

Unit 29 - Personal pronouns (1)

1 Definition

Personal pronouns are words such as *il*, *lui*, *eux*, *y* and *en* that stand in the place of a noun (or occasionally an adjective, adverbial or clause) and which always function like nouns. They alter according to their grammatical person (first, second or third person), number (singular or plural), gender (masculine, feminine or neuter), or case (subject, object or other form of complement).

2 Subject pronouns

2.1 Referring to people or things

The **subject personal pronouns** are *je*, *tu*, *il / elle / on*, *nous / on*, *vous*, *ils / elles*, and they are used to replace people or things that are the subject of a verb.

Je ne me suis pas rendu compte de l'heure

I didn't realize the time

It is particularly important to remember that when replacing nouns referring to things, subject pronouns must have the same gender as the noun replaced :

La conjoncture économique paraît bonne mais je crains qu'**elle** ne s'aggrave vers la fin de l'année

i.e. *La conjoncture économique* replaced by *elle*

This contrasts with English which generally uses the impersonal pronoun *it*.

The economic situation seems good, but I fear **it** will get worse towards the end of the year

i.e. *The economic situation* replaced by *it*

Tu v Vous

French has 2 ways of expressing the English singular pronoun *you*. *Vous* is used between people who are unfamiliar with one another, or between people in a formal social or professional context. In situations such as school or the workplace where there is a clear hierarchy, a "superior" might use *tu* as an indication of authority, an "inferior" responding with *vous*. In smaller companies or organisations people will often use *tu* whatever their hierarchical position. In all cases, older people are more likely to use *vous* rather than *tu*. Non-native French speakers should always use *vous* unless sure that *tu* is acceptable.

2.2 Impersonal use

The pronoun *il* is sometimes used with impersonal verbs, in which case it is neutral :

Il s'agit dans le roman d'une histoire d'amour conventionnelle

(**and never** **Le roman s'agit de ...*)

The pronoun *on* is generally used indefinitely, the equivalent of *one* or *you* in English :

Lorsqu'**on** arrive à un entretien pour un emploi, il y a souvent un sentiment d'inquiétude

When one arrives / you arrive for a job interview, there's often a feeling of apprehension

However, in informal contexts *on* is used as a substitute for *nous*. In this case French people tend to use the same agreements as for *nous* :

Hier **on** est tous allés à la plage

Yesterday we all went to the beach

UNIT 29 - PERSONAL PRONOUNS (1)

French generally uses *l'on* after *et, si, que, où* or *ou*, but not before words beginning with *l* :

Les tickets sont moins chers si **l'on** est déjà abonné
The tickets are cheaper if you're already a subscriber

but Les tickets sont moins chers si **on** les paie d'avance
The tickets are cheaper if you pay for them in advance

3 Object pronouns

A **direct object pronoun** is one which takes the place of a **direct object noun**, that is to say a noun which experiences the direct action of a verb. The direct object pronouns in French are : *me, te, le / la, nous, vous, les*. (For *en* used as an object pronoun, see section 4 below.) For example :

J'ai donné l'argent à ma mère - *I gave the money to my mother*

⇒ *argent* is the direct object of the verb *donner*

Je l'ai donné à ma mère - *I gave it to my mother*

⇒ the pronoun *le* has taken the place of the direct object noun *argent*.

An **indirect object pronoun** is one which takes the place of an **indirect object noun**, that is to say that is the recipient or beneficiary of the action of a verb and its direct object. In French indirect object nouns are usually introduced by the preposition *à*. In French the indirect object pronouns are : *me, te, lui, nous, vous, leur*. For example :

J'ai donné l'argent à ma mère

⇒ *ma mère* is the indirect object of the verb *donner*

Je **lui** ai donné l'argent

⇒ the indirect object pronoun *lui* has taken the place of the phrase *à ma mère*

4 *Y, en*

The **pronoun complements** *y* and *en* act as object pronouns referring to places or things :

J'ai renoncé **aux cigarettes** - J'**y** ai renoncé (*y* = indirect object)

I've given up cigarettes - I've given them up

Elle s'est occupée **de l'affaire** - Elle s'**en** est occupée

She dealt with the matter - She dealt with it

En can refer to people when used with an expression of quantity :

Il voulait inviter **douze personnes** ⇒ Il voulait **en** inviter **douze**

He wanted to invite twelve people ⇒ He wanted to invite twelve (of them)

Y and *en* are used to replace words, phrases or clauses introduced by *à* and *de* respectively :

4.1 Replacing nouns / noun phrases

Y and *en* can replace nouns or noun phrases introduced by *à* and *de* respectively :

Elle a consacré toute sa vie **à la médecine** ⇒ Elle **y** a consacré toute sa vie

She devoted her whole life to medicine ⇒ She devoted her whole life to it

Je vais **à Paris** demain - J'**y** vais demain

I'm going to Paris - I'm going there tomorrow

Il se souvient bien **de cette journée** ⇒ Il s'**en** souvient bien

He remembers that day well ⇒ He remembers it well

Je reviens **de Paris** demain - J'**en** reviens demain

I'm coming back from Paris tomorrow - I'm coming back from there tomorrow

UNIT 29 - PERSONAL PRONOUNS (1)

4.1.1 *En* replacing *de* as article

The same rule applies where the *de* is not a preposition (as in ***de mon bureau***) but an article (as in ***du chocolat, des cigarettes***). In this case it is a **direct object pronoun** :

Je voudrais **du chocolat / de la confiture** - J'**en** voudrais (*en* = direct object)

I'd like some chocolate / jam - I'd like some

Je voudrais **des cigarettes** - J'**en** voudrais (*en* = direct object)

I'd like some cigarettes - I'd like some

4.1.2 *En* can also replace nouns introduced by the singular indefinite article (*un, une*), even though it does not contain *de*, because the idea of "of" is implied. Note that in affirmative sentences *un* and *une* are retained, but not in negative sentences :

Est-ce que tu veux un chocolat ? - Oui, j'**en** veux **un**

Do you want a chocolate ? - Yes, I do want one (i.e. of them)

Est-ce que tu veux un chocolat ? - Non, je n'**en** veux pas

Do you want a chocolate ? - No, I don't want one (i.e. of them)

4.1.3 A similar structure is used for the following expressions of quantity : *plusieurs, quelques* (which becomes *quelques-un(e)s*), *aucun, autre, beaucoup, plein, trop, assez, peu, plus, moins, autant, un kilo, une bouteille* etc. and all numerals :

Tu **en** veux **un autre** ? J'**en** ai **plusieurs**

Do you want another one (i.e. of them) ? I have several (i.e. of them)

4.2 Replacing infinitive clauses

Y and *en* can also replace infinitive clauses introduced by *à* and *de* respectively :

Etes-vous parvenu **à le faire** ? - Oui, j'y suis parvenu

Did you manage to do it ? Yes I did (manage it)

Je n'ai pas le droit **de le faire** - Si, tu **en** as le droit

I don't have the right to do it - Yes you do (have the right)

Note, however, that with verbs such as *permettre, défendre* and *interdire*, which have a construction *à quelqu'un de faire quelque chose*, the phrase introduced by *de* is treated as a direct object and is replaced by the neutral *le* :

J'ai promis à ma mère **de faire le repassage** ⇒ J'ai promis à ma mère **de le faire**

I promised my mother I'd do the ironing ⇒ I promised my mother (I'd do it)

4.3 Replacing completive (*que*) clauses

Y and *en* can also replace clauses introduced by *à ce que* and *de ce que* respectively :

Il s'attendait **à ce qu'on le lui dise** ⇒ Il s'y attendait

He expected to be told about it ⇒ He expected it

J'ai profité **de ce qu'il était en retard** pour finir mon devoir ⇒ J'**en** ai profité

Since he was late, I took the opportunity to finish my homework ⇒ I took advantage of it

4.4 *Y* as adverbial

Y can also replace an adverbial of place in the way that *there* does in English :

Je les ai laissés dans la cuisine, mais ils n'y sont plus

*I put them in the kitchen, but they're no longer **there***

UNIT 29 - PERSONAL PRONOUNS (1)

4.5 *Y* and *en* in idiomatic expressions

Note also that there are many idiomatic expressions involving *y* and *en*. Here is a selection :

<i>y</i>	ça y est - <i>that's it !</i> elle n'y peut rien - <i>there's nothing she can do about it</i> je vais m'y mettre demain - <i>I'll start tomorrow</i> rien n'y fait - <i>it's no use</i> s'y connaître - <i>to know all about</i> s'y prendre - <i>to go about sth</i> s'y retrouver - <i>to cope</i> tu n'y arriveras jamais - <i>you'll never manage</i>
-----------------	---

<i>en</i>	en venir à qch - <i>to come to the point of doing sth</i> en vouloir à quelqu'un - <i>to be annoyed with someone</i> s'en prendre à qn - <i>to take it out on sb</i> je n'en peux plus - <i>I'm tired out / can't go on any more</i> je n'en suis pas à faire - <i>I haven't reached the point of doing</i> j'en ai assez - <i>I've had enough</i> j'en ai pour 2 heures - <i>I'll be / it'll take me 2 hours</i> ne t'en fais pas - <i>don't worry</i> n'en croyez rien - <i>don't believe it</i> où en es-tu avec - <i>how far have you got with</i> s'en sortir - <i>to cope, manage</i> s'en tenir à qch - <i>to stick to sth, confine oneself to sth</i> va-t'en - <i>go away !</i>
------------------	---