

21. Impersonal pronouns (1)

1 Definition

An **impersonal pronoun** is a pronoun such as *il*, *ce*, *cela* or *ça* that does not take the place of a specific noun, but which refers to something implied in the context (such as the weather in *Il fait beau aujourd'hui* - *The weather's nice today*) or to something about to be mentioned (as in *Il est important que Pierre obtienne cet emploi* - *It's important for Peter to get this job*).

2 Constructions taking *il*

2.1 *Il y a / Il existe*

Note that with *il y a* it is the subject *il* which governs the verb (*avoir*) and not the object (as in the English equivalent *there is, there are*). Hence the French never say **il y ont*.

Il y a beaucoup de choses à faire (singular verb)

There are a lot of things to do (plural verb)

Il n'existe pas de meilleure équipe

There's no better team

2.2 *Il faut*

This can be followed by a noun, an infinitive or *que* clause (in which case it takes the subjunctive):

Il faut **un billet** pour entrer

You need a ticket to get in

Il faut **nettoyer** la maison avant qu'elle n'arrive

We need to clean the house before she arrives

Il faut **que tu te rendes compte de la gravité de la situation**

You need to realize how serious the situation is

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: 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

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 Expressions about the weather, temperature etc. (see also list at end of book)

Il pleut	Il neige
<i>It's raining</i>	<i>It's snowing</i>
Il fait du vent	Il fait noir
<i>It's windy</i>	<i>It's dark</i>

2.6 *Il reste, Il manque*

Il reste toujours quelques places
<i>There are still a few places left</i>
Il manque un livre
<i>There's a book missing</i>

2.7 Constructions 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
<i>It's better not to phone him / her at this time</i>
Il arrive que nous nous y rendons en bus
<i>Sometimes we go there by bus</i>

For information about using the indicative or subjunctive after these constructions, see Unit 25 below.