

## Impersonal uses of French demonstrative *ça*

In the French constructions described in (1) and (2), the impersonal pronoun *il* and the demonstrative *ça* (*ce, cela, c'*) are virtually interchangeable:

- (1) « *hé là! Sainte Vierge, est- il possible que le bon Dieu veuille faire souffrir ainsi une malheureuse créature humaine?* (Proust M. *Du Cote de Chez Swann*)  
'Hey! Holy Virgin, is it possible that the Good Lord may want to inflict such suffering on a poor human creature?'
- (2) *est- ce possible que durant toute ma vie terrestre, je n'obtienne jamais un peu de justice?* (Bloy L. *Journal T. 2*)  
'Is this [it] possible that during all my life on earth I will never get a little justice?'

Despite this similarity, most syntactic accounts treat *il* constructions as impersonals and the structures which contain *ça* as dislocation constructions, and therefore analyze the two pronouns in radically different ways. For example, Jones (1996: 128) claims that: "impersonal sentences are constructions in which the subject position is occupied by a dummy pronoun *il*, which does not refer to anything", while "*ce* or *ça* are not impersonal constructions, but dislocated constructions" with the consequence that "the demonstratives are not 'dummy' pronouns, but referential expressions which refer forward to the finite or infinitival clause" (Jones 1996: 128). This presentation argues against this position, and claims that i) the constructions illustrated in (2) should be considered legitimate impersonals, and ii) the characteristics of *ça* impersonals which distinguish it from the *il* constructions are clearly observable in the pronoun's other senses.

With respect to i), a number of researchers (Cadiot 1988, Carlier 1996, Achard 2000) have shown that the pronoun's reference is often quite flexible, to the point of sometimes being indistinguishable from a specific segment of reality, as illustrated in (3):

- (3) *Elle vivait avec un jeune homme. Ça s'est mal passé entre eux. Il l'a tuée.*  
She was living with a young man. It [this] went sour between them. He killed her.

That segment of reality can be interpreted as the "field" within which the interaction profiled in the complement takes place (Langacker manuscript) in the context of the copular (*être* 'be') construction, where the event/proposition in the complement is evaluated relative to the general categories of reality (epistemic modals), necessity (deontic modals), and emotion (emotion reaction), and hence accessible to any conceptualizer in a position to experience it. In this specific use, *ça* can be considered a true impersonal.

With respect to ii), *il* and *ça* profile different reasons for evoking the scene coded in the complement: *il* constructions pertain to its existence, *ça* constructions to its evaluation. Importantly, although both *il* and *ça* can be said to profile the "field", *ça* imposes a subjective construal on it. This subjective construal is inherited from *ça*'s other uses, where the pronoun's presence blurs the asymmetry between the subject and object of conceptualization by treating them both as an undistinguished part of the profiled scene. This is illustrated in (4), where the source and perceivers of the noise are both treated as part of the overall atmosphere.

- (4) *Les Archaos ont investi le Cirque d'Hiver, et ça fait du vacarme.*  
'The Archaos have invaded the Cirque d'Hiver, and this makes a raucous.