Null Subjects and Impersonality: Counter-Evidence from French

Languages vary with respect to the way they express impersonality. Some languages make use of reflexive construction (e.g., Spanish, Italian), while others convey the proposition through a null generic pronoun (e.g., Finnish, Brazilian Portuguese) or overt subject pronoun (e.g., English). The distribution of these syntactic devices has generally been attributed to the difference in the null subject (NS) property of languages in the literature (Holmberg, 2005). This generalisation has also been rooted or suggested in many of the existing analyses of impersonal reflexive construction (IRC), which links the NS property to the availability of the construction; IRC is found in consistent NS languages, such as Spanish and Italian, but not in non-NS language, including French (contrast (1a) and (1b)).

(1) a. Se come mucho aquí
   SE eat.3.SG.PRES much here
   ‘One eats a lot here (Spanish)

   b. *Il se mange beaucoup ici
   it SE eat.3.SG.PRES much here
   Intended: ‘One eats a lot here’ (French)

French, however, does allow a reflexive construction to express impersonality in certain restricted contexts, namely when the predicate is transitive and takes a definite DP complement (2). This posits a problem for analyses directly associating the reflexive clitic with the pronominal nature of INFL (Belletti, 1982; Rizzi, 1986).

(2) a. Il se mange souvent des gâteaux ici
   it SE eat.3.SG.PRES often some cake.PL here

   b. *(Il) se mange souvent les gâteaux ici
   it SE eat.3.SG.PRES often the cake.PL here
   ‘One often eats cakes here / Here cakes are often eaten’
   (Cinque, 1988; Mendikoetxea, 2008)

In this study, by examining the exceptional occurrence of reflexive se in French impersonal construction, I show that the NS property cannot be the sole factor determining the nature of impersonal statements across languages. Rather, I develop an analysis in which the way impersonality is expressed depends on the interaction between the EPP requirements and the specificity of the subject referent, which I argue is realised as a specificity feature on D in the inflectional domain. Through my research, I aim to provide a unified analysis of impersonal constructions which simplifies the previous analyses by removing the language-specific mechanisms.

References:


