

Specifying the “field”. Impersonal subjects in English and French

This presentation uses monolingual and parallel corpora to investigate the two kinds of English and French impersonals illustrated in (1)-(3), namely English *it* and (existential) *there*, as well as French *il* and *ça* constructions:

- (1) Having said this, it should not be necessary to point out that all the Member States should act in accordance with these intentions.
- (1') À ce point de la procédure, il ne devrait plus être nécessaire de signaler que tous les États membres sont censés participer à ces actions.
- (2) Are there any comments?
- (2') Y a-t-il des observations?
- (3) It is true that consultation with Parliament has only come about at a late date.
- (3') C'est vrai que la consultation de votre Assemblée est intervenue tardivement.

In English, *there* is concerned with the existence or location of the entity in the complement, while *it* is concerned with its emotional or epistemic assessment (Achard 2008). Different distinctions are observed in French. *Il* is concerned with the existence or a location of the entity in the complement, while *ça* provides a subjectively construed evaluation of the section of reality which includes the complement scene (Achard 2001, 2008). Importantly, all *il* impersonal forms are existential, i.e. even the epistemic assessment of an entity is presented with respect to its location in a model of possibilities. The distinction between *il* and *ça* in terms of the viewing arrangement of the conceptualized scene has no equivalent in English.

This analysis of the English and French constructions forces us to refine the traditional Cognitive Grammar treatment of impersonals as “abstract setting constructions”, because the analyses currently proposed for impersonal subjects in different languages are too general to adequately represent their language specific functions. For example, Langacker’s definition of English *it* in as “the relevant field, i.e. the conceptualizer’s scope of awareness for the issue at hand” (Langacker manuscript) and Achard’s definition of its French counterpart *il* as “the abstract setting identifiable as the immediate scope for the existential predication (Achard 1998) are not distinctive enough to capture the distributional differences between the two pronouns illustrated in (1)-(3).

This presentation argues that in order to describe the English and French impersonals, the notion of “field” needs to be expanded, or more precisely, the construct with respect to which the conceptualizer’s scope of awareness is determined should be specified along two dimensions. First, two levels of reality need to be recognized (Achard 1998). The fields *there* and “simple” *il* impersonals profile are characterized with respect to a basic level of observed reality R, while *it* and “complex” (epistemic) *il* impersonals are described relative to a more analytical level of reality R’ where the facts observed within R are assessed. *It* and *il* are thus distinguished by the scope of the field they profile. *It*’s more restricted scope is explained by *there*’s presence in the English system. Secondly, the conceptualizer’s scope of awareness should be specified in terms of its viewing organization.

In a way consistent with the cognitive linguistic principles, the kind of field *there* and *ça* profile in their impersonal sense are shown to be directly related to their more concrete senses.