Impersonal pronouns and coreference: the case of French on

Denis CREISSELS
Université Lumière (Lyon2)
e-mail: denis.creissels@univ-lyon2.fr

1. Introduction

The initial impetus for this study of the coreference properties of the French impersonal pronoun *on* was the hypothesis that the coreference properties of impersonal pronouns such as French *on* or German *man* should provide a straightforward criterion for distinguishing them from impersonal markers that do not originate from pronouns, like those occurring in unspecified subject constructions of the type found for example in Polish, in Finnic languages, or in Celtic languages, and for describing the possible conversion of impersonal pronouns into impersonal markers. However, the data I was able to gather suggested that things are much more complex than I imagined at first, and convinced me that more precise descriptions of the coreference properties of various types of unspecified and/or implicit subjects in individual languages are necessary before trying to put forward any generalization.

The account of the coreference properties of *on* proposed in this paper builds on work by Köninger 1999 and Köninger & Mauner 1999, who within the framework of Discourse Representation Theory argue that *on* does not introduce a ‘discourse marker’, and therefore is not available for certain types of anaphoric reference which are possible with indefinite pronouns truth-conditionally equivalent to *on*. But their analysis concentrates on the ‘existential’ uses of *on*, and on certain aspects of its referential behavior. The aim of this paper is to provide a more detailed account of the coreference properties of *on* in its various uses.

The paper is organized as follows. In section 2, I examine the morphosyntactic, semantic and discursive properties of *on* that remain constant in all its uses. Section 3 is devoted to the distinction between 1st person plural *on* and all the other uses of *on*, subsumed under the term ‘impersonal *on*’. Sections 4 & 5 examine two particular varieties of *on* that sharply differ in their coreference properties, ‘existential *on*’ and ‘gnomic *on*’. Section 6 discusses

---

the division of the uses of impersonal on into those characterized by discourse inerti
ness and those characterized by discourse availability. Section 7 puts forward some conclusions.

2. General properties of on

2.1. The origin of on

Historically, on comes from Latin homo ‘human being’, and is therefore cognate with the noun homme ‘man’. On grammaticalized very early in the history of French from the ‘cas sujet’ (reflex of the Latin nominative form homo) of this noun, whose ‘cas regime’ (reflex of the Latin accusative form homine(m)) quite regularly gave the noun homme. It is commonly assumed that Germanic influence was decisive, but Giacalone & Sansò 2007a & 2007b show that the initial stage of this process can be traced back to Latin.

2.2. The morphosyntactic nature of on

Morphosyntactically, regardless of the variations that may affect its interpretation, on unquestionably belongs to a paradigm of subject pronominal clitics including also je (1sg), tu (2sg), il (3sgm), elle (3sgf), nous (1pl), vous (2pl), ils (3plm), and elles (3plf), as well as a clitic variant of the neuter demonstrative cela ~ ça ‘that’. Like other subject pronominal clitics, on normally occurs to the left of the verb, in a position apparently similar to that of subject NPs, but in certain conditions, for example in the interrogative construction illustrated by ex. (1), subject pronominal clitics (including on) immediately follow the verb (or the auxiliary, in analytical tenses), in a position in which NPs and non-clitic pronouns cannot occur.3

(1)  a. Comment as-tu réussi à ouvrir cette porte ?

How have.PRS.2SG-2SG manage.PTCP to open.INF DEM.SGF door.SG
‘How did you manage to open this door?’

b. Comment a-t-il réussi à ouvrir cette porte ?

How have.PRS.3SG-3SGM manage.PTCP to open.INF DEM.SGF door.SG
‘How did he manage to open this door?’

c. Comment a-t-on réussi à ouvrir cette porte ?

How have.PRS.3SG-ON manage.PTCP to open.INF DEM.SGF door.SG
‘How did they manage to open this door?’

2 In this respect, French on is very different from Italian impersonal si, sometimes analyzed as a subject clitic similar to French on: on the one hand, Standard Italian has no clitic variant of the personal pronouns in subject role with which impersonal si could be compared directly, and on the other hand, the position of accusative or dative clitics before impersonal si is at odds with what is observed in the preverbal clitic clusters of other Romance varieties.

3 Some of the examples used in this paper have been constructed, others have been taken from French grammars and dictionaries or observed in conversations, broadcasting, newspapers, etc., but all of them have been discussed with other native speakers of French, and I have retained only those for which my consultants and I agreed on relatively clear-cut acceptability judgments.
d. *Comment a Jean réussi à ouvrir cette porte ?
Intended: ‘How did Jean manage to open this door?’

Another piece of evidence that on belongs to the paradigm of subject pronominal clitics is that, like the other subject clitics, on in preverbal position can be separated from the verb by the accusative or dative pronominal clitics, the reflexive clitic se, the locative clitic y, the ablative clitic en, and the negative marker ne – ex. (2), but does not permit the insertion of any other form, unlike subject NPs and non-clitic pronouns in subject role, which can for example be separated from the verb by parenthetical clauses – ex. (3).

(2) a. Je ne lui en parlerai pas.
‘I will not mention it to him.’

b. On ne lui en parlera pas.
‘It will not be mentioned to him.’

(3) a. Marie, je l’ai remarqué,
‘Mary, as I noticed, does not like to be contradicted.’

b. *Tu, je l’ai remarqué,
Intended: ‘You, as I noticed, do not like to be contradicted.’

(OK : Toi, je l’ai remarqué, tu n’aimes pas être contredit – toi is the independent 2nd person pronoun)

c. *On, je l’ai remarqué,
Intended: ‘People, as I noticed, do not like to be contradicted.’

(OK : Les gens, je l’ai remarqué, n’aiment pas être contredits. – les gens = ‘people’)

Verbs hosting on in the subject clitic slot invariably show 3rd person singular agreement, not only in the ‘existential’ use of on illustrated by ex. (4), but also in all of its other possible uses.
2.3. On, verbal valency, and the [+human] feature

With the only exception of 1st person plural on (see section 3.2), clauses in which on occupies the subject clitic slot cannot include a topicalized NP representing the subject argument, and the presence of an adjunct representing the subject argument (like the "agent phrase" in passive constructions) is also excluded. But in spite of that, a general property of on is that its presence in the clitic subject slot never implies a modification in the valency of the verb. Whatever the particular reading of on triggered or licensed by the context, the subject argument of a verb hosting on in the clitic subject slot remains semantically present, as proved by the possible presence of agent-oriented adverbials, and no modification is observed in the expression of the other arguments – ex. (5).

(5)  a. Jean a ouvert la porte soigneusement.  
Jean  have.PRS.1SG open.PTCP DEF.SGF door.SG carefully
‘Jean opened the door carefully.’

b. On a ouvert la porte soigneusement.  
ON  have.PRS.1SG open.PTCP DEF.SGF soigneusement door.SG carefully
‘The door has been opened carefully.’

c. *On a ouvert la porte par Jean.  
ON  have.PRS.1SG open.PTCP DEF.SGF door.SG par Jean.
Intended: ‘The door has been opened by John.’

OK: La porte a été ouverte par Jean. (passive)

Another general property of on is that, whatever its precise value, it imposes the feature [+human] (or perhaps rather [+conscious]) on the subject argument of the verb.

2.4. On and control

The variations in the possible interpretations of on do not affect the behavior of the subject argument in control constructions, in particular in constructions involving complement infinitives. As shown by ex. (6), in constructions involving the control of a complement
infinitive by the subject of the main verb, the subject argument of verbs hosting on in the subject clitic slot invariably behaves like canonical subjects.

\[(6)\]

\textbf{a.}\textit{Jean} t’ a critiqué.  
\textit{Jean} 2SG.ACC have.PRS.3SG criticize.PTCP.SGM  
‘Jean criticized you’

\textbf{b.}\textit{Jean} a essayé de te critiquer.  
\textit{Jean} have.PRS.3SG try.PTCP comp 2SG.ACC criticize.INF  
‘Jean tried to criticize you.’

\textbf{c.}\textit{On} t’ a critiqué.  
\textit{On} 2SG.ACC have.PRS.3SG criticize.PTCP.SGM  
‘\textit{They} arb criticized you’ (= ‘You were criticized’)

\textbf{d.}\textit{On} a essayé de te critiquer.  
\textit{On} have.PRS.3SG try.PTCP comp 2SG.ACC criticize.INF  
‘\textit{They} arb tried to criticize you.’

3. First person plural on and impersonal on

3.1. Preliminary remarks

In this analysis of the coreference properties of on, I will not assume an a priori classification of the uses of this pronominal clitic. Rather, I will try to show how the observation of the coreference properties of on can contribute to such a classification. However, the distinction between 1st person plural on and the other uses of on is so clear-cut that it can conveniently be established before tackling the analysis of the other varieties of on, subsumed here under the label ‘impersonal on’.

3.2. On as a 1st person plural pronoun

In Colloquial French, on has a fully grammaticalized use as 1st person plural subject clitic, in which it simply substitutes for the subject clitic nous of Standard French, but neither for nous as an accusative/dative clitic nor for nous as an independent pronoun, as illustrated by ex. (7).

\[(7)\]

\textbf{a.}\textit{Nous aussi, nous y étions;}  
\textit{Nous} 1PL too \textit{nous} 1PL loc be.IMPF.1PL  
\textit{tu ne nous as pas vus?}  
\textit{2SG neg 1PL.ACC have.PRS.2SG neg see.PTCP.PLML}  
‘We too were there, didn’t you see us? (Standard)

\textbf{b.}\textit{Nous aussi, on y était;}  
\textit{Nous} 1PL too \textit{on} loc be.IMPF.1PL
tu ne nous as pas vus?
2SG NEG 1PL.ACC have.pres.2SG NEG see.ptcp.plm
'We too were there, didn’t you see us? (Colloquial)

c. *On aussi, on y était; tu n'on a pas vus ?

Not surprisingly, the use of on as a 1st person plural subject clitic is not always easy to distinguish from ‘universal’ on on a purely semantic basis, but ex. (8) illustrates on unambiguously referring to a specific group of persons including the speaker.

(8) Avec Jean, on ira au théâtre ce soir.
with Jean on go.fut.3sg to.def.sgm theater.sg dem.sgm evening.sg
'Jean and I will go to the theater tonight'

Morphosyntactically, like all other varieties of on, 1st person plural on combines with verbs in the 3rd person singular and triggers the choice of the 3rd person form of the reflexive clitic se. But in all other respects, it triggers the choice of unambiguous 1st person plural forms: the corresponding possessive is 1st person plural notre, and the corresponding form of the intensive pronoun is 1st person plural nous-mêmes. By contrast, in the other uses of on that allow the reflexive binding of possessives and the use of intensive pronouns, in the same way as with the implicit subject of uncontrolled infinitives, the possessive is 3rd person singular son, and the intensive pronoun is soi-même, the use of which tends to be restricted to unspecified subjects. Ex. (9) & (10) illustrate the contrast between 1st person plural on and gnomic on (which will be described in detail in section 5), and the similarities between the behavior of gnomic on and that of the implicit subject of uncontrolled infinitives.4

(9) a. Nous avons envoyé nos enfants à la campagne.
1PL have.pres.1Pl send.ptcp poss1Pl.pl child.pl to.def.sgm countryside.sg
'We have sent our children to the countryside’ (Standard)

b. On a envoyé nos enfants à la campagne.
on have.pres.3sg send.ptcp poss1Pl.pl child.pl to.def.sgm countryside.sg
'We have sent our children to the countryside’ (Colloquial)

c. On aime ses enfants.
on love.pres.3sg poss3sg.pll child.pl
'One loves one’s children’ (gnomic on)

d. Il est normal d’aimer ses enfants.
3SGM be.pres.3sg normal comp love.inf poss3sg.pll child.pl
'It is normal to love one’s children.’

4 Note however that the presence of the 1st person plural possessive does not exclude possible ambiguities with other varieties of impersonal on. For example, another possible reading of sentence (8b) is ‘They have sent our children to the countryside’ (or ‘Our children have been sent to the countryside’).
(10) a. Nous nous défendrons (nous-mêmes).
   1PL REFL.1PL defend.FUT.1PL INT.1PL
   ‘We will defend ourselves.’ (Standard)

   b. On se défendra (nous-mêmes).
      ON REFL.3 defend.FUT.3SG INT.1PL
      ‘We will defend ourselves.’ (Colloquial)

   c. Quand c’est nécessaire, on se défend soi-même.
      when DEM be.PRES.3SG necessary.SG ON REFL.3 defend.PRES.3SG INT
      ‘When it is necessary, one defends oneself.’ (gnomic on)

   d. Se défendre soi-même n’est pas facile.
      REFL.3 defend.INF INT NEG be.PRES.3SG NEG easy.SG
      ‘To defend oneself is not an easy task.’

It is also interesting to observe (Patricia Cabredo Hofherr, p.c.) that 1st person plural on triggers 3rd person singular agreement of finite verb forms, but plural agreement of adjectives and participles.

3.3. Impersonal on

In the terminology used in this paper, ‘impersonal on’ refers to all the uses of on in which on does not substitute for the 1st person plural subject clitic nous of Standard French. At first sight, this terminological choice may seem to be at odds with the well-known fact that some occurrences of on may be truth-conditionally equivalent, not only to 1st person plural, but also to 1st person singular, second person, or 3rd person pronouns – see 6.1.2 & 6.2.3 for more details. But the intuition of French speakers, reflected in the comments of French grammars and dictionaries, is that such uses of on are ‘stylistically’ marked (i.e., they involve marked discourse strategies), in contrast with 1st person on, the use of which depends exclusively on speech register. In Colloquial French, 1st person plural on is absolutely neuter with respect to speech strategy. Crucially, this intuition is supported by a very simple and general criterion setting 1st person plural on apart from all other varieties of on, including those that can be paraphrased by personal pronouns other than 1st person plural: as illustrated by ex. (7b) above, 1st person plural on occupying the subject clitic slot can co-occur with the independent form of the 1st person plural pronoun in topic position, whereas in all of its other uses (including those spontaneously interpreted by French speakers as referring to speech act participants or to some specific individual present in the situation), on excludes the presence of a topicalized pronoun or NP referring to the subject argument.

In other words, 1st person plural on is the only variety of on that does not exclude naming the subject argument by means of a topicalized pronoun or NP. This justifies grouping all the other varieties of on under the label ‘impersonal’, in spite of the fact that they may occur in contexts in which there is no ambiguity over the identification of the subject argument.
4. Coreference properties of existential on

4.1. Existential on

It is well known that on referring to an unspecified subject can sometimes be truth-
conditionally equivalent to quelqu’un ‘someone’ or des gens ‘some people’ (‘existential on’, as in ex. (11)).

(11) a. On frappe à la porte.
   on knoc.kPRS.SG at DEF.SGF door.SG
   ‘Someone is knocking at the door.’

b. On a retrouvé ton porte-monnaie.
   on have.PRS.SG find.PTCP POSS2SG.SGM purse.SG
   ‘Your purse has been found’

c. On a dormi dans ce lit.
   on have.PRS.SG sleep.PTCP in DEM.SGM bed.SG
   ‘This bed has been slept in.’

Cabredo Hofherr 2003 discusses cross-linguistic evidence supporting the distinction
between several semantic sub-types of (quasi-)existential readings of unspecified subjects.
On the basis of the definitions she provides, it is possible to recognize a specific existential
reading of French on (temporally anchored, as in On frappe à la porte), a vague existential
reading (only implying that an event of the type described has taken place, as in On a retrouvé
ton porte-monnaie), and an inferred existential reading (characterized by inference of an event
from its perceivable results, as in On a dormi dans ce lit). However, I have found no evidence
that the coreference properties of on could be sensitive to these distinctions. The
coreference properties of on do not even support the recognition of the equivalence with
quelqu’un as a valid criterion for distinguishing a subtype of on clearly distinct from other
subtypes. Sentences such as those of ex. (11) must therefore be viewed as a mere illustration
of a possible discursive behavior of on which is particularly easy to establish in sentences in
which the intuition of French speakers is that on and quelqu’un are synonymous.

It is not difficult to show that there is no clear-cut boundary separating such sentences
from other possible uses of on, the explanation being that the equivalence between on and
quelqu’un puts into play several factors, including not only the tense-aspect-mood value of
the verb form and the lexical meaning of the verb, but also contextual data.

For example, the equivalence between on and quelqu’un ‘someone’ / des gens ‘some
people’ suggested by sentences such as those of ex. (11) above, is valid in contexts implying
no reference to a particular group of people to which the agent belongs, but does not
extend to contexts implying that the agent belongs to a particular group of people. In such
contexts, as illustrated by ex. (12), on does not imply any restriction on the extension of the
subject argument, contrary to quelqu’un / des gens, which suggest that only a relatively low
proportion of the persons that were present took part in the event. Sentence (12b) is OK not
only for situations that could be described by sentences (12c-d), but also for situations in
reference to which it would be possible to use sentence (12e). A crucial observation is that, when a passive formulation is possible, as in ex. (12), it provides a much better equivalent of ‘existential on’ than formulations using indefinite pronouns or NPs: ‘existential on’ allows for the same indetermination about the subject argument as agentless passives.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(12) a. } & \text{ Tu as été critiqué à la réunion.} \\
& \text{2SG have.PRS.2SG be.PTCP criticize.PTCP.SGM at DEF.SGF meeting.SG} \\
& \text{‘You have been criticized at the meeting.’} \\
\text{b. } & \text{On t’a critiqué à la réunion} \\
& \text{ON 2SG.ACC have.PRS.3SG criticize.PTCP.SGM at DEF.SGF meeting.SG} \\
& \text{same meaning as (a)} \\
\text{c. } & \text{Quelqu’un t’a critiqué à la réunion.} \\
& \text{someone 2SG.ACC have.PRS.3SG criticize.PTCP.SGM at DEF.SGF meeting.SG} \\
& \text{‘Someone criticized you at the meeting’} \\
\text{d. } & \text{Des gens t’ont critiqué à la réunion.} \\
& \text{INDEF.PL people.PL 2SG.ACC have.PRS.3PL criticize.PTCP.SGM at DEF.SGF meeting.SG} \\
& \text{‘Some people criticized you at the meeting’} \\
\text{e. } & \text{Tout le monde t’a critiqué à la réunion.} \\
& \text{everybody 2SG.ACC have.PRS.3SG criticize.PTCP.SGM at DEF.SGF meeting.SG} \\
& \text{‘Everybody criticized you at the meeting’} \\
\end{align*}
\]

In other words, existential in the expression ‘existential on’ must be taken in its logical sense ‘for at least one person’, which contrary to linguistic expressions such as quelqu’un ‘someone’ or des gens ‘some people’ does not imply a relative limitation of the set of the persons taking part in the event.

Moreover, existential on sharply contrasts with quelqu’un in its scope properties. In negative sentences, as illustrated by ex. (13), there is no equivalence between quelqu’un and on.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(13) a. } & \text{Quelqu’un ne t’a pas critiqué.} \\
& \text{someone NEG 2SG.ACC have.PRS.3SG NEG criticize.PTCP.SGM} \\
& \text{‘Someone did not criticize you.’ i.e. } \exists x, \text{Neg [criticize(x, you)]} \\
\text{b. } & \text{On ne t’a pas critiqué} \\
& \text{ON NEG 2SG.ACC have.PRS.3SG NEG criticize.PTCP.SGM} \\
& \text{‘No one criticized you’, ‘You were not criticized’ i.e. Neg [} \exists x, \text{criticize(x, you)]} \\
\end{align*}
\]

Similarly, when a temporal adjunct implying repetition is present in postverbal position, the only possible interpretation with quelqu’un in subject role is that the same person is involved in the successive occurrences of the event (in logical terms, the iterative operator is under the scope of the existential operator), whereas on carries no such entailment – ex. (14).
(14) a. *On t’ a appelé plusieurs fois.
on 2SG.ACC have.PRS.3SG call.PTCP.SGM several.PL time.PL
‘There were several phone calls for you’, i.e. Iter [∃ x, call(x, you)]

b. On t’ a appelé plusieurs fois,
on 2SG.ACC have.PRS.3SG call.PTCP.SGM several.PL time.PL
mais ce n’ était pas la même personne.
but DEM NEG be.IMPF.3SG NEG DEF.SGF same.SG person.SG
‘There were several phone calls for you, but it was not the same person.’

c. Quelqu’un t’ a appelé plusieurs fois.
someone 2SG.ACC have.PRS.3SG call.PTCP.SGM several.PL time.PL
‘Someone called you several times.’, i.e. ∃ x, Iter [call(x, you)]

d. *Quelqu’un t’ a appelé plusieurs fois,
someone 2SG.ACC have.PRS.3SG call.PTCP.SGM several.PL time.PL
mais ce n’ était pas la même personne.
but DEM NEG be.IMPF.3SG NEG DEF.SGF same.SG person.SG

4.2. The discourse inertness of existential on

Kœnig 1999 and Kœnig & Mauner 1999, whose study of the discourse properties of on concentrates on this type of use, show that the definite pronoun il ‘he’ can refer back to quelqu’un ‘someone’, but not to existential on; similarly, the definite plural pronoun ils ‘they’ can refer back to des gens ‘some people’, but not to existential on – ex. (15).

(15) a. Quelqu’un t’ a demandé,
someone 2SG.ACC have.PRS.3SG ask.PTCP.SGM
mais il n’ a pas pu attendre.
but 3SGM NEG have.PRS.3SG NEG can.PTCP wait.INF
‘Someone asked for you, but they were not able to wait.’

b. *On t’ a demandé,
on 2SG.ACC have.PRS.3SG ask.PTCP.SGM
mais il n’ a pas pu attendre.
but 3SGM NEG have.PRS.3SG NEG can.PTCP wait.INF
Intended: ‘Someone asked for you, but they were not able to wait.’

c. Des gens t’ ont demandé,
INDEF.PL people.PL 2SG.ACC have.PRS.3PL ask.PTCP.SGM
mais ils n’ ont pas pu attendre.
but 3PLM NEG have.PRS.3PL NEG can.PTCP wait.INF
‘Some people asked for you, but they were not able to wait.’
The same contrast is observed, not only within the frame of multi-clausal discourse, but also within the frame of a single sentence – ex. (16).

(16) a. Quelqu’un a dit qu’il pouvait faire ça.

‘Someone said that they were able to do that.’

b. *On a dit qu’il pouvait faire ça.

Intended: ‘Someone said that they were able to do that.’

Would be OK with disjoint reference: ‘Someone said that he was able to do that.’

As shown by Köng 1999, examples such as (17) seem to contradict the statement that existential on cannot act as the antecedent of an anaphoric expression, but they do not really violate the discourse inertness of existential on, since the anaphoric relation in such a configuration is not direct. It arises from inferences, similarly to what may occur with the implicit agent of short passives.

(17) On a tué le président ;

‘The president was killed; the murderer was from the Berry.’

Similarly, the discourse inertness of existential on (i.e., its inability to take part in anaphoric relations other than those arising from inferences) is not contradicted by the possibility of coreference with the unexpressed subject of rationale clauses, as in ex. (18). Here again, this property is shared (at least to some extent) by the implicit agent of short passives.

(18) On l’a tué pour lui prendre son argent.

‘He was killed to take his money.’

5 The indexation of prendre in this example is intended to reflect the fact that the implicit subject of this infinitive form (which according to some syntactic theories is represented by invisible “PRO”) is identified to the unspecified subject of the main verb, encoded by on.
Another property of existential *on* not signaled by Kœnig & Mauner but which is worth emphasizing, since existential *on* contrasts in this respect with other uses of *on*, is that cross-sentential anaphoric coreference involving existential *on* may be impossible, not only with 3rd person pronouns, but also with *on* itself – ex. (19).

(19) *On* t’a demandé, mais la personne en question n’a pas pu attendre.

In discourse configurations of this type, *on* can be maintained in the first clause only by using an anaphoric expression lending itself to ‘identification through accommodation’ – Kœnig & Mauner 1999 (section 4.2), as illustrated by ex. (17). Similarly, in the case of ex. (15), a possible formulation would be *On* t’a demandé, *mais la personne en question* n’a pas pu attendre.

There are apparent counterexamples, in which *on* can be interpreted as referring back to a previous occurrence of existential *on*, as in ex. (20a). However, formally identical clause sequences involving two successive occurrences of existential *on* in contexts implying or suggesting disjoint reference are perfectly normal – ex. (20b). This shows that *on* referring back to a previous occurrence of existential *on* is only a possibility in clause sequences in which the second clause does not go beyond the description of a particular aspect or a subsequent stage of the same event.

(20) a. *On* a volé ma voiture,

b. *On* a volé ma voiture,
Intended: 'There was a phone call for you; the person in question had a German accent' (OK: \textit{Quelqu'un t'a appelé au téléphone; il avait un accent allemand} ‘Someone called you, he had a German accent’, or \textit{On t’a appelé au téléphone; la personne en question avait un accent allemand}. ‘There was a phone call for you, the person in question had a German accent.’)

b. \textit{On} t’a appelé au téléphone; \\
\textit{ON} 2SG.ACC have.PRS.3SG call.PTCP.SGM at.DEF.SGM phone.SG \\
\textit{On} parlait avec un accent allemand. \\
\textit{ON} speak.IMPF.3SG with one.SGM accent.SGM German.SGM  \\
‘There was a phone call for you; the person in question spoke with a German accent.’

The discourse inertness of existential \textit{on} manifests itself, not only in the strategies that must be used in order to refer back to a participant whose existence is implied by a previous use of \textit{on}, but also in the relation between existential \textit{on} and the preceding context. The use of \textit{on} does not exclude identifying the subject argument to a participant whose existence is implied, either by a previous use of \textit{on}, as in (20a), or by a previous occurrence of an agentless passive, as in (22a). By contrast, \textit{quelqu’un} sounds at best strange in contexts which strongly suggest identifying it as referring back to the implicit argument of an agentless passive, as in ex. (22b).

\begin{enumerate}
\item\textit{Ma voiture a été volée, } \\
POSS1SG.SGF car.SG have.PRS.3SG be.PTCP steal.PTCP.SGF  \\
mais on l’a abandonnée peu après. \\
but \textit{ON} 3SGF.ACC have.PRS.3SG abandon.PTCP.SGF shortly afterwards \\
‘My car was stolen, but shortly afterwards it was abandoned’
\item\textit{Ma voiture a été volée, } \\
POSS1SG.SGF car.SG have.PRS.3SG be.PTCP steal.PTCP.SGF  \\
mais quelqu’un l’a abandonnée peu après. \\
but someone 3SGF.ACC have.PRS.3SG abandon.PTCP.SGF shortly afterwards \\
‘My car was stolen, but someone abandoned it shortly afterwards’ – Impossible with the reading ‘My car was stolen, but shortly afterwards the thief abandoned it’
\end{enumerate}

4.3. Existential \textit{on} and reflexive/intensifier binding

In this section, I describe a limitation to the coreference possibilities of existential \textit{on} that is not recognized by Koenig & Mauner 1999, who argue that “the referent of \textit{on} can be the target of intrasentential reflexive binding” and that here again, this is in accordance with the common assumption that “cross-sentential pronominal coreference differs from both subject PRO anaphoric identification and intrasentential reflexive binding”. However, the
data they use to illustrate reflexive binding are partial, and their relevance to the issue of reflexive binding is questionable.

The point is that the only example of reflexive binding presented by Kœnig & Mauner 1999 concerns the so-called reflexive clitic se, and is therefore not conclusive for those who think that se and its equivalents in other Romance languages are not really involved in syntactic reflexive binding, and should rather be analyzed as the trace of a lexical operation on the valency of the verb.\(^6\) If we now turn to uncontroversial examples of reflexive binding, what we observe is that possessives, which normally lend themselves to reflexive binding (and can in particular be bound by the implicit subject of uncontrolled infinitives) cannot refer back to existential on – ex. (23).

\[(23)\]
\[
\begin{align*}
\text{a. } & \text{Quelqu'\textsuperscript{un}\textsubscript{i} t'} & \text{a laiss\textsuperscript{e} } & \text{son\textsubscript{i} adresse.} \\
& \text{someone} & \text{2SG.ACC} & \text{have.PRS.3SG} & \text{leave.PTCP POSS3SG.SGF} & \text{address.SG} \\
& \text{‘Someone\textsubscript{i} left his\textsubscript{i} address for you.’} \\
\text{b. } & \text{On\textsubscript{i} t'} & \text{a laiss\textsuperscript{e} } & \text{son\textsubscript{i} adresse.} \\
& \text{on} & \text{2SG.ACC} & \text{have.PRS.3SG} & \text{leave.PTCP POSS3SG.SGF} & \text{address.SG} \\
& \text{Intended: ‘Someone\textsubscript{i} left his\textsubscript{i} address for you.’} \\
\end{align*}
\]

Similarly, unlike quelqu'un ‘someone’, existential on cannot be the antecedent of an intensifier – ex. (24).

\[(24)\]
\[
\begin{align*}
\text{a. } & \text{Quelqu'\textsuperscript{un}\textsubscript{i} a trouvé lui-même\textsubscript{i} la solution.} \\
& \text{someone} & \text{have.PRS.3SG} & \text{find.PTCP INT.3SGM DEF.SGF} & \text{solution.SG} \\
& \text{‘Someone\textsubscript{i} has found the solution himself\textsubscript{i}.’} \\
\text{b. } & \text{On\textsubscript{i} a trouvé lui-même\textsubscript{i} / soi-même\textsubscript{i} la solution.} \tag*{7} \\
& \text{on} & \text{have.PRS.3SG} & \text{find.PTCP INT.3SGM / INT DEF.SGF} & \text{solution.SG} \\
& \text{Intended: ‘Someone\textsubscript{i} has found the solution himself\textsubscript{i}.’} \\
\end{align*}
\]

Curiously, the ban on reflexive binding tends to extend to the implicit subject of infinitives controlled by existential on, as in ex. (25b). However, in such a configuration, the unacceptability is less strong than in (23b), and some speakers at least consider such sentences more or less marginally acceptable.

\[(25)\]
\[
\begin{align*}
\text{a. } & \text{Quelqu'\textsuperscript{un}\textsubscript{i} t'} & \text{a appelé sans donner\textsubscript{i} son\textsubscript{i} nom.} \\
& \text{someone} & \text{2SG.ACC} & \text{have.PRS.3SG} & \text{call.PTCP SGM without give.INF POSS3SG.SGF} & \text{name.SG} \\
& \text{‘Someone\textsubscript{i} called you without giving his\textsubscript{i} name.’} \\
\end{align*}
\]

\(^6\) Evidence supporting this view is discussed by Alsina 1996 (chapter 6) and Creissels 2006 (chapter 22).

\(^7\) In addition to intensifiers formed by adding -\textit{même} to personal pronouns, French has an intensifier \textit{soi-même} which, like the reflexive pronouns \textit{soi} from which it is formed, can be bound by generic subjects only.
4.4. Conclusion of section 4

The observations analyzed in section 4 can be summarized by saying that, apart from anaphoric relations involving inference rather than coreference proper and following from the process of accommodation analyzed in detail by Koenig & Mauner 1999 within the framework of Discourse Representation Theory, the only anaphoric mechanisms in which existential *on* can assume the role of antecedent are those involving the implicit argument of infinitives in control constructions (2.3) and the reflexive reading of *se* (4.3).\(^9\)

5. Coreference properties of gnomic *on*

5.1. Gnomic *on*

‘Gnomic *on*’ refers here to the use of *on* in sentences expressing generalizations devoid of any temporal anchoring about humans in general, or about subgroups of humans whose delimitation may be variously suggested by the context, often (but not necessarily) with a normative flavor – ex. (26).\(^9\)

(26) a. *En vieillissant, on a besoin d’aide.*

in get.old.GER have.PRS.3SG need.SG of help.SG

‘When one gets old, one needs help.’

b. *En Italie, on sait préparer les pâtes.*

in Italy have.PRS.3SG prepare.INF DEF.PL pasta.PL

‘In Italy, they know how to prepare pasta.’

In ex. (26b) above, but not in (26a), arbitrary *ils* ‘they’ provides a possible paraphrase of gnomic *on* (*En Italie, ils savent préparer les pâtes*). The explanation is that arbitrary *ils* implies an exclusive reading (i.e., is limited to generalizations over groups to which the speech act participants do not belong), whereas gnomic *on* is not sensitive to the inclusive vs. exclusive distinction. For example, (27a) can indifferently be uttered by speakers living in town or in the countryside, whereas (27b) implies that both the speaker and the addressee live in town.

---

\(^8\) Although this is not directly relevant to the issue addressed in this paper, it is worth noting that this supports the view that infinitive control and the interpretation of *se* involve lexical operations rather than syntactic configurations including invisible pronouns, since the invisible pronouns posited in order to explain these mechanisms should be able to resume antecedents that are not accessible to ordinary pronouns.

\(^9\) The choice of the term gnomic rather than generic is motivated by the relative imprecision of generic, the use of which is not limited to utterances expressing the precise type of meaning considered in this section. The necessity of introducing this narrow notion of gnomicity follows from the fact that, as will be shown in section 6.1.1, some uses of *on* that fall under the current definition of genericity have coreference properties different from those found in the use of *on* characterized here as gnomic. On genericity, see among others Krifka & al. 1995, Papafragou 1996, Malamud 2006.
(27) a. A la campagne, on mange des légumes

at DEF.SGF countryside.SG on eat.PRS.3SG some.PL vegetable.PL

Qu’on fait pousser soi-même dans son jardin.

REL on make.PRS.3SG grow.INF INT in POSS3SG.SGM garden.SG

‘In the countryside, one eats vegetables one grows oneself in one’s garden.’

b. A la campagne, ils mangent des légumes

at DEF.SGF countryside.SG 3PLM eat.PRS.3PL some.PL vegetable.PL

Qu’ils font pousser eux-mêmes dans leur jardin.

REL 3PLM make.PRS.3PL grow.INF INT.3PLM in POSS3PL.SGM garden.SGM

‘In the countryside, they eat vegetables they grow themselves in their garden.’

5.2. Gnomic on and inter-sentential anaphoric processes

Like existential *on*, gnomic *on* is not available as a possible antecedent for 3rd person pronouns, but sequences of clauses including several occurrences of gnomic *on* expressing generalizations over the same subgroup of humans are perfectly normal – ex. (28).

(28) A Noël, oni décore un arbre de Noël,

at Christmas oni decorate.PRS.3SG one.SGM tree.SG of Christmas

At Christmas, people decorate a Christmas tree,

oni achète des cadeaux pour ses proches,

oni buy.PRS.3SG some.PL present.PL for POSS3SG.PL relative.PL

they buy presents for their close relatives,

et oni essaie de deviner

and oni try.PRS.3SG COMP find.out.INF

les cadeaux qu’oni recevra soi-même

DEF.PL present.PL REL oni receive.FUT.3SG INT

and they try to find out the presents they will get themselves.’

In this respect (the ability to be repeated without varying in its reference), the behavior of gnomic *on* is similar to that of personal pronouns.

5.3. Gnomic on and intra-clausal anaphoric processes

In ex. (28) above, the second clause shows that, unlike existential *on*, gnomic *on* is a possible antecedent of possessives, and the third clause shows that, contrary to existential *on*, gnomic *on* can bind the intensifier *soi-même* ‘oneself’.

Ex. (29) provides an additional illustration of 3rd person possessives referring back to gnomic *on*. 
(29) \[ \text{On}_i \ n' \text{ abandonne pas ses}_i \text{ amis dans le besoin.} \]

‘One does not abandon one’s friends when they need help.’

Ex. (30) shows that gnomic on is a possible antecedent of the reflexive pronoun soi.

(30) a. \[ \text{Quand on}_i \text{ est seul, on}_i \text{ ne compte que sur soi.} \]

‘When one is alone, one relies only on oneself.’

In spite of the fact that gnomic on is often interchangeable with plural expressions like les gens or ils, it requires the 3rd person singular form of the possessives it binds. It is also worth noting that, in contrast to arbitrary ils, possessives referring back to gnomic on force a distributive interpretation of the possessive relation, and cannot be used for situations implying a collective reading – ex. (31).

(31) a. \[ \text{En France, ils}_i \text{ célèbrent la / leur}_i \text{ fête nationale le 14 juillet.} \]

‘In France, they celebrate (their) National Day on July 14’

b. \[ \text{En France, on célèbre la */sa */leur fête nationale le 14 juillet.} \]

‘In France, National Day is celebrated on July 14.’

c. \[ \text{On}_i \text{ célèbre son}_i \text{ anniversaire en famille.} \]

‘One celebrates one’s birthday as a family party.’

5.4. Coreference properties of gnomic on in complex constructions

The third clause of ex. (28) above shows that on in a subordinate clause can refer back to gnomic on in the role of subject of the main verb. Ex. (32) shows that, in such configurations, the second occurrence of on is equivalent to a 3rd person pronoun referring back to a variable bound by a distributive operator, and cannot be viewed as the mere repetition of on expressing a generalization over a group of persons, since *Everybody thinks that everybody is different from the others or *Everybody always wants more than everybody has are not possible paraphrases.

(32) a. \[ \text{On}_i \text{ croit qu’ on}_i \text{ est différent des autres.} \]

‘Everybody thinks that they are different from the others.’
b. Oni veut toujours plus que ce qu'on a.

‘Everybody always wants more than they have.’

Ex. (33) shows that complex constructions allow for anaphoric relations between gnomic on in antecedent role and 2nd person plural pronouns assuming syntactic roles other than subject.

(33) a. Oni attend toujours des autres qu’ils vous aident.

‘One always expects help from the others.’, lit. ‘One always expects from the others that they help you.’

b. Oni ne sait jamais ce que l’avenir vous réserve.

‘One never knows what may happen’, lit. ‘One never knows what the future reserves for you.’

c. Quand on est jeune, tout vous semble possible.

‘When one is young, one gets the impression that everything is possible.’

This use of 2nd person pronouns is consistent with the fact that, in generic sentences expressing generalizations about humans, second person pronouns constitute possible equivalents of on. However, only 2nd person plural pronouns have the ability to refer back to gnomic on – ex. (34a), whereas in similar sequences using exclusively 2nd person pronouns receiving an arbitrary reading, the singular is perfectly normal in familiar speech register – ex. (34b).

(34) a. *Oni attend toujours des autres qu’ils t’aident.

Intended: ‘One always expect help from the others’

b. Tu attends toujours des autres qu’ils t’aident.

‘You always expect from the others that they help you.’, with (depending on the context) the possibility of an arbitrary reading of you

Ex. (35) illustrates the possibility that gnomic on in the subject clitic slot of the main verb acts as the antecedent of a 2nd person plural pronoun belonging to a subordinate clause whose subject is existential on.

(35) Oni veut toujours plus que ce qu’on vous donne.

‘Everybody always wants more than they are given.’
5.5. Conclusion of section 5: gnomic on and the implicit subject of uncontrolled infinitives

Unlike existential on, gnomic on is discursively active, and shows coreference properties to some extent comparable to those of personal pronouns. However, in its coreference properties, gnomic on shows even more striking similarities with the implicit subject of uncontrolled infinitives, since it shares with it the property of being a possible antecedent of 3rd person possessives – ex. (36), of on in subject role – ex. (37), of 2nd person plural vous in syntactic roles other than subject – ex. (38), and of the reflexive pronoun soi – ex. (39).

(36) a. Oni aide ses amis.
   'One helps one's friends.'

   
   b. Aideri ses amis est un devoir.
   'To help one's friends is a duty.'

(37) a. Oni oublie facilement ce qu'on a promis.
   'One forgets one's promises easily.'

   
   b. Oublieri ce qu'on a promis n'est pas bien.
   'It is not good to forget one's promise.'

(38) a. Oni aide ceux qui vous ont aidé.
   'Everybody helps those that helped them.'

   
   b. Aideri ceux qui vous ont aidé est un devoir.
   'To help those by which one was helped is a duty.'

(39) a. Quand on est seul, on ne compte que sur soi.
   'When one is alone, one relies only on oneself.'

   
   b. Il est prudent de ne compter que sur soi.
   'It is advisable to rely only on oneself.'

6. Two varieties of impersonal on

In this section, I examine some typical uses of impersonal on, divided into those showing the same discourse inertness as existential on (whose coreference properties have been
Denis Creissels, Impersonal pronouns and coreference: the case of French on, p. 20

presented in section 4), and those showing the same discourse availability as gnomic on (whose coreference properties have been presented in section 5).

6.1. Discursively inert on

6.1.1. Existential on in generic sentences

In section 4, the discourse inertness of existential on has been illustrated in episodic sentences, but existential on in generic sentences is equally unable to act for example as the antecedent of possessives – ex. (40).

(40) a. Tous les soirs, quelqu’un sa voiture devant ma porte.
   all.PLM DEF.PLM evening.PL someone POSS3SG.SGF car.SG in.front.of POSS1SG.SGF door.SG
   ‘Every evening somebody parks their car in front of my door.’

b. *Tous les soirs, on sa voiture devant ma porte.
   all.PLM DEF.PLM evening.PL on POSS3SG.SGF car.SG in.front.of POSS1SG.SGF door.SG
   Intended: ‘Every evening somebody parks their car in front of my door.’

What seems to be relevant here is that the generalization expressed by this sentence is not about (a group of) people, but about events occurring in a given place.

6.1.2. Author’s on

The use of on constitutes a common strategy for avoiding the use of 1st person pronouns in scientific style, as in ex. (41).

(41) Dans cet article on montrera que ...
   in DEM.SGM article.SG on show.FUT.3SG COMP
   ‘In this article it will be shown that ...’

But in spite of the fact that, in such contexts, on is truth-conditionally equivalent to je ‘I’, it is not available as an antecedent of 1st person possessives, and 3rd person possessives cannot refer back to this variety of on either – ex. (42).

(42) *On présentera plus loin ma / sa propre analyse.
   on present.FUT.3SG below POSS1SG.SGF / POSS3SG.SGF own analysis.SG
   Intended: ‘I will present my own analysis below.’
   OK: Je présenterai plus loin ma propre analyse. or Nous présenterons plus loin notre propre analyse.
6.1.3. Corporate on

The ‘corporate’ use of on is illustrated by ex. (43). In this use, on is in competition with arbitrary ils ‘they’, whose use in French is otherwise relatively limited, and is commonly stigmatized as ‘familiar’.

(43) a. On va encore augmenter les impôts.
   'Taxes will be raised again.'
   
   b. Ils vont encore augmenter les impôts.
   id.

What is essential in this use of on or ils is that the meaning of the VP plays a crucial role in the identification of the plural individual to which the subject argument is identified: ‘The people who have the power to fix taxes, i.e. the government’.

Here again, possessives cannot refer back to this variety of on, whereas they are perfectly possible in the synonymous formulation with ils – ex. (44).

(44) *On va augmenter les impôts
   pour financer sesi/leursi réformes.
   Intended: ‘They (i.e., the government) are going to raise taxes in order to finance their reforms.’
   OK: Ils vont augmenter les impôts pour financer leursi réformes.

6.2. Discursively active on

6.2.1. Instructive on

On can refer to members of a group to whom the speaker gives instructions. As illustrated by ex. (45), on in this use is discursively active.

(45) Maintenant oni vérifie qu' oni a bien sesi papiers.
   'Now everybody checks that they have their papers.'

6.2.2. Experiencer on

In the use of on illustrated by ex. (46), the speaker generalizes his/her own perception of a situation: ‘I have the impression that it will rain, and I guess that other people have the same impression’. Ex. (46b) shows that on in this use is discursively active.
(46) a. On a l’impression qu’il va pleuvoir.
   `One has the impression that it is going to rain.’

   b. On n’ en croit pas ses yeux.
   `One does not believe one’s eyes.’

6.2.3. De-personalizing on

In this use, often characterized as ‘stylistic’ in French grammars or dictionaries, on refers to specific individuals that could be designated by 2nd or 3rd person pronouns without changing the truth-value of the sentence. This use of on typically implies a condescending attitude towards the person referred to. In assertive sentences, it usually marks that the event is viewed by the speaker as exceptional, or deviating from normality, often with shades of surprise and/or irony or contempt. As illustrated by ex. (47), typically uttered in situations in which the person(s) in question is/are not supposed to wear new shoes, on in this use is discursively active.

(47) Je vois qu’on a mis ses chaussures neuves.
   `I see that you are wearing your new shoes / he is wearing his new shoes / she is wearing her new shoes / they are wearing their new shoes.’

In interrogative sentences, the use of on referring to specific individuals that could be designated by 2nd or 3rd person pronouns presupposes a hierarchical relation whereby the speaker qualifies to check the behavior of the person in question. Interrogative sentences of this type are typically used by adults in interactions with children – ex. (48).

(48) On a bien mangé sa soupe ?
   `Did you eat your soup (as was expected from you)?’

6.3. Three minimal pairs

On may sometimes be ambiguous between two readings, and in such cases, it may happen that the establishment of an anaphoric relation excludes one of the possible interpretations. For example, sentence (49a) is ambiguous between an existential reading (‘At least one of the persons at the place in question can speak French’) and a reading in which it refers to a typical behavior of the people that live at the place in question. But the first interpretation is ruled out if a possessive referring back to on is introduced, as in (49b), which cannot be interpreted as ‘At least one of the persons at the place in question speaks French to his/her children’.
(49) a. Ici on parle français.
‘French is spoken here.’

b. Ici on parle français à ses enfants.
‘The people that live here usually speak French to their children.’

Ex. (44) above, repeated here as (50a), illustrates the discourse inertness of corporate on in an episodic sentence. Ex. (50b) shows that, in generic sentences, corporate on may be discursively active, provided the generalization concerns the behavior of groups of people (here, freshly elected governments).

(50) a. *On va augmenter les impôts
pour financer ses/leurs réformes.
Intended: ‘They (i.e., the government) are going to raise taxes in order to finance their reforms.’

b. Après les élections, on augmente les impôts
pour financer ses promesses électorales.
‘After the elections they usually raise taxes in order to finance their vote-catching promises.’

The first sentence of ex. (51) is a typical illustration of gnomic on. (51b) might suggest that, with the same predicate in an episodic sentence, on loses (or at least tends to lose) its discourse availability. However, (51c) shows that, in spite of the episodic character of the sentence, the insertion of an adjunct suggesting some other kind of generalization restores the discourse availability of on.

(51) a. A Noël, on fait des cadeaux à ses enfants.
‘At Christmas, one makes presents to one’s children.’

b. ??Hier c’ était Noël,
on a fait des cadeaux à ses enfants.
Intended: ‘Yesterday was Christmas, people made presents to their children.’

c. Hier c’ était Noël, partout en France
Denis Creissels, Impersonal pronouns and coreference: the case of French  on, p. 24

\[ on_{i} \text{ a fait des cadeaux à ses enphants.} \]

\[ \text{ON have.PRS.3SG make.PTCP some.PL present.PL to POSS3SG.PL child.PL} \]

‘Yesterday was Christmas, everywhere in France people made presents to their children.’

6.4. Discussion

This enumeration of typical uses of impersonal  on classified according to their coreference properties raises the question of the conditioning of the variations observed. Many recent studies of the semantics of arbitrariness have pointed to the relevance of the episodic vs. generic distinction in the choice between (quasi-)existential and (quasi-)universal readings of unspecified subject constructions. But the data examined in sections 6.1 to 6.3 shows that, by itself, the distinction between episodic and characterizing (or generic) sentences is not sufficient to provide a universally valid explanation of the distinction between discursively inert and discursively active  on.

However, with one exception (‘de-personalizing  on’, examined in section 6.2.3, which obviously relies on a marked discourse strategy I will not try to explain here), the uses in which  on shows discourse availability can be characterized as (quasi-)universal in the sense that they have in common the expression of a generalization over a more or less clearly identifiable set of human beings, whereas those showing discourse inertness do not lend themselves to such a characterization.

In other words, in the discursively active uses of  on, the semantic characterization of the subject argument includes the feature [+sum individual] in addition to the feature [+human] common to all of the uses of  on, and the predication involves generalization over the atomic individuals whose sum constitutes the referent of the subject argument.

It seems therefore reasonable to suppose that the (quasi-)existential reading of  on, characterized by discourse inertness, is the default reading that arises when nothing is added to the characterization of the subject argument as [+human], and that the relative discourse availability shown by impersonal  on in some of its uses results from a richer semantic specification implying the presence of some generalization operator.

The authors that have analyzed the conversion of nouns meaning ‘man’ into impersonal pronouns agree that, historically, the development of uses of the type designated here as ‘gnomic’ precedes the development of (quasi-)existential uses:

(52) The diachronic development of HOMO-indefinites (Egerland 2006)

a. A lexical DP that is kind-denoting under the scope of a generic operator >
b. A nominal generic indefinite expression that is not kind-denoting >
c. A nominal indefinite expression that may appear in episodic contexts

\[ \text{(52) The diachronic development of HOMO-indefinites (Egerland 2006)} \]

A grammaticalization path for *man* (Giacalone & Sansò 2007a)

\[(a^1) \text{man as species-generic} \Rightarrow (a^2) \text{man as human non-referential indefinite} \Rightarrow (b) \text{man as human referential indefinite} \quad (\text{through generalization})\]

\[\Downarrow\]

\[(c) 1\text{st person singular/plural}\]

Historically, the feature \([\text{+sum individual}]\) that conditions the discourse availability of *on* constitutes therefore the retention of what was at an early stage of the evolution an intrinsic property of *on*, and the possible deletion of this feature, resulting in the discourse inertness observed in some uses of *on*, constitutes a relatively recent development.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, after presenting the general properties of *on* (section 2), I have shown that the inability to refer back to a topicalized NP or pronoun provides a general characterization of the uses of *on* other than its use as a 1st person plural subject clitic (section 3). In sections 4 and 5, I have analyzed two particular uses of impersonal *on* that clearly contrast in their discourse behavior: existential *on* shows coreference properties comparable to those of the implicit argument of agentless passives (section 4), whereas the availability of gnomic *on* as an antecedent in various types of anaphoric relations is similar to that of the implicit subject of uncontrolled infinitives (section 5). In section 6, after briefly presenting other uses of impersonal *on* classified according to their coreference properties, I have concluded that the choice between the two possible discourse behaviors of impersonal *on* is not directly triggered by the *episodic* vs. *generic* distinction, but rather by the addition of the feature \([\text{+sum individual}]\) to the specification of the subject argument of verbs hosting *on* in the subject clitic slot as \([\text{+human}]\).

This conclusion raises in particular the following question, which should be the object of future investigations: since morphosyntactically, irrespective of the variety of readings it may receive, *on* very clearly remains a subject pronoun, to what extent are its coreference properties still conditioned by its nominal origin? More generally, do the coreference properties of unspecified subjects in constructions involving impersonal pronouns differ significantly from the coreference properties of unspecified subjects in other types of constructions that suspend the expression of the subject argument without removing it from argument structure and without affecting other aspects of verbal valency?

The Estonian data analyzed by Kaiser & Vihman 2006 rather suggest a negative answer, and returning to *on*, serious doubts arise from the mere fact that the coreference properties of the two varieties of impersonal *on* are similar to those of the implicit argument of agentless passives on the one hand, and of the implicit subject of uncontrolled infinitives on the other hand, i.e., of two types of implicit arguments that have no historical link with pronouns. But it would certainly be premature to put forward generalizations before having at one’s disposal more detailed studies of the coreference properties of impersonal pronouns and implicit subjects in a variety of languages, as well as precise data about the changes that may occur in the coreference properties of emerging impersonal pronouns at
early stages of the grammaticalization processes that convert nouns into impersonal pronouns.

Acknowledgements

First of all, I am grateful to Virve Vihman, whose comments at the occasion of the lectures on the typology of impersonals I gave at the University of Tartu convinced me of the interest of a detailed study of the coreference properties of impersonal pronouns. I am also grateful to Patricia Cabredo Hofherr and two anonymous readers for their very useful comments on a first version of this paper.

Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABL</td>
<td>ablative clitic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACC</td>
<td>accusative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMP</td>
<td>complementizer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAT</td>
<td>dative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEF</td>
<td>definite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEM</td>
<td>demonstrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FUT</td>
<td>future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GER</td>
<td>gerund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMPF</td>
<td>imperfect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INDEF</td>
<td>indefinite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INF</td>
<td>infinitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INT</td>
<td>intensifier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOC</td>
<td>locative clitic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEG</td>
<td>negation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PL</td>
<td>plural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLF</td>
<td>plural feminine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLM</td>
<td>plural masculine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POSS</td>
<td>possessive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRS</td>
<td>present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTCP</td>
<td>participle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFL</td>
<td>reflexive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REL</td>
<td>relativizer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESTR</td>
<td>restrictive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBJV</td>
<td>subjunctive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SG</td>
<td>singular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SGF</td>
<td>singular feminine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SGM</td>
<td>singular masculine</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References


