

36. Personal pronouns (1) - subject pronouns

1 Definition

Personal pronouns are words such as *il, lui, eux, y* and *en* that stand in the place of a noun:

Mme Chevalier travaille en ville. **Elle** est avocat.

Madame Chevalier works in town. She's a lawyer.

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

J'aime bien cette voiture. **Elle** est très fiable.

i.e. *cette voiture* is replaced by *elle*

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

I really like this car. **It's** very reliable.

i.e. *this car* is replaced by *it*

2.2 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.

3 Impersonal subject pronouns

3.1 The pronoun *il* can also be used with impersonal verbs, in which case it does not refer to a specific noun:

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

The novel is a conventional love story

The impersonal *il* cannot be replaced by a noun, i.e. you **cannot** say **Le roman s'agit de ...*

3.2 The pronoun *on* is generally used impersonally, 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

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