

ISMGE 2020

II International Scientific and Practical Conference "Individual and Society in the Modern Geopolitical Environment"

MEANING AND FUNCTIONS OF MAN AND ON FOR DENOTATION OF A SUBJECT

Alexander Chervoniy (a), Evgenia Murashova (b)*, Yulia Demonova (c)

*Corresponding author

(a) Taganrog State Pedagogical Institute, Chair of German and French Philology Taganrog, Russia,
ckutrik@yandex.com

(b) Taganrog State Pedagogical Institute, Chair of German and French Philology, Taganrog, Russia,
shenetschka@rambler.ru

(c) Taganrog State Pedagogical Institute, Chair of English Philology, Taganrog, Russia,
demonowa.yulya@yandex.ru

Abstract

The article studies the ways of explicating the semantic subject by personal indefinite pronoun *man* in German and personal indefinite pronoun *on* in French. The authors analysed the functions of *man* and *on* as well as subjective reasons why speakers use these pronouns for nomination. They used the method of semantic analysis, comparative and contextual analyses to scrutinize the meaning and functions of *man* and *on*. The investigation was done on the literary texts by Erich Maria Remarque, Pierre Louis Boileau, Thomas Narcejac in which the pronouns *man* and *on* are used to determine a doer. Indefinite personal pronouns of the third person *man* in German and *on* in French are distinctive by their wide semantic meaning: they can serve as markers of the first and second person. The referents to the mentioned above pronouns can be an indefinite, definite and generalized real doer. The specification of the doer is done according to the concrete context. In a sentence *man* and *on* always fulfil the function of a grammatical subject and the singular form can denote real plural subject. The personal indefinite pronoun *man* in German and personal indefinite pronoun *on* in French in speech serve as a reducing semantic subject. Studies dedicated to the peculiarities of speech phenomena like those of excluding the semantic subject in German and French fully coincides with the focus of anthropocentric scientific paradigm. Such phenomena create a kind of information base about linguistic self-identification of a person as the representatives of a certain culture.

2357-1330 © 2020 Published by European Publisher.

Keywords: Function, personal indefinite pronoun, semantic meaning, subject nomination.



This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 Unported License, permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

1. Introduction

The research of the recent years conducted in the field of cognitive linguistics, pragmatic linguistics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics and others displays a certain change in the interpretation of the Subject. This is largely connected with the revision of such core categories like action, speech act, intention, illocution, presupposition and others according to which the Subject is identified.

The Subject is mostly interpreted now as an active doer (passionary language/speech individuum). The passionary nature is heavily accented and now some linguistic units rarely associated with the Subject of communication are involved in the investigation of the matter (Fillmore, 1987; Malamud, 2012; Murashova, 2015; Oppenrieder, 2010; Pishwa, 1994).

As a result, in cognitive and pragmatic linguistics we review the meaning of the linguistic units which denote or indicate the Subject in various kinds of texts.

2. Problem Statement

In their research the authors used the method of semantic analysis, comparative method and contextual method which let them view the semantic meaning and functions of personal indefinite pronoun *man* in German and personal indefinite pronoun *on* in French from different angles.

The data for investigation was taken from German and French fictional texts by E. M. Remarque, P. Boileau, T. Narsezhak, where pronouns *man* and *on* are used for expressing the subject.

3. Research Questions

3.1. Personal indefinite pronoun *man* in German.

Classical German definition dictionaries interpret personal indefinite pronoun *man* as capable of denoting subject (single living being, person) or a group of subjects (living beings, people), accomplishing some action (Duden, 2019).

Besides the classical approach, in modern linguistics there exist several more approaches to identify and classify *man*.

According to one of them *man* is a semantic primitive, which provides the interpretation to the existing indefinite pronouns *jemand, jedermann, jeder, beide, alle, etwas, nichts, alles, ein-, kein-, welch-, manch-, einig-, mehrere*) (Marschall, 1996, p. 96). Interestingly enough, all of them indicate an unknown or indefinite person or object and *man* is characterized as the most ambiguous.

According to another approach *man* is a special generalizing kind of personal general pronouns because it denotes, as a rule, a group of people, accomplishing some action (Haspelmath, 1997; Hoekstra, 2010), or one person as an accomplisher of the action (Siewierska, 2011). Viewing passionarity of a person as their essential characteristic, the followers of this approach advocate that *man* is a special kind of personal pronouns indicating an indefinite group of passionary subjects.

Within the limits of the third approach some principle differences of *man* are studied (Zifonun, 2000, p. 245). It differs from indefinite as well as personal pronouns; it is also capable of expressing personal meaning and passionary nature as a dominating component but only in the certain context.

The latter approach seems most adequate to us, so we have proved its relevance through the prism of literary texts.

Studying the realization of the pronoun *man* in the literary discourse of E.M. Remarque we came across its context similarity to pronouns *ich* and *wir*.

For example, the pronoun *man* denotes a subject which includes a group of other subjects and characterizes the action of the active subject identical to other subjects in similar extra linguistic context:

Ich blicke auf meine Stiefel. Sie sind groß und klobig, die Hose ist hineingeschoben; wenn **man** aufsteht, sieht **man** dick und kräftig in diesen breiten Röhren aus (Remarque, 2013, p. 24).

Inclusion of the addresser into the action in the given above excerpt is emphasized with the personal pronoun *ich*.

Man merkt, dass **wir** nahe an den Meeren sind, **man** wacht vor Kälte immer wieder auf (Remarque, 2013, p. 44).

Man, which is actualized in the excerpt twice is related to the personal pronoun *wir* in the post-position. The context meaning of *man* comes close to that of *wir*.

Both given above examples illustrate the inclusion of the speaker's activity into that of a social group, a part of which the speaker represents at the current moment.

Endlich rief Katezinsky ihm zu: "Nun mach deinen Bouillonkeller schon auf, Heinrich! **Man** sieht doch, dass die Bohnen gar sind" (Remarque, 2013, p. 5).

Here we can talk about generalizing meaning of *man* because in the given above context it accumulates the activity of the addresser as well as of the addressee and actually any person put in the same situation. What is more, the realization of *man* in this context is a marker of conscious removing of the subject, who is aiming at avoiding direct indication to the doer.

An den Seitenflächen befinden sich Handgriffe, so dass **man** sie transportieren kann (Remarque, 2013, p. 7).

Here *man* denotes all people as potential doers (all, everyone), that is expresses a generalizing meaning.

Ich habe dir ja immer gesagt, dass **man** eine so gute Uhr nicht mitnimmt (Remarque, 2013, p. 12).

In the above excerpt the meaning is also generalizing and the described action can be related to any living being (all, everyone).

Während er bewusstlos war, hat **man** ihm seine Uhr gestohlen (Remarque, 2013, p. 12).

Man points to indefinite person accomplishing the action (somebody). The construction with *man* is used instead of passive voice but is not regarded as equal to verbal passive constructions because it underlines the active position of the subject.

From the point of view of syntactical and morphological grammatical structure, *man* is a stable unchanging form. *Man* is realized into speech in a nominative case singular and has the function of a subject accordingly. In other cases, suppletive forms of the indefinite pronoun *einer* are used.

Man ist aus den Baracken manches gewohnt, aber hier kann **einem** doch flau werden (Remarque, 2013, p. 12).

In accordance to the mentioned above *man* cannot be substituted for *einer* out of the context without any change in meaning because *man* denotes an indefinite number of people (one person, a group or the humanity as a whole) while *einer* points to only one indefinite individual in the speech context.

From the morphological point of view, *man* is singularia tantum but can be used with verbs or verbals which denote an action accomplished by several people (*miteinander bekannt sein, miteinander sprechen*). *Einer* is not used here.

Man ist zu wenig miteinander bekannt, um mehr zu tun, als etwas zu quatschen und abends Siebzehn-und-vier zu spielen oder zu mauscheln. **Man spricht miteinander** (Remarque, 2013, p. 138).

German pronoun *man* has one more distinctive feature which is will not be found with French *on*, for example. *Man* is always combined with a possessive pronoun of masculine gender *sein*.

Sehen ist ganz schön, aber wenn **man seine** Frau nach so langer Zeit wiederhat, will **man**, wenn es eben geht, doch noch was anderes (Remarque, 2013, p. 194).

This is connected with critical binary opposition: subject – masculine gender and object – neuter gender, which exists in German. The subject under consideration or a number of subjects in its turn can be of either masculine or feminine gender.

In every of the given above examples, the denotative nucleus *man* is a person (a living being) no matter whether one man or the whole mankind is meant (Remarque, 2013, p. 18).

One more proof to the given above idea lies in realizing *man* with reflective pronoun *sich* which denotes an active subject.

Man kann es nicht erklären. **Man** geht und denkt an nichts – plötzlich liegt **man** in einer Bodenmulde, und über einen spritzen die Splitter hinweg; – aber **man** kann **sich** nicht entsinnen, die Granate kommen gehört oder den Gedanken gehabt zu haben, **sich** hinzulegen (Remarque, 2013, p. 41-42).

Erde, mit deinen Bodenfallen und Löchern und Vertiefungen, in die **man sich** hineinwerfen, hineinkauern kann! (Remarque, 2013, p. 41).

Das Grauen lässt sich ertragen, solange **man sich** einfach duckt; aber es tötet, wenn **man** darüber nachdenkt (Remarque, 2013, p. 102).

Mir wird schwindelig, es ist nichts hier, woran **man sich** noch halten könnte. (Remarque, 2013, p. 110).

All in all in the investigated literary text discourse of E.M. Remarque the meaning of *man* denoting subject or subjects can be found in three variants:

- 1) generalising meaning (people without limitations in time and location)

Man schmeckt den Pulverqualm bitter auf der Zunge (Remarque, 2013, p. 39).

- 2) episodic meaning (a person or a group of people limited in time and location)

Es sind seine besten Stücke. «Wir können sie ja umtauschen», schlägt Müller wieder vor, »hier draußen kann **man** so was brauchen» (Remarque, 2013, p. 14).

- 3) specific situational meaning

Franz Kemmerich sah beim Baden klein und schmal aus wie ein Kind. Da liegt er nun, weshalb nur? **Man** sollte die ganze Welt an diesem Bette vorbeiführen und sagen: Das ist Franz Kemmerich, neunzehneinhalb Jahre alt, er will nicht sterben (Remarque, 2013, p. 24).

Realization of the situational meaning of *man* can be followed by explicit involving of the subject-addresser into the fragment of the reality.

Es hat keinen Zweck mehr. **Man** kann ihn nicht überzeugen. Mir ist elend vor Hilflosigkeit (Remarque, 2013, p. 24).

3.2. Indefinite personal pronoun *on* in French

The pronoun *on* is one of the most widely used lexical units in French which expresses most general and approximate idea about a doer (semantic subject). This pronoun, derived from Latin *homo* (Petit, 1981) (compare derivation of German *man* from substantive *Mann* (m) (François, 1984), demonstrates the existence of a mark which serves for denoting a person as an active doer of real and virtual worlds.

Using *on* in French testifies not only a person's presence but also expressing human personality via speech.

As it is widely known, *on* first and foremost expresses an indefinite person. For example:

On a frappé à la porte. Je l'ai ouverte, c'était ma cousine.

Nevertheless, this pronoun is also used for expressing a definite (Muller, 1979) as well as a generalized subject (Gak, 2000).

For example :

- 1) Il dut perdre connaissance un court instant. Agenouillé dans les cailloux, je tenais sa main. Je n'avais jamais imaginé qu'**on (je)** pût être aussi malheureux (Boileau & Narcejac, 1986, p.16)
- 2) Elle poussa vers moi un journal déplié.
- 3) «**On (tout le monde, tous)** parle déjà de votre ami, sans donner de détails. Lisez. En page trois» (Boileau & Narcejac, 1986, p. 28).
- 4) Elle est revenue, souriante. Elle m'embrasse. «**On (tu)** a été bien sage? Devine ce que t'apporte? Des galettes» (Boileau & Narcejac, 1986, p. 28).

It should be mentioned that *on* contains only one feature of a semantic subject which is its animate nature.

A subject categorized this way is semantically deficient. Thus, the subject expressed by means of *on* has no gender characteristics. This pronoun due to its wide generalized meaning is a perfect example of language asymmetry of form and meaning.

Grammatically the pronoun *on* is related to the third person singular therefore when used in a sentence it agrees with a verb in the form of a third person singular; still in the context, it can be related to the first person (Grafström, 1969) as well as a second person. What is more, a singular form can refer to a plural number.

The examples are:

- 1) «Quel âge a-t-elle? chuchotai-je.
– Vingt-quatre ans.
– **On (je)** lui en donnerait seize. Elle est charmante» (Boileau & Narcejac, 1986, p.25).
- 2) Elle est revenue.

«Bernard!» cria Agnès. Venez! On (**nous**) a besoin de vous.... (Boileau & Narcejac, 1986, p.82).

- 3) Nous entendîmes les pas de Julia dans le corridor et les deux femmes, instantanément, changèrent de contenance. On (**elles**) avait l'habitude, ici, de faire front contre les intrus et la correction était plus forte que la haine (Boileau & Narcejac, 1986, p.78).

Contradictory nature of the pronoun *on* is manifested in the fact that despite its wide semantic meaning, in a sentence it can express only one function – that of the subject.

As the analysis shows the use of *on* in speech can be caused by some objective as well as subjective reasons.

- I. The speaker doesn't know who the real doer is; there is no relevant information to denote the doer as a definite one. For that reason, the speaker has to employ indefinite personal pronoun *on*. The synonyms to *on* in this case, can be *quelqu'un* (somebody) and an adjective *certain(e)* (some) in the preposition to the noun.
- II. If the speaker uses *on* to denote people well known to them it accounts for some hidden pragmatic meaning like unwillingness to specify the doer due to some subjective reasons.

Thus intentional denotation of the semantic subject is characterized by pragmatic intention which presumes maximum vagueness of characteristic traits which make up the notion of a human.

In our opinion, using *on* in speech is a way of intentional explicit reduction of the semantic subject in French.

As mentioned above the referent to the deleted by means of *on* subject can be a definite, indefinite or generalized doer.

As to what type of referent the subject is related to, it becomes clear in the context within which the semantic subject is put.

A thought which travels from the unknown to the known is first formed by indefinite lexical units; however, as the information accumulates, the thought acquires a more concrete form of expression. Thus, an indefinite form of a pronoun gives way to a definite personal one.

For example :

On sonna, sur le palier. Je courus sans bruit jusqu'au grand salon, surveillant le vestibule sans être vu. Hélène reconduisait **son élève, une grande fille** à lunettes qui portait des partitions roulées sous le bras; elle introduisit **un garçon d'une quinze années**, qui rougissait en lui parlant et ne savait où mettre ses mains (Boileau & Narcejac, 1986, p. 35).

The search of a semantic subject, accumulating data about it leads to its specification and actualization if that is the intention of the speaker.

In personal generalized sentences *on* can take the position of grammatical subject (Chervoniy, 2019). In this case the speaker knows, however vaguely, who the semantic subject is. For example:

Si j'avouais que je n'étais pas Bernard, **on** me soupçonnerait fatalement de l'avoir tué pour prendre sa place (Boileau & Narcejac, 1986, p. 30).

With the help of generalization by combining own opinion with that of others the speaker enhances their argumentation. But through accenting all the attention on the argumentative effect the speaker imagines the real doer as one of the many without identifying them. For example : – J'aurais bien

voulu, mais je ne dispose que de trois ou quatre jours. **On** ne fait pas ce qu'**on** veut, dans la commerce (Boileau & Narcejac, 1986, p. 67).

In a situation of communication, the use of a generalized personal pronoun *on* fulfills a pragmatic function whose realization is done through phraseological means like proverbs and sayings. For example:

- 1) **On** apprend à tout âge.
- 2) **On** ne meurt qu'une fois.
- 3) **On** ne peut avoir le lard et le cochon.

To avoid repetition the pronoun *on* can replace some concrete explication of the subject of it used to be lexically defined and therefore known to the communicants. For instance :

Et j'eus l'intuition profonde que je ne comptais vraiment pas, que je n'étais pour **elles** qu'un objet qu'**on** se dispute, qu'**on** se vole (Boileau & Narcejac, 1986, p. 78).

It should be noted that the pronoun *on* exists in the marginal zone on the crossroads of the expressive means of the subject. In other words, it stands in opposition to definite forms of expressing real doer (personal nouns, pronouns), to indirect nominations (metaphor, metonymy) and to implicit forms of nominating semantic subject (nomination, passive constructions).

4. Purpose of the Study

In the research, the attempt was made to analyse the functions of *man* and *on* as well as subjective reasons why speakers use these pronouns for nomination.

5. Research Methods

To achieve the analysed the functions of *man* and *on* as well as subjective reasons why speakers use these pronouns for the nomination, integral analytical apparatus was referred to, including the application of the semantic analysis, comparative and contextual analyses which allowed us to scrutinize the meaning and functions of *man* and *on*.

The analysis was based on the semantics of the signified notion and the pragmatics of speech was also taken into account.

6. Findings

Man is an indefinite personal pronoun which is used for the purpose of denoting subject without specifying its activity which represents it as a doer.

Etymologically *man* is connected with the noun human as well as *man* in Icelandic, Swedish, *men* in Dutch and *on* in French.

This connection is fixed in the denotative core of the pronoun.

A generalized model of *man* can be represented as the following: *Man* = indication to a person + generalizing indication to a doer + combination with a verb in the form of the third person singular.

For the specifications in meaning some context is needed.

Man has some peculiarities in denoting subject on all linguistic levels such as semantics, morphology, syntaxes and pragmatics.

The pronoun *on* as well as *man* in German etymologically is connected with *homo* in Latin. In a sentence *on* always fulfils the syntactical function of a grammatical animate subject which holds the initial position in a French declarative sentence.

The referents to the pronoun *on* can be indefinite personal, generalized and definite semantic subject. Determination of the subject types expressed by *on* is done within the contextual communicative situation.

7. Conclusion

The mentioned above peculiarities differ *man* and *on* from all other pronouns, and this fact entitles us to prove their unique role in creating a class of indefinite personal pronouns in German and French.

The semantic width and active functioning of *man* and *on* in the process of communication entitles them to be one of the basic explicit forms of deleting semantic subject in German and French.

What with common tendencies in formation and functioning of the algorithms of the formal exclusion of the subject in generalizing utterances in different linguistic systems (including German and French) *Man* and *On* demonstrate certain differences in the nuances of contextual meanings. These nuances, conveyed by certain linguistic traditions or context, can reveal themselves as the information about the level of the subject generalization. In the majority of the analyzed contexts alongside with the anonymity of the subject, *Man* and *On* also express insignificance of the subject referent to the speaker.

In the German and French linguistic systems *Man* and *On* demonstrate a certain syntactic status connected with the subjects of various quantity and level of determination. The mentioned above pronouns are expressed with the third person singular form regardless of the number of the implied persons.

Acknowledgments

The research was carried out with the financial aid of the Russian Foundation for Basic Research (RFBR) within the scientific project № 19-012-00062 “The Polyphony of the semantic subject (on the basis of the Russian, French, English and German languages) done in FSBEI HE “Rostov State University of Economics”; the leader of the project – PHD, head of the Department of German and French languages Alexander Chervoniy.

References

- Boileau, P., & Narcejac, T. (1986). *Persons in a Shadow. Gate of the Sea: Collection*. Rainbow.
- Chervoniy, A. M. (2019). Semantic subject in generalizing statements of Russian and French. In *Language and Reality. Scientific Readings at the Department of Romance Languages named after V.G. Gak Collection of Articles on the Results of the IV International Conference* (pp. 432-440). Moscow.
- Duden. (2019). *Deutsches Universalwörterbuch*. 9 (p. 2144). Online-Ausgabe. https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/man_jemand_irgendeiner_irgendeine.
- Fillmore, Ch. J. (1987). *Fillmore's Case Grammar: a Reader*, ed. by René Dirven and Günter Radden. Groos.
- François, J. (1984). *Analyse Énonciative des Équivalents Allemands du Pronom Indéfini «on» Recherches en pragma-sémantique*. Klincksieck.

- Gak, V. G. (2000). *Theoretical Grammar of French*. Dobrosvet.
- Grafström, A. (1969). «On» remplaçant «nous» en Français. *Revue de Linguistique Romane*, 33, 270-298.
- Haspelmath, M. (1997). *Indefinite Pronouns*. Clarendon Press.
- Hoekstra, J. (2010). On the impersonal pronoun 'one'. *Modern West Frisian in Journal of Comparative Germanic Linguistics* 13, 31-59.
- Malamud, S. A. (2012). Impersonal indexicals: one, you, man and du. Impersonal indexicals in DRAFT. *Journal of Comparative Germanic Linguistics*. <http://people.brandeis.edu/~smalamud/malamud-JCGL-web-draft.pdf>
- Marschall, G. R. (1996). Was bezeichnet man? Das indefiniteste „Indefinitpronomen“ und seine Verwandten”. In *Pro-Formen des Deutschen* (pp. 87-97). Staufenburg.
- Muller, Ch. (1979). *Sur les Emplois Personnels de L'indéfini «on» dans Langue Française et Linguistique Quantitative*. Slaktine.
- Murashova, E. A (2015). *Pragmatic Meaning of Speech Units. Problems and Prospects*. Pero.
- Oppenrieder, W. (2010). *Von Subjekten, Sätzen und Subjektsätzen in Untersuchungen zur Syntax des Deutschen*. De Gruyter. http://www.degruyter.com/search?f_0=isbnissn&q_0=9783111356426&searchTitles=true
- Petit, R. (1981). *Dictionnaire alphabétique & analogique de la langue française par Paul Robert*. Société du nouveau littré. Le Robert.
- Pishwa, H. (1994). Die Bedeutung des grammatischen Subjekts für die nicht-linguistische Textinterpretation. In *Texte verstehen: Konzepte, Methoden, Werkzeuge. Konstanz* (pp. 183-204). UVK Univ.-Verl. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-14682>
- Remarque, E. M. (2013). *Im Westen nichts Neues*. Dt. Nationalbibliothek, Online-Ressource. Propyläen-Verl.
- Siewierska, A. (2011). Overlap and complementarity in reference impersonals. Man-constructions vs. third person plural-impersonals in the languages of Europe”. In *Impersonal Constructions. A cross-linguistic perspective* (pp. 57-89). Benjamins.
- Zifonun, G. (2000). “Man lebt nur einmal”. Morphosyntax und Semantik des Pronomens man. *Deutsche Sprache Jg.*, 28(3), 232-253.