

Syntactic change in progress:

The use of impersonal *il* in modern spoken French – a micro-diachronic analysis

Modern Standard French is traditionally analysed as a non-null-subject language (Perlmutter 1971, Rizzi 1982, De Cat 2005). In the framework of generative syntax, the difference between languages that allow an empty pronoun in the subject position of a finite phrase and languages that require this position to be filled obligatorily by a lexical subject is explained on the basis of the so-called “null-subject parameter” or “*pro*-drop parameter”. For the case of modern French, this means that, apart from a limited set of exceptions, it does not allow the omission of subject pronouns, neither referential nor impersonal ones. In modern spoken French however, we can frequently observe the omission of the expletive subject pronoun *il* in finite impersonal constructions such as *y avoir* ‘exist’, *falloir* ‘must’ and *paraître* ‘seem’ (Culbertson & Legendre 2014, Zimmermann & Kaiser 2014, Grevisse & Goosse 2016:§235). The following examples by Auger (1993) illustrate the variation between the realization and the omission of impersonal *il*:

(1) a. (Il) faut y aller

(it) must there go

‘One must go there.’

b. (Il) me semble que c’est une bonne idée

(Auger 1993:179)

(it) me seems that this is a good idea

‘It seems to me that this is a good idea.’

This empirical issue has important theoretical consequences since it affects the analysis of French as a strict non-null-subject language. In the literature, there already exists a debate about the proposal to analyse French as a null-subject language and its subject pronouns such as impersonal *il* as agreement markers (Auger 1993, Fonseca-Greber 2004, Culbertson 2010). What has not been investigated yet is whether the described variation has changed in modern French. Consequently, this paper addresses the question of whether the variation phenomenon of spoken French represents a syntactic change in progress. The hypothesis of this study is that the omission of impersonal *il* has increased in the past decades.

In order to verify this hypothesis, a micro-diachronic corpus analysis will be presented. The empirical study is based on the oral corpus called *Enquêtes SocioLinguistiques à Orléans* (henceforth *ESLO*), a vast corpus of French spoken in the city of Orléans containing about 700 hours of transcribed recordings. The corpus consists of two comparable parts that have been recorded 40 years apart, the first part between 1968 and 1971 and the second in the

2010s (Baude & Dugua 2011). It therefore qualifies for micro-diachronic research on modern spoken French and allows verifying a possible change in the use of impersonal *il*.

An analysis of the *ESLO* corpus shows significant differences between the two parts of the corpus concerning the (non-) use of *il* in impersonal constructions. For impersonal constructions containing the verb *falloir* for example, the corpus analysis reveals a relative increase of the omission of *il* of 63 % between the two stages of recordings. A consequence of this increase is the observation that in the majority of constructions with *falloir*, the subject is not phonetically realised.

In the presentation, a more detailed analysis of the results of the micro-diachronic corpus study will be used to discuss the question of whether the increased non-use of *il* in impersonal constructions represents a change in progress of the null-subject status of modern spoken French. Considering the results of the corpus study, an analysis will be presented following the theory of parameter hierarchies by Roberts (2019).

References

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