Morphosyntactic properties of impersonal pronouns

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1 Introduction

1.1 The pronouns examined here

• In grammars one often finds explanations like the following:

(1) "impersonal pronoun like man, on, they comparable to impersonal uses of you."

• Have formal and semantic differences between the different types of expression:

(2) a. impersonal uses of 2sg are restricted to generic contexts

b. impersonal uses of 2sg interact with politeness forms (Fr. tu/ vous; Ru. ty/ vy)

c. 3pl impersonal pronoun-constructions are plural and either null (Modern Hebrew, Russian) or identical to (some form of the) the 3pl pronoun (English, French, German).

d. 3pl impersonal pronoun constructions exclude the speaker and hearer (English, French, Spanish)

• The impersonal pronouns considered here share three fundamental properties:

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1I wish to thank Bashiir Keenadiid for his help with the Somali data, Sabrina Bendjaballah and Gilles Boyé for their help with French, Jean Lowenstamm for his help with French and Yiddish. I thank Anne Zribi-Hertz for her comments on previous versions of this work. The research on this subject was partially funded by the project Dépendances distributives: pluralité nominale et verbale of the Fédération TUL (CNRS FR 2559).
I will contrast the properties of impersonal pronouns in English, German, French, Somali, Spanish and Yiddish.

1.2 The problems

Impersonal pronouns raise a number of problems

(4) **Anaphora** (cf section 2.2.3)
   a. Impersonal pronouns, unlike existential pronouns like *someone*, cannot be taken up by a 3sg pronoun.
   b. For co-reference, the impersonal pronouns need to be repeated, (this is impossible for existential pronouns like *someone*).

(5) **Bound possessives**: (cf section 2.2.4)
   a. Existential readings of impersonal pronouns in French and German are not compatible with bound possessives (generic readings are ok).
   b. The impersonal pronoun in Somali is not compatible with bound possessives (neither in episodic nor in generic readings).

(6) **Limited syntactic distribution: defectivity vs suppletion** (cf section 2.3)
   a. Some impersonal pronouns are described as only having a nominative form (French *on*, Yiddish *men*, ?
   b. Other impersonal pronouns have suppletive forms (German nom. *man*, acc. *einen*, dat *einem*, ?)
   c. **Problem:** Substitution by semantically close constructions is very common:
      When *one* goes in there they tell you to come back later.

• I propose an analysis for the properties **Anaphora** and for **Bound possessives**.

(7) a. I propose that impersonal pronouns are comparable to personal pronouns in their binding behaviour across sentence boundaries: they have to be repeated.
b. I propose that the binding differences between episodic and generic uses of the impersonal pronoun is due to the featural makeup: generic pronouns in some languages contain a lexical generic operator which is absent in the impersonal pronoun that appears in episodic sentences.

2 The data

2.1 Defining properties of the pronouns examined

• Obligatorily human referent.

(8) a. # Dans cette basse-cour, on doit pondre 2 oeufs par jour. (Fr)
   b. # In diesem Hühnerhof sollte man 2 Eier pro Tag legen. (Ge)
   c. # En este gallinero uno debe poner 2 huevos por día. (Sp)
   d. # In this hen-house one should lay 2 eggs a day.
   e. # Albaab-ka waa la xir-ay.
      door-det WAA LA close-3ms.pst
      The door has been closed by somebody.2 (Som)

   Question: Matthew Baerman: is this HUMAN or SPEAKER-APPLICABLE (i.e. human only since the speaker is human)?

   Suggestion: (Greville Corbett) Speaking to a horse: Auf dieser Reise muss man 60 Meilen am Tag laufen. (not acceptable)

• Generic readings

(8) a. On doit se laver les dents deux fois par jour. (Fr) 
   b. Man soll sich zweimal am Tag die Zähne putzen. (Ge)
   c. Uno debe lavarse los dientes dos veces por día. (Sp)
   d. Waa in la cadayaa labo jeer maalin kasta.
      WAA que LA blanchir.prog.prs deux fois jour chaque
      (translation = ( ??e))
      (Som)
   e. One should brush one's teeth twice a day.

2 The unspecified actor is understood to be human, if the wind closed the door have to say:

(i) Albaab-ka waa is xir-ay
      door-det.m WAA+3ms REFL close-3ms.pst
      The door closed.
• Agreement in the 3rd singular

(9)  a. on the verb (English, French, German, Somali, Spanish, Yiddish), see ex (??)

b. on the participle (French)

Une fois qu'on s'est mis au go, on ne veut plus jouer autre chose.
Once you start with Go, you do not want to play anything else.

c. on the adjective (French, Spanish)

Quand on est amoral/ *amoraux, on n'obtient pas ce qu'on veut.
When one is amoral, one doesn't get what one wants.

Cuando uno está cansado/ *cansados, uno no debe conducir.
When one is tired one shouldn't drive.

d. on the possessive (German, French)

Man kann sein Auto hier nicht parken.
One cannot park one's car here.

• In French, impersonal on can appear with a féminine or masculine adjective (in the singular), have the same flexibility with polite 2sg:

(10)  a. Quand on est beau / belle, ...

b. Vous êtes beau / belle.

2.2 Semantic properties

2.2.1 Generic and episodic readings

• Some impersonal pronouns admit an episodic reading, others do not:
(11) i. Gestern hat man mir mein Rad geklaut.
   Hier, on m’a volé mon vélo.  (episodic)
   Yesterday, my bike was stolen (lit. yesterday, one stole my bike)

   A l’accueil on m’a dit que je pouvais utiliser l’ascenseur.  (episodic)
   At the reception, I was told that I could use the lift (lit ... one told me that ....)

Matthew Baerman: Is there a drift generic > episodic > 1pl?

PCH: I think the drift generic > 1pl is independently attested, but have to check whether episodic readings are an intermediate stage.

2.2.2 Semantic number

• Impersonal pronouns behave as semantically plural: they license reciprocals in German and Yiddish, and reciprocal readings of reflexives in French, Somali, German and Yiddish.

(12) a. impersonal pronouns and reciprocals

   i. Man₁ grüsste einander₁ wieder.  (Ge)
      One greeted each other again.

   ii. me kukt eyns af dos andre on grisn zikh (Yi)
      MEN looks one on the other without greet refl
      One looks one at the other without greeting each other.

b. impersonal pronouns and reciprocal readings of reflexives

   i. Man₁ grüsste sich₁ wieder.  (Ge)

   ii. On₁ se₁ saluait à nouveau.  (Fr)
      One greeted each other again.

   iii. Markaa la is-la hadl-aa
        moment-Foc LA REFL+LA speak-prs.3ms
        When one speaks with each other ...

2.2.3 Anaphora

• For co-reference, need to repeat the impersonal pronoun (the star indicates that the coreferent reading is impossible):
(13)  
  a. Wenn man nicht aufpasst, kann man sich erkälten (German)  
  b. Si on ne fait pas attention, on peut s’enrhumer. (French)  
  c. when one isn't careful, one can catch a cold.  
  d. Aqal-ka markaa la dhisayo, aad baa / *b+uu lo oga house-det moment+BAA LA builds, very BAA / BAA+3ms LA+U+KA tahadaraa.  
     attentive-is  
     When one builds a house, one is very careful. (Som)  

• For co-reference, need to repeat the impersonal pronoun: impersonal pronouns that do not have a form for a given feature combination cannot be taken up:  

(14) Oblique form (accusative)  
  a. Wenn man anruft, erteilt einem der Portier eine Auskunft. (German)  
  b. Si on appelle, le portier lui donne un renseignement. (French)  
  c. When one rings, the porter gives the details.  

(15) Possessive pronoun (anaphora)  
  a. Man kann hier nicht parken oder die Polizei schleppt sein Auto ab.  
  b. Uno no puede estacionarse aquí o la policía va a confiscar su carro.  
  c. On ne peut pas se garer ici ou la police va embarquer sa voiture.  
  d. ?? One cannot park here or the police will tow one's car away.  

• Note that one's be used without an antecedent:  

(16)  
  a. One's dreams should remain private.  
  b. One's parents are important.  

• If... then clauses are much better:  

(17)  
  a. If one rings the Ministry one's request is dealt with in less than an week.  
  b. One cannot park here since one's car is towed away.  

But compare:  

(18)  
  a. Man kann hier parken und sein Auto wird sogar bewacht.  
     Wenn jemand hier parkt wird sein Auto überwacht.  
  b. Uno, puede estacionarse aquí y su carro hasta está vigilado.
2.2.4 Bound possessives

• With respect to binding of possessive pronouns, the impersonal pronouns vary across languages.

(19) In German and French, possessive 3ms pronouns can be bound in the same clause— if tense is generic, but not in episodic sentences.

a. Generic:
   In diesem Kasten kann man seine Adresse hinterlassen. (Ge)
   Dans cette boîte on peut laisser son adresse. (Fr)

b. Episodic:
   * Heute morgen hat man seine Adresse für dich hinterlassen. (Ge)
   * Ce matin on a laissé son adresse pour toi. (Fr)
   This morning (some)one left his address for you. comparer avec:
   Heute morgen hat man eine Nachricht für dich hinterlassen.
   Ce matin on a laissé un message pour toi.
   This morning (some)one left a message for you.

(20) In Somali and Yiddish, the impersonal pronouns (la and men respectively) cannot bind a 3ms possessive (cf Cabredo Hofherr 2004 for Somali, Prince 2006 for Yiddish).

a. Halkaan baabuur-*kiisa laoga ma tegi karo.
   here car-det.poss3ms LA+U+KA neg leave can.3ms
   One cannot leave one’s car here. (Som)

b. men tor nit blaybn in zayn shtetl
   MEN should neg stay in poss3ms village
   One should not stay in one’s village
   (no co-reference men-zayn ?) (Yi)

• There is a further complication: Yiddish zayn does not admit a bound reading, but Somali -kiisa does:

(21) a. keyner blaybt nisht in *zayn shtot
   no-one stays neg in poss.ms village
No one stays in his village. (his = someone previously mentioned, no bound reading)

b. **Qof-kasta**₁ wuxuu dhistaa aqal-**kiisa**₁_i.  
Person-each WAXAA+3ms builds house-his. 
Everyone builds his house.

### 2.3 Defectivity and suppletion

- **Defectivity and suppletion**: the impersonal pronouns in French/ Yiddish are defective in that they do not have a non-nominative clitic form, but German man has suppletive forms for the dative and accusative (but not for the genitive).

  (22) **Problem**: Substitution by semantically close constructions is common
  
  When **one** goes in there they tell **you** to come back later.
  Should this be treated as suppletion: no, since the nominative **you** also functions as an impersonal (unlike German **einer**)

- There are contexts where **on** has a non-subject form **soi** (cf. ? and references cited there) et les références citées par cette auteure :

  (23) a. **On n’aime jamais vraiment que soi.**  
  One neg loves never really but oneself.

  b. **On ne peint bien que soi et les siens.**  
  One neg paints well but oneself and one’s family. (A. France).

  c. **Travailler pour soi est une chose bien agréable.**
  To work for oneself is a very pleasant thing. (S. de Beauvoir). (exemples empruntés à Zribi-Hertz (à par.))

### 3 The analysis

- I propose an analysis for the properties **Anaphora** and for **Bound possessives** (in progress).

  (24) a. I propose that impersonal pronouns are comparable to personal pronouns in their binding behaviour across sentence boundaries: they have to be repeated.
b. I propose that the binding differences between episodic and generic uses of the impersonal pronoun is due to the featural makeup: generic pronouns in some languages contain a lexical generic operator which is absent in the impersonal pronoun that appears in episodic sentences.

3.1 Anaphora

• As Prince (2006) points out for French and Yiddish two occurrences of an impersonal pronoun can be co-referent or disjoint:

(25) a. On dit maintenant qu’on doit manger 5 légumes par jour.  
    ON says now that-ON should eat 5 vegetables per day  
    Now they say that one should eat two portions of vegetable a day.

b. Quand on se met sur la pelouse, on est bien.  
    when ON refl puts on the grass, ON is well  
    When one sits down on the grass, one feels at ease.

• This pattern is the same for unstressed personal pronouns:

(26) a. Situation A : a little girl is playing in the garden. (coreference)  
    Situation B : a mother who is worried unless her daughter is playing in  
    the garden (disjoint).

b. Elle n’est bien que quand elle joue dans le jardin.

c. Nur wenn sie im Garten spielt, ist sie zufrieden. (all)

d. Only when she plays in the garden, she is happy. (angl)

• Stressed personal pronouns (sometimes) induce a disjointness effect:

(27) Cuando él vende una casa, él tiene que hacer muchos trámites. Quand  
    lui (il) vend une maison, lui (il) doit faire beaucoup de papiers.

• Minimal pair with indefinite pronouns:

(28) Si quelqu’un est malade, quelqu’un doit se soigner.  
    If someone is ill, someone must look after himself.

(29) Si on est malade, on doit se soigner.  
    If one is ill, one must look after himself.
• Impersonal pronouns and 3rd person personal pronouns differ from indefinite pronouns in that their referent is unique in the given context.

The indefinite pronoun behaves like an indefinite GN: it introduces a new variable in the context and co-reference between two indefinites is impossible.

• I follow?: impersonal pronouns are a separate type which is neither definite nor indefinite, which they call a-definite. They propose that this type of pronoun is the lexical equivalent of an implicit argument: it saturates an argumental position but is not accessible for anaphoric reference (Prince (2006) proposes a similar analysis in the framework of Centering Theory).

### 3.2 Bound possessives

• As we have seen above, some impersonal pronouns can bind possessives.

• Implicit arguments cannot bind possessive pronouns:

(30)  


Le Jour de l’An on lave sa / son / sa voiture.

One washes one’s / his car on New Year’s Day.

b. Sein Wagen wird zu Neujahr gewaschen.

Sa voiture est lavée le Jour de l’An.

His car is washed on New Year’s Day.

(not: One’s car is washed on New Year’s Day. )

c. Die Reinigung seines Wagens wird zu Neujahr vorgenommen.

Le nettoyage de sa voiture se fait le Jour de l’An.

The cleaning of his car is done on New Year’s Day.

(not: The cleaning of one’s car …)

• Two possibilities (work in progress):

(31)  

a. Proposal 1: Certain impersonal pronouns can bind because they contain a lexical generic operator as part of their lexical make-up.

b. Proposal 2: The incompatibility can be traced back to the semantic plural properties of impersonal pronouns.

• Proposal 1 is less intuitive, but it seems to be necessary to account for the difference between Somali and German/French:
(32)  

a. Somali la does not contain a generic operator: generic readings are due to a sentence-level generic operator, so never have binding.

b. German and French have two impersonal pronouns:
   (i) a generic one, containing a lexical generic operator
   (ii) an episodic one, which does not contain this operator.
   (compare referential and impersonal es/il).

- If Proposal 2 can be made to work, it is more insightful, since number is somehow more visible than "generic operator", but if number were the only factor, I would not expect Somali to differ from German/ French.