

INCLUSIVE AND EXCLUSIVE IMPERSONAL PRONOUNS: A FEATURE-GEOMETRICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

As is well-known, impersonal pronouns split into two main groups as far as their interpretation is concerned. Pronouns belonging to the first group, such as Italian *si*, receive an inclusive interpretation under certain specific circumstances, i.e. the speaker is included among those performing the action expressed by the verb. On the other hand, pronouns belonging to the second group do not allow for such a reading. In this paper we investigate the triggers and the distribution of inclusiveness. In particular we are concerned with the properties that are responsible for the difference between the two groups of pronouns. We show that unspecified time reference (Cinque 1988), as well as imperfective aspect, trigger a generic reading on pronouns. The absence of such specifications in a clause gives rise to the necessity of linking the impersonal pronoun to the Speech Act (Sigurðsson 2002, *Speas to appear*), thus triggering an inclusive reading.

Furthermore, we propose that the reason why impersonal forms are used in some languages to convey a 1st person plural reading is that such pronouns have been used more and more with an inclusive reading, losing their generic referentiality. This has led to a reanalysis of such forms as exclusively 1st plural forms.

This paper is structured as follows: in the introduction, we provide an overview of the problems we are confronted with. Section 2 contains a discussion of those aspects which yield an inclusive reading of impersonal *si*. In this section, we examine the effects of specific time reference and perfective aspect on inclusiveness, and draw a parallel with a similar phenomenon involving Spanish *se* and French *on*. In section 3, we provide an analysis which accounts for the interaction of impersonal *si* with Aspect and the Speech Act. Our proposal has implications for other pronouns: we discuss these in section 4. Section 5 contains a short note on the reinterpretation of impersonal *si* constructions as 1st person plural forms.

1. Introduction

The syntax-semantics and discourse interface is an area of investigation that has pre-occupied the recent literature. One of the most frequent questions has been which part of the information is conveyed by syntactic means, and which by semantics. In this paper, we are confronted with a very interesting problem that makes reference to this interface: that of the interpretation of impersonal pronouns. Such an interpretation is provided, we propose, by the interaction of syntax and discourse.

Impersonal pronouns are used to introduce an unspecified subject in an utterance. However, they do not form a uniform class, as they display diverse interpretations. One group of impersonal pronouns has a variable interpretation: impersonals belonging to this group can have both a generic and an inclusive reading (i.e. a 1st person plural reading). An example of such an alternation is shown in (1) and (2):

- (1) In quel ristorante si mangiava bene
in that restaurant si ate-IMPF well
'People used to eat well in that restaurant'
(2) In quel ristorante si è mangiato bene
in that restaurant si is eaten-PF well
'We have eaten well in that restaurant'

The sentence in (1) has a generic reference. The subject of the predicate is understood as generic, unspecified. (2), on the contrary, has a specification for inclusiveness: the first reading that one gets from (2) is one where the reference set necessarily includes the speaker. Observe that also in (1) the speaker may be included in the reference set, just because the speaker is part of the universe. The difference, however, between (1) and (2) is tangible, (2) resulting clearly specified for inclusiveness.

The first problem we are confronted with is what causes the different reading on the same impersonal pronouns in (1) and (2). A related issue is the use of impersonal forms to convey a 1st person plural meaning. This strategy has been observed in several of the world's languages, also not related to each other at all. The following example is taken from Florentine:

- (3) Si va al mare
si goes to the sea
'We go to the beach'

Note that Florentine lacks the 1st person plural inflection on the verb altogether. That is, despite the fact that the pronoun *noi* is still alive, it is the impersonal form which identifies a 1st person plural reference. Hence the second problem we are

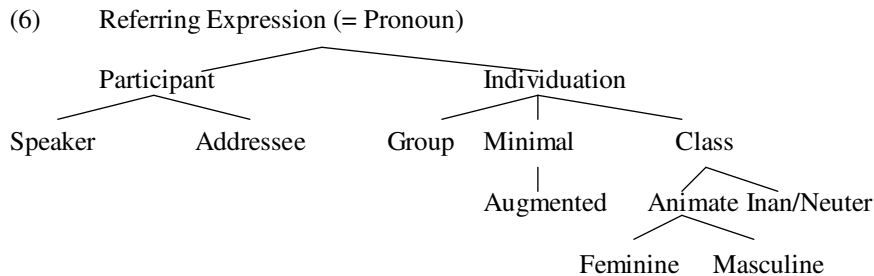
confronted with is what causes the use of impersonals instead of 1st person plural pronouns.¹

However, not all pronouns can receive a restrictive interpretation. In fact, some pronouns can never acquire an inclusive interpretation, under any circumstance. An example is *nome*, an impersonal pronoun found in Abruzzese, a southern Italian dialect (see D’Alessandro & Alexiadou 2002):

- (4) Nome magne’ bbone a cchi lu poste
 IMPERS ate-IMPF well at that the place
 ‘They used to eat well at that place’
- (5) A nome magnate bbone a cchi lu poste
 Have IMPERS eaten-PF well at that the place
 ‘Some people have eaten well in that place’

The third question we address in this paper is why can some impersonal pronouns never be inclusive?

Following Harley & Ritter (2002), we assume that phi-features on pronouns are not simple, but complex. Thus, the person feature is made up of the sub-features Speaker and Addressee, the Number feature contains the features Group, and so on. The feature geometry that Harley & Ritter propose for pronouns is exemplified in (6):



[from Harley & Ritter (2002:8)]

The feature assessment on an impersonal pronoun is not univocally determined. We propose that the aspectual specification of the clause in which it appears plays a great role in the sub-feature specification of a pronoun, i.e. perfective aspect results in an inclusive reading, and imperfective results in a generic (i.e. non specified for

¹ Impersonal *si* in Florentine often appears together with the 1st person plural pronoun *noi*. The interesting fact is, however, that *noi* doesn’t trigger verb agreement, and that the impersonal form is used to identify a 1st person plural referent.

inclusiveness) reading. In particular, we propose that the specification for inclusiveness has its locus on the person feature, which gets its specification by checking a generic feature which is present when imperfective is present or by entering agreement with the Speech Act head.

Before presenting the details of our analysis, the following note is in order: thus far we have only mentioned generic vs. inclusive readings of impersonal pronouns. Under the label 'generic' we also include the arbitrary reading of impersonal pronouns. The difference between arbitrary and generic is not relevant for the purposes of this paper, and therefore we consider arbitrary and generic as belonging to a unique class.

In the next section, we discuss the feature bundle of *si*, and then sketch our proposal.

2. The inclusive reading of *si*

According to Chierchia (1995), impersonal *si* is always inclusive. He observes that there can be no antecedence relation between *si* and *pro_{arb}*:

- (7) **Si_i è detto che pro_i vinceranno*
si is said that will win-3RD PL
'People say that they will win'

Chierchia suggests that impersonal *si* in (7) cannot co-refer with *pro_{arb}* because *si* is always inclusive, while *pro_{arb}* is always exclusive.

(8), however, shows that if we modify the aspectual specification of the sentence and provide a relevant context, so that impersonal *si* is not necessarily interpreted as inclusive, coreference is possible:

- (8) *Nel 1800, quando si_i costruiva una casa, pro_i facevano molto rumore*
in the 1800 when si built-IMPF a house did-3RD PL IMPF much noise
'In 1800, when a house was built, people used to make a lot of noise'

(8) is an example of what Cinque (1988) calls 'suspended time reference'. It shows that imperfectivity correlates with a generic reading, and that referentiality on *si* can vary. In what follows, we concentrate on the causes of the inclusive reading on *si*. In section 3, we formulate our analysis in terms of person feature specification for inclusiveness.

2.1. Specific time reference

In his seminal paper, Cinque (1988) notes that a specific time reference can result in an inclusive interpretation. Example (9) is then ruled out because interpretationally unacceptable: *si è morti* gets an inclusive reading, and therefore the speaker cannot say anything anymore!

- (9) # Oggi, a Beirut, si è morti inutilmente
today in Beirut si is dead in vain
'Today, in Beirut, we have died in vain' [from Cinque (1988)]

Cinque also notes that unergative and transitive verbs in the past tense develop an inclusive reading which is not compulsory. That is, the inclusive reading is triggered but not forced in the past tense. With other classes of verbs, such as unaccusatives, psych verbs, raising verbs, passives, etc., on the other hand, the inclusive reading in the past tense is obligatory, that is to say that there is no other reading possible. We leave the matter of the optionality aside for the moment, and concentrate on the fact that inclusiveness is triggered in the past tense.

2.2. Aspect

Specific time reference is not the only trigger for inclusiveness though, as Cinque also observes. As (10) shows, 'suspension' of inclusiveness is linked to the suspension of specificity of the time reference:

- (10) Se si è morti, non ci si muove più
if si is dead not si moves more
'If one is dead, one doesn't move anymore'

This observation strongly suggests that aspect plays a role in determining inclusiveness, as it correlates with the genericity of the action. This intuition is already present implicitly in Cinque's paper. The question here is: why it is the case that perfectivity results in an inclusive reading? In principle, there is no reason why the telicity of the event or the characterization of the event as completed would trigger a 1st person plural reading. That is, any pronoun or NP might in principle saturate an argument of the predicate. But why 1st plural?

That aspect plays a role in determining the reading of *si* is clear, if one considers sentences (1) and (2) again, repeated below as (11) and (12):

- (11) In quel ristorante si mangiava bene
in that restaurant si ate-IMPF well
'People used to eat well in that restaurant' (GEN)
- (12) In quel ristorante si è mangiato bene
in that restaurant si is eaten-PF well
'We have eaten well in that restaurant' (INCL)

The use of an imperfective form in (11) causes a generic interpretation of the pronoun. The perfective form in (12), on the other hand, causes a 1st person plural interpretation.

Furthermore, something similar to Cinque's 'past tense effect' is obtained if we vary the aspectual setting of a sentence:

- (13) Ieri sono stato tutto il giorno in casa. Alla stazione si
 Yesterday I am been all the day in house. At the station si
 arrivava con il solito ritardo
 arrived-IMPF with the usual delay
 ‘Yesterday I sat at home the whole day. People arrived at the station with the usual delay’
- (14) #Ieri sono stato tutto il giorno in casa. Alla stazione si
 Yesterday I am been all the day in house at the station si
 è arrivati con il solito ritardo
 is arrived-PF with the usual delay
 ‘Yesterday I sat at home the whole day. We arrived at the station with the usual delay’

(14) is somehow odd because the first interpretation of the sentence requires the ability of being ubiquitous, which is of course not common among humans. In other words, one cannot sit at home while simultaneously arriving at the station. (11) and (12), (13) and (14) strongly suggest that aspect determines the interpretation of impersonal *si*.

2.2.1. Spanish and French

The same sensitivity to aspect shown by Italian impersonal *si* constructions is also observed with Spanish *se* and French *on* constructions. The following data, from Montrul & Slabakova 2000, show that we find exactly the same effect in Spanish as with the correspondent Italian sentences in (11) and (12):

- (15) Se comía bien en este restaurante
 se ate-IMPF well in this restaurant
 ‘One used to eat well in that restaurant’ (GEN)
- (16) Se comió bien en este restaurante
 se ate-PF well in this restaurant
 ‘We ate well in that restaurant’ (INCL) [from Montrul & Slabakova (2000)]

In (15), imperfective morphology corresponds to a generic interpretation. In (16), just like its Italian counterpart in (12), perfective morphology corresponds to an inclusive interpretation.

In a similar way, the interpretation of *on* constructions depends very much on the aspectual specification of the clause in which it occurs:

- (17) On mangeait bien dans ce restaurant
 IMPERS ate-IMPF well in that restaurant
 ‘One used to eat well in that restaurant’ (GEN)

- (18) On a bien mangé dans ce restaurant
IMPERS has well eaten in that restaurant
'We have eaten well in that restaurant' (INCL) [Eric Mathieu, p.c.]

We can thus propose the following generalization:

- (19) There is a group of pronouns, containing Italian *si*, Spanish *se* and French *on*, whose interpretation varies according to the aspectual specification of the clause.

2.3. The link to the Speech Act

So far, we have observed that aspect plays an important role in sentence interpretation. The data in (20) and (21), however, seem to contradict this observation:

- (20) Ti si cercava
you-ACC si looked for-IMPF
'We were looking for you' (INCL)
(21) Ti si è cercato
you-ACC si is looked for-PF
'We were looking for you' (INCL)

These sentences contradict our generalization according to which perfectivity is responsible for inclusive readings. (20) is in fact imperfective but nevertheless the pronoun has an inclusive reading. It seems, however, that the alternation imperfective=generic / perfective=inclusive seems odd, if we change the object:

- (22) Li si cercava
them-ACC si looked for-IMPF
'People/we were looking for them' (INCL/GEN)

The sentence in (22) has a double interpretation. If *li* is used in a deictic sense, the reference of *si* is inclusive. If *li* refers to a referent already introduced in the discourse, the reference is generic. The situation becomes even more clear-cut when we use an object which is not related to the speech act at all, such as *una macchina* (a car):

- (23) Si cercava una macchina
si looked for-IMPF a car
'One/ somebody was looking for a car' (GEN)

The reading of (23) is undoubtedly generic. There is a clear contrast between it and (20), despite the verb and the aspectual specification of the sentence are the same.

This apparent exception to our generalization actually leads us to understand the origin of the inclusive reading differently. It seems that introducing an object which

strictly correlates with the speech act forces an inclusive reading, no matter which aspect we choose. This interaction between reference and the speech act is somehow welcome, as the speech act includes necessarily a speaker, and therefore a link to the speech act may introduce the speaker among the referents. Hence an analysis of the inclusiveness of *si* needs to capitalize both on the correlation of the aspectual variation with the inclusive-exclusive reading and on the strong role that the speech act plays.

3. *Aspect, Speech Act and phi-features on si*

In the previous section, we have observed how the interpretation of impersonal *si* depends on aspect, and how the speech act might play a role in such an interpretation as well. In this section, we propose an analysis of the inclusiveness phenomenon which, far from covering all the possible interpretational variations, captures most of the general trends examined so far, while including aspect and speech act among the causes of inclusiveness.

Specifically, we propose that inclusiveness corresponds to saying that there is a sub-feature specification for Speaker. Such an idea finds independent evidence in the work of Harley & Ritter (2000). Harley & Ritter show that in some languages, such as Kalihna, mainly spoken in Venezuela, inclusiveness is signalled with a specific morpheme. That is, the presence of a Speaker feature is overtly shown by morphology on Kalihna 1st person inclusive pronouns. Along the lines of Harley & Ritter, we propose that inclusiveness on impersonal pronouns means specification of a sub-feature of the Person feature on *si* as +Speaker. *Si* may get its reference in two ways: by entering some kind of agreement relation with the aspectual head or via agreement with the Speech Act. If Aspect does not have a generic feature, i.e. if Aspect in non-imperfective, the sub-feature specification takes place via agreement with the Speech Act head.

3.1. *The features on si*

Before outlining the analysis, a short note on the feature composition of impersonal *si*. The phi-features of impersonal *si* are not easy to detect because of the puzzling agreement patterns that *si* produces (see Cinque 1988, Raposo & Uriagereka 1990, and recently D'Alessandro 2002). However, it is widely accepted that *si* has a syntactic person feature, strictly related to its intrinsic animacy (see Ormazabal & Romero 2002 among others). It is well known that impersonal *si* identifies a group of humans as its reference. Such a characteristic has been often considered to have a syntactic counterpart, namely an 'animate/person' feature.

It is also a well-known fact that impersonal *si* triggers 3rd person agreement on the verb. After Beneveniste (1966), 3rd person is often considered as 'no-person'. For the person specification on *si* we follow D'Alessandro (to appear) in assuming

that *si* does have a person feature (see also Anagnostopoulou 2002), but this feature is underspecified for Speaker/Addressee. This underspecification makes the difference between impersonal *si* and 3rd person pronouns, which do have a specification as -Speaker/-Addressee (-1st/-2nd).

The person feature on *si* needs to be specified in the course of the derivation, and this happens when it enters agreement with Aspect or Speech Act, as already mentioned before. We discuss the exact mechanism for this feature specification in the next section.

Concerning the number feature on *si*, it is almost universally accepted that *si* is plural, as it triggers plural agreement on the adjective in predicative sentences like the one exemplified in (24):

- (24) Se *si* è ricchi *si* è molto simpatici a tutti
if *si* is rich-PL *si* is very nice-PL to all
‘If one is rich, he/she is very nice for everybody’

Si is considered not to be specified for gender.

3.2. *Aspect and Speech Act projections*

As has been argued in e.g. Belletti (1990) and most recently in Cinque (1999), following the Split-Infl hypothesis, there is at least one Aspect projection somewhere above the VP and below the TP. Such an aspectual projection contains the information needed in order to specify the feature content of *si*. In particular, we postulate the existence of a ‘generic’ feature, which is projected together with the imperfective head (see also Alexiadou 1997). When imperfective morphology is absent, such feature is also absent.

In addition, following recent work by Sigurðsson (2002), we assume the existence of a projection which encodes the properties of the speech act (in particular, for what matters to us, the presence of a speaker). The structure that we follow in our analysis is reproduced in (25):

- (25) [CP ... [Speech Act P ... [TP ... [Aspect P ... [vP ... [VP ...]]]]]]

Moreover, we assume that *si* is NOT directly merged in the specifier of TP, as often assumed (see Belletti 1982, Cinque 1988, among others). With unergative verbs, such as the ones we are considering in this paper, we assume that *si* is merged in the specifier of *v*, as an external argument. Note that such an assumption is not uncontroversial. For further discussion on this point see Cinque (1988, Embick 2000, D’Alessandro 2003).

3.3. The generic vs. inclusive reading

As mentioned in section 2.2, imperfective aspect determines a reading on the impersonal pronoun as not specified for inclusiveness. Following Chierchia (1995) and Bonomi (1997) among many others, we assume that imperfective aspect introduces a generic operator. This amounts to saying, in Harley & Ritter's terms, that there is a generic feature on the Aspect head whenever an imperfective item is merged there². The person feature on *si* gets its specification via agreement with the Aspect head. Specifically, when *si* enters agreement with imperfective Aspect, it gets its person feature specified as generic.

If aspect is not imperfective, the Aspect head will lack the generic feature. In this case, *si* will need to look further up in order to get its feature specified, and it will enter agreement with the Speech Act head. As the speech act necessarily includes the speaker, the person feature of *si* will be specified for speaker, that is for 1st person in declarative sentences. The specification of 1st person, plus *si*'s plural number feature result in a 1st person plural reading.

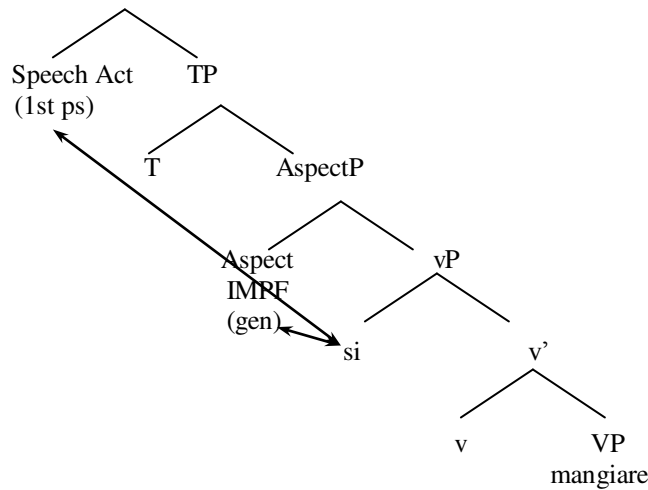
Note here that what we have in mind does not strictly correspond to Chomsky's mechanism of valuation. According to Chomsky (1999), pronouns and DPs carry interpretable phi-features, while functional heads carry uninterpretable ones. The mechanism of feature valuation and checking takes place as follows: interpretable features (i.e. valued features, features with a value) on DPs enter an Agree relation with uninterpretable features (i.e. unvalued features, which do not have a value yet) on functional heads such as T and *v*. The Agree relation values the unvalued uninterpretable features, which will be removed after such valuation. For us, the aspectual head carries the interpretable feature 'generic' and the pronoun is unspecified. That is *si*, which is a DP, has unvalued features. Our proposal is more in the spirit of Bianchi (2003). According to Bianchi, the person feature is intrinsically *deictic*, that is it needs to be linked to the speech act. In other words, it is the speech act that makes the feature interpretable. The person feature, Bianchi claims, 'establishes the relationship between the participant of the speech event encoded in the Speech Phrase and the participants of the reported event' (Bianchi 2003:9). Person checking is the syntactic mechanism that anchors the lexical person feature of pronouns to the speech event.

Building on Bianchi, we can reformulate our analysis as follows: *si*'s reference set is not entirely determined in the lexicon. It is clear, as Chierchia (1995) suggests, that impersonal *si* identifies a group of humans, but such a group needs further specification. This lack of specification corresponds to the lack of specification of

² Harley & Ritter (2002) do not have a model for impersonal pronouns. The 'generic' feature is an extension of their proposal for our own purposes.

the person feature on *si*. We know that a 3rd person plural pronoun such as *nome* is specified for non-1st/non-2nd, while *si* lacks such a specification. In order to obtain such a specification, *si* establishes agreement relations with the locally closest head which can provide it with a specification, namely Aspect. If Aspect carries such feature, which is obtained by means of imperfective morphology, then *si* gets a generic person feature specification. In case Aspect lacks such a feature, *si* agrees with the higher Speech Act head, which provides it with a speaker (i.e. inclusive) feature specification. What follows is the derivation of sentences (1) and (2): *In quel ristorante si mangiava bene /si è mangiato bene*.

(26) Speech Act P



If one takes the definition of speech act seriously, one would expect that the real specification for inclusiveness would always include the speaker, also in the case of reported speech. In other words, if *si* appears in a reported speech context, it should include the speaker encoded in the sentence and not the person who utters the sentence. Let us concentrate on the following example:

(27) Maria e Gianni hanno raccontato che si è
 Maria and Gianni have told that si is
 mangiato bene in quel ristorante
 eaten well in that restaurant
 ‘Maria and Gianni said that they have eaten well in that restaurant’

To the extent that a sentence like (27) is grammatical³, if the speech act projection determines the feature specification of *si*, *si* should qualify as including the speakers Maria and Gianni, and not the person who utters the sentence. This is exactly what happens with (27), where the reference set identified by *si* includes *Maria and Gianni*, and not the person who utters the sentence. Such examples provide strong support for our analysis which heavily relies on the Speech Act and on the Speaker feature.

4. The feature specification of 3rd person impersonal pronouns

As already mentioned in the introduction, some impersonal pronouns can never be inclusive. This impossibility follows readily from our analysis. If the inclusive reading is obtained via Person feature specification, such a reading will be barred in pronouns that already have a person feature specification which is not 1st person. This is indeed the case with 3rd person plural pronouns, such as Abruzzese *nome* and *pro_{arb}*. As these pronouns are already specified for -1st person, it is impossible for them to get a further specification as +1st person.

Concerning 3rd person plural pronouns, it has often been claimed that it is plural number what conveys exclusiveness, and not the person feature. The following Hebrew example directly contradicts this hypothesis:

- (28) be-Savu'ot'oxlim givna
 in-Pentecost eat-BENONI MASC PL cheese
 'One eats cheese in Pentecost' (INCL)

[from Borer (1998) in Cabredo-Hofherr (2002)]

In Modern Hebrew, *benoni* (i.e. the present tense) is only marked for gender and number, not for person. Plurality in (28) does not trigger exclusiveness. Therefore, the specification of inclusiveness/exclusiveness has to be done on the Person feature, as we propose.

5. The case of Finnish and Florentine

Recall that a further problem with impersonal constructions was that they can be re-interpreted as 1st person plural constructions. This is the case in e.g. Florentine. The phenomenon is, however, not only restricted to Florentine, but it is quite widespread among the languages of the world. (29) is an example of an impersonal con-

³ When a subordinate clause and the main clause have the same subject in Italian, the subordination with *che* is barred, and an infinitival subordinate is required. The sentence in (27) would be better uttered as 'Maria e Gianni hanno raccontato di aver mangiato bene in quel ristorante' (Maria and Gianni have told to have eaten well...)

struction in spoken Finnish. As can be seen, the impersonal construction replaces the 1st person plural form:

- (29) Me mennään kauppaan
We go-IMPERS shop-ILL
'We go to the shop'

In (29), despite the presence of the 1st person plural pronoun, the verb shows an impersonal form.

We believe that the source of the plural interpretation of impersonal forms is the generalization of the inclusive use of the impersonal construction. That is the inclusive use has generalized, the result being that the construction with the 1st person plural form of the verb slowly dies out. This re-interpretation is a case of grammaticalization and it must involve a period where both forms co-existed. Interestingly, we find different stages of this process instantiated in the world languages, occasionally depending on the register. Spoken Finnish, for example, has completed the process, while written Finnish is still in the stage of having two coexisting forms. Another interesting case is French, which is losing the 1st person plural form. This is almost always replaced by the impersonal *on* construction.

To conclude, in this paper we discussed two types of impersonal pronouns. Pronouns belonging to the first group, such as Italian *si*, can receive an inclusive interpretation. On the other hand, pronouns belonging to the second group do not allow for such a reading. We investigated the triggers and the distribution of inclusiveness. We argued that unspecified time reference, as well as imperfective aspect, trigger a generic reading on pronouns. The absence of such specifications in a clause gives rise to the necessity of linking the impersonal pronoun to the Speech Act (Sigurdsson 2002, *Speas to appear*), thus triggering an inclusive reading. We further proposed that the reason why impersonal forms are used in some languages to convey a 1st person plural reading is that such pronouns have been used more and more with an inclusive reading, losing their generic referentiality. This has led to a reanalysis of such forms as exclusively 1st plural forms.

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