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## EXISTENCE AND EVALUATION: FRENCH *IL* AND *ÇA* IMPERSONALS

MICHEL ACHARD

*Rice University*

THIS PAPER ARGUES that in the context of the French copular complement constructions illustrated in (1)–(4), where the impersonal pronoun *il* ‘it’ and the demonstrative *ça* (*c’ce/cela*) ‘this/that’ are virtually interchangeable<sup>1</sup>, both *il* and *ça* can be analyzed as impersonals.<sup>2</sup>

- (1) *hé là! Sainte Vierge, est-il possible que le bon Dieu veuille faire souffrir ainsi une malheureuse créature humaine?*  
‘Hey! Holy Virgin, is it possible that the Good Lord may want to inflict such suffering on a poor human creature?’ (Proust 1962[1913]:123)
- (2) *est-ce possible que durant toute ma vie terrestre, je n’obtienne jamais un peu de justice?*  
‘Is this [it] possible that during all my life on earth I will never get a little justice?’ (Bloy 1956–1963[1907]:122)
- (3) *Pour la première fois je sentais qu’il était possible que ma mère vécût sans moi*  
‘For the first time I felt it was possible for my mother to live without me’ (Proust 1962[1918]:648)
- (4) *bien sûr que la journée ne se passera pas sans pluie. Ce n’était pas possible que ça reste comme ça, il faisait trop chaud*  
‘Of course the day will not finish without rain. This [it] was simply not possible it would stay like that, it was too hot’ (Proust 1962[1913]:101)

The treatment of the *ça* examples in (2) and (4) as impersonals directly contradicts most analyses found in traditional grammars as well as the syntactic literature, where *il* is uniformly regarded as introducing an impersonal, while *ça*’s presence signals a dislocated construction. Allegedly, *il* functions as a dummy place holder, whose presence merely fulfills the structural requirement that French clauses should have an explicit subject: “Impersonal sentences are constructions in which the subject position is occupied by a dummy pronoun *il*, which does not refer to anything” (Jones 1996:120). On the other hand, *ça* is allegedly a real

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<sup>1</sup> The two pronouns are also in competition with weather verbs, but these will not be considered in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> *Cela*, *ce*, and *c’* will be treated as variants of *ça*. *Ce* and *c’* precede *être* ‘be’, respectively, when the verb form starts with a consonant and a vowel. Although *cela* can also be found in impersonal contexts, its distribution will not be considered in this paper.

demonstrative which refers to the following clause: “It is postulated that the constructions with *ce* or *ça* are not impersonal constructions, but dislocated constructions analogous to *elle est arrivée, Marie*.” The demonstratives are therefore not dummy pronouns, but “referential expressions which refer forward to the finite or infinitival clause” (Jones 1996:128).

Two arguments are usually proposed to structurally distinguish *il* and *ça* constructions. The first one concerns *il*'s presumed lack of meaning, the second one the two pronouns' respective distribution in other contexts. More specifically, since *ça* cannot replace *il* in the other impersonals illustrated in (5) and (6), the two forms must be structurally distinct.

- (5) #*Il/ça faut revenir nous voir*  
 ‘You must come back and see us’
- (6) #*Il/ça est arrivé deux enfants*  
 ‘There [it] arrived two children’

Neither of these arguments is particularly convincing. First, *il*'s treatment as a necessary dummy place holder doesn't withstand close scrutiny. For one thing, the claim that impersonal pronouns do not refer to anything has been seriously questioned since Bolinger's famous ‘ambient it’ paper (Bolinger 1973). Following Bolinger's lead, and congruent with the Cognitive Grammar (CG) tradition (Langacker 1987, 1991, 2008), the next section shows that *il* is indeed a referential (albeit general) expression. Furthermore, the structural need for a place holding subject in French is equally questionable, since  $\emptyset$  impersonals are not only possible, but the most frequently attested form following certain predicates (see **Table 1** below and note 7). Secondly, the fact that *il* and *ça* are not always interchangeable does not challenge the possibility that *ça* may be an impersonal in one of its senses.

The account presented in this paper emphasizes the commonalities between *il* and *ça* in an effort to capture the intuitive similarity between the constructions illustrated in (1)-(4). Section 1 briefly reviews the CG treatment of impersonals. It further shows that in the specific context of copular complement constructions, *ça* fits the definition, and explores the meaning difference between *il* and *ça*. Section 2 argues that this semantic distinction directly accounts for the distribution of the two pronouns when they are mutually incompatible as well as when they overlap semantically. Section 3 recapitulates the results and concludes the paper. The data on which the analysis is based come from two sources, namely the ARFTL/FRANTEXT database of twentieth-century French texts, and a corpus of journalistic prose composed of approximately 8.5 million words from a series of *Le Monde* articles published between 1989 and 1990. The few manufactured examples are preceded by the # sign.

1. IMPERSONAL CONSTRUCTIONS IN COGNITIVE GRAMMAR. In CG, each linguistic expression allows speakers to structure their conceptual content in a particular manner by imposing its own specific structure on it. A particularly significant dimension of construal concerns the selection of the focal elements of the conceptualized scene, i.e., the entities which will be coded as subjects and objects. Expressions which profile relationships con-

fer varying degrees of prominence to their participants. The primary focal participant is called the trajector. The secondary focal participant is called the landmark. At the clausal level, “a subject is characterized as a nominal expression which specifies the trajector of a profiled relationship, and an object as one which specifies a landmark” (Langacker manuscript 2006). Subject selection is a matter of focal prominence. Participants tend to be selected because of their inherent cognitive salience as shown in (7), but speakers possess the linguistic means to focus on whatever aspect of a scene they choose (Langacker 2004, 2008). In particular, they can select the spatial or temporal location where the profiled relation takes place, as in (8), where the sentences present the judgment of a generalized conceptualizer, i.e., anyone in a position to judge what happens within the limited setting of the garden or Houston.

(7) Bees are swarming in the garden (Langacker 2006)

(8) a. The garden is swarming with bees (Langacker 2008)  
 b. #Houston has seen its share of political scandals

Impersonals are analyzed as similar constructions, where the pronoun profiles the setting within which the event coded in the complement takes place. They differ from the constructions in (8), however, because that setting doesn't refer to a specific spatial or temporal location, but to a more general and abstract region which Langacker (2006) describes as “the relevant field, i.e., the conceptualizer's scope of awareness for the issue at hand”.<sup>3</sup> Importantly, the scene coded in the complement is not presented as anyone's conceptualization, but made available to any conceptualizer in a position to experience it.

I have proposed elsewhere (Achard 1998, ch. 7; 2009) that *il*'s semantic function is to present the existence or location of an entity in its relevant domain. In (9) for example, the communicative purpose of the sentence is to introduce the existence of an alternative edition of a book unknown to the hearer. *Il* profiles the field, or in other words the scope of awareness within which the entity *une autre [édition]* ‘another one’ can be conceptualized. In this case, this scope represents the section of reality necessary to the conceptualization of the new edition.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Several researchers describe impersonal pronouns in various languages as meaningful but highly abstract. For instance, Bolinger (1977:84) defines English *it* as a “definite nominal with almost the greatest possible generality of meaning”. For others, impersonals represent “general presence or availability” (Kirsner 1979:81 [Dutch]), a “mental space” (Lakoff 1987:542, Smith 2000:489 [German]), an “abstract setting” (Langacker 1993:353), “the abstract setting identifiable as the immediate scope for the existential predication” (Achard 1998, ch. 7 [French]).

<sup>4</sup> The evidence for *il*'s existential function comes from the distribution of predicates in the impersonal construction. Previous research (Hériaux 1980, Achard 2009) has shown that the verbs which consistently occur with impersonal *il* are those that most saliently include the field in their lexical semantic structure, namely *être* ‘be’, *exister* ‘exist’, *venir* ‘come’, *passer* ‘pass’, *rester* ‘stay’, *pousser* ‘grow’, etc. These verbs constitute a good fit with impersonal *il* because the relation they profile involves the interaction between the participants and the field within which the process is observed.

- (9) *le désespéré que vous avez eu tant de peine à vous procurer, dites- vous, est, sans doute, l'édition Soirat. Il en existe une autre qui vient de paraître, à mon insu et sans mon autorisation...*

'The desperate one you say you had such trouble finding is most likely the Soirat Edition. There exists another one which was just released unbeknownst to me and without my permission...' (Bloy, L. *Journal*, 74)

1.1. *ÇA*: FROM DEMONSTRATIVE TO IMPERSONAL. At first glance, a demonstrative pronoun such as *ça* seems like a poor candidate to develop an impersonal sense because of its referential function illustrated in (10):

- (10) *Chose ahurissante: le fauteuil voisin de la dame est occupé par un ours. Celui-ci s'absente quelques instants, à l'entr'acte. Le spectateur en profite: «excusez-moi, dois-je croire mes yeux? C'est un ours qui vous accompagne?»*

'Incredible thing: the seat next to the lady was occupied by a bear. The latter steps outside for a moment, during the intermission. The spectator takes advantage: "Excuse me, can I believe my eyes? It [this] is a bear with you?"' (Gide 1960[1951]:1188)

In (10), the speaker's purpose is to identify (or rather confirm) the category of an unexpected spectator. *Ça*'s referent can unequivocally be identified as the spectator whose category is being confirmed. The pronoun's referent, however, is not always so easily identifiable. A number of researchers (Cadiot 1988, Carlier 1996, Achard 2000) have shown that it is often difficult to identify with precision as in (11), or it can even be general enough to be interpreted as a subsection of reality itself, as illustrated in (12).

- (11) *J'avais gardé de bons copains du temps de l'Opéra, dont un qui était passé chez Cuevas. Il m'a attrapé dans un bar de la rive gauche et m'a conseillé la mode, m'a envoyé présenter mes dessins. A l'époque, je m'habillais beaucoup, j'étais presque un personnage avec des avions, des nuages d'or et d'argent découpés sur le dos de mes blousons. Je ne savais rien, j'ai préparé un dossier, ça a marché. J'ai appris comme ça, et je n'ai pas arrêté.*

'I had kept good friends from the Opéra days, including one who had gone to Cuevas. He caught me in a bar on the left bank and advised me to get into fashion, and sent me to show my drawings. At the time, I would dress up a lot, I was almost a character with cut-outs of planes, and gold and silver clouds in the back of my jackets. I didn't know anything, I prepared a portfolio, it [this] worked out. I learned like that, and I never stopped.' (ACL<sup>5</sup> 47)

- (12) *Et puis, un soir de janvier 1989, le téléphone a sonné. C'est Daniel qui a décroché, là-bas près du canapé rose.» Manuela, quoi Manuela? - Elle vivait avec un jeune homme. Ça s'est mal passé entre eux. Il l'a tuée. Venez vite. On vous attend."*

'And then, one evening of January 1989, the telephone rang. Daniel picked up,

<sup>5</sup> ACL = Association for Computational Linguistic's 1994 corpus of *Le Monde* newspaper articles.

over there by the pink sofa. “Manuela, what about her? - She was living with a young man. It [this] went sour between them. He killed her. Come quickly. We are waiting for you.” (ACL 750)

In (11) and (12), the demonstrative can still be considered a referential expression, but its referent cannot be located with precision. For the purposes of this paper, it is sufficient to note that in those examples, the pronoun’s referent possesses approximately the same level of generality as the abstract setting the impersonals profile.

It is also important to note that *ça* imposes a particular viewing arrangement on the entity it profiles. As an illustration, consider the example in (13).

- (13) *Les Archaos ont investi le Cirque d’Hiver, et ça fait du vacarme. Ils se déguisent en punks désinvoltes, pratiquent la dérision-déglingue avec une fraîcheur revigorante, en bons enfants des Monty Python et du Magic Circus...*  
 ‘The Archaos have invaded the Cirque d’Hiver, and this makes an uproar. They dress up as carefree punks, poke fun at everything with invigorating freshness, the rightful heirs to Monty Python and Magic Circus...’ (ACL 1120)

Compare the attested form in (13) to the possible alternative *Les Archaos ont investi le Cirque d’Hiver et ils font du vacarme* ‘The Archaos have invaded the Cirque d’Hiver, and they are making an uproar.’ In this alternative, the source of the noise is clearly delineated and identified with the subject *ils* ‘they’, while the conceptualizing subject (the speaker) and the object of conceptualization (the source and production of the noise) are well defined and kept separate. This construal therefore maximizes the asymmetry that naturally exists between the subject and object in the conceptualizing act. In (13) by comparison, the pronoun profiles the field within which the uproar is experienced in an all encompassing manner which includes both the experiencer and the source of the noise, so that neither is individualized or even distinguishable. Because *ça*’s presence blurs the natural asymmetry between the conceptualizing subject (the experiencer) and the object of conceptualization (the source and production of the noise) by treating them both as an undistinguished part of the profiled scene, the pronoun can be said to impose a subjective construal on that scene (Langacker 1985, 1990, Achard 2000). This subjective construal represents a characteristic of *ça* frequently attested in several of its senses, and can also be observed in complement constructions, as illustrated in (14):

- (14) *et toi, mauvais gredin, que je t’y reprenne à courir les routes en faisant le conspirateur! ... ça t’étonne que je t’aie tiré de là, hein?*  
 ‘as for you good-for-nothing scoundrel, don’t let me catch you running around doing mischief! It [this] surprises you I got you out of this doesn’t it?’ (Adam 1903:280)

In (14), the speaker reports the hearer’s surprise at the fact that reality has evolved in a specific way. *Ça* profiles the section of current reality which contains the event or proposi-

tion described in the complement. Because this global subjective construal does not isolate the precise element which creates the surprise, the latter is later objectified and presented in the complement clause. It is important to note that the content of that clause is totally contained in the section of reality *ça* subjectively profiles, even before being objectified and singled out as the specific reason for the hearer's surprise.<sup>6</sup>

Even though *ça* profiles the abstract setting within which the event coded in the complement takes place, the construction in (14) could not be analyzed as impersonal because the construal of the complement scene is specifically tied to the hearer. In copular complement constructions, however, the event/proposition coded in the complement is not exclusively considered with respect to its effect on a specific conceptualizer, but evaluated relative to the general categories of reality (epistemic modals), necessity (deontic modals), or emotion (emotion reaction), usually available to anyone. Because any conceptualizer in the right position will invariably experience the surprise caused by the observation of the scene the complement clause profiles, the construction illustrated in (15) meets the definition of an impersonal. It is semantically very close to the one in (14), but the presence of the copula provides the additional level of generality required of impersonal constructions. It is within this particular context that *ça* can truly be considered an impersonal pronoun.

- (15) *D'ailleurs il n'est pas tout à fait vrai que le chemin de fer ait un tracé aussi raide, aussi indifférent et brutal qu'on veut bien le dire. Ainsi que tu me le faisais remarquer l'an dernier, en haut de La Sèche, c'est étonnant de voir comme il s'est incorporé au paysage.*

'Anyways, it is not quite true that the railroad track cuts such a steep, indifferent and brutish path as people have said. As you were indicating to me last year, at the top of La Sèche, it [this] is surprising to see how well it blends into the landscape.' (Rivière 1930[1914]:28)

The generality of access to the event in the complement the copular complement construction affords is directly responsible for the competition between *il* and *ça* illustrated in the comparison between (15) and (16), since *il* is impossible with the same predicate in the less general construction illustrated in (14).<sup>7</sup>

- (16) *n'est-il pas étonnant que la ruche que nous voyons ainsi confusément, du haut d'un autre monde, nous fasse, au premier regard que nous y jetons, une réponse sûre et profonde?*

'Isn't it surprising that the hive that we see so approximately from the top of another world would give us, as soon as we look at it, such a positive and profound response?' (Maeterlinck 1914[1901]:46)

<sup>6</sup> In this analysis, *ça* is therefore not a cataphoric pronoun (Grevisse 1986) in the strictest sense, since it refers to the field which contains the event or proposition individualized in the complement.

<sup>7</sup> This pattern holds true for most emotion/ reaction and epistemic predicates. Verbal predicates such as *étonner* 'surprise' in (14) can only be accompanied by *ça*, but predicate adjectives found in the copular construction [*être étonnant* 'be surprising' in (15) and (16)] are felicitous with both *il* and *ça*.

	<i>il</i>	<i>ça</i>	∅	Total
<i>Ennuyeux</i>	2 (6%)	29 (94%)	– (0%)	31 (100%)
<i>Dommage</i>	15 (11%)	37 (27%)	86 (62%)	138 (100%)
<i>Agréable</i>	88 (68%)	42 (32%)	– (0%)	130 (100%)

**Table 1.** Relative distribution of impersonal forms with three emotion reaction predicates in the twentieth century texts of the FRANTEXT database.

To briefly summarize, within the context of copular complement constructions, *il* and *ça* represent two alternative impersonals. As such, both profile the field within which the interaction coded in the complement clause takes place, but *il* presents it objectively, while *ça* imposes a more subjective construal on the same scene. The two impersonals can be further distinguished in terms of their semantic function. *Il* establishes the existence of the event or proposition coded in the complement, while *ça* evaluates it with respect to the general categories of reality, necessity, or emotion. Importantly, all the characteristics of impersonal *ça* can be observed in the pronoun's other senses.

2. DISTRIBUTION OF *IL* AND *ÇA* IMPERSONALS IN THE COPULAR CONSTRUCTION. This section shows that the distribution between *il* and *ça* is directly imputable to their respective meanings described in the previous section. First of all, note that *ça* is impossible with the verbs which profile the existence of an entity (or its appearance on the scene) because the existence of an entity must be established before it can possibly be evaluated. Conversely, the emotion/reaction verbal predicates illustrated in (14) are impossible with *il* because the existence of the proposition in the complement is already established, and thus no longer at issue. Secondly, even in copular complement constructions where *il* and *ça* represent possible alternatives, one must exercise great caution not to generalize too hastily, because the distribution of impersonal forms varies greatly depending on the meaning of individual predicates, even within the same general semantic classes. For example, consider the respective distribution of three impersonal forms (*il*, *ça*, and ∅) with the three emotion/reaction predicates *être agréable* 'be pleasant', *être ennuyeux* 'be annoying', and *être dommage* 'be a pity' presented in **Table 1**.<sup>8</sup>

Because of the idiosyncrasy of each predicate, this section will simply consider *il* and *ça*'s (*c'*) distribution with the epistemic copular predicate *est vrai* 'is true'. Other predicates also need to be analyzed individually, before any general conclusion can be drawn. The relative frequency of each form is presented in **Table 2**.

In the impersonal construction, the predicate *vrai* 'true' profiles a proposition which has already been entertained, or that is, at least, potentially available. Consequently, the distinction between stating it, i.e., presenting it with respect to its existence (*il*), or agreeing

<sup>8</sup> The numbers in the two tables in the paper reflect the number of instances attested in the literary corpus alone. Although null (∅) impersonals are seldom mentioned in the literature, it is interesting to note that they constitute the most frequent form with *dommage* 'pity'. I will not pursue this matter here.

	<i>il</i>		<i>ça</i>		Total	
<i>Vrai</i>	1256	(77.25%)	370	(22.75%)	1626	(100%)

**Table 2.** Distribution of impersonal forms accompanying the predicate *est vrai*.

with it, namely categorizing it as true (*c'*) will be quite subtle at times, which explains why both pronouns can often be used with minimum semantic distinction. This is the case with the example in (17), where *c'* could be used as an alternative to the attested *il* with little difference in meaning.

- (17) *Il me suffira de rappeler comment M. Klein, dans une question relative aux surfaces de Riemann, a eu recours aux propriétés des courants électriques. Il est vrai que les raisonnements de ce genre ne sont pas rigoureux...*

'It will be sufficient to remind you how M. Klein, in a question relative to Riemann surfaces, used the properties of electrical current. It is true that such arguments are not rigorous...' (Poincaré 1905:154)

However, this lack of distinction between the pronouns quickly evaporates if the logical relations that exist between the different propositions that constitute a particular passage play a predominant part in its intended reading. For instance, *il* is frequently attested if the proposition it introduces serves to temper a previously made statement by presenting a piece of information that challenges its force. Consider the example in (18) for illustration:

- (18) *À voir cela, il me semble que la révolte est plus loin de nous que je ne croyais d'abord. Il est vrai que je suis avec des montagnards, écartés des centres industriels et très fatalistes.*

'When I see this, it seems to me that the rebellion is further from us than I first thought. It is true that I am with mountain men, remote from the industrial centers, and very fatalistic.' (Rivière 1930[1914]:120)

In (18), the proposition *il* presents a piece of information that challenges the generalizing force of the previous statement. The author's earlier position about the state of the rebellion is nuanced by his further consideration of the fatalistic nature of his companions. *Il's* selection is consistent with its meaning described in the previous section because the mere statement of the existence of a fact which runs counter to the overall argument suffices to weaken the latter's scope and power. Conversely, the presence of *c'* would indicate that the proposition in the complement had somehow already been established, and was now being evaluated.<sup>9</sup>

Also consistent with the pronoun's meaning, one of the most frequently attested functions of the proposition *c'* introduces is to express agreement with a previously made

<sup>9</sup> Such a construal with *il* is not impossible, but it would denote a sort of speaker-internal ongoing dialogue.

statement. This is illustrated in (19) and (20). In (19), the content of the proposition that follows the predicate *Farnese était seul* ‘Farnese was alone’ repeats a section of the preceding discourse verbatim. In (20), the quotes surrounding “*près de mes intérêts*” ‘close to my interests’ indicate that this very expression was used in a previous letter.

- (19) *je sais: il a tué un pauvre vieil homme sans défense: Farnese était seul,- pas un laquais,- et le coup de revolver a été tiré par derrière. Je sais tout ça.... mais écoutez un peu: ce n'est pas vrai que Farnese était seul.*  
 ‘I know: he killed a poor defenseless man: Farnese was alone,- not a servant,- and the shot was fired from behind. I know all that...but listen for a minute: It [this] is not true that Farnese was alone.’ (Farrère 1924[1907]:280)
- (20) *S'il te faut une confiance perpétuelle sache que tu l'as et que c'est elle qui s'inquiétait quand j'écrivais ma dernière lettre. Mais sache aussi que cette confiance est exigeante et demande qu'on la satisfasse. C'est vrai que je suis « près de mes intérêts ». Plus je vais, plus je veux acquérir.*  
 ‘If you require everlasting trust, know that you have it and it was that trust getting worried when I wrote my last letter. Be also aware, however, that this trust is demanding and expects to be satisfied. It [this] is true that I am “close to my interests”. I want to acquire more and more as time passes.’ (Rivière 1930[1914]:207)

If the content expressed in the complement proposition has already been established in the context, and the communicative purpose of the predicate *vrai* ‘true’ is merely to confirm it, *c'* alone is possible, as the example in (21) shows:

- (21) *Mais je ne prendrai pas un coup, Maria, pas un seul! Il hésita un peu et demanda abruptement, les yeux à terre: - peut- être... vous a- t- on dit quelque chose contre moi? - non. - c'est vrai que j'avais coutume de prendre un coup pas mal, quand je revenais des chantiers et de la drave; mais c'est fini.*  
 ‘But I won’t have a drink, Maria, not a single one! He hesitated a little and asked suddenly, his eyes downcast: - maybe... someone told you something against me didn’t they? –no-. – it [this] is true that I used to drink quite a bit when I came back from working or cutting wood; but it’s over.’ (Hémon 1921[1916]:93)

In (21), the speaker confirms a rumor about himself. *C'*’s presence is thus expected. *Il* would be awkward because it would imply the speaker is stating the existence of what is already common knowledge.

The few examples presented in this section suffice to show that the respective meanings of *il* and *ça* account for their distribution in copular complement constructions. It is important to remember, however, that the principles presented here merely constitute tendencies, and that the selection of a specific pronoun remains a matter of construal, and thus ultimately of speaker choice.

3. CONCLUSION. This paper has argued that in the context of the French copular complement construction, both *il* and *ça*, can be analyzed as impersonals. As such, both pronouns profile the field within which the event or proposition coded in the complement takes place, but *il* imposes an objective construal on it, whereas *ça* construes it subjectively from within. Functionally, *il* impersonals present the existence of the event/proposition in the complement, while *ça* impersonals are concerned with its evaluation. This meaning distinction was shown to account for the distribution of the two pronouns in the cases where they are mutually exclusive as well as where their usage overlaps.



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