

On versus *tu* and *vous*: Pronouns with indefinite reference in synchronous electronic French discourse

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Abstract

This article examines the variable use of the French pronouns *on*, *tu*, and *vous* with generic-indefinite reference in synchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC). The primary objective is to compare the use of these pronouns in CMC, a written/typed form of discourse, and in conversational spoken French as it has been analyzed over the past few decades. A VARBRUL analysis produced results comparable to those reported in previous studies in which such an approach was used. Overall, the results suggest that the use of *on* versus *tu/vous* with indefinite reference is influenced by affirmation/negation, syntactic frame (generalizations versus implicatives), discursive-pragmatic effect (situational insertions versus morals/truisms), and type of event (specific versus non-specific).

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1. Introduction

The French subject pronoun *on* possesses a wide range of potential meanings and referents, especially in spoken discourse. Its versatility, while offering many opportunities for a variety of uses and discursive-pragmatic flexibility, can also create ambiguity, whether this is done expressly or unintentionally.¹ As one of the very few lexical items to move into a restricted or closed category, from common noun (from a form of the Latin *homo*, meaning *man*, then to *om* in Old French) to pronoun, *on* has never been entirely semantically stable, which might explain its continued ability to adapt itself to the needs of the shifting pronoun paradigm in French (see Rickard, 1993, pp. 23, 49, 68; Ayres-Bennett, 1996, pp. 28, 105). In grammars and textbooks, the pronoun *on* is usually presented first as an equivalent of the generic English pronoun *one*. Some textbooks explain the versatility of *on*, but the scope is often limited to a discussion of its alternation with the subject pronoun *nous* (i.e. an equivalent of the English pronoun *we*) in everyday, conversational French (Blondeau,

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¹ For a thorough description of the various referential values of the pronoun *on*, see Jisa and Vigié (2005) or a comprehensive dictionary such as the *Trésor de la langue française*. An historical overview of indefinite French pronoun use is provided in Coveney (2003).

2001; Coveney, 2000; Fonseca-Greber and Waugh, 2003). Even when textbooks, for example, go beyond the interchangeable use of *on* and *nous*, they rarely offer an account of the pronoun paradigm that reflects anything other than literary/formal French. Coveney (2003) notes one specific example of a French textbook for English-speaking learners in which ‘the following mild criticism [is offered regarding the generic-indefinite use of *tu* and *vous*]: *Vous* should not be used in this general sense (Price 1993: 207)’ (p. 168). Nonetheless, *on* can alternate with *tu*, *vous*, and *ils* with indefinite reference, and in addition to alternating with *nous* as a definite pronoun, it can also be used (as a definite pronoun) to replace or alternate with all other subject pronouns, even though these cases are certainly less frequent and more stylistically marked (Peeters, 2006).

Example 1 demonstrates a use of indefinite *tu*, a case in which indefinite *on* could also have been used. (Incidentally, singular *vous* is, of course, possible instead of *tu*, but the complexities of *tu* vs. *vous* are beyond the scope of this article.) This example is an excerpt from a discussion in this chat room about some of the social aspects of on-line communication. In Example 1, Titigre uses a direct object pronoun with definite reference in the first clause, but in the second clause the use of *tu* is clearly indefinite since BiiJoujou is not being singled out as the only person who can make friends on line. Titigre is obviously offering an opinion based on personal experiences and observations. (No non-traditional linguistic forms were altered in these examples. They were reproduced as they appear in the corpus.)

Example 1. (Titigre) BiiJoujou je te rassure, tu peux te faire de belles amitiés et partager des moments avec des gens en ligne [‘BiiJoujou I assure you, you can establish good friendships and spend time with people on line’]

Example 2 shows *tu* as a definite or non-generic subject pronoun, which is made clear by the use of nominal address (i.e. Lisette) to introduce the clause and the presence of the disjunctive pronoun *toi* in phrase-final position. In this case, *tu* could not alternate with *on* since this is an instance of definite reference.

Example 2. (CDrole)Lisette t’aimes le rap ou pas toi? [‘Lisette do you like rap or not?’]

The present study analyzes the distribution and variation of *on* and *tu/vous* when they are used as generic or indefinite subject pronouns in synchronous (i.e. real-time, live) electronic French discourse. All tokens of *on* and *tu/vous* coded for our analysis are those that can be used interchangeably since our primary objective is to understand how and in which contexts they alternate. Although this type of communication—live chat—is not absolutely synchronous, we refer to it as such in spite of Garcia and Jacobs’s (1999) labeling of it as quasi-synchronous, and we do so for two reasons. First, real-time or live chat is primarily labeled and referred to as being synchronous in the literature since it resembles, in many ways, real-time speech, which is usually in real-time and more or less spontaneous. Second, the only text-based chat software that allows participants to view letters and words as they are being typed (i.e. truly synchronous) is ICQ, which is primarily a tool for sending instant messages (i.e. in a private, restricted, limited group), whereas most studies of live chat are based on public communication spaces where many-to-many interaction occurs. Although voice chat, which is similar to telephone conferencing via the Internet, would fit into the category of truly synchronous discourse proposed by Garcia and Jacobs, this is a relatively new technology that has not been as widely studied as text-based forms of chat. Nonetheless, we suspect that as other new technologies are developed and the field of computer-mediated communication matures, the distinction made by Garcia and Jacobs will eventually be incorporated into analyses, descriptions, and typologies of electronic discourse.

Our analysis of the distribution and variable use of generic-indefinite *on*, *tu*, and *vous* in synchronous electronic French discourse aims to compare our findings with those of researchers who have studied spoken discourse recorded during sociolinguistic interviews within the variationist tradition developed by Labov (1966, 1972, 1994) in addition to studies operating within different frameworks. Although studies using the Labovian model were limited in the early years to phonological variation, the scope has since been widened to include studies of lexical, morphological, and syntactic variation, a move which has not been entirely uncontroversial. Some of the earliest criticism can be found in Lavandera (1978), a well known and often-cited article in which Lavandera, while recognizing the value of variationist research that investigates non-phonological linguistic variation, cautions that additional methodological considerations must be addressed and that data for any such analyses should not necessarily and automatically be given the same status as those used to study phonological variation ‘because they need further interpretation; they do not in themselves constitute a definitive analysis’ (p. 171; see also Wolfram, 1991).

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