



## UNIT 19 - IMPERSONAL CONSTRUCTIONS

### 2.3 *Il s'agit de*

This construction is most commonly used :

- to describe what's going on in a novel, a film etc., akin to the English *to be about*.  
Il s'agit **dans ce film** de la vie du Mahatma Gandhi  
*This film is about the life of Mahatma Gandhi*

Note that this construction can **never** have a subject other than the impersonal *il* : you **cannot** say  
*\*Le film s'agit de la vie du Mahatma Gandhi.*

- to describe what's going on in real life, akin to the English *there is, it is* etc. :  
Selon le gouvernement, **il ne s'agit pas** d'une crise économique  
*According to the government there is no economic crisis*
- to express a need :  
**Il s'agit** pour le gouvernement de créer de nouveaux emplois  
*What the government must do now is create more jobs*

### 2.4 Expressions of time

Quelle heure est-**il** ? – *What time is it ?*

**Il** est 5 heures / midi – *It's 5 o'clock / midday*

**Il** est tard – *It's late*

**Il** est temps que tu ailles au lit – *It's time you went to bed*

### 2.5 Constructions taking a noun

Constructions taking a noun phrase, such as *il se passe, il reste, il arrive*. These are used as a stylistic device preparing the way for the real subject by making a preliminary reference to it :

**Il se passait** quelque chose d'extraordinaire

*Something extraordinary was going on*

**Il reste** toujours quelques places

*There are still a few places left*

**Il est arrivé** quelque chose de surprenant

*Something surprising has happened*

### 2.6 Expressions taking an infinitive / *que*

There are a large number of constructions taking the infinitive or *que* or both.

**Il vaut mieux** ne pas lui **téléphoner** à cette heure-ci

*It's better not to phone him / her at this time*

**Il arrive que** nous nous y rendons en bus

*Sometimes we go there by bus*

With *que* it is necessary to decide whether the verb following it takes the indicative or the subjunctive. If the construction expresses an idea of **certainty** or **probability**, the **indicative** is used:

Il est certain qu'il **est** allé au bureau mercredi

*It is certain that he went to the office on Wednesday*

Il est probable qu'il **ira** au bureau mercredi

*It is likely that he will go to the office on Wednesday*

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If the construction expresses an idea of **uncertainty** or **possibility**, the **subjunctive** is used:

Il est possible qu'il **ait** été au bureau mercredi  
*It is possible that he was in the office on Wednesday*

If the construction expresses an idea of **personal will** or **interpretation**, the **subjunctive** is also used:

Il vaut mieux que tu **viennes** immédiatement  
*You must come immediately*  
Il est dommage qu'elle **ait** perdu  
*It's a shame she lost*

### 2.7 Passive constructions

Il / **Ça** a été décidé de repousser la date de la réunion  
*It has been decided to postpone the date of the meeting*

### 2.8 *Il est* + noun

This is sometimes used as an alternative to *il y a* :  
Il est des moments où tout va de travers  
*There are moments where everything goes wrong*

### 2.9 Expressions about the weather, temperature etc.

il pleut, **ça** pleut  
*it's raining*  
il neige, **ça** neige  
*it's snowing*

However, similar expressions using *faire* always take *il* :

il fait du vent, **il** fait noir  
*it's windy, it's dark*

### 2.10 Verb constructions followed by completive or infinitive clause as subject

Where the verb construction is indirect, *il* or *cela / ça* may be used :

Il / **Ça** déplaît à Marie qu'on lui téléphone tard le soir  
*Marie doesn't like people phoning her late at night*  
Il / **Ça** convient à Pierre d'habiter si près de ses parents  
*Pierre finds it convenient to live so close to his parents*

However, where the verb construction is direct, only *cela / ça* is used :

**Cela / Ça** irrite Marie qu'on lui téléphone tard le soir  
*It annoys Marie when people phone her late at night*  
**Cela / Ça** intéresserait Pierre d'habiter plus près de ses parents  
*Pierre would be interested in living closer to his parents*

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### 3 *Ce* v *il*

*Ce* and *il* can be used both as personal and impersonal pronouns.

#### 3.1 *Ce* v *il* as impersonal pronouns

3.1.1 The impersonal pronouns *ce* and *il* are generally used with *être* (or with *devoir être* or *pouvoir être*). Where *être* is followed by something **other than** an adjective, *ce* is used :

**C'est / Ce doit / Ce pouvait être le professeur**

*It's / It must / It could be the teacher*

**C'est ainsi** que je l'ai trouvé

*That's how I found him*

Il a pris une décision courageuse : **c'était de continuer**

*He took a brave decision : to continue*

- Qui est là ? - **C'est moi**

*"Who's there ?" "It's me"*

Note that *ce* is generally followed by a verb in the third person singular :

*C'est moi, c'est nous, c'est eux, c'est mes parents*

However, in written and more formal spoken French *ce sont* is used when referring to a third person plural noun or pronoun :

- Qui est là ? - **Ce sont** mes parents / eux

*"Who's there ?" - "It's my parents / them"*

3.1.2 Where *être* is followed by an **adjective** :

- *Il* is used when the adjective **refers forward** to something about to be mentioned :

**Il** est surprenant que ses notes aient été si mauvaises

*It is surprising that his marks were so poor*

However, in spoken French it is equally acceptable to use *ce* :

**C'est** surprenant que ses notes aient été si mauvaises

- *Ce* is used when the adjective **refers back** to something just expressed :

Ses notes ont été très mauvaises, **c'est** surprenant

*His marks were very poor, it's surprising*

Note that the preposition *de* introduces the infinitive when **referring forward** to something about to be expressed, but the preposition *à* introduces the infinitive when **referring back** to something just expressed :

**Il** est difficile **d'**expliquer une telle conduite

*It is difficult to explain behaviour such as that*

Expliquer une telle conduite, **c'est** difficile **à** faire

*Behaviour such as that is difficult to explain*

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Note that the construction :

**It is + adjective + for + pronoun + to do**

is translated in French by :

**Il + indirect pronoun + est + adjective + de faire**

For example :

It is difficult **for him** to accept his new circumstances

**Il lui** est difficile d'accepter sa nouvelle situation

3.1.3 The structure *c'est ... qui* or *c'est ... que* is used to provide emphasis. *C'est ... qui* is used to emphasize a subject noun :

**Ce sont** les parents **qui** sont les vrais coupables

*It's the parents who are the real guilty ones*

*C'est ... que* can be used to refer to any other part of the sentence :

**C'est** à moi **qu'**il a envoyé le paquet

*He sent the package to me*

**C'est** grâce à lui **que** le paquet a été retrouvé

*It's thanks to him that the package was found*

For more information about creating emphasis, see Unit 50.

### 3.2 *Ce* v *il/elle* as personal pronouns

When using pronouns in the 3rd person singular or plural with *être*, the following rules apply :

3.2.1 *Il* and *elle* can only be used if they are followed by an **adjective** (without a noun) or a **complement** (a noun behaving like an adjective) :

Voilà ma maison. **Elle** est très belle - *That's my house. It's very beautiful*

Voilà Pierre. **Il** est très sympathique - *There's Pierre. He's very nice*

Voilà Mr Dupont. **Il** est professeur - *There's Mr Dupont. He's a teacher*

3.2.2 *Ce* is used when followed by a **noun** :

Voilà où j'habite. **C'est** une belle maison - *That's where I live. It's a beautiful house*

Voilà Pierre. **C'est** une personne sympathique - *There's Pierre. He's a nice person*

Voilà Mr Dupont. **C'est** un professeur - *There's Mr Dupont. He's a teacher*