

AUTHENTIC MATERIALS FOR EVERYDAY SPOKEN FRENCH: CORPUS LINGUISTICS VS. FRENCH TEXTBOOKS

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The authors argue for the necessity of anchoring authentic materials development in findings from corpus linguistics. In support of their claims, they present evidence from a corpus of Everyday Conversational European French that shows that the pronominal system of the everyday spoken language is drastically different from the typical textbook treatment, which does not take into account the increasingly wide gap between spoken and written French. Although in written French 'we' is still expressed by 'nous' and the generic 'one, you, they' by 'on', in conversation 'we' has come to be expressed by 'on' and the generic 'one, you, they' by 'tu' and 'ils' in addition to 'on'. Textbooks should stop leaving learners stranded in a 'no-speaker's land' if they are to acquire pragmatically appropriate, sociolinguistic competence in spoken French.

INTRODUCTION

Linguists, language teachers, and literary scholars have, with some urgency, pointed out the fact that there is an increasingly wide difference between spoken and written (European) French. This is especially true if the comparison is made between the everyday conversational language and the culturally prestigious written language. Language learners have been just as vocal about the fact that when they arrive in France (or Switzerland or Belgium) they are stunned by the difference between the spoken language they learned in communicative classrooms and the ordinary spoken French (see Gadet, 1989/1996) they hear around them, including the French used by educated, middle-class speakers.

As we will show, the spoken French taught in American classrooms is a fiction, based on ideas about how people should speak, not on how they do speak. The supposed spoken French of standard reference grammars and pedagogical grammars is actually close to a spoken version of the written language. But it is not quite the literary language either. So, what we teach is a 'pseudo-language', a hybrid of the standard written language and an idealized notion of the everyday spoken language, which has no sociolinguistic authenticity and is based on anecdotal information about what spontaneous, natural conversation is like. That is, although we have moved away from a grammar-translation approach favoring the written language to a communicative approach favoring the spoken language, we have become trapped in a sort of 'no-speaker's land' in between. But this is not the language we should be teaching in our classrooms. In order for our linguistic, reference, and pedagogical treatments to be successful, they must offer something close

to the spoken authentic language, and for this, they must be based on rigorous, empirical analysis of the actual spoken language. We must allow the results of corpus-based research (see also Biber, 1988; Biber, Conrad & Reppen, 1998) to drive our future materials development. In addition, since we also want to teach the written language, we have to address directly in our classrooms the almost diglossic gulf between the spoken language and the written language (Lodge, 1993).

Nowhere is this gulf more apparent than with the pronominal system of French. As a point of departure against which we can later compare spoken French, Table 1 presents the pronouns of written French, a table familiar to anyone who has ever studied French. The first column identifies the subject pronouns, *je, tu, il/elle*, etc. (called clitics in linguistic treatments, conjunctive or unstressed pronouns in the reference and pedagogical grammars). The subject clitics can only be used with a finite (conjugated) verb and are placed either before the verb (the majority of the cases) or after it. The second column presents the object pronouns (also clitics, not analyzed here -- a '-2' is placed after those object clitic forms that are the same as the subject clitics). Finally, the third column identifies *moi, toi, lui*, etc. as disjunctive (stressed, tonic) pronouns -- these can occur in isolation, after a preposition, or for stress or contrast, and so forth (and a '-3' is placed after those forms that are the same as the subject clitics). Typically, these disjunctives cannot appear as subjects (or objects); however, under certain circumstances (not relevant here), *lui* and *eux* can occur as subject pronouns. For written French, this table is descriptively adequate, but for spoken French, it turns out to be woefully inaccurate.

Table 1: Personal Pronouns and Disjunctive Pronouns of Written French

	Subject Clitics	Object Clitics	
	Disjunctive Pronouns		
1 st Sg.:	je (I)	me	moi
2 nd Sg.:	tu (you (& familiar))	te	toi
3 rd Sg.:	il, elle (he, she, it)	le, la, lui, se	lui, elle-3
1 st Pl.:	nous (we)	nous-2	nous-3
2 nd Pl.:	vous (you (& formal))	nous-2	vous-3
3 rd Pl.:	ils , elles (they)	les, leur	eux, elles-3
Indefinite	on (one/you/they)	se	soi

Of particular interest to us in this study will be the status of the five subject clitics in bold in Table 1: *tu* (2nd Sg./Familiar, 'you'), *nous* (1st Pl., 'we'), *vous* (2nd Pl./Formal, 'you'), *ils* (3rd Pl., 'they'), and *on* (3rd Sg., Indefinite, 'one'). The sentences in (1-5) illustrate meanings and contexts for these forms as one finds them in some linguistic analyses, reference books, and traditional textbooks.

- (1) **Nous** reviendrons le 27 novembre.
"We'll come back on November 27th."

- (2) **On** m'a fait légaliser le mariage.
"They made me authenticate the wedding."
- (3) Est-ce que **tu** fais des pâtisseries?
"Do you make pastries?"
- (4) Faites-**vous** des pâtisseries?
"Do you make pastries?"
- (5) J'aime beaucoup ces éclairs; **ils** sont délicieux.
"I like these eclairs a lot; they're delicious."

Note that in (1) *nous* means 'we', *on* in (2) is translated as 'they' (indefinite, non-specific), the difference between *tu* in (3) and *vous* in (4) is singular and familiar (solidarity) vs. either plural or formal (politeness, distancing), and *ils* is 'they' with a masculine antecedent (it can also be used with a masculine and feminine antecedent). Most descriptions and textbooks present these as the only ways to communicate these meanings (e.g., only *on* is used for indefinite/non-specific meaning) and the only possible meanings for these forms (e.g., *tu* is only used for singular/familiar usage). However, all of these claims are falsified by the findings reported here.

THE CORPUS: EVERYDAY CONVERSATIONAL EUROPEAN FRENCH (ECEP)

In order to study the actual uses of the pronouns, the authors analyzed the everyday conversational language of European speakers of French in Fonseca-Greber's corpus of Everyday Conversational Swiss French (ECSF) and Waugh's corpus of Everyday Conversational Metropolitan French of France (ECMF). Both corpora represent spontaneously occurring, informal, face-to-face conversation between family members, friends, and (less often) acquaintances and were recorded in Switzerland and France respectively, in the mid to late 1990's. The conversations occur over food and sometimes in other types of contexts (e.g., friends talking while one of them is packing for a trip). A preliminary investigation of each of the corpora with respect to the issues discussed here showed that the everyday spoken language represented in the corpora was basically the same. "Indeed", as Offord states (1990, p. 18), "it is best to consider the standards of Belgium and Switzerland as the same as standard French [of France], with minor modifications". Further, these modifications are usually considered to be lexical or phonological, rather than morpho-syntactic or grammatico-semantic, and this accorded with what our preliminary investigation showed. In light of these findings, we pooled the two corpora to create a corpus of Everyday Conversational European French (ECEP), comprised of 194,000 words (15 conversations, 27 educated, middle-class speakers, ten over 40, 17 under 40, 11 men and 16 women).

Before turning to the findings themselves, a caveat is in order regarding the transcription conventions. It should be remembered that the transcription of the French original and the translation into English attempt to represent actual speech, and therefore try to convey actual usage in the spoken language, which at times may differ drastically from the familiar norms of the writing system (in English and in French). We have systematically transcribed the clitics as prefixes (hyphenated forms linked to the verb) since other work (see Fonseca-Greber 2001, Fonseca-Greber and Waugh in press-a, in press-b) has shown that they have morphologized to prefixal status. We render this in English through hyphenation of the corresponding pronouns and through reduction of the pronoun when possible. The prefixal status of the clitics is an extremely important finding for the issue of teaching the spoken language, but one which will have to be put aside due to restrictions of space.

DISCUSSION OF THE DATA

The fate of 'nous' and the new meaning of on-

The first, most striking, finding is the nearly categorical loss of *nous-* for the subject pronoun 'we' (as in (1) above), and its replacement by *on-* (see Table 2). While it should not be surprising to anyone who has had extensive contact with spoken French that a corpus of conversational French would reveal a high percentage of *on-* in the meaning of 'we', the virtually categorical substitution of *on-* for *nous-* is not at all what would have been expected.

Table 2: 1st Pl. ('we') in ECEF

n =	1348	Tokens	%
Nous-	13	1%	
On-	1335	99%	

Table 2 shows that 99% of the uses of 1st Pl. tokens are *on-*, not *nous-*, as exemplified below by (8) and (9). In other words, the change from *nous-* to *on-* with this meaning is not an on-going change with inter-speaker variation, but actually a change that is virtually complete. We have only 1% of the total 1st Pl. tokens, with *on-*, and the bulk of these came from older, more conservative speakers, who are schoolteachers. Moreover, they all came from the ECMF corpus -- in other words, the change is completed in Switzerland and almost completed in France. We attribute the more conservative usage and hypercorrection in France to the forces of standardization, the educational system, and the prestige of the literary language in France, all of which exist in Switzerland but are not as powerful as in the French (and in particular, the metropolitan French) context.

Nous- : (6) G: **Nous**-venons coucher ici.
"we'll-come to sleep here"

(7) G: **Nous**-revenons sur Lyon.
"we'll-come back to Lyons"

- On-: (8) M: Mais ça-va être une catastrophe si **on-y**-va pas.
 "But it'll be a disaster if we don't go there."
- (9) N: Non, tu-n'as pas à l'acheter
 S: Ah je-ne-sais pas le [faire]
 N: [non je-ferai] je-ferai
 S: sur internet
 N: ouais
 S: N, est-ce-que nous **on-en**-a un? J'ai l'impression qu'**on-**
 en-a plus
 N: c'est pas nécessaire <laugh>
 S: comment c'est pas nécessaire?
 "N: No, you-don't have to buy it.
 S: Ah, I-don't know how to [do it]
 N: [No I'll-do it] I'll-do it
 S: On the internet
 N: yeah
 S: N, do we we -have one? I-have the impression that we-
 don't have any more
 N: it's not necessary <laugh>
 S: huh? it's not necessary?"

In (8), *on-* can have no other meaning than 'we', because S is speaking of herself and her interlocutors. In (9), we have a use of *nous on-*, which occurs quite often in this corpus: *nous* is the (disjunctive) pronoun, and *on-* the prefix, both of which have the same referent. This is further proof that *on-* means 'we' in this usage.

Irrespective of its on-going use in written French, the figures in Table 2 clearly illustrate that *nous-* is all but gone from ECEF. However, pedagogical and reference grammars and textbooks only admit that *on-* may be used for 'we' in special constructions or among certain segments of the population (e.g., less well educated speakers) or in special registers (e.g., highly informal speech). But such claims are never based on the study of a corpus -- indeed, they seem to arise out of the intuitions and, we dare say, the prejudices of the grammarians. Our findings show that we need to change what we teach, and we need to base our textbooks not on what the traditional reference grammars say but on what the results of rigorous corpus analysis show. We need to teach that *nous* is the written form meaning 'we', whereas the spoken form is *on-*.

This change, while interesting in itself, has many other consequences, for it then sets up a series of subsequent semantic changes, to be discussed in turn, that widen the gulf between everyday spoken French and the language taught in textbooks.

'On'-: personal meaning (1st Pl.) vs. indefinite meaning

The replacement of *nous-* by *on-* raises another question. As we saw in Table 1, the traditional way of expressing indefinite meaning is with *on-*. But, now that *on-* has in essence become the sole way of expressing 1st Pl. meaning, as we saw in Table 2, the question arises as to whether this change has had any effect on the traditional role of *on-*, that of expressing indefinite/non-specific meaning. In Table 3, we see that it has. Once again, we see that a radical shift in meaning has taken place. From its original indefinite meaning, *on-* has, in the modern spoken language, taken on the personal meaning 'we' as its basic (core) meaning, and the indefinite meaning, while still possible, has become marginal -- only 5.7% of the uses of *on-* could be clearly and unambiguously classified as being indefinite. We also found that there were 18% of the uses of *on-* that we classified as "vague" (or transitional). They are vague because, even taking their linguistic, discourse, and conversational context into account, we felt that these cases of *on-* could be interpreted either as indefinite or as 1st Pl., but there is no evidence within the interaction that such vague uses were problematic for either the speaker or the addressee(s). We have, therefore, chosen not to force these vague tokens into one category or the other. Examples of indefinite *on-* and vague *on-* are given as (10), (11), (12), (13), and (14), respectively, below.

Table 3: Relative Frequency of Indefinite vs. Personal Uses of *on-* in ECEF

n. = 1749	Tokens	%
On- = Indefinite	100	5.7%
On- = Vague*	314	18%
On- = Personal	1335	76.3%

* Vague=could be interpreted as either Indefinite (3rd Sg.) or Personal (1st Pl.)

Indefinite *on-*:

- (10) M: parce qu'**on**-nous-avait volé les clés de la maison
"because someone-stole our house keys"
- (11) S7: **on**-nous-attend
S8: ah oui? **on**-vous-attend?
"someone's-waiting for us
oh really, someone's-waiting for you?"
- (12) N: Et euh **on**-te-donne une chambre dans un foyer universitaire.
"And, uh, they-give-you a room in a dormitory"

Vague *on-*:

- (13) N: Cette année c'était une bonne année.
G: Mais tu-sais ya des souvenirs, N, qu'**on**-garde dans le coeur quoi.

"That year that was a good year.
But you know, N, there are memories that
one/you/we/I/people keep in one's/your/our/my/their hearts
so"

- (14) N: Ya.. ya une différence au niveau de la culture. Ya aucune culture. L'Amérique eh dans eh dans les grandes villes on-a beaucoup de culture. On-a des musées surtout à Washington. Les musées, les pièces de théâtre, et des expositions.
"There's there's a difference in the level of culture. There's no culture. America uh in uh in the big cities you/they/one/we have a lot of culture. They/we have museums especially in Washington. Museums, plays, expositions."

In (10) and (11), the presence of the object clitics *-nous-* (1st Pl.) and *-vous-* (2nd Pl.) and in (12) the presence of the object clitic *-te-* (2nd Sg.) force the indefinite reading of *on-*. In (13) and (14), without some kind of speaker recall task immediately afterwards, it becomes impossible to determine which particular meaning the speaker would have had in mind. In (13) it is clear that G is both speaking about herself and at the same time making a general statement. In (14) the speaker is talking about Washington, D.C., where he has traveled many times. There is other evidence in the corpus that shows that he considers Washington to be a place he identifies with, even though he is French. Throughout this conversation, he presents himself as an expert on America because he has spent quite a bit of time there. Therefore, in this example, and others in the corpus, he could be interpreted as meaning 'we in America/Washington' or 'they in America/Washington' (or 'people in America/Washington').

While such vague uses occur fairly frequently in our corpus, we recognize that they would be particularly difficult for non-native speakers of French and therefore we advocate teaching them only in more advanced classes. How we should treat the use of *on-* for indefinite/non-specific meaning will be discussed further below.

Indefinite/Non-specific: 'on'- vs. 'tu'-/'vous'-

The decline in the use of *on-* for indefinite meaning leads us to another question. As we have just seen, *on-* only marginally means indefinite. Yet, speakers presumably still have the communicative need to express indefinite meaning. So how do speakers of ECEF now express the indefinite? In this section, we address the use of the 2nd person pronouns for indefinite meaning; later, we look at 3rd person *ils-*. In Table 4, we see that another radical semantic shift has occurred in the use of *tu-*. If we compare the use of *on-* for indefinite meaning vs. *tu-* and *vous-*, we find that *on-* is outnumbered by *tu-*: where *on-* is used one-third of the time, *tu-* is used two-thirds of the

time. *Vous-* (2nd Pl./Formal) is in essence a non-participant in this change, accounting for barely more than 1% of the tokens. However, this discrepancy is not merely an artifact of one-on-one interaction in a predominantly familiar corpus, where the interlocutors used *tu-* much more than *vous-*. The example of indefinite *tu-* in (15) below is, in fact, addressed to a group of three or four of her peers. Beyond the corpus, anecdotal evidence based on published interviews and on conversations the researchers have had with French native speakers with whom they use *vous-* shows that indefinite *tu-* can be used even in an otherwise *vous-* context. The prevalence of 2nd Sg. discourse markers such as *t-sais* 'y-know' and *t-vois* 'y-see', excluded from these figures, may be helping the development of a generalized, 2nd Sg. indefinite.

Table 4: Indefinite/Non-specific Meaning Expressed by either *on-*, *tu-*, or *vous-* in ECEF

n = 1350	Tokens	%
On- (Indef. & Vague*)	414	30.7%
Tu-	918	68%
Vous-	18	1.3%

* Vague=could be interpreted as either Indefinite (3rd Sg.) or Personal (1st Pl.)

When an earlier version of this paper was given at the International Cognitive Linguistics Conference in July 2001, several members of the audience claimed that the replacement of an original indefinite by some sort of 'you' is an ongoing change in other European languages and attributed this to the influence of English. In other words, this change may be related to a wider, areal phenomenon. But there is no other language except French (that we are aware of) in which this change is associated with the use of the earlier indefinite to mean 'we'.

Examples (15) and (16) show the use of *tu-* for indefinite meaning, and (17) one of the rare uses of *vous-* as an indefinite.

Indefinite Tu-:

(15) M-L: Mais c'est bien au moins l'un des deux tu-n'as pas besoin de voir les deux mais l'un des deux.

"But it's good at least one of the two you don't need to see both but one of the two"

(16) N: C'est extrême ségré. Ya des quartiers pauvres où tu- ne-vas pas aller parce qu'ya ..tu-n'as rien à faire là
"It's extremely segregated. There are poor neighborhoods where you don't go because you have no reason to go there"

Indefinite Vous-:

(17) S1: pis moi je-dis ben..là en bas vous-avez le Doubs..là vous-avez le début des arbres..que vous-voyez dans la-- dans la..pis au fond c'est la France..hnn..

"then I I-say so...there down there you've got the Doubs..there where you've got the tops of the trees...that you-see in the--in the then in the distance that's France..uh"

Example (15) shows the use of the indefinite *tu-* as the speaker talks about a general situation that holds for anyone. The same holds for (16), where the speaker describes a situation that is general but that the others have never seen (the poor neighborhoods of American inner cities). Finally, in (17), the indefinite *vous-* means that the speaker's actual listeners or anyone else who comes to this lookout point would have the same view down into the river gorges of the Doubs.

What makes the speaker in (16) opt for indefinite *tu-* despite the fact that he is addressing two people while the speaker in (17) chooses the indefinite *vous-* to address his plural group? There are various possible explanations. One possibility is that in the former case, the addressees, although plural, were his peers, whom he addressed as *tu*. In contrast, in the latter case, not only were there several addressees, but they were not his peers, and most were older, some significantly so, than he was at the time of the guided tour. It is possible that either plurality or formality alone allows indefinite *tu-* but when the two factors are combined, they favor indefinite *vous-* instead. This obviously would be a fruitful area for future research with a larger corpus. In any case, at the present time, the balance has clearly shifted away from *on-* for expressing indefinite meaning in ECEF, whatever the social context.

This situation, though, leaves us with another question. According to Table 1, the sole traditional function of *tu-* was as the 2nd Sg./Familiar subject pronoun, yet now we see that *tu-* has emerged as the preferred indefinite in addition to its personal meaning. What effect, if any, is indefinite *tu-* having on the original personal meaning? Is the personal meaning still valid? In Table 5, we see the relative frequency of the personal versus the indefinite meanings of *tu-*.

Table 5: Relative Frequency of Personal vs. Indefinite Uses of *tu-*

n = 2126	Tokens	%
Tu- = Personal	1208	56.8%
Tu- = Indefinite	918	43.2%

Of the 2126 total tokens of *tu-* in the corpus, we can see that the personal meanings (as in (18) below, where the speaker directly addresses her friend, who is packing) still outnumber the indefinite ones, but the gap between the two is not as wide as might have been expected. We should add that once again the speakers in the Swiss corpus were in a more advanced stage of the shift since the percentages for both *on-* and *tu-* for indefinite meaning were close to 50%. The Metropolitan French speakers are lagging behind, just as we saw for the use of *nous-* for 'we'.

Personal *Tu-* : (18) S: Ouais, après, tu-pars comment demain?
 "Yeah, after, you leave when tomorrow?"

Given the high frequency of the indefinite use of *tu-*, as shown by this table, it is highly appropriate for textbooks to teach this usage. The fact that *tu-* can be used for both 'you' and indefinite meaning should not be difficult for English learners: after all, it is the same situation in English. But in both French and English, what makes the difference is the context; therefore, the right time to teach *tu-* for indefinite meaning will be dictated by the capacities of the learners to discern, on a contextual basis, which use of *tu-* is relevant.

Given this state of affairs, our textbooks should not present *on-* as the favored (or only) way to express the indefinite and should address the use of *tu-* in this meaning. Failing to do so can put our students in the embarrassing situation of using what they assume to be an indefinite *on-*, only to have it interpreted as a first-person plural. Also, our students may misinterpret a use of *tu-* as a personal one and as licensing the use of *tu-* for personal address with a particular interlocutor. Finally, since the situation is similar in English, where 'you' is very often used for indefinite meaning, native speakers of English would find this use of *tu-* much easier to learn than *on-*.

'Ils-': personal vs. indefinite

The use of *tu-* for indefinite meaning and its parallel with the situation in English brings up an immediate further question: what about *ils-* 'they'? Is it also used for indefinite meaning in spoken French, just as it is in English? An examination of the ECMF corpus reveals that it is so used, as shown by Table 6 and as exemplified by (19) and (20).

Table 6: Personal vs. Indefinite Uses of *ils-* in ECMF

n=341	Tokens	%
<i>ils-</i> Personal	198	58.1%
<i>ils-</i> Indefinite	139	40.8%

(19) shows *ils-* with a specific antecedent and (20) with a generic antecedent; both were counted as personal uses. (Note that *ils-* is the traditional spelling; before a consonant, there is only [i], whereas before a vowel it is typically [iz]. We thus render it with either *i-* or *iz-* in the examples below.)

Personal *ils-*:

- (19) G: ces intégristes i-veniennent et i-couvrent leurs femmes en noire
 "Those fundamentalists they-come back and they-cover up their women in black"
- (20) G: même les jeunes iz-étaient scandalisés t-vois
 "even the young people were scandalized y'know"

The next examples, (21) and (22), show indefinite uses of *ils-*: in (21), there is technically no antecedent; however, the locative phrase *à Zürich* provides, metonymically, a general context for the referents of *ils-*. In (22), on the other hand, only the wider context tells the listener how to understand *ils-*.

Indefinite *ils-*:

- (21) S2: *à Zürich iz-ont toujours eu des problèmes*
 "in Zürich they always had trouble with that"
- (22) S3: *au classement...i-sont ba:s...t'sais ifont toujours un classement général*
 "in the rankings...they're way down there...y'know how they always do an overall ranking"

As with the use of *tu-* for indefinite meaning, the conclusion is clear: we need to teach *ils-* as an indefinite as well as a personal pronoun. We are doing our students a disservice if we forbid the use of *tu-* and *ils-* as indefinites, especially given the fact that there are parallels between French and English which would make the learning of these other pronouns as indefinites an easier task for native English-speaking students.

But what do we tell our students about the differences between *tu-*, *ils-*, and *on-* for indefinite meaning? A comparison of the frequency of their usage in the Metropolitan French corpus reveals that all three are robust in their use as indefinites.

 Table 7: Uses of *tu-*, *on-*, *ils-*, *vous-* for Indefinite/Vague Meaning in ECMF

Total indefinites/vague tokens=615	Tokens	%
<i>tu-</i>	258	42%
<i>on-</i>	206	33%
<i>ils-</i>	139	23%
<i>vous-</i>	12	2%

As for the difference in discourse-pragmatic meaning between *tu-*, *ils-*, and *on-*, this remains for future investigation, but one example taken from our corpus points to possible future research:

- (23) N: *Ils-te-paient la moitié de ton voyage. Ils-te-paient les cours. Ils-te- donnent une bourse de transport de l'équivalent de 30 dinars ça-fait 180 francs. Mais c'est c'est beaucoup là-bas. On--on-fait pas mal avec. Et euh on-te-donne une chambre dans un foyer universitaire.*

"They pay half of your trip for you. They pay your tuition. They give ya a 30 dinars travel allowance -- that's 180 francs. That's a lot over there. Y'can get along pretty well on that. And uh they give ya a dorm room."

Here, all three indefinites are used, and in the majority of the clauses two of the three occur together. One generalization is that indefinite *tu-* (here, in its object form *-te-*), as one would suspect given its origin in 'you', is more inclusive of the speaker and addressee -- that is, that the situation being talked about could pertain to either speaker or addressee. On the other hand, the forms *ils-* and *on-* (in conformity with their origin in 'they' and 'one' respectively) tend to exclude speaker and addressee and to point to an 'other', outside of the speaker and addressee (outside of the speech event). But much further research needs to be done before there can be more rigorous claims about the discourse-pragmatic differences between these three pronouns (for earlier work on this issue, see Laberge & Sankoff, 1979; and Ashby, 1992; both of these studies recognize the use of *tu-* and *vous-* for indefinite meaning, but neither addresses the issue of *ils-*).

What can be said in general, however, about the difference between French and English is that, as far as the possibilities of expressing indefinite meaning are concerned, there is, at least at the level of form, a parallel between the two languages. The French indefinites *tu-*, *ils-* and *on-* are like the English indefinites 'you', 'they', and 'one'. However, while the example given above suggests that indefinite *tu-* and indefinite 'you' tend to pattern alike, the situation is less clear where conversational French affords two possibilities (indefinite *ils-* and *on-*), and conversational English typically affords only one pronoun ('they'), since 'one' is rarely used, at least in American English. More corpus work needs to be done on both languages before we can reach definitive conclusions.

Current situation

Let us now summarize the results of these interlinked changes. In order to understand better these differences between written and spoken French, we contrast the meanings of the various forms under study here in the written and spoken language in Table 8.

Table 8: Meanings in the Written and Spoken Language

Forms	Written Meanings	Spoken Meanings
<i>nous(-)</i> :	1 st Pl.	
<i>on(-)</i> :	Indefinite	1 st Pl., Indefinite+Vague
<i>tu(-)</i> :	2 nd Sg./Familiar	2 nd Sg./Familiar, Indefinite+Vague
<i>ils(-)</i> :	3 rd Pl.	3 rd Pl., Indefinite+Vague

Nous, the 1st Pl. of written French, is no longer applicable to a discussion of spoken French. In its stead, the form *on-* has undergone a change in its basic meaning, which is now the personal 'we', whereas its original indefinite sense has dwindled to a marginal meaning. In addition, the form *tu-*, which traditionally had a single meaning, 2nd Sg./Familiar, has now split into two meanings: 2nd Sg./Familiar and indefinite (and vague). Finally, the form *ils-*, which traditionally had one meaning, 3rd Pl., has now also acquired an indefinite meaning in spoken French.

CONCLUSION

As far as the meanings of the pronouns are concerned, there is a large gulf between spoken and written French, just as there is between the authentic spoken language and the language we teach in our communicative classrooms. And this is no accident, since, as said earlier, the spoken language we teach is closer to the written language than to the true spoken language. It is clear, therefore, that more good corpus work is needed for a fuller understanding of spoken European French. Paradoxically, in addition, good corpus work is also needed on written French, since the reference and pedagogical grammars that focus on the written language tend to be based on the written French of only the best authors of high-culture literary texts and good usage (*bon usage*). Work on other grammatical categories in other types of writing (e.g., see Waugh & Monville-Burston, 1986; Waugh, 1990; Monville-Burston & Waugh, 1991; Waugh & Bahloul, 1996 on the tenses of French in journalistic usage; cf. also Monville-Burston & Waugh, 1998 on the lexicon) has shown that there are large differences in the use of grammatical categories depending on the genre of writing; preliminary work also shows that pronominal usage is likewise different from one written genre to another. And finally, corpus-based reference works, textbooks, and dictionaries are essential if we expect our native English speaking students to develop any real, pragmatically appropriate, communicative proficiency in French.

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