concluding remarks with respect to the need and the advantages of the analyses proposed. As announced in the introduction, the entire book argues that French impersonals should not be conceived of as a structural but as a functional class. Over the chapters it is consistently shown that the impersonal *il* construction shares fundamental semantico-pragmatic properties with certain subsets of the *ça* construction, the middle construction and the indefinite *on* construction. Whenever one of these four constructions defocuses the agent of the predicate and describes “a situation at a degree of stability and predication that makes it available to a generalized conceptualizer” (p. 344), it should be considered as impersonal, a label thus reserved for a functional rather than a

structural domain. The entry point to this functional domain differs for each morpho-syntactic construction: it can be a property of the conceptualizer's assessment (*il*), of the context (*ça*), of the entity (*se*) or of the agent (*on*). Interestingly, none of these structural categories is entirely impersonal on a functional level (not even *il* constructions) and with the exception of *il* constructions, they all tend to exhibit their impersonal potential only in specific constructional contexts (such as the copular complement construction for demonstrative *ça* impersonals). The author argues that the distinction of a functional impersonal category in French is relevant, as the systematic emergence of stable clusters encoding highly stable and predictable events in a variety of morpho-syntactic structures reveals the need the French speaker has to describe this kind of impersonal events. The author ends his book with a reminder that the proposed analysis has several advantages. First, it clusters a set of constructions which remain totally isolated in structural approaches despite important common semantic characteristics. Second, it outlines how these constructions relate to other morpho-syntactic categories such as middles (profiling a process without mentioning its cause) and passives (defocusing of an agent who remains responsible). Finally, it offers a usage-based explanation of the various degrees of compatibility between the construction and different semantic classes of predicates.

This monograph provides a coherent hypothesis partly drawing on Michel Achard's previous studies on French impersonals and related constructions. While particularly useful for readers who are not yet familiar with the author's work, it is also a solid step forward in the global understanding of the impersonal category in French. The hypothesis of the functional equivalence of four morpho-syntactically quite different structures is convincing and well-argued, thus leading to an innovative semantico-pragmatic definition of the impersonal category in French. Another major plus of this book is that it discusses rich qualitative data coming from a great variety of corpus analyses and consistently makes the link with text genres and narrative strategies.

Not only does the book cover a variety of well-studied structures, it also deals with a particularly large body of theoretical literature. To help readers follow the general argument, the book systematically explains the relevant concepts within both the French tradition on each specific construction and Langacker's model of Cognitive Grammar. Moreover, the main arguments and hypotheses are frequently summarized in such a way that the chapters can be read separately and the systematic translation of French examples and notions makes it accessible to readers who do not have a full understanding of the French language.

This book has very few shortcomings. Maybe the bibliography is quite short (8p. out of 372p.). More fundamentally, however, one might wonder why there is no specific section on *il* impersonals without any post-verbal complement, such as weather predicates (*pleuvoir* 'rain', *tonner* 'thunder', etc.). These structures are in fact mentioned in a few footnotes (p. 18) and short comments (p. 84), but mostly only to clarify that weather expressions are not considered in the analysis. This decision is rather surprising for several reasons. Firstly, a variety of French constructions which encode weather events precisely constitute the studied morpho-syntactic structures: *il pleut*, *il y a du vent* 'there is wind', *ça tonne*, *ça se couvre* 'it is becoming overcast', etc. Secondly, this category is one of the most consistent impersonal categories cross-linguistically as there are no clear participants involved. However, as it is difficult to maintain that weather verbs entail a process of agent-defocusing or describe stable predictable situations (they rather tend to encode dynamic, spontaneous and unpredictable events), the general hypothesis of this book seems to challenge their impersonal character. Are impersonal weather predicates part of this small minority of *il* constructions which fall outside the scope of functional impersonals? The question then arises whether the label "impersonal" really is the most appropriate to refer to the set of four functionally equivalent

constructions in this study. In any case, this choice would probably have deserved a more thorough justification (p. 29).

These remaining questions, however, do not detract from the overall quality of the monograph. The volume is a very valuable contribution and reveals to be fruitful reading for students and scholars interested in the impersonal domain, both in French and from a cross-linguistic perspective. Indeed, the innovative functional definition of impersonality will undoubtedly be of great service for comparisons between languages, at least within the Romance language area.

#### Reference

Kemmer, S. (1993). *The middle voice*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. doi: 10.1075/tsl.23