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Developmental perspectives on the role of French *on* in written and spoken expository texts

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Abstract

This article focuses on the ability to use linguistic forms in ways that are appropriate to the constraints of genre (expository discourse) and modality (writing and speech) in the course of monologic text production, as an ability whose development spans many years and requires considerable experience and schooling. The use of the French subject clitic *on* is examined in written and spoken expository texts produced by French speakers in four age groups (9–10-, 12–13-, 15–16-year-olds, and university graduate adults). The analysis reveals that the use of *on* decreases with age, while the use of another construction, the passive, which carries some of the same functional load, increases with age. This development is particularly marked in the written texts. We conclude that the study of later language development requires careful consideration of both written and spoken modalities as well as a variety of text genres. In the absence of such cross-modal and cross-genre investigation, ideas of children's developing linguistic competence across school-age and adolescence are liable to be partial or even misleading.
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1. Introduction

This article considers the French subject clitic *on* as a multifunctional element which serves, inter alia, for alternating discourse stance along a continuum from specific personal

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reference (where *on* is largely coreferential with the personal plural pronoun *nous* 'we') to fully generic reference corresponding to expressions like *tout le monde* 'the whole world = everyone'. Two more general themes underlie this discussion: first, the importance of a context-based, discourse-embedded study of multifunctional elements such as French *on*, and second, the fact that such expressions tend to be highly language-specific, making it hard, for example, to identify *on* with translation equivalents in other languages, such as English *one* or Dutch *men*. The study demonstrates that the development of a given linguistic construction needs to take into account how it is used in both speech and writing, what functional load it carries, and how it interacts with other constructions that share some of its functions.

The paper starts by considering the notion of '*on* as an alternative' (Section 1.1) and goes on to describe key features of its morphosyntactic distribution (Section 1.2). Different characterizations of the use of *on* constructions are then reviewed (Sections 2.1–2.3) and compared with competing constructions like passives and middle voice (Section 3) as background to our predictions (Section 4), followed by a description of the study (Section 5) and presentation of findings (Section 6), and concluding with interpretations of these results (Section 7).

1.1. 'On' as an alternative

The French subject clitic *on* is highly multifunctional, and its referential interpretation is far from transparent. Classifying the different uses of *on* is not only problematic for linguists; it is also difficult for speakers to choose between *on* and its various alternatives. This is illustrated in the series of reformulations in the following example taken from our corpus, a subset of the French texts collected in the framework of the more general project described in the introductory article to this volume.

(1) *On peut voir enfin tout le monde en a conscience euh enfin quand vous vous côtoyez les uns et les autres que vous êtes amenés à rencontrer certains problèmes même dans le cadre scolaire* [s11f, Exp, Sp][1]
'One/we can see well everybody is aware eh well when you [Plural] mix and mingle with one another that you are led to encounter certain problems even in school contexts.'

The speaker begins with *on*, then rewords what she is saying to a generic expression (*tout le monde* literally 'all the world' = 'everyone') and finally settles on a generic

[1] The code given after the examples taken from our corpus indicates the following: subjects age group (*s* or *u* indicates that the subject is an adult university student in either sciences (*s*) or humanities (*u*), *g* refers to grade school subjects (9–10-year-olds), *j* to junior high school subjects (12–13-year-olds) and *h* refers to high school subjects (15–16-year-olds); the next two digits specify subject number, followed by subject sex indicated by *m* or *f; Exp* stands for the expository text type, and *Sp* for spoken modality, *Wry* for written. To illustrate, [s11f, Exp, Sp] stands for a science major adult (*s*), the 11th subject in that age-group (*11*), a female (*f*) and it is an expository (*Exp*) in the spoken (*Sp*) modality, while [h17f, Nar, Wr] stands for a high school student (*h*), the 17th subject in that age-group (*17*), a female (*f*), and it is a narrative (*Nar*) in the written (*Wr*) modality.

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second person expression (*vous*). It is just this elusive character of *on* that will be the focus of the work presented here. *On* is never strictly obligatory in any context. Rather, speaker/writers must make a choice between *on* and its alternatives. Below we investigate the impact of age, level of schooling, and modality (writing versus speech) on this choice.

Imagine a scene in which a vase has been broken. Such a situation can be expressed in various ways. The renderings in (2) describe this scene by different wordings, ranked on a continuum of speaker involvement in, or responsibility for, the contents of the utterance from the highest degree in (2a) to the lowest degree in (2e).

(2)
a. *J'ai cassé le vase.* 'I broke the vase'
b. *On a cassé le vase.* 'Someone∼We broke the vase'
c. *Le vase a été cassé* (*par le garçon*). 'The vase was broken (by the boy)'
d. *Le vase s'est cassé* 'The vase broke'
e. *Le vase est cassé* 'The vase is broken'

In (2a) the speaker takes full responsibility for the information in the predicate by use of the first person pronoun as subject. The next two alternatives, the *on* construction (2b) and the passive construction – either with or without an agent phrase – in (2c) are the focus of our concern in this paper. In (2b), the agent of the activity encoded in the event is necessarily human, but *on* can either attribute responsibility to the speaker or not – that is, it may (but need not necessarily) have a reading that is close to (2a). In the passive construction in (2c), the speaker can shift responsibility for the action encoded in the predicate to an agent (*by the boy*) or omit the agent altogether, remaining vague as to whether the agent is human (*by the boy*, or *by me*) or nonhuman (*by the wind*). In the remaining examples, the middle voice construction in (2d) and the predicating adjective construction in (2e), there is no explicit mention or any attribution of a potentially responsible agent for the breaking of the vase.

Berman et al. (2002) and Berman (this volume) define 'discourse stance' as referring to three interrelated dimensions of text construction: (1) *Orientation*—sender, text, recipient; (2) *Attitude*—epistemic, deontic, affective; and (3) *Generality*—specific or general reference or quantification. Here, our approach to discourse stance will highlight the first and last of these dimensions. *Orientation* in this context concerns the relations between three participating elements in text production and interpretation – sender, text, and recipient. With respect to orientation, we argue that the *on* construction can either include or exclude the sender and/or recipient, so that the assignment of responsibility for the information in the text is ambiguous. In contrast, the agentless passive construction is completely neutral with respect to the responsibility of the sender and recipient. In this respect, the passive construction can be taken as an indication of text orientation, while the *on* construction indicates either a sender or a recipient orientation. As shown by several of the papers in this volume (see also Tolchinsky et al., 2002), the ability to adopt a text orientation is a late development.

The dimension of *generality* refers to how generalized or specific the reference is to people (including the sender), place, and/or times referred to in the text. The *on* construction can be either highly specific (corresponding to the first person plural *nous*

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'we') or highly generic (corresponding approximately to English 'one' or impersonal 'they' and to French impersonal *ils* 'they', *tout le monde* 'everyone'). The excerpts in (3a) and (3b) contrast use of an *on* construction in a spoken expository text and an agentless passive in a written text produced by the same woman.

(3) a. *Il y a d'autres problèmes qu'on a tendance à négliger* [s11f, Exp, Sp]
'there are other problems that one tend(s) ∼ we tend to neglect'

b. *Les autres difficultés de rapports entre les personnes au niveau collège sont par contre un peu oubliées* [s11f, Exp, Wr]
'Other difficulties in personal relations in junior high are on the other hand somewhat forgotten'

In the *on* construction in (3a), responsibility for the neglecting of problems is ambiguous between a specific or a generic agentive meaning. In contrast, the passive construction in (3b) leaves responsibility for forgetting unassigned, so that in this respect, the agentless passive eliminates the sender role, whereas the *on* construction leaves it rather more ambiguous. In terms of the speaker–writer's commitment to the propositional content of a message (Biber and Finegan, 1989), the agentless passive contributes to more distance between the sender and the message than does the *on* construction. In developmental terms, this is in line with the prediction of Berman et al. (2002) that the overall stance of more mature speaker/writers will tend to be more distanced, detached, and objective than that of children.

The chameleon character of *on* has been studied from many different perspectives, including its social and demographic distribution in everyday discourse and in interviews, and its use and perhaps abuse in the mass media, both for Canadian French (Laberge, 1978; Laberge and Sankoff, 1980) and for European French (Ashby, 1992; Atlani, 1984; Koenig, 1999; Simonin, 1984). An important conclusion emerging from such analyses is that *on* is, as noted, highly multifunctional, and that its reference varies depending on the particular discourse context and communicative setting. Thus, *on* can be used with the same functions as generic second person *tu*/*vous* singular/plural 'you', first person plural *nous* 'we', third person plural *ils* 'they', as well as other generalizing or quantifying expressions like *tout le monde* 'everyone' and generic collective nouns like *les gens* 'people'. In all cases – except as a variant of first person plural *nous* – the reference of *on* is non-specific but restricted to human referents.

The question underlying the present study is, since *on* can refer to a variety of referents for which there are many other alternative referring expressions, why do speaker/writers choose *on* rather than one of the other possible options? In addressing this issue, we take a developmental perspective by examining the distribution of *on* in spoken and written expository texts produced by French monolingual children at three age levels (9–10, 12–13, 15–16 years of age) compared with university educated adults, and we take a functional perspective by comparing the use of *on* to the use of passive constructions in the same texts.

Expository discourse requires that speaker/writers generalize across individuated experiences and events, presenting information as objective generalities. Because *on* is particularly vague, speaker/writers can use it to step back from attributing clear and unique

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responsibility for the information contained in their utterances. *On* is thus an important indicator of speaker/writer stance. However, as argued earlier, the passive construction creates even more distance between the speaker/writer and the content of the message than does the *on* construction.

The analysis that follows examines the distribution of *on* and passive constructions in written texts versus spoken expository texts produced by French-speaking schoolchildren, adolescents, and adults. As background, we describe the features of *on* as a subject clitic (Section 1.2) and the uses of *on* at the clause level and across clause boundaries (Section 2), and then consider alternative constructions, in particular passives that may alternate with *on* constructions (Section 3).

1.2. Morphological features of on

Morphologically, *on* is in the same paradigm as other subject clitics such as *je* 'I', *tu*/*vous* 'you', *il*/*elle* 'him/her', *nous* 'we' and *ils*/*elles* 'they' (Creissels, 1995). This is demonstrated by restrictions on the syntactic environments in which it can or must occur. In declarative sentences, *on*, like the other subject clitics, must directly precede (in declarative mood) or follow (in the interrogative) the verb (*on doit*/*doit-on* 'one must/must one', *il doit*/*doit-il* 'he must/must he') except in cases where the subject clitic is separated from the verb by another clitic pronoun functioning as a direct, dative, or oblique object, e.g., *on le doit*'one it must = one needs it', *il le doit* 'he it must = he needs it'). In other respects as well, *on* shares most of the characteristics of other subject clitics. Thus, it is disallowed in conjoined subjects where a disjunctive pronoun is required – such as *lui* in (4a) – in contrast to the conjunctive clitics *il* and *on* in (4b) and (4c); and it is disallowed when a scope particle such as *aussi* 'also' is inserted between the subject clitic and the verb as in (5b) and (5c), where, again, only a disjunctive pronoun is allowed, as in (5a).

(4)	a.	*Jean et lui sont partis*	'Jean and him left'
	b.	**Jean et il sont partis*	'Jean and he left'
	c.	**Jean et on sont partis*	'Jean and we left'
(5)	a.	*Lui aussi est parti*	'Him also left'
	b.	**Il aussi est parti*	'He also left'
	c.	**On aussi est parti*	'We also left'

Further, in dislocated constructions consisting of a disjunctive pronoun like those in (6a) through (6c), or a noun phrase followed by a resumptive clitic as in (6d) and (6e), *on* can function as a resumptive clitic that is coreferential only to first person plural – as in (6c) and (6e) but not (6f) and (6g) (Jones, 1996: 287).

(6)	a.	*Moi*$_i$, *je*$_i$ *pense que* ...	'me, I think that ...'
	b.	*Toi*$_i$, *tu*$_i$ *penses que* ...	'You, you think that ...'
	c.	*Nous*$_i$, *on*$_i$ *pense que* ...	'Us, we think that ...'
	d.	*Les gens*$_i$, *ils*$_i$ *pensent que* ...	'People, they think that ...'

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253	e.	*Ma mère et moi*$_i$, *on*$_i$ *pense que* ...	'My mother and I, we think that ...'
259	f	**Les gens*$_i$, *on*$_i$ *pense que* ...	'People, *people∼we∼someone think(s) that ...'
264	g.	**Tout le monde*$_i$, *on*$_i$ *pense que* ...	'Everybody, *they∼we∼someone think(s) that ...'

In the well-formed examples (6a) through (6e), the dislocated elements are co-referential with the resumptive clitics that follow them. When the resumptive clitic is *on*, it is co-referential only with first person plural as in (6c) and (6e). That is, although as noted earlier, *on* can alternate with generic expressions in subject position, as a resumptive clitic it cannot be co-referential with generic expressions like those in (6f) and (6g).

2. Uses of *on*

This section briefly reviews earlier analyses of how *on* is used in clause-level constructions (2.1), across clause boundaries (2.2), and in broader, discourse-based interpretations (2.3).

2.1. Clause-level uses of on

Jones (1996: 286–287) lists three basic uses of the subject clitic *on*: first person plural, generic, and indefinite. As a colloquial alternative to *nous* 'we', *on* has first person plural reference, as in sentences like *on a passé les vacances dans le Midi* 'we spent our vacation in the Midi'. As a generic form, *on* refers to people in general, e.g., *en France on mange les escargots* 'in France one eats snails', corresponding to subjectless 'pro-drop' constructions in Spanish or Hebrew with plural verb marking (Berman, this volume; Tolchinsky and Rosado, this volume). In its third use, as an indefinite, *on* corresponds to *quelqu'un* 'someone', e.g., *on a volé mon stylo* 'someone stole my pen', or to the understood subject of a passive construction, e.g., *mon stylo a été volé* 'my pen was stolen'.

It is not always easy to classify different uses of *on*, but several studies note that features of the verb with which it is associated are critical for how it is interpreted. Verb tense, for example, is important for determining the type of *on*. The generic interpretation is available only when the verb has a non-punctual tense, such as the present or imperfect, denoting a state or habitual event (Jones, 1996: 287). When used with a verb in the specific past tense (French *passé composé* corresponding roughly to English simple past), as in *on a volé son sac* 'someone∼we stole her/his purse', *on* can have either an indefinite or a first person plural interpretation, as shown by the gloss.

Verb semantics is also important in determining the indefinite interpretation of *on*. For example, Koenig (1999) argues that the referent of indefinite *on* must be an active, volitional participant in the situation encoded by the sentence in which it has the subject role, as shown in (7b) compared with (7a).

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(7) a. *On a reçu des lettres d'insultes* '*Somebody∼We received letters of insult.'
b. *On lui a envoyé des lettres d'insultes* 'Somebody∼We sent him letters of insult.' Koenig (1999: 238)

The subject of *recevoir* 'to receive' in (7a) does not entail agentivity, since semantic agency is not necessary in order to 'receive' something. In contrast, indefinite *on* can occur as the subject of a verb such as *envoyer* 'to send', as in (7b), which does involve volitional agentivity. This semantic restriction requires that to be interpreted as an indefinite subject, the clitic *on* ''must be the subject of a verb whose agentive or actor semantic role it satisfies'' (Koenig, 1999: 237).

2.2. Interclause uses of on

Across clause boundaries, *on* functions as a marker of coreferential identity only when it refers to the first person plural *nous*, as in (8a). With a generic expression, as in (8b), *on* can have partial correferentiality with *tout le monde*, that is, the referent(s) of *on* can be included in the class of *tout le mode*, but total identity is ruled out. Moreover, *on* in (8b) can also refer to a completely different set of individuals from those included in *tout le monde*.

(8) a. *Ma mère et moi*$_i$ *sommes allées voir le film. On*$_i$ *ne l'a pas aimé.*
'My mother and I$_i$ went to see the film. We$_i$ didn't like it.'
b. *Tout le monde*$_i$ *est allé voir le film. ???On*$_i$ *ne l'a pas aimé.*
'Everybody$_i$ went to see the film. *Everybody$_i$∼We didn't like it.'

Even though indefinite *on* is similar in meaning to *quelqu'un* 'someone', syntactically it behaves more like the implicit agent of passive constructions (Jones, 1996: 287). Thus, *on* cannot function as the antecedent of another pronoun, as shown in (9a), whereas *quelqu'un* can do so, as in (9b). Nor can the pronoun *il* in (9c) refer back to the implicit agent of the agentless passive *mon stylo a été volé*. In (9c) *il* could potentially refer to *mon stylo* in a very bizarre reading of the pen having a name.

(9) a. **On$_i$ a volé mon stylo. Il$_i$ s'appelle Jules.*
'Someone$_i$ stole my pen. His$_i$ name is Jules'
b. *Quelqu'un$_i$ a volé mon stylo. Il$_i$ s'appelle Jules.*
'Someone$_i$ stole my pen. His$_i$ name is Jules'
c. *Mon stylo a été volé. Il s'appelle Jules.*
'My pen has been stolen. His name is Jules'

Koenig (1999: 241–242) describes indefinite *on* as having a characteristic 'discourse inertness', discussing cases where *on* seems to be the antecedent of a following referent but in fact requires a particular type of inference. As noted, *on* can be coreferential across clause boundaries only in cases where it is interpreted as *nous* 'we'. Thus, in (10a), *on* and *il* 'he' cannot be coreferential. This contrasts to indefinite *quelqu'un* 'someone', which can be coreferential to *il* 'he', as in (10b).

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(10) a. *On_i *a tué le président. Il_i était du Berry, paraît-il.*
'Someone killed the president. He comes from the Berry it seems.'

b. *$Quelqu'un_i$ a tué le président. Il_i était du Berry, paraît-il*
'Someone killed the president. He [=the person who did the killing] comes from the Berry it seems.'

However, Koenig (1999) also notes instances where *on* introduces a new referent that appears to be referred to by a lexical noun in the following clause. Koenig argues that in such cases, the anaphoric relation between *on* and *le meurtrier* in (11) is not direct, but derived through inference.

(11) *On_i a tué le président. Le meurtrier$_i$ était du Berry, paraît-il.*
'Someone killed the president. The murderer comes from the Berry it seems.'

The act of killing involves a potential agent and patient, and the noun 'murderer' refers to someone who engaged in the act of killing the president, as patient. Demands of text coherence require that the event encoded in the two successive clauses be the same. Since the patient role is assumed by 'the president' in the first clause, the murderer in the second clause is inferred to fulfil the agent role.

The same type of inference can be observed in the opposite direction, where *on* has what appears to be an antecedent in the preceding text, as in (12).

(12) *Les services de contrôle ont quadrillé ces deux zones et y effectuent des prélèvements de terre. Pour l'instant, on n'a pas trouvé de dioxine dans la zone B.* (Atlani, 1984: 18)
'The control services have squared off these two zones and are sampling the ground. For the moment, they have not found dioxine ~ dioxine has not been found in zone B.'

If *les services de contrôle* squared off zones and sampled the ground, they must have been looking for something. Thus, through inference, *on* in (12) can be interpreted as having anaphoric reference.

In sum, *on* can be characterized as having three basic functions. It can refer (1) to first person plural *nous* 'we'; (2) to a generic referent, particularly when used with a verb in a non-punctual tense; and (3) in its indefinite usage, *on* can be a variant of *quelqu'un* 'someone' or of an agentless passive construction. In this last function, *on* indicates a change of verb valence by eliminating an agent without promoting any other participant. Ashby (1992) points out that this use of *on*, when it demotes an agent but does not promote any other participant, serves to foreground the predicate.

2.3. Discourse-based interpretations of *on*

The larger discourse context also plays a role in determining the referent of *on*. In her study of French newspapers, Atlani (1984: 15) explains the importance of extralinguistic contextual clues (e.g., as to who the writer and reader are and where they are located) in establishing the referent of *on*. The use of *on* in (13) below can alternate with *nous* 'we',

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including the journalist and, potentially, the audience of readers. Here, use of *on* enables the journalist to step back from adopting sole responsibility for the contents of the complement clause.

(13) *On comprend par ailleurs que plus de 1000 personnes soient déjà venues spontanément se faire examiner.* (Atlani, 1984: 17)
'We understand, in addition, that more that 1000 people have already come spontaneously to be examined.'

This use of *on* is highly favored in the context of cognitive predicates like *consider*, *know*, *understand*, *discover*, and *think*, typically accompanied with clausal complements, as in (13).

Atlani (1984:17) notes another context favoring *on*, which she describes as 'public rumor', where a location is identified and the referent of *on* are agents or actors who live or work there, along the lines characterized by Myhill (1997: 810) as 'locative *they*'. As illustrated in (14), the writer–journalist excludes him- or herself and the reading audience to the extent that they are not 'in Brianza'. On the other hand, if the location is identified as the city of Lyon and the sentence comes from a Lyonnais newspaper read by inhabitants of Lyon, this selfsame use of *on* could be considered equivalent to *nous* 'we'.

(14) *Sur place en Brianza, on parle surtout du problème de l'avortement.* (Atlani, 1984: 18)
'In Brianza, they ~ people speak mostly about the problem of abortion.'

3. Constructions in competition with *on*

The notion of 'competition' refers here to the idea that there is no single way to verbalize the contents of any given situation in the world (of reality or fantasy), and that speaker/writers have a range of options for describing the selfsame scene (Berman and Slobin, 1994: 516–517; Slobin, 1996, 2002). Speaker/writers select semantic roles they wish to express in describing a given situation, and also which participant or component of the scene they present as foregrounded or backgrounded. From a developmental point of view, it is important to consider the range of structural options available for expressing a given function in the target language (Clark, 2001). Thus, the *on* construction shares some of the functional load carried by agentless passives and middle voice constructions in French and in other languages (Ashby, 1992; Berman, 1980; Jisa et al., 2002; Koenig, 1999; Lyons, 1995; Vinay and Darbelnet, 1995; Tolchinsky and Rosado, this volume). Agentless passive constructions, as in (15a), and middle voice constructions, as in (15b), have in common the fact that the patient participant is foregrounded and the agent participant is backgrounded. A human agent is implied in both cases, but explicit reference to this participant is typically absent in passive constructions and is disallowed in middle voice constructions.

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(15) a. *Les problèmes ont été résolus tout de suite.*
'The problems were resolved right away'
b. *Les problèmes se sont résolus tout de suite.*
'The problems resolved themselves right away' ∼ 'The problems got resolved right away'

The *on* construction illustrated in (16) below – in contrast to the passive and middle voice constructions in (15) – does not eliminate the agent, but it does have the effect of downgrading agent individuation. Ashby (1992) argues that the use of an *on* subject serves to foreground the information contained in the predicate, part of which is implied by the patient participant, *les problèmes* 'the problems'.

(16) *On a résolu les problèmes tout de suite.*
'(Some)one ∼ We resolved the problems right away.'

Here, the *on* construction resembles the passive in (15a) since it foregrounds the patient participant and downgrades the agent. And it contrasts with the middle voice in (15b), to the extent that human agentivity is clearly encoded with *on*, but totally avoided in middle voice constructions.

4. Predictions

Since *on* can be used in variation with a number of other constructions, our prediction is that the use of *on* will decrease with age as the other constructions become productive and more widely used. Note that as a subject clitic, *on* is readably available to children from very young preschool-age as an alternative to first person plural *nous* 'we', basically because in spoken French, *on* is the equivalent of *nous* (Ashby, 1992; Jones, 1996). There is no doubt, then, that even the youngest subjects in our sample, the 9–10-year-olds, have acquired this clitic in at least one of its uses.

As we have seen, *on* can serve the same functions as other generic expressions, such as *tout le monde* 'everyone', *les gens* 'people', or *les habitants de la ville* 'city dwellers'. Previous research on a data-base similar to the one used in this analysis in French (Gayraud, 2000) and in other languages (Ravid et al., 2002) have shown that with age, the frequency of pronouns decreases and the frequency of lexical noun phrases rises, particularly in written texts. Another reason for predicting that use of *on* will decrease with age, then, is the general tendency that has been revealed for subject pronouns to be replaced by lexical subjects – particularly in written discourse.

Indefinite *on*, as noted, provides an alternative to agentless passive constructions. Previous work on written texts in five languages from the larger cross-linguistic project (Jisa et al., 2002) investigating the same four age groups as in this study (9–10, 12–13, 15–16 years of age, and adults) revealed two important findings. First, the five languages can be clustered into two groups, with Dutch, English, and French on the one hand, and Hebrew and Spanish on the other. Writers of languages in the first group of languages used significantly more passive constructions than those in the second group. This was attributed to the fact that Hebrew and Spanish use alternative constructions, most particularly

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subjectless impersonals, to downgrade agency without promotion of another participant. Second, all the languages revealed a strong developmental effect, and use of passives increases with age across the sample. Comparison of the youngest French children (9–10-year-olds) to their Dutch and English counterparts reveals a slight developmental lag. While no difference is observed between subjects writing in the three languages after 12–13 years of age, French grade-school children aged 9–10 years use fewer passives compared to their Dutch- and English-speaking peers. This, too, gives us reason to expect the use of *on* to decrease and the use of passive constructions to increase with age.

We also expect that the use of *on* yielding to passive constructions will be more marked in the written texts than in the spoken texts. An example of such an alternation is provided by comparing excerpts from spoken texts (17a) and written expository texts (17b) of the same French-speaking woman, a graduate level university student in the humanities.

(17) a. *Donc je vais parler des sujets euh conflictuels euh ou euh affectifs qu'on pourrait rencontrer dans la vie de tous les jours* [u33f, Exp, Sp]
'So I'm going to talk about conflictual eh or eh affective subjects that one can encounter in everyday life'

b. *Les problèmes entre les gens, rencontrés durant leur vie scolaire et leur vie professionnelle de tous les jours, sont finalement les mêmes.* [u33f, Exp, Sp]
'Problems between people, encountered during their academic life or their everyday professional life, are after all the same'

Many contrasting cases such as those in (17a) and (17b) can be found in the adult data – all with an *on* construction in the spoken version and a passive construction in the written one. Not a single case was observed of the converse, with a passive construction in the spoken version corresponding to *on* in the written version.

The assumption underlying our prediction that use of *on* will decrease with a concomitant increase in use of passive constructions is that this trend reflects development in the ability to manipulate discourse stance in an increasingly varied and context-appropriate fashion. Passive constructions can be interpreted as an indication of a more mature orientation to the text – in the sense noted in the introduction – since they require the speaker–writer to abandon a sender/receiver-oriented stance in favor of a more neutral, text-oriented formulation of events (compare *les problèmes qu'on peut rencontrer/les problèmes qui sont rencontrés*). Moreover, use of passive voice contributes to a greater distancing between the speaker/writer and the content of the text that he or she is producing, and this too is an indication of a more mature, less subjectively focused type of text production (Berman et al., 2002).

5. The study

The data-base for this study included 160 expository texts, two (one written and one spoken) from each of twenty subjects in four different age groups: 9–10-year-old

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Table 1
Clause length of expository texts: spoken and written texts

	9–10-year-olds	12–13-year-olds	15–16-year-olds	Adults
N	20	20	20	20
Spoken				
Mean clauses	16.85	14.4	16.85	49.75
S.D.	13.98	7.06	11.14	33.85
Range clauses	5–49	6–30	7–51	15–114
Written				
Mean clauses	8.35	13.05	16.75	24.45
S.D.	3.42	6.41	7.73	13.2
Range clauses	4–17	4–23	8–32	13–67

children in the equivalent of 4th grade of elementary school (French *primaire*), 12–13-year-old *collège* (junior high) students, 15–16-year-old high school (*lycée*) students, and adult university graduate level students. Order of production was balanced across the two modalities, with half of the subjects first producing their expository texts in writing and the other half first in speech (for details, see description of the overall project as detailed in Berman and Verhoeven, 2002). Table 1 gives information on the average length of texts included in our sample, counted in terms of number of clauses per text.

In view of the varying range of text lengths, as shown in Table 1, the frequency of both *on* constructions and passive constructions were calculated as a percentage of total clauses. Both authors coded all the uses of *on*, and disagreements were resolved through discussion. All occurrences of *on* were divided into two subcategories: those used with first person plural reference and those used generically or with indefinite, nonspecific reference. We then disregarded for further analysis all cases of the first class where *on* is personal and makes first person plural reference to the speaker and one or more other participant(s) in the situation. Thus, for example, in excerpt (18), from the oral expository text of a 4th grade girl, only one of the four instances of *on* was included for analysis (the one glossed as 'one ∼ they'), and the other three instances (glossed as 'we') were excluded from the analysis.

(18) *et puis il y avait d'autres nouvelles. et puis* on [= first person plural, personal] *était sympa. et puis à la limite je vois pas pourquoi* on [generic/indefinite] *nous aurait rejeté.* on [= first person plural, personal] *était sympa.* on [= first person plural, personal] *participait.* [g02f, Exp, Sp]
'and then there were other new (pupils). and then we were nice, and then in the end I don't see why one ∼ they would have rejected us. we were nice. we joined in'

All the texts were further coded for occurrence of passive voice, including canonical passives (Keenan, 1985) with a form of the auxiliary *être*, either agentless, as in (19a), or

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with an agent, as in (19b). Past participle forms without an auxiliary – as in the case of *rencontrés* in (17b) – were also coded as passive constructions, as in (19c).[2]

(19) a. *Car si son voisin copie les mêmes erreurs, il serait peut-être sanctionné* [h31f, Exp, Wr]
'So if his neighbor copies the same errors, he will perhaps be reprimanded'
b. *La violence est souvent engendrée par la jalousie* [h12f, Exp, Wr]
'Violence is often created by jealousy'
c. *Les autorités ou les instances chargées de regler ce problème devraient prendre en compte les origines de ces phénomènes* [s11f, Exp, Wr]
'The authorities or the bodies commissioned to handle this problem should take into account the origins of these phenomena'

6. Results

Table 2 shows the distribution of clauses with a generic *on* subject, calculated as a percentage out of total clauses, in spoken and written expository texts.

Table 2 shows that the use of generic *on* decreases significantly with age ($F_{(3,152)} = 2.59$, $p < 0.05$). There is no significant difference in this respect between the grade-schoolers and the junior-high schoolers, or between the high school students and the adults. However, there is a significant difference in distribution of *on* between the two younger groups and the two older groups. The 15–16-year-olds contrast with the 9–10-year-olds ($p < 0.02$) and with the 12–13-year-olds ($p < 0.04$). Modality is also a significant factor in the distribution of *on* ($F_{(1,152)} = 5.61$, $p < 0.01$). For all age groups *on* is used more in spoken texts than in written texts.

Table 3 shows the distribution of clauses in the passive voice, calculated as percentage of total clauses, in spoken and written expository texts.

The frequency of passive constructions, in contrast to *on* constructions, increases significantly with Age ($F_{(3,152)} = 8.33$, $p < 0.0001$). And, similarly to what was noted for the *on* constructions, use of passive voice divides our subjects into two groups: the two younger and the two older groups. That is, the grade school and junior high groups show no significant difference in this respect, nor do the high school and adult groups. Rather, the 15–16-year-olds differ significantly from the 9–10-year-olds ($p < 0.004$) and from the 12–13-year-olds ($p < 0.01$), and the adults contrast with the 9–10-year-olds ($p < 0.0001$) and with the 12–13-year-olds ($p < 0.001$). Modality also has an important effect on the use of passive voice. These constructions are employed more in written texts than in spoken texts ($F_{(1,152)} = 23.63$, $p < 0.0001$), a difference that is observed consistently across all age groups.

[2] Past participles of transitive verbs used adjectivally to represent 'non-canonic' passives (Keenan, 1985) without an auxiliary form were also coded as passive constructions in the study on depersonalising devices in Spanish (Tolchinsky and Rosado, 2002).

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Table 2
Percentage of *on* per total clauses in expository spoken and written texts

	9–10-year-olds	12–13-year-olds	15–16-year-olds	Adults
N	20	20	20	20
Spoken				
Mean (%) *on*	17.4	14.22	9.70	9.95
S.D.	20.06	13.93	9.81	10.20
Range (%) *on*	0–80	0–50	0–30	0–34.8
Written				
Mean (%) *on*	9.48	11.65	7.59	6.83
S.D.	11.29	9.81	8.78	7.69
Range (%) *on*	0–37.5	0–23.07	0–30	0–23

Table 3
Percentage of *passive constructions* out of total clauses in expository spoken and written texts

	9–10-year-olds	12–13-year-olds	15–16-year-olds	Adults
N	20	20	20	20
Spoken				
Mean (%) passive	0.14	2.38	2.74	3.03
S.D.	0.65	4.61	4.51	2.02
Range (%) passive	0–2.9	0–14.28	0–14.28	0–6.25
Written				
Mean (%) passive	2.66	3.23	5.59	10
S.D.	5.70	5.07	7.09	6.85
Range (%) passive	0–18.18	0–15.38	0–27.27	0–30

The results above are summarized in Figs. 1 and 2, where the data are divided according to modality of production. Fig. 1 shows the distribution of *on* and of passive voice constructions in spoken expository texts.

Fig. 2 shows the same distribution for the written texts.

These two figures show that use of generic *on* constructions decreases and use of passive voice increases with age in both written and spoken texts, as was expected. The decrease in

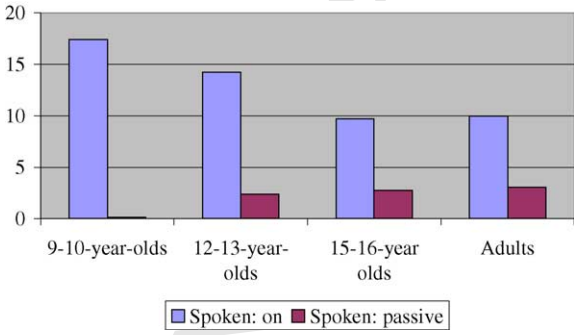

Fig. 1. Percentage of *on* and passive constructions in spoken expository texts.

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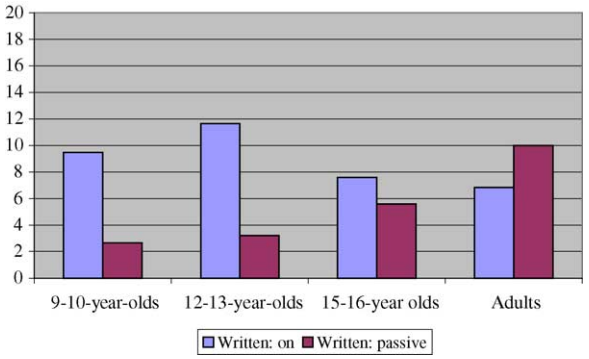

Fig. 2. Percentage of *on* and passive constructions in written expository texts.

682 frequency of *on* is replaced by greater use of passive voice constructions, and this trend is
683 particularly marked in the written texts.

684 7. Discussion

685 This study illustrates a well-established pattern in the general domain of language
686 development (Slobin, 1973) and in other areas of cognitive development (Werner and
687 Kaplan, 1963: 60): new forms take on old functions and old functions receive new forms.
688 'New forms taking on old functions' is illustrated by the development of passives taking
689 over some of the functional load of *on* constructions. 'Old forms taking on new functions'
690 is reflected in the fact that earlier uses of *on* as the equivalent of *nous* in spoken French take
691 on generic and indefinite uses with advancing age and schooling. In both cases, we find
692 expanding repertoires along the dimension of form-function mappings with age. This is not
693 to say that all indefinite uses of *on* are replaced by passive constructions, or that speaker–
694 writers no longer use *on* for first person plural reference. Rather, what emerges is a gradual
695 development of control over the multiple options provided by the language—very much as
696 demonstrated by Tolchinsky and Rosado's study (this volume) of different devices for
697 agent-downgrading in Spanish.
698 We have also seen that analysis of this expanding repertoire of forms is enhanced by
699 comparison of the written and spoken modalities. Passive constructions are rare in spoken
700 discourse (Fig. 1) even among adult subjects. In contrast, in the written texts, use of passive
701 voice increases with development to the point where it eventually overtakes generic and
702 indefinite use of *on* among the adult subjects (Fig. 2). This suggests that generalizations
703 based on a single modality may fail to do justice to the developing linguistic knowledge of
704 school-age children, particularly in later stages of development when they have had
705 extensive experience with literacy-based activities and with reading and writing different
706 types of academic discourse. The present study does not include a detailed functional or
707 discourse-embedded analysis of the constructions—for example, relating their use to the
708 discourse sites in which they appear, and whether they are distributed differentially in, say,
709 illustrations as opposed to key propositions, or in introductions as opposed to conclusions.

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Nonetheless, even the distributional analysis provided here demonstrates that in addition to acquiring productive use of the two competing forms, children must also develop the competence necessary for deploying them in the most appropriate contexts.

Another factor that needs to be considered in a developmental perspective is the role of genre distinctions. We have argued that passive constructions, particularly agentless passives, are stronger indicators of distance between the sender and the message of the text than are *on* constructions. This kind of 'distance' is a defining characteristic of expository texts. Clearly, corresponding analyses of the narrative texts produced by the same subjects would reveal radically different profiles for use of both *on* and passive voice.

This study focused on the changing distributional pattern of the subject clitic *on* and of passive constructions. Yet, as noted, other forms can be in functional competition with *on*. Research currently in progress aims to specifically address the impact of *middle voice* constructions in relation to decreasing use of *on,* where the notion of middle voice is used in a narrow sense to include all and only cases where the action encoded by the verb implies a human agent and the grammatical subject is the patient participant of a corresponding active voice construction. This is illustrated by excerpt (20) from an expository text written by a university graduate student.

(20) *Les situations conflictuelles se rencontrent chaque jour et à tous les moments de la vie.* [u15f, Exp, Wr]
'Conflictual situations are encountered [=arise] every day and at all moments in life'

Initial investigation of our data-base reveals that productive use of this type of narrowly defined middle voice is also a very late development.

A second related construction type is dislocation of the kind typical of spoken French. Passive constructions in French are possible only with strictly transitive verbs, so that formation of a passive on an indirect object results in ungrammatical forms, as in (21).

(21) **Jean a été donné un prix par le conseil*
'Jean was given a prize by the committee'

When a speaker wants to foreground an oblique object, spoken French offers the possibility of dislocating it, leaving a pronominal trace in the matrix clause, as in (22).

(22) *Jean, le conseil lui a attribué un prix.*
'Jean, the committee gave him a prize'

The contradictory status of this construction is summarized in Berrendonner and Reichler-Béguelin (1997). They point out that some high school textbooks mention left dislocations as an accepted procedure for foregrounding, on a par with the stylistically prestigious inversion of noun phrase subjects in normative usage. Other textbooks, however, inform students that dislocation is 'colloquial' or typical of spoken French. In their study of written texts produced by professional writers and university students,

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Berrendonner and Reichler-Béguelin found that left dislocations were used for apparently contradictory purposes. They serve, on the one hand, to create a spontaneous or colloquial style while, on the other, being used to produce a particularly *recherché* rhetorical effect. On the basis of the rich sample available to us from four different age groups, we now propose to examine the uses of dislocations across modalities and genres from a developmental perspective by comparing these other devices for alternative discourse stance in narrative versus expository French texts. Even at this preliminary stage of our investigation, it is clear that French speaker–writers have available a rich range of means for differentiating along the dimensions of discourse stance enunciated in the source chapter to this study, and that it takes children a long period of time to learn to alternate them skilfully and appropriately across genres and modalities.

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